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THE NEW YORKER



Ulrichsen

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Goings On

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“Hacks,” for which she was nominated for five Emmys and four Golden Globes, winning one Emmy and a Critics Choice Award (and proving herself, beyond all doubt, not a hack). Einbinder’s début standup special, “Everything Must Go,” was released in 2024. This year, she starred in the gory, genre-bending film “Teenage Sex and Death at Camp Miasma,” which premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won the Queer Palm. Einbinder and the staff writer Rachel Syme sit down for what’s sure to be a lively chat.

The Art of Humor Writing

6 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre, at 150 W. 17th St.

A serious talk about a not-so-serious subject: Just what exactly turns a Whispers & Mumbles into a Shouts & Murmurs? Find out at this master class. The veteran Shouts & Murmurs writers Ian and Cora Frazier—who also happen to be father and daughter—join the articles editor Susan Morrison for a discussion about humor writing at a magazine that was founded, in 1925, as a “comic weekly.” Ian Frazier is a two-time recipient of the Thurber Prize for American Humor, for his essay collections “Coyote v. Acme” and “Lamentations of the Father.” Cora Frazier has contributed humor writing to The New Yorker since 2012. There will be readings, an audience Q. & A., and surely lots of shouts, murmurs, and, of course, laughter.

Ken Burns Talks with Michael Luo

6:30 P.M., the Joyce Theater, 175 8th Ave.

The filmmaker Ken Burns once said that “the great arrogance of the present is to forget the intelligence of the past.” In the course of forty-five years in the business, with investigations ranging from “The Civil War” and “The Vietnam War” to “Baseball” and “Country Music,” the documentarian has done his best to stay humble. Recently, he turned to the phenomenon that determined the course of our country—“The American Revolution.” Burns stops by the Festival to discuss his work with Michael Luo, an executive

editor at the magazine, and the importance of chronicling history at a time when more and more is being written over and erased.

King Princess Talks with Amanda Petrusich and Performs

8:30 P.M., Webster Hall

“Girl Violence,” the third and most recent album by the singer and multi-instrumentalist Mikaela Straus, a.k.a. King Princess, ushered in a new era for her experiments in sonically fluid sapphic pop. If “1950,” her breakout single, from 2018, was emblematic of a vintage musical matrix that she has spent much of her career so far riffing on, “Girl Violence” longs to synthesize those sounds into something more peerless and forward-thinking. Straus, equal parts pop agitator and quirked-up rock star, wants to add more ferocity to songs of the queer canon, and she brings her learn-as-you-go energy to a performance and talk with the staff writer Amanda Petrusich.

Parker Posey Talks with Michael Schulman

8:30 p.m., the Joyce Theater



From party girl to teacher's pet, Parker Posey, named Time's "Queen of the Indies" in 1997, has delighted audiences for three decades with her exasperated-quirky-girl zingers and her uncanny embodiment of indignance. Last year, in Mike White's third season of "The White Lotus," Posey sunk her teeth into the plummy accent and soul-subsuming wealth of a Southern princess turned ill-equipped matriarch. This fall, she appears in Martin McDonagh's new movie, "Wild Horse Nine," as the wife of a C.I.A. agent who's been dispatched to Easter Island, played by Sam Rockwell. At the Festival, Posey joins the staff writer Michael Schulman to talk about her career as a sui-generis actress.

Critics at Large Live, Featuring Vinson Cunningham, Naomi Fry, and Alexandra Schwartz

8:30 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

Are you in need of some guidance? Do you feel lost, culturally, socially, or just generally? Never fear: your favorite trio of culture gurus are here to help. The Critics at Large podcast hosts come to you live with their special segment "I Need a Critic!," dishing out advice that they may or may not be qualified to give. Chime in with your questions, concerns, gripes, and hopes, and be prepared to have your life changed for the better—or, at the very least, to laugh a lot.

Saturday, October 24

Ann Patchett and Louise Erdrich Talk with Deborah Treisman

10 A.M., Webster Hall

Ann Patchett, the author of "Bel Canto" and, most recently, the Times best-seller "Whistler," is the great conjurer of chosen families, crafting unlikely bonds between characters under duress. Louise Erdrich, a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians and the award-winning author of "The Night Watchman" and a new collection of stories, "Python's Kiss," is the premier voice memorializing the severed ties of family and culture

among Native peoples. Both authors have invested in their home communities as owners of a local bookstore: Erdrich's Birchbark Books, in Minneapolis, and Patchett's Parnassus Books, in Nashville. The *New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman hosts the discussion.

The Future of A.I., Featuring Jill Lepore, Gideon Lewis-Kraus, and Andrew Marantz, with Joshua Rothman

10 A.M., the Joyce Theater

In early September, a former Anthropic employee said that the people building A.I. believe it could kill us all in less than ten years—a deeply unsettling proposition, especially for something that has already infiltrated our daily lives, in both obvious and invisible ways. Is that really where we're headed? Is there any hope for regulation? And, if so, what will happen to all those chatbot boyfriends? The writers Jill Lepore, Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Andrew Marantz, and Joshua Rothman will parse through questions such as these, contemplating what the future holds for a technology that, for better or worse, seems here to stay.

Michael Douglas Talks with Ariel Levy

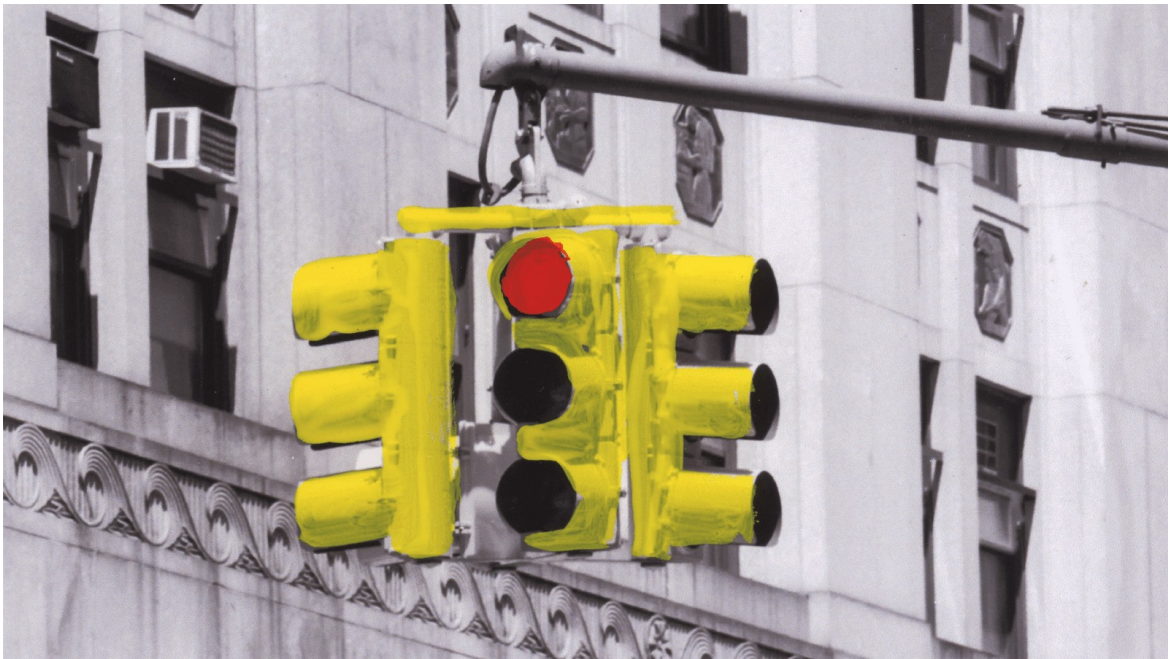
12:30 P.M., Webster Hall

Gordon Gekko embodied the nineteen-eighties Zeitgeist when he said—as delivered by a slick, suspender-clad Michael Douglas, in perhaps his most iconic role, in “Wall Street”—“Greed, for lack of a better word, is good.” Is it greedy to sustain a half-century career in Hollywood, win two Academy Awards, and receive A.F.I.'s Life Achievement Award? Maybe so, but then again Douglas also gives back, as a U.N. Messenger of Peace. You can read about it in his new memoir, “One Helluva Ride.” He speaks with the *New Yorker* staff writer Ariel Levy, who knows her way around an iconic octogenarian actor: she is Dustin Hoffman's co-author for his forthcoming memoir, “Look at Me.”

Who Gets to Be an American?, Featuring Isabel Wilkerson, Jonathan Blitzer, and Jelani Cobb, with Michael Luo

12:30 P.M., the Joyce Theater

With an increase in ICE raids and violent arrests across the U.S., the topic of American identity is at the forefront of our political climate. What does it mean to be a part of this country, and how has that definition changed in recent years? Isabel Wilkerson, the author of “The Warmth of Other Suns” and “Caste,” joins the New Yorker writers Jonathan Blitzer and Jelani Cobb and executive editor Michael Luo for a roundtable discussion about the question of citizenship and the ways the Trump Administration has put its finger on the scale in the never-ending debate of belonging.



The Political Scene Live, Featuring David Plouffe, Susan B. Glasser, Jane Mayer, and Evan Osnos

3 P.M., Webster Hall

As the midterm elections approach, America’s future is up in the air and the stakes have never felt higher. Will the Democrats get themselves together and win the majority? If they do, will it make a tangible difference? Or will Republicans hold steady, insuring that President Trump stays bolstered by Congress? The country turned two hundred and fifty this year—will it last another quarter millennium? The hosts of The Political Scene podcast, Susan

B. Glasser, Evan Osnos, and Jane Mayer, will be joined by the Democratic campaign strategist David Plouffe for a live taping, to discuss this pivotal moment in our history and how they think events might unfold.

Lorna Simpson Talks with Thelma Golden

3 P.M., the Joyce Theater

Visual art has the profound ability to act as a gateway and a solace, as a meditation and a statement. Perhaps no one is more representative of this breadth than the multimedia artist and photographer Lorna Simpson. One of the first African American female artists to exhibit at the Venice Biennale, Simpson has made a career capturing the conversation around the relationship between identity and memory. At this year's Festival, she will sit down with Thelma Golden, the chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, to discuss the power of the image and the fulfillment and responsibility that come with creating.

The Pursuit of Equality

3 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

The feminist activist Barbara Smith co-founded the Combahee River Collective, a pioneering group that called attention to intersecting forms of oppression facing Black women in America; she also co-founded Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, in 1980, to amplify the voices of people of color in publishing. She will join the staff writer Jia Tolentino to discuss the history of the feminist movement, the legacy of Gloria Steinem, and the role of activism in the modern world.

Cole Escola Talks with Julian Lucas

5:30 P.M., Webster Hall

Cole Escola burst onto the theatre scene in 2024, with their insanely irreverent, wickedly funny Off Broadway show, "Oh, Mary!," in which they played Mary Todd Lincoln, a lush and a scamp, who just wants to sing

cabaret. But Escola had been making uncanny videos (see “Pee Pee Manor,” about an especially unlucky real-estate agent) and TV appearances—on “Search Party,” “At Home with Amy Sedaris,” “Difficult People”—for years. “Oh, Mary!” is now enjoying an extended run on Broadway, with a rotating cast of Marys; Escola joins the staff writer Julian Lucas to talk about their career as an ingenious comedic scallywag.

Cartoon Improv, Judged by Josh Gondelman and Alison Leiby, Hosted by Emily Flake

5:30 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

The cartoonists Ellie Black, Ellis Rosen, Will Kiley Santino, and Drew Dernavich battle it out to prove that the pen is mightier than the sword, at this year’s installment of live cartoon improv. The comedians Josh Gondelman and Alison Leiby will serve as judge and jury, and the purportedly impartial cartoonist Emily Flake m.c.s. If you’re questioning this group’s qualifications for such a smackdown: Black has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2019; Rosen’s graphic-novel series about an evil squirrel will be released next year; Santino’s first book of cartoons will be published in 2027; and Dernavich has had more than three hundred cartoons in the magazine. Over on the judicial branch, Gondelman is a four-time Emmy Award-winning writer, and Leiby has contributed to television shows including “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.” Flake is the recipient of the 2026 Thurber Award for Cartoon Art, so don’t heckle her.

Matthew Broderick Talks with Naomi Fry

6 P.M., the Joyce Theater

Life moves pretty fast for Matthew Broderick, the Tony-winning, Emmy-nominated actor who, for some, will always evoke the clarion call “Bueller . . . Bueller . . . Bueller.” Fresh off back-to-back theatrical performances, in “Ulster American,” at the Irish Rep, and “Celebrity Autobiography,” on Broadway, and looking ahead to an upcoming film aptly titled “The Best Is Yet to Come” (in which he reunites with his “Ferris Bueller” co-star Alan Ruck), Broderick sits down with Naomi Fry, a co-host of *The New Yorker’s*

Critics at Large podcast and a staff writer covering pop culture. Broderick used to hang out with Marty Reisman, at a table-tennis parlor uptown, and Fry had a cameo in “Marty Supreme,” the Josh Safdie film based on Reisman’s exploits—does that count as six degrees of separation?



The Pixies Talk with Amanda Petrusich and Perform

8 P.M., Webster Hall

In the four decades since the Pixies dropped their debut album, so much pop music has been shaped in their image. A few punks from Boston became the architects of a tectonic alt-rock sound that swung purposefully between noise and quiet, and the band’s 1988 masterpiece, “Surfer Rosa,” became a testament to its artsy thrasher sensibility. The music bore an awe--inspiring, cathartic quality that the group carries with it into its work today, most recently on the subtly charged 2024 album “The Night the Zombies Came.” In addition to diving into its catalogue for a live performance, the Pixies’ current foursome—Black Francis, Joey Santiago, David Lovering, and Emma Richardson—sits down with the staff writer Amanda Petrusich.

Benito Skinner Talks with Michael Schulman

8 P.M., the Joyce Theater

The comedian Benito Skinner—known as Benny Drama to his millions of followers on TikTok and Instagram—brings the drama to his conversation with the staff writer Michael Schulman. Skinner’s comedic stylings and vast collection of wigs are showcased in his original sketches and celebrity impressions; you might recognize the character “Jenni the TMI hairstylist,” along with nearly every Kardashian sister, from his videos. Skinner is the creator of the series “Overcompensating,” in which he stars as a fictionalized version of himself, closeted in college. In 2025, Skinner received the Critics Choice L.G.B.T.Q.+ Rising Star Award. All signs point to Skinner getting interviewed as, well, Benito Skinner, but an appearance by “Kris Jenner” is not out of the question.

Theater of War Productions Live, with Paul Dano and Bryan Doerries

8 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

Paul Dano has played a remarkable range of characters, from Brian Wilson, in the bio-pic “Love & Mercy,” to twin brothers in “There Will Be Blood.” For his next performance, he’ll read a *New Yorker* piece by Andrew Lipstein, about what it feels like to live with obsessive-compulsive disorder and its unruly symptoms. It’s a live production with Theater of War, a company that works with actors to present seminal texts. Its artistic director, Bryan Doerries, a writer and translator, will guide an audience discussion after the reading.

Trivia Night with The New Yorker, Hosted by Mina Kimes

8 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

Get ready for a night of quizzical fun for folks who read—or, at least, attempt to read (it counts)—the magazine cover to cover. The “Celebrity Jeopardy!” champion Mina Kimes hosts a rollicking evening of trivia crafted by members of *The New Yorker*’s Puzzles & Games department. Kimes won the top prize on “Celebrity Jeopardy! All-Stars” this year. And, when she’s

not winning big, she's an analyst on ESPN's flagship football program, "NFL Live." Pro tip: a sports-trivia category seems very likely.

Sunday, October 25

Min Jin Lee and Elizabeth Strout Talk with Katy Waldman

10 A.M., Webster Hall

Min Jin Lee dazzled the literary world with her second novel, "Pachinko," chronicling the struggles of a Korean family in Japan during the turbulent twentieth century. Elizabeth Strout, the bard of Maine, is best known for detailing the complexities of small-town life in such books as "Olive Kitteridge" and "My Name Is Lucy Barton." The writers' stories, set in vastly different places, converge around the unique responsibilities shouldered by women. Lee's much anticipated third novel, "American Hagwon," released last month, charts a Korean family's diaspora; Strout's new novel, "The Things We Never Say," follows the fallout of a boating accident in New England. They'll chat with the *New Yorker* books writer Katy Waldman.

Portraits in Power, Featuring Isaac Chotiner, Clare Malone, Jane Mayer, and Lawrence Wright, with Daniel Zalewski

10 A.M., the Joyce Theater

Writing about any subject can be a delicate and formidable practice. When that subject happens to be one of the most powerful individuals or institutions in the world, it becomes a whole other challenge. In this Festival roundtable, the journalists Isaac Chotiner, Jane Mayer, Clare Malone, and Lawrence Wright will join Daniel Zalewski, an executive editor, to discuss what it's like to excavate the hidden realities of titanic figures—whether it's an architect of war (Chotiner), dark-money billionaires or Pete Hegseth (Mayer), Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. (Malone), or the Church of Scientology (Wright)—unearthing hidden details that the subjects would probably rather be left buried.

Ben Lerner and Valeria Luiselli Talk with Cressida Leyshon

12 P.M., the Joyce Theater



The MacArthur Fellows Ben Lerner and Valeria Luiselli share a proclivity for pushing the boundaries of fiction. Lerner, in his most recent novel, “Transcription,” tells his story via an interview unravelling in real time, the protagonist’s recording device breaking just before a crucial moment. Luiselli derives inspiration from sonic essays that she makes—capturing volcanic noise or the speech of strangers—and notes sound as a major inspiration for her latest book, “Beginning Middle End.” It’s up to the audience, and Cressida Leyshon, *The New Yorker’s* deputy fiction editor, to distinguish between interview and autofiction when these two critically acclaimed authors sit down for a discussion.

Aaron Sorkin Talks with Tyler Foggatt

12:30 P.M., Webster Hall

The subject of influence has never been more relevant, or more complex. Enter Aaron Sorkin, with such projects under his belt as the TV show “The West Wing,” the movie “Steve Jobs,” and the play and subsequent film “A

Few Good Men,” which is getting a Broadway revival this fall. Sorkin has made his career exposing the nuances of political, and personal, power dynamics. This year, he takes to the Festival stage, in a discussion with the senior editor Tyler Foggatt, just in time for his new film, “The Social Reckoning,” the follow-up to “The Social Network.” The movie is based on the true story of a whistle-blower who exposed Facebook’s secrets. There might just be a special guest appearance—though probably not from Mark Zuckerberg.

Ethan Hawke Talks with Emily Nussbaum

3 P.M., Webster Hall

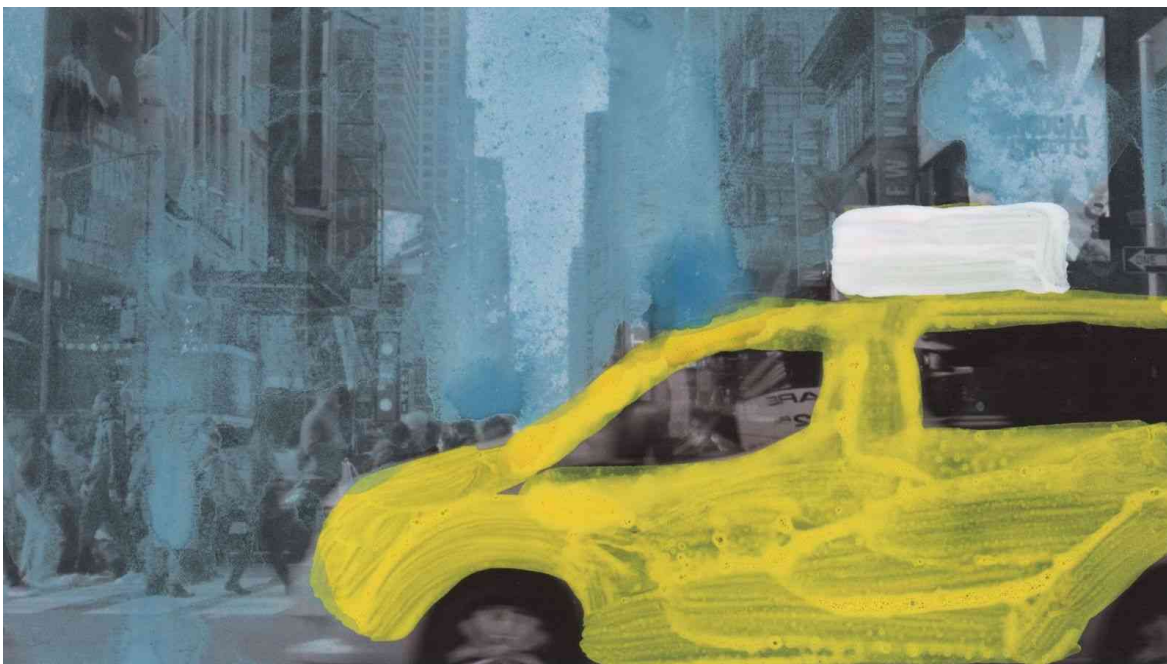
Gen X underdog heartthrob, graphic novelist, Shakespearean actor, foil to Julie Delpy, and muse to Richard Linklater—Ethan Hawke wears many hats. Whether coming of age in “Dead Poets Society,” fighting to stay on the straight and narrow in “Training Day,” or aging before our eyes in “Boyhood,” Hawke is an inveterate entertainer. In last year’s “Blue Moon,” his ninth movie with Linklater, which earned him his fifth Academy Award nomination, he plays the lyricist Lorenz Hart, embodying a bitter and jealous endurer of humiliations, in a performance that Richard Brody called “exalted and startling.” He now stars in the TV crime drama “The Lowdown,” and a new film, “The Weight,” co-starring Russell Crowe, about a Depression-era road gang. He speaks with Emily Nussbaum, the magazine’s theatre critic.

Tessa Hadley and Colm Tóibín Talk with Deborah Treisman

3 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

Tessa Hadley and Colm Tóibín were born within a year of each other, with just the Irish Sea between them. Their writing, though both full of empathy and mounting tension, couldn’t be more distinct. Hadley, whose novella, “The Party,” will be published in paperback in 2027, pressurizes complicated domestic lives to the point where the sitting room is a war zone. Tóibín places his characters on cultural and institutional fault lines ripe for fictionalization, as in his next novel, “The Bridge,” publishing in December.

In what promises to be a transatlantic treat, the *New Yorker* fiction editor Deborah Treisman talks with the pair.



Colson Whitehead Talks with Julian Lucas

3:30 P.M., the Joyce Theater

Colson Whitehead, a native New Yorker, won back-to-back Pulitzer Prizes for “The Underground Railroad” and “The Nickel Boys.” His most recent novels, which together constitute his Harlem Trilogy, are “Harlem Shuffle,” “Crook Manifesto,” and “Cool Machine.” This summer, the *New Yorker* staff writer Julian Lucas wrote an eight-thousand-word Profile of Whitehead, following him from a Manhattan bench with his name on it to his East Hampton home and a reading in Wyoming, ultimately shining light on the man that *Time* magazine called “America’s Storyteller.” Apparently, they only scratched the surface, so Lucas is returning for a deeper conversation with the award-winning writer.

Conan O’Brien Talks with David Remnick

5:30 P.M., Webster Hall

The flame-haired former late-night host Conan O'Brien swaps sides of the proverbial desk (there will be no desk) with the editor of *The New Yorker*, David Remnick. O'Brien, who is apparently a hundred-per-cent Irish, is much less than a hundred-per-cent lucky: he has been nominated for an Emmy Award thirty-six times, and won six. His most recent win was for his work as the host and executive producer of "Conan O'Brien Must Go," on HBO Max, where he capped off one of the longest tenures in late-night-talk-show history, with a total of twenty-eight years as a host; he was the 2025 recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor. In addition to producing a podcast series, "Conan O'Brien Needs a Friend," he has kindly agreed to host the Academy Awards once again, next year.

Dr. Becky and Emily Oster Talk with Dhruv Khullar

5:30 P.M., the Joyce Theater

The best-selling author Emily Oster will join Becky Kennedy—also known as Dr. Becky, the clinical psychologist who founded the parenting platform Good Inside—to talk with the physician and *New Yorker* contributing writer Dhruv Khullar about family matters. Oster's data-driven books include "Expecting Better" and "Cribsheet," works that have helped many an overwhelmed parent find the facts. Kennedy's compassionate approach has proved similarly useful for caregivers trying to raise resilient, confident kids. If you have children, you won't want to miss this panel.



Mahershala Ali Talks with Vinson Cunningham

5:30 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

From “Moonlight” to “Green Book,” “House of Cards” to “True Detective,” Mahershala Ali doesn’t just steal scenes—he runs away with the project and leaves the indelible mark of his character onscreen. Among many accolades, he is the first Muslim man to win an Academy Award. Before conquering Hollywood, Ali played Division I basketball (standing at six feet four) and released rap albums under the name Prince Ali. This fall, Ali stars in Bassam Tariq’s thriller, “Your Mother Your Mother Your Mother.” He will be in conversation with Vinson Cunningham, a critic at the magazine and a fellow basketball obsessive.

Atsuko Okatsuka and Chris Fleming Talk with Emma Allen

8 P.M., Webster Hall

The standup comedians and general goofballs Atsuko Okatsuka and Chris Fleming join the cartoon editor Emma Allen for a lively discussion that may or may not end with Okatsuka’s viral Drop Challenge. Okatsuka and Fleming are known for their signature locks: Okatsuka for her coiffed bowl

cut and Fleming for his cascading curls (tragically shorn for a recent role). Fleming, a self-proclaimed “showpig” who got his start on YouTube, playing a stay-at-home mom named Gayle, and who recently appeared in the first season of “Widow’s Bay,” released an Emmy-nominated standup special, “Chris Fleming: Live at the Palace,” this year. Okatsuka’s second special, “Father,” premiered last year, nabbing a Webby Award for best standup.

Mariska Hargitay Talks with Rachel Syme

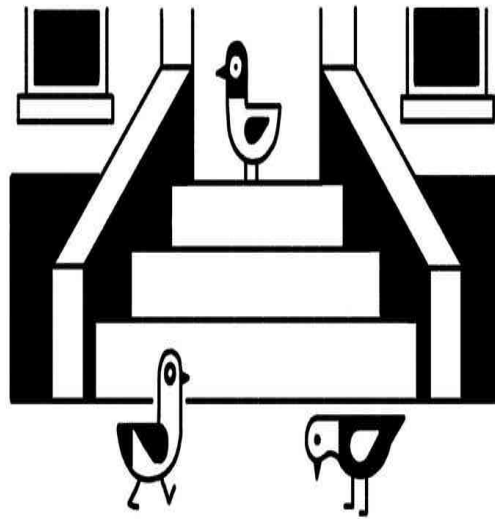
8 P.M., the T. Rowe Price Theatre

Mariska Hargitay, coming off a successful turn hosting the Emmys, is the embodiment of a safe space for many people who know her as Captain Olivia Benson, the character that she’s played on “Law & Order: S.V.U.” for twenty-seven years. In real life, she founded the Joyful Heart Foundation, dedicated to changing society’s response to sexual assault and domestic violence. Beyond the realm of criminal justice, Hargitay recently put out the documentary “My Mom Jayne,” and made her Broadway début, in “Every Brilliant Thing.” She speaks with the *New Yorker* staff writer Rachel Syme, who writes about Hollywood and fashion, and who will hopefully address Hargitay’s record-breaking number of outfit changes at the Emmys.

Wynton Marsalis Talks with Nick Trautwein and Performs

8:30 P.M., the Joyce Theater

The distinguished New Orleans-born musician Wynton Marsalis has worn many hats: dynamic trumpeter, intrepid composer and bandleader, and artistic director for Jazz at Lincoln Center, which he founded, in 1987. He is a Pulitzer Prize winner and a multi-Grammy holder—the only to win in both jazz and classical in the same year—but, chiefly, he is an ambassador for those traditional forms across generations. His most recent recordings with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, “We the People” and “Let Freedom Swing,” seek the intersection of arts appreciation and political involvement. Marsalis samples his expansive repertoire in performance and is joined in conversation by the senior editor Nick Trautwein.



In the Neighborhood

[*Shauna Lyon*](#) on fun spots in Chelsea.

There has been a tremendous amount of recent development in Chelsea, but, ever the story in New York City, as beloved old places close their doors, new favorites emerge. A wonderland of park space has been created along the Hudson River, where you can partake in kayaking or jogging or sunbathing, or escape to leaf-peep the maples and dogwoods of **Little Island**. You could spend hours taking in art of all kinds in the still thriving **gallery district** in the far West Twenties; for your book fix, stop in at **Printed Matter, Inc.** (231 Eleventh Ave.), heavily stocked with zines and art journals, or at the well-curated, charmingly tiny **192 Books**, on Tenth Avenue at Twenty-first Street. Over on Seventh Avenue, **Books N' Cup** is a cozy new coffee shop; if the literary environs cause a sudden urge to type the old-fashioned way, you might check **Gramercy Typewriter Co.**, on Seventeenth Street, for vintage models for sale. Food meccas include **Pier 57** (hit Nom Wah for legendary dim sum, or LoLo's on the Water for the fish fry) and, of course, **Chelsea Market** (try Miznon's pita cheeseburger and roasted cauliflower, and Ayada's mango sticky rice). For drinks and elevated snacks close to the Joyce, **Konban** is an adventurous Japanese izakaya; the **Lobby Bar** in the

storied Hotel Chelsea serves a mean margarita, and **Shukette** throws a party complete with addictive dips and wood-fired breads. A jaunt in Chelsea would not be complete without a stroll on the **High Line**, pausing near Thirtieth Street to contemplate a twenty-seven-foot Buddha sculpture, by Tuan Andrew Nguyen. Keep walking north for a treat at **Mercado Little Spain**, in Hudson Yards, where you can sample the platonic ideal of *pan con tomate*, on the correct Catalan *pan de cristal*, and José Andrés's famous bursting Liquid Olives, a throwback to the heyday of molecular gastronomy—remember that?

[Rachel Syme](#) on *East Village treasures*.



The East Village is, let's be honest, not what it once was, but then, is anywhere in New York? The city is the rare global metropolis that has little preciousness about living in the past; the only constant is change. The East Village is no longer the city's preëminent gritty haven for punks, artists, and eccentrics—St. Mark's Place, once a hashish-scented playground full of leather clubs and piercing studios, is now a manicured promenade where young professionals go to drink spritzes en plein air—but that doesn't mean it's without delights, both old and new. If you're in the area for The New Yorker Festival, you could do far worse than to dip into some still-going classic establishments, such as Veselka, for borscht and pierogi; **John's of**

12th Street, for penne alla vodka; or **Veniero's**, for coffee and cannoli. If you're after even more sugar, you can stop into **Lady Wong Patisserie** for delicate little cakes, **Librae Bakery** for Middle Eastern pastries, or **SLIK** for Scandinavian pick-and-mix candy. Need a drink? **Rabbit Books & Bar** is a new spot that is half bookstore and half low-lit lounge, or there's **Madeline's Martini**, a veritable temple to the classic cocktail. The East Village is also a vintage shopper's haven: there's **Tokio7** for designer clothes, **Fabulous Fanny's** for glasses, and **Cure Thrift** for delightful bric-a-brac. (Hot tip: Cure is where the iconic downtown magpie Amy Sedaris drops off her gently used goods.) After a brisk stroll through **Tompkins Square Park**, you can hop across the street to the cult-favorite **Superiority Burger**—everything on the menu is vegetarian, but you won't miss the meat. Lastly, try ducking into **Casey Rubber Stamps**, founded in 1979, in the West Village, and a neighborhood fixture since 2003. Some of the old Village is still lurking there, if you squint.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Another reason not to bite your ice cream](#)
- [Just try to be bored in New York City](#)
- [Andrew Garfield does it again](#)

The Talk of the Town

- [Facing the Death Penalty](#)
- [Your Next Vacay Is . . . the Strait of Hormuz?](#)
- [Bill Irwin Is the O.G. Clown](#)
- [Josh Safdie's Top Ten \(or So\) N.Y.C. Films](#)
- [The Furry Prima Donna of "La Bohème"](#)

[Comment](#)

Facing the Death Penalty

The cases of Christa Pike and Nidal Hasan show how vanishingly fine the line is between a routine execution and an unbearable one.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Bloomberg / Getty; Picture Alliance / Getty

In recent weeks, tolerance for the death penalty, as it is carried out in the United States, has been sorely tested twice. On September 30th, the state of Tennessee bungled its attempt to kill Christa Pike, who survived two injections of pentobarbital. Eight days later, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth gleefully invited the nation to tune in, via live stream, for the death by firing squad of Nidal Hasan, scheduled for December 3rd. It took another week for President Donald Trump to call off the broadcast, amid an uproar. He said, in a Truth Social post, that, though he thought a live stream would send a useful message about America's strength, he accepted that "many very good and well meaning people would rather not watch." He made it sound like a programming preference, not a moral one.

Pike's botched execution did not result in Tennessee looking strong. Though the event was not public, there were watch-rooms connected to the death chamber. In one sat May Martinez, the mother of Colleen Slemmer, who was

nineteen years old when, in 1995, Pike, then eighteen, beat and killed her, with the help of two teen-age accomplices. A group of journalists, designated as “media witnesses,” sat in another. At 7:26 *P.M.*, according to the journalists, a black curtain fitted to a large glass window was pulled back, and they saw Pike strapped to a gurney. Prison personnel had already set I.V. lines and left the chamber to begin the flow of pentobarbital from yet another room.

Through a microphone, the journalists listened as Pike spoke what were meant to be her last words—about love—and sang with her Buddhist spiritual adviser. Then they heard her ask if her arm was supposed to hurt as much as it did—as if her veins would burst. She raised her head and kicked her legs, knocking a sheet off the gurney. At 7:46 *P.M.*, the curtain was closed. It was opened three minutes later, presumably so that the witnesses could see the effects of a second, backup dose. What they saw was a woman who was clearly alive. At 8:05 *P.M.*, the curtain closed again, but the microphone stayed on, leaving the journalists with the sound of Pike’s labored breathing and snoring. When, at 8:53 *P.M.*, they were finally told to go, they were pretty sure that Pike was not dead.

“I cannot emphasize enough how much of whatever just happened happened behind a closed curtain,” Steven Hale, of the Nashville *Banner*, said at a press conference afterward. In the days that followed, more details came out. Before the curtain opened, according to Pike’s lawyers, medical workers had struggled with the I.V., using at least seven needles. A working theory is that a line was misplaced, or that a vein was blown, causing the pentobarbital to spread into the surrounding tissue. Pike’s lawyers had warned, in court filings, that she had blood and circulatory conditions that put her at risk for precisely this outcome. (They have also argued that sexual violence Pike endured as a child should have weighed more heavily in her sentencing.)

Lethal injection is the most common method of capital punishment in the U.S. And yet, according to the Associated Press, I.V. problems have derailed more than half a dozen executions since 2009, including one in Tennessee this past May. Pike’s case stands out because the execution team proceeded with the injection of pentobarbital anyway. The level of recklessness in that decision will no doubt be a focus of the investigation that Bill Lee, the governor of Tennessee, has ordered. Lee has delayed other pending

executions, but he has not yet said if the state will try again to kill Pike, who was unconscious for several days before waking up in a hospital, confused and in pain. It's unclear if she will fully recover. Last week, it emerged that even the call from the prison for an ambulance was mishandled. Pike's lawyers have described what happened to her as torture. An unanswerable question is how the night might have ended had no one been watching.

There is a distinction, of course, between insisting on witnesses and staging a spectacle. Hegseth promoted the live stream in an interview with Jack Posobiec, a right-wing influencer, on the deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. Hasan, a former Army major and psychiatrist, shot and killed twelve fellow-soldiers (one of whom was pregnant) and a civilian at Fort Hood, in 2009, ahead of a deployment to Afghanistan. "No-brainer. Execution by firing squad," Hegseth said. "And we'll make sure that people are able to watch it, that it's public." There hasn't been a public execution in the United States in almost ninety years. Hasan is confined to a wheelchair; he was paralyzed as a result of the firefight that ended his shooting spree. He has said that he wants to be a martyr, and one of the many problems with Hegseth's plan was that it might have helped him get his wish. But the more profound issue was the grubby death-cult revelry that a live stream would entail.

Even some supporters of capital punishment, including a number of Republican lawmakers, seemed repelled by the prospect. In recent years, only a few countries have been known to conduct public executions, notably Iran and Afghanistan. Meanwhile, of the thirty-eight nations in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, only two—the U.S. and Japan—regularly carry out death sentences at all. (China, which is not in the O.E.C.D., does, too.)

The Eighth Amendment forbids "cruel and unusual punishments"; the Supreme Court has long said that the death penalty is permissible, even as it has gradually tightened its standard. In 1988, for example, the Court banned the death penalty for crimes committed by someone under the age of sixteen. The Justices only raised the age to eighteen in 2005. But such adjustments, welcome as they are, cannot conceal the essential brutality of the enterprise; the Pike and Hasan cases show how vanishingly fine the line is between a routine execution and an unbearable one.

When Markwayne Mullin, the Secretary of Homeland Security, was asked about Hegseth's live stream before Trump called it off, he said, "No one has to watch." In the age of TikTok and autoplay videos, that's simply not true. But Mullin's reply also seemed to convey a hope that no one would notice the actions and the character of this Administration, with officials, such as Hegseth, who appear unashamed of their worst instincts. One can't always look away. ♦

Your Next Vacay Is . . . the Strait of Hormuz?

The ad agency M+C Saatchi has been working to boost tourism in the war-torn region. One of its inspo pics is Anthony Bourdain in sunglasses.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

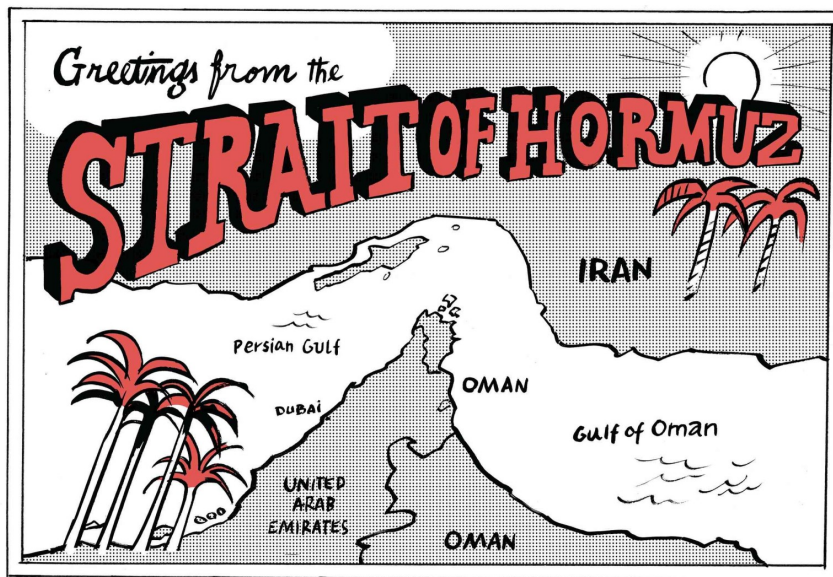


Illustration by João Fazenda

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In August, six months into the escalating war between the United States and Iran (and their various regional allies), the global advertising agency M+C Saatchi put out a press release. It had become the “creative agency partner” for the Ras al-Khaimah tourism authority, following “a highly competitive multi-stage pitch process.” Ras al-Khaimah is among the seven emirates that make up the United Arab Emirates. Its northern coasts, known for their golden-white-sand beaches and mangrove forests, abut the Strait of Hormuz. At least two dozen vessels, many of them commercial tankers carrying crude oil and gas, have been attacked this month as they’ve tried to pass through the strait. But, war or no war, M+C Saatchi would endeavor to lure tourists here.

The press release noted that the Ras al-Khaimah tourism authority was “one of the region’s most ambitious,” but it did not mention the ongoing conflict centered on the nearby strait. Instead—beneath a photograph of smiling young people sitting on sumptuous rugs and drinking colorful beverages on the edge of a cliff overlooking a strait-like body of water—text announced that M+C Saatchi would be launching “a new destination proposition” for the area over the following three years. The agency had been chosen, it explained, for its “belief in Cultural Power” and its ability to bring together “specialists . . . to deliver connected thinking across every touchpoint.”

A separate M+C Saatchi document—this one internal—was a request for proposals, inviting content creators to come up with “a destination campaign that changes how people think” about the war zone, through “a fresh approach to destination storytelling.” It envisioned a campaign with an “observational, journalistic approach” that “feels more like a beautifully crafted documentary than a tourism commercial.” What kind of documentary, exactly? “Think Anthony Bourdain’s curiosity,” the brief went on, under a photo of Bourdain in sunglasses, leaning out of a train window, alongside stock images of starry skies, ocean swimmers, and a mountain climber on a sweeping ridge. “Space. Discovery. Contrast,” the document continued vaguely. Desired tone? “The emotional honesty of a travel journal.” Project bidders were advised to “be comfortable following something unexpected if it reveals a better truth.” The instructions concluded, “Show us moments that couldn’t happen anywhere else.”

One photographer who saw the internal M+C Saatchi document suspected that it had been created by artificial intelligence. “The Bourdain bit was a dead giveaway for A.I.,” he said. “Like, come on.” He went on, “If they want someone to come up with the creative direction and shoot the campaign—in a war zone—they’re gonna need to find a content creator with a solid ring light and a working air-defense system.” He added, “Feels fraught.” President Donald Trump recently told the United Nations that he was considering whether to “annihilate the Islamic Republic” and “drive them into hell,” which, one presumes, would not bode well for photographers or tourists in the region.

Another photographer who reviewed M+C Saatchi’s document said, “If the request is to work in an active war zone, you’d like to think they’d be up

front about it. I had to do a Google search to confirm.” A travel-industry veteran who saw the R.F.P. said, “Not only are you possibly getting bombed, but you’re basically sending hundreds or thousands of other people—tourists—into it. Wild times.”

According to a recent article in *Arabian Business*, a Middle Eastern news outlet that covers real estate, there are “lots of rooms available” in hotels “overlooking the Strait of Hormuz.” A room at the four-star Azimut Hotel Musandam, just across the border, in Oman, was recently going for seventy-two dollars a night. An online writeup of the hotel said, “Ride an Omani Dhow cruising the sea coast in the Strait of Hormuz.” The construction of the Wynn al-Marjan Island, a multibillion-dollar gaming resort on a man-made island sixty miles southwest of the strait, has also slowed. “This picture could shift,” a Wynn executive told investors earlier this year, during a dour earnings call.

Still, tourism around the strait has not completely ground to a halt. A recent review of the budget-tier Ras al-Khaimah Hotel described it as a “perfect staycation,” despite the fact that “the swimming pool is average.” ♦

[The Boards](#)

Bill Irwin Is the O.G. Clown

Fresh from playing the Cyclops in Christopher Nolan's "The Odyssey," the rubber-limbed actor chats about reviving and starring in Molière's "The Imaginary Invalid" on Broadway.

By [Henry Alford](#)

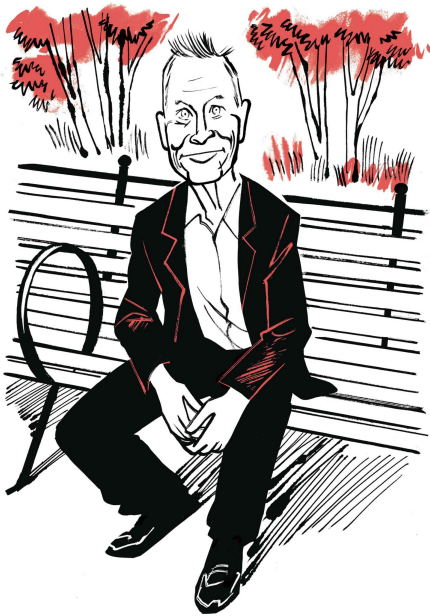


Illustration by João Fazenda

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Seldom does the theatre adequately address the topic of enemas. But Molière's "The Imaginary Invalid," which Bill Irwin has adapted and is starring in on Broadway, will serve all your peristaltic needs: Irwin's hypochondriacal title character encounters a syringe the size of a submachine gun. "Molière pushes the envelope," Irwin said the other day, on a park bench in Union Square, where he and his wife, Martha, and their Ridgeback mix, Zelda, had just dropped off their compost. "I worry that we might have too many enema references, though."

Irwin typically skews self-deprecatory in conversation. He first came on most people's radars through his baggy-pants clowning on Broadway and, later, on "Sesame Street," as Mr. Noodle, radiating a kind of doomed

naïveté. “In clowning, there’s a paradigm,” he said. “Chaplin and Keaton and Harold Lloyd—the young guy who’s going to make it in life, or who’s going to impress his mother or girlfriend.” He went on, “But you get a little older, and you realize, I don’t do that anymore. I’m no use to that genre anymore.” Irwin, who is seventy-six, had on sneakers and a loose blue jacket. As his recent roles suggest, he is better served performing the catalyst or the antagonist. In “The Imaginary Invalid,” his character is trying to marry his daughter off to a doctor against her will. In this summer’s “The Odyssey,” as the Cyclops, he prays to his father, Poseidon, to curse Odysseus and his men after they’ve broken into his cave, blinded him, and, as Irwin put it, “fucked with my cheese.”

When Irwin first met with the film’s director, Christopher Nolan, to discuss playing the Cyclops, he asked if he’d be wearing a mask. “Chris said, ‘Probably.’ He didn’t know yet. He often doesn’t know.” In Nolan’s 2014 film, “Interstellar,” Irwin voiced and did much of the puppetry behind *TARS*, the robot that resembles an enormous metallic KitKat bar. For “The Odyssey,” Irwin, wearing full-body makeup and prosthetics, shot with a thirty-six-foot-tall puppet in a cave in Greece and in a miniature mockup of the cave in Culver City. “Tom Holland said Chris was the most meticulously prepared shoot-from-the-hip director he’d ever worked with,” he recalled.

Irwin initially told Nolan that he might be too old to play the Cyclops. (“You need a guy who doesn’t need kneepads.”) He had no such anxieties with “The Imaginary Invalid”: Molière, who played the title role himself in 1673, wrote the play while he was in a tubercular decline, creating a part in which he could cough a lot while staying in character. Irwin was not rattled by the fact that Molière died after his fourth performance. Asked how his own health is, Irwin replied, “It is a daily question. But good, I think.” He added, “Martha and I ride Citi Bikes, and I’m a more law-abiding cyclist than I normally would be.”

He was pleased to hear, from his “Imaginary Invalid” co-star Rachel Bloom, the co-creator and star of TV’s “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend,” that clowning is huge in L.A. these days. “She said that the same young guys who, eighteen months ago, would have used a different label—‘improv’ or something—are now all ‘I’m hard-core clown,’ ” he noted. His years in the trenches have fostered compassion: “I have great sympathy for anyone who has signed on

to be Ronald McDonald. He's the least tuned-in-to-clown-history example of clowning. I learned at the Ringling school that the lower lip is the expressive lip. Like, tonight, when I do the show, I'll go"—he twisted his lower lip—"because that's the one that defines the expression. Ronald McDonald's makeup is all upper lip, and that's why he's kind of frozen-looking."

He talked about losing himself in a role. "When I watch myself, there's usually more of me than I'd like there to be," he said. Many of his roles feature an element of absence—from his early work as a silent clown to the strangled emotion he brought to assorted Beckett projects to his Tony-winning turn as George in "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" What he holds back is what defines him. When a passerby in the park—a former colleague—called out, "Bill! I saw you!," Irwin replied, "Hey, man! Did you come? You dog, you."

Confused, the man asked, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I'm doing a show."

"No, I mean, I saw you just now. I haven't seen you in decades."

"Well, shit on a stick." ♦

Josh Safdie's Top Ten (or So) N.Y.C. Films

By Bruce Handy.



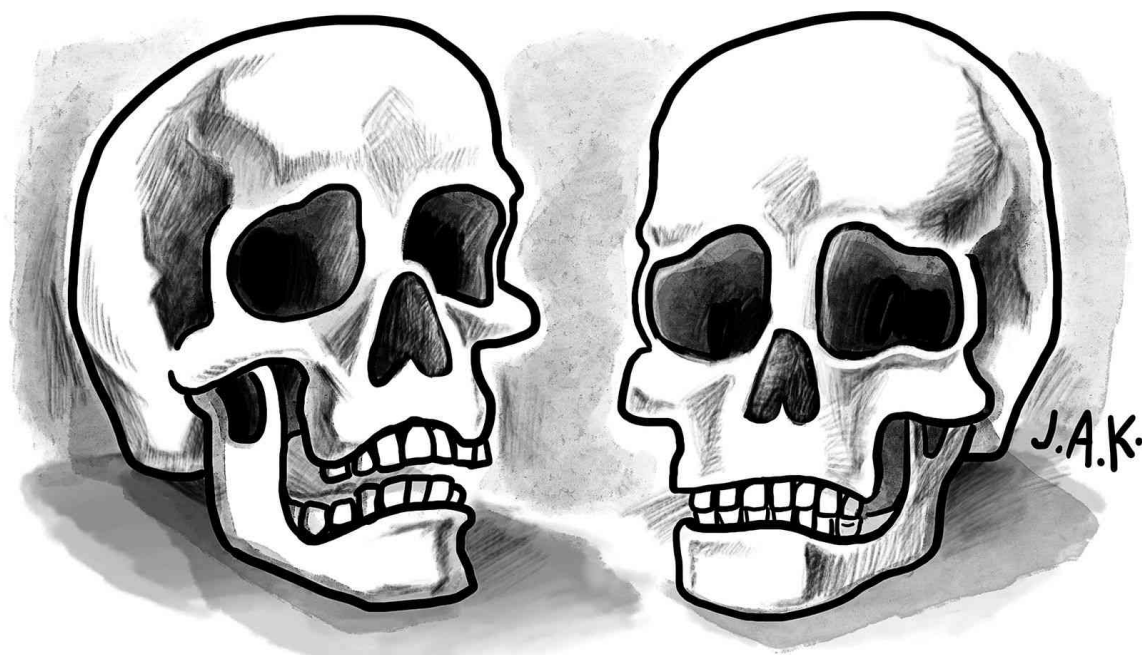
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Josh Safdie directed and co-wrote “Marty Supreme.” He also co-directed (with his younger brother, Benny) and co-wrote “Uncut Gems.” Like the heroes of those films, Safdie is a native New Yorker and a very fast, very entertaining talker. He demonstrated this one recent morning, when he arrived at Two Palms, a sprawling printmaking studio in SoHo where he was set to sign, number, and date a run of silk-screen prints that he’d created in collaboration with the studio’s artisans. The prints, fifty in total (plus multiple artists’ and printers’ proofs), were laid out in tranches of six on carefully prepared worktables. Four Staedtler 2B pencils were ready to go—sharpened and then slightly dulled, to prevent puncturing the paper. (Safdie,

who is particular about writing implements, had test-driven possible pencils earlier.) Small talk was dispensed with quickly, but then the director, forty-two years old with collar-length hair and a beard that stops just shy of scraggly—you could add him to the cover of Dylan and the Band’s “Basement Tapes” LP and no one would notice—began reminiscing about a nearby office he’d had years ago, in the same building as “Greta and Lena.” And bingo: he was off on a ping-ponging monologue.

He brought up Jonas Mekas, the underground filmmaker and co-founder of Anthology Film Archives—a “genius,” but also a “difficult” boss. (Safdie’s screenwriting partner once worked at Anthology as a projectionist.) Mekas led him to Fluxus, the nineteen-sixties arts movement in which Yoko Ono played a prominent part. Fluxus led to “a girl I used to live with” whose father had served as Fluxus’s organizer and later worked with Ono and John Lennon. The father had “this house that’s packed with crap. Not crap. Artifacts.” Among those artifacts was a Nudie suit given to Lennon by his pal Harry Nilsson. “I just had to try it on because I was super skinny then,” Safdie said. (Note: He’s still pretty slender.) “We did a little photo series,” he continued. “Wow. Anyway.”

Twenty minutes after he walked in the door, the signing began. Saloni Shah, a Two Palms employee who otherwise guides the studio’s work with experimental materials, called out Safdie’s progress—“Three of fifty . . . four of fifty . . .”—to keep him on track. The print, titled “Top 10 NYC Films,” had begun life as an eight-and-a-half-by-seven-and-a-half-inch notecard on which the director listed his favorite movies shot in New York, intended as a gift for friends. “I was never going to do just ten,” he admitted. But Safdie kept adding more films, and then still more, in block letters using pens of different colors. He underlined some titles, highlighted others, changed his mind, appended qualifications here and there. The document ended up looking like Grandma’s favorite recipe card, if Grandma had O.C.D. and a pen fetish.



"He was going on about 'Alas, poor Yorick,' and I didn't want to say anything, but I was thinking, Dude, you don't exactly seem to be thriving right now yourself..."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

David Lasry, Two Palms' founder, contrasted the studio's collaboration with Safdie to past work with artists like Chuck Close and Sol LeWitt: "They're conceptual artists. They made rules for making art. Josh started with rules, but then he lost control of it because of his enthusiasm." The task for the printmakers, led by Erik Hougen, Jeremy Ruiz, and Tom Smith, was to reproduce the jottings, corrections, and accidental smears on Safdie's notecard as faithfully as possible, and also to scale it up in size. The process took two months and involved twenty silk-screen passes, plus collage, handstamps, and stencils for a special paint designed to crackle in imitation of Safdie's blots of Wite-Out.

Films you'd expect made the cut ("Taxi Driver," "Do the Right Thing," "Dog Day Afternoon"), along with some you might not ("Cruising," a pair of Troma Z movies). Only a week earlier, Safdie had decided to add the 1978 Richard Gere picture "Bloodbrothers," even though the silk screening had already been completed. Neither Safdie nor Lasry was sure how many films were on the finished prints, or even which ones. "Do I have 'Wild Style' on here?" Safdie asked, referencing the seminal 1983 hip-hop movie. He did. He counted the films, tallying a hundred and fifteen—plus another twelve he had added with asterisks, because they were only partially filmed in New York ("The Godfather," parts I and II) or were, one way or another,

“in communication with” the city (the Hoboken-set “On the Waterfront”). Lasry dryly suggested a new title: “115 of the Top 10 NYC Films.”

The signing completed, Safdie sat with a cup of coffee and mentioned several movies he’d chosen not to include, one being “Manhattan,” a film that he admitted he “didn’t really love.” This wasn’t a knock on Woody Allen; Safdie had included “Broadway Danny Rose” and “Hannah and Her Sisters.” Allen, he said, is “one of the most New York filmmakers.” He paused. “Do I not have ‘Radio Days’ on my list? Oh, my God. I’m so embarrassed if it’s not on.” He got up to check. A moan: “I fucking don’t have ‘Radio Days’!” He consulted with Lasry, and within minutes the team had begun to create a rubber stamp so that “Radio Days” could be added to the finished (and, in some cases, already sold) prints, wedged in tiny and tight, right below “The Apartment.” ♦

The Furry Prima Donna of “La Bohème”

Wanda the Donkey regularly steals the show at the Met’s most popular production. Here’s an inside look at her creative process.

By [Sarah Larson](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

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On Amsterdam Avenue by the Metropolitan Opera House—a day before [Mayor Mamdani](#) announced his new free-opera-tickets initiative—two supernumerary performers in Puccini’s “La Bohème,” the Met’s most popular opera, disembarked from a horse trailer. Wanda, a donkey, and Max, a horse, split their time between a farm upstate and a stable in the Bronx. They’re “Bohème” veterans, and that morning was the season’s first full-dress rehearsal. “Here she is!” the animals’ agent, Nancy Novograd, a silver-haired former lawyer in sunglasses and a dark jacket, said. “There’s Wanda! Isn’t she a cutie? And Max is handsome and magnificent.” Wanda is gray, with white-grizzled accents, upturned ears, and a classically round torso; Max is a glossy bay, with a mane like Moe Howard’s bangs. “And the

personalities are what count, right?” Novograd went on. “It’s always personality. For animals, we call it temperament.” She owns a company called All Tame Animals (“Anything from elephants to insects”), which matches productions with show-biz-ready beasts. “Bold is the key,” she said. “It’s the same with dogs. If they’re not confident, they can’t do it.” Wanda, eighteen, has a temperament of supreme unflappability. “A lot of donkeys won’t let you touch their feet,” Novograd said. “She’s special in that way.” Wanda’s other steady gig is an annual Palm Sunday procession at a church uptown.

In the parking garage, the animals were unfazed by noisy construction and enthusiastic fans. “*Hey*, the stars of the show!” a man said. A handler made a call: “Hi, we have the horse and donkey. Are you ready?” The stars proceeded through the “horse door,” up a ramp, and down a hallway with a red vinyl floor, passing costume racks and photos of “Das Rheingold” and “Turandot.” Onstage, they crossed a set strewn with paper snowflakes where, in Act III, Mimì and Rodolfo would sing “Addio, dolce svegliare” (“Farewell, sweet awakening”) and agree to break up in the spring. The group reached the cavernous stage-left space, where they spend Act I, and stood alongside two-story façades of Parisian apartment buildings and, for the evening’s updated production of Mozart’s “Così Fan Tutte,” Coney Island-style backdrops (hot-dog stand, bearded-lady sideshow). “I’m coming back tonight for ‘Così,’ ” Novograd said. “I’ve got a snake in it.”

Novograd has worked with the Met since 1998, when she was hired “to bring the horses and work with Mr. Zeffirelli, for ‘Carmen.’ ” Once, she recalled, he’d singled out a nervous equestrian: “You! You look like you’re going to your husband’s funeral on the back of another man’s horse!” Novograd laughed. “He was so attentive to detail.” Opera’s animal friendliness has waned a bit. “ ‘Aida’ should have elephants,” Novograd said. Gone are “Carmen” ’s and “Aida” ’s horses and “Hansel and Gretel” ’s cat. Then again, “Così Fan Tutte” usually lacks a snake; this one has a boa constrictor.

A soundproof curtain descended, and the opera began. Only occasionally did a note seep through. Wanda’s handler, a young woman in a Ford Mustang T-shirt, helped Wanda into a pointy red hat with ear holes, a neck ruffle, and a fancy blanket with a “P” on it—Zeffirelli originals—and sat on Mimì’s

fainting couch. She ate a granola bar and checked her phone. Wanda, mildly curious, nuzzled the phone. Wanda plays the donkey of a toy seller, Parpignol (Gregory Warren); she pulls his lavishly painted cart outside Café Momus on Christmas Eve. Warren, a tenor, arrived in a pink harlequin outfit, with knee socks and buckled shoes. His stubble was obscured by a full face of clown makeup. “I’m also in ‘Lincoln in the Bardo,’ ” he said. He picked up a Napoleon-style hat with pink hair attached, put it on his head, and fastened the chin strap. “In this, my line is ‘*Ecco i giocattoli di Parpignol!*’—‘Here are Parpignol’s toys!’ ” he added.

The soundproof curtain came up, and a crew in T-shirts (Knicks, Amoeba Music) loaded out the garret set. The animals and handlers headed to the stage-left wing and waited alongside smartly dressed, whispering children; Warren did some stretching and bouncing. Onstage, two hundred townsfolk sang, and a stilt walker strolled. Then the big moment: Parpignol sang, Wanda pulled the toy cart onstage (guided by her handler, now in a cloak and top hat), and kids swarmed them, clamoring for treats. Wanda remained chill. Back offstage, she waited for Max to drop off Musetta as a pit crew swiftly removed her ruffle and her hat. Soon, with Max, she was back in the trailer, chomping on a peppermint. “Goodbye!” Novograd said. She’d return that night for the snake-handling. Meanwhile, “we have a dog with a late call today on ‘NCIS: New York.’ He’s a fabulous dog, a blue-pit mix, and he is beloved wherever he goes.” ♦

Reporting & Essays

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The Danger of Getting Too Close to a Source

Richard Darman was my source in the Reagan and Bush Administrations—and my best friend.

By [Bob Woodward](#)



Darman in his White House office, in 1985. Photograph by Diana Walker / Getty Images

“Woodward, Darman,” he said. It was how every phone call from him began over two decades. Richard G. Darman was what I call a “hide in plain sight” source, because it was widely known that we were close friends. Not known, but perhaps suspected, was that he was a pipeline for me into the White House during the Presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush.

I first met Darman in 1973, during the Watergate affair, which I was covering for the *Washington Post* with my reporting partner Carl Bernstein. Darman and I were both thirty, and both obsessed with work and with the dramatic political history we were witnessing. At that time, Darman was a top aide to the Attorney General, Elliot Richardson, who had refused to carry out Richard Nixon’s order to fire Archibald Cox, the Watergate special prosecutor. Richardson resigned and Nixon fired Cox. This was the firestorm

called the Saturday Night Massacre, a crucial event that helped lead to Nixon's resignation, on August 9, 1974. Darman regularly filled me in on the behind-the-scenes story, its color and meaning.

Darman was a Harvard graduate, an overachiever, clearly driven, cerebral, witty, and tenacious. He believed in the good that both he and the government could do for the country. He was an idealist and a cynic. He once told the *New York Times* that his only hobby was work.

We had countless long lunches together—Saturday or Sunday—at the Madison Hotel, across the street from the *Post*, discussing government, journalism, and ourselves. I felt like I was getting a master class in how government really operated. Plus, many scoops. In later years, Darman would drive out on weekends to our country house near Annapolis, Maryland, to spend large parts of the day with me and my wife, the journalist Elsa Walsh, who was particularly fond of him. Some people found him arrogant, but I loved his comfortable confidence as a friend and a source. It was part of what made him so extraordinary and valuable. He knew how to turn on the charm, and he did for both Elsa and me.

The most celebrated source of my career was Mark Felt, the No. 2 man at the F.B.I. during the Nixon years, who died in 2008. I referred to him as Deep Throat. But if Felt was on one end of the source spectrum—a secret source for thirty-three years, who operated entirely in the shadows, deeply paranoid and careful about what information he provided me and how he did it—Darman was his opposite. Flagrant and out in the open, he casually spoke to me about the most sensitive and high-level decision-making inside the Reagan and Bush White Houses.

So much of the U.S. government ran on paper. What Darman understood better than most was the *flow* of paper, what it said and what it left out. Darman introduced me to one of my most important channels of information: the staff secretary. “A key to understanding what goes on in any White House,” he told me, “is the staff secretary.”

The position sounded to me like a paper pusher, a mindless cog in the bureaucracy. In fact, as Darman tutored me, the staff secretary sees and controls all information that goes to the President. Darman asked to be, and

was appointed, staff secretary during Reagan's first term. In that period, he knew virtually everything important about Presidential business, behavior, and decisions. He was known as a master of policy detail and made himself the indispensable man in the Administration. His information checked out. Darman was a protégé of James Baker, who was chief of staff to Reagan. In Reagan's second term, when Baker became Treasury Secretary, Darman became his deputy. And from 1989 to 1993, under Bush, he was the director of the Office of Management and Budget.

From critical national-security information to the colorful office tales he shared, Darman provided me with a gold mine of information. I interviewed him in at least fifty-eight meetings or phone conversations. I have boxes filled with hundreds of pages of notes on our discussions. After our most important conversations, as is my practice, I typed a memo of one to six pages, laying out in detail what he'd said.

Darman was hardly an elegant presence. He cut his own hair and clearly did not care what clothes he wore. He was pudgy until he went on one of his intensive weight-loss programs. When he lost weight, he would rarely buy new clothes; he just tightened his belt ever tighter.

Darman was one of the smartest people I have ever interviewed. He had analytical brilliance and analytical patience. He had a hawklike ability to zero in on weaknesses—in policy, in people, and in his own Administration.

Reagan delegated a lot of his authority, creating a power struggle of wannabe Presidents among his advisers. Each one struggled to secure greater power for himself by isolating others from the President, Darman said. Baker was one of the most enduring if not triumphant of those competing for power and proximity to Reagan. "Jim Baker has to stop trying to be President," Darman said to me of his mentor.

Darman had a cool disdain for everyone. Over the years, I do not believe I ever heard him voice much respect or admiration for any of his superiors—Reagan, Bush, or Baker. In 1987, Darman told me, "For four years in the Reagan Administration, I lived in a world of delegated authority without a fully engaged President. With a team of competing Presidents trying to kill

each other off in secret.” Reagan was forgetful but not necessarily cognitively impaired, Darman said.

As Baker’s protégé, Darman had participated in these internecine and often wretched White House wars. He told me that his role, which was highly secret, would have been described in earlier eras as a “hatchet man.” Baker periodically deployed Darman to discredit and even destroy Baker’s rivals for Presidential attention in the Administration. Chief among those rivals were the Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Reagan’s top aide Edwin Meese, and the C.I.A. director Bill Casey. I knew I was being used sometimes, but that did not mean that the information I gleaned was not accurate.

Darman maintained that he executed these “hits” with hard facts, rarely embellished. He was a careful man. Over the first eighteen months of the Reagan Administration, he said, Haig had been hanging himself with his ego and impulsiveness. Darman just helped speed up the process by leaking precise, detailed accounts of Haig’s behavior at meetings, privately telling selected reporters and others that the Secretary of State was a “joke,” an “ass-kisser,” a “danger to the Republic,” and even “insane.” Haig finally resigned in 1982.

The next target was Meese, Reagan’s Presidential counsellor and close confidant. Darman said that he spread stories of Meese’s ignorance and quasi-scandalous activity over ten thousand dollars in moving expenses that Meese might have improperly reported to the Internal Revenue Service as supplemental income. Nothing came of it.

In 1983, Baker and Casey became embroiled in a public dispute over who had clandestinely obtained Jimmy Carter’s briefing book for the 1980 Presidential debate. Darman directed a barrage of stealth media fire at Casey. He dismissed Casey as a hopelessly out-of-touch intelligence chief who risked too much on behalf of the President and undermined the legitimacy of the C.I.A. and covert action. “A naïve conservative who has a kind of nineteen-twenties view that you can preach away communism,” Darman said about Casey, in a 1985 interview.

The hardest of Darman's targets to dislodge was the First Lady, Nancy Reagan. While Darman poured scorn on her in private, describing her to me as a "mean bitch," he could not find a way to drive a stake into her heart. He wanted to reduce her influence with the President as much as possible. He couldn't understand the basis for their marriage. Reagan had clearly been hurt by his father's alcoholism and unemployment. The President had an emotional wall within him, Darman concluded, and no one knew whether Nancy got through that wall. If so, she would have been the only one who did, he said.

Although Darman could be slashing and unforgiving, he was a generous friend to me over the years. We had one of our long lunches in April, 1982. I had been offered an on-air job at CBS television and was seriously considering it just for a change from a life writing newspaper pieces and books. I was also at a real crossroads. The year before, when I was the editor of the *Post's* Metro section, I had made a mistake that insured that I would not succeed Ben Bradlee as executive editor of the *Post*. One of the reporters under my wing, Janet Cooke, had won a Pulitzer Prize for an article headlined "Jimmy's World," about an eight-year-old heroin addict, which turned out to have been fabricated. It was a giant mistake on my part, and I took responsibility. The incident reinforced in my mind, and to others at the *Post*, that I was not cut out to be an editor. It was also a moral failing. If I had tried to save the child first, the fraud would have been identified.

As an editor, I gave the journalists in my unit an enormous amount of running room, but demanded more and more from them. "Let's peel back more layers. We haven't gotten to the core yet," I would say. "Go back. Interview them four more times." I wanted maximum-impact stories. Some journalists called being under me a "gilded graveyard," because their stories were unlikely to make the paper more than once or twice a year. That pressure, coupled with my lack of supervision and distraction with my own reporting, had led to my spectacular failure with Janet Cooke. One day, Don Graham, the publisher of the paper, took me out to lunch and said, You'll always have a home here, but you'll never be executive editor. I understood.

Darman sketched out on paper a comparison of all the advantages and disadvantages of continuing to work at the *Post* while writing books, versus moving to TV. He wrote up nine categories to compare, including

“challenge,” “perceived external success,” “impact,” and “skill level.” For “impact,” he gave the *Post* a 4, versus only a 2 for TV.

That was the Darman I knew. The opposite of a bare-knuckled partisan, he was all brains and elbows, a pushy strategist with an unconcealed take-charge persona. What he should have told me, and maybe wanted to, was that I would not be any good on television.

We were two sides of the same coin, different but similar in many ways. My young daughter Tali and Darman’s son Willie were the same age and became friends. They often accompanied us on our weekend outings, lunches and dinners, playing together while Darman and I talked for hours.

At one point over the years, Darman said that he was appointing me to be the godfather to his son Jonathan. I was surprised and worried about the inappropriateness of a journalist becoming godfather to the son of a close source. But I could not find a way to voice my objections. I said nothing. The problem was that Darman was my best friend and a source. He was the closest friend I ever had who was not also a reporter.

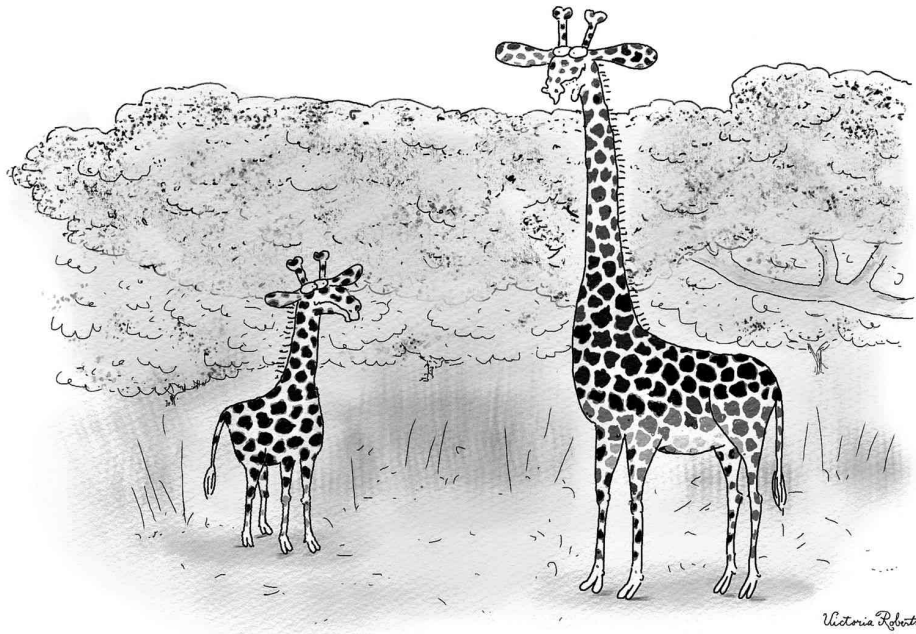
I should have realized the danger. But the information flow and the time with Darman was so valuable and at times exciting that it started to have a narcotic effect. We had such fun. I didn’t want to lose him or his information channel.

In 1981, little more than two months after entering the White House, Reagan was shot by John W. Hinckley, Jr., in an effort to impress Jodie Foster, who played a teen-age prostitute in the film “Taxi Driver.” The bullet lodged about an inch from the President’s heart. He was under anesthesia during a two-hour emergency surgery at George Washington University Hospital. Bush, who was then Vice-President, was returning from Texas that afternoon aboard an Air Force jet that was not equipped with advanced voice communications.

“Honey, I forgot to duck,” Reagan reportedly told his wife before going into surgery. He told his doctors, “Please tell me you’re Republican.” Reagan’s courage and sunny optimism won widespread praise.

It was nine months after the assassination attempt—a good indication of how long it takes to find out what really happens during a crisis—that I learned of, and wrote a story for the *Post* about, the frightening few hours after the President was shot. Before then, the public hadn't known where his nuclear-code card had been. It was Darman who eventually revealed to me that the F.B.I. had taken possession of the secret code card, which Reagan usually carried in his wallet, during their evidence-gathering process after the shooting. The card's loss had caused a serious dispute. The President's military aide—the officer who travels with the President carrying the top-secret handbook of military options, including nuclear-strike options—fought a losing battle against the F.B.I. agents at the hospital. The Attorney General, William French Smith, who was stationed in the White House Situation Room, instructed the F.B.I. to take control of the card. Charles Ruff, the U.S. Attorney for D.C., told me, “There was a confrontation on the scene with the military adviser or aide. It was resolved to my best knowledge within thirty-six to forty-eight hours.” There was a lot of discomfort and uncertainty, however, during those hours.

White House officials worked hard to assure me that there had been no loss of control over the U.S. nuclear arsenal, no real crisis. The communications director, David Gergen, told me, “At no time during the events of March 30th was the national security of the United States impaired. Beyond that, we have no comment.” But to me the incident raised a plethora of questions about how well the emergency system operated in a time of crisis, and all the ways it could have failed. I recalled sitting in French-history class as a Yale undergraduate on the afternoon of November 22, 1963, when the professor was handed a note during his lecture. It was almost unheard of to interrupt a lecture, and it seemed rude. The students stirred uncomfortably at the clear breach of protocol. The professor opened the note and read to the class, “President Kennedy and Vice-President Johnson have been shot in Dallas.” There was a pause. “Class dismissed.” We filed out and I went to a small eating hall and watched television. It was quickly apparent that the report about Johnson was inaccurate. First reports often are wrong.



"And when you grow up you, too, will have this fabulous view."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

When I spoke to Darman about Reagan's shooting and the debacle over the nuclear-code card, to my surprise, he agreed with me on the dire risks. "A wounded President on its face jeopardizes the national security," he said. "But this system doesn't work, and the Administration knows it has problems and there is no more crucial sensitive system that has to work." I published what Darman told me in the paper without naming him.

On the day Reagan was shot, the Defense Secretary, Caspar W. Weinberger, had, on his own authority, publicly raised the readiness of U.S. forces from the normal *DEFCON* 5 to *DEFCON* 4 on the standard scale of five levels of alert for defense conditions. My anxieties heightened.

During a conversation in June, 1985, Darman seemed tired and frustrated. He told me that he was going to leave government. I doubted that. After a discussion of the President's tax policy and the Soviet Union, I turned the subject back again to what Reagan was like immediately after the shooting.

My handwritten notes from that interview offer one of the clearest examples of how every detail and raw emotion is compiled over months and even years of reporting and used to set the scene in my books. I was able to take readers inside the room with the President as he returned to the White House

after a two-week stay in the hospital. In my book “Veil,” published in 1987, I wrote:

The next morning the President limped from his bedroom to an adjoining room in the upstairs residence. He emerged slowly, walking with the hesitant steps of an old man. He was pale and disoriented. Those who observed were frightened. Reagan hobbled to a seat in the Yellow Oval Room, started to sit down and fell the rest of the way, collapsing into his chair.

He spoke a few words in a raspy whisper and then had to stop to catch his breath. He looked lost. The pause wasn't enough, and his hands reached for an inhalator, a large masklike breathing device sitting next to his chair. As he sucked in oxygen, the room was filled with a wheezing sound.

Reagan could concentrate for only a few minutes at a time, then he faded mentally and physically, his wounded lung dependent on the inhalator. During the following days, he was able to work or remain attentive only an hour or so a day.

Meese, Baker, [the deputy chief of staff Michael] Deaver and the few others who were granted access to the President were gravely concerned. This was supposed to be the beginning of the Reagan presidency, but at moments it seemed the end of Reagan, the Reagan they knew. At times he was overcome with pain, he seemed in constant discomfort. His hearty, reassuring voice sounded permanently injured, his words gravelly and uncertain. His aides began to consider the possibility that his was going to be a crippled presidency. That it would, at its very beginning, devolve into something similar to Woodrow Wilson's at the end, a caretaker presidency, and they reduced—or elevated—to a team of Mrs. Wilson's.

Fortunately, Reagan did recover. But to this day I have always focussed on the vulnerabilities of Presidents. That is in part why I try to maintain relationships with Secret Service agents, and with F.B.I. and C.I.A. officials. They see and hear so much firsthand.

Darman was willing, even eager at times, to talk about the most sensitive intelligence matters, including N.S.A. intercepts and covert C.I.A. operations. He was always careful not to talk about matters that would harm national security, I believed, but he would go right up to the edge—a reporter's dream source.

“Recently the intelligence man ran in and said, ‘You got to read this,’ ” Darman told me on a Sunday afternoon in March, 1985. It was an intercept from the Japanese, outlining what U.S. negotiators were going to say at an upcoming meeting.

During a weekend trip to Maryland, Darman shared with me one of his favorite Reagan stories. In October, 1981, Reagan was pushing hard for Congress to approve the sale of E-3A *AWACS* (Airborne Warning and Control System) aircraft to Saudi Arabia. The sale totalled \$8.5 billion and was the largest U.S. arms package ever proposed for a non-*NATO* country at that time. I remembered it was reported in the paper, I said. When the President was informed that he had won the *AWACS* vote, he said prayerfully, “Thank God.” Correct, Darman said, but what the report left out was what he said next. After Darman and Deaver delivered the news of the vote to the President, Reagan said, “Whew! Ever feel like you shit a pineapple?”

Darman understood and appreciated the extraordinary power of the Presidency. And, like so many, he felt its gravitational pull. He dreamed of the office for himself. In 1992, during Bush's Presidency, Darman told me that he was giving thought to running for President in 1996. This was the first time I had ever heard someone voice such an ambition with real seriousness.

“If Buchanan could do it, why not me?” Darman said, referring to Nixon's aide Pat Buchanan. Darman realized that he had no electoral base but argued that he could present an economic plan and defend it. “Bush can't defend the plan,” he said. “I could never be elected, but I could get exposure for it.”

I did not know what to say, so I said nothing. Even people you think you know well can surprise you with their ambition. I thought it showed his love

of power and attention, and his genuine motivation to fix a lot of what he saw as wrong.

Bush had become President in 1989, and had appointed James Baker to be Secretary of State and Darman to be director of the O.M.B. This made Darman one of the most powerful unelected officials in the government, involved in the main financial and strategic decisions of the Administration. The O.M.B. prepares the President's budget, essentially setting the framework for key federal spending and policy priorities. It gave Darman a chance to get his fingers in every pie.

I was hardly on Bush's Christmas-card list. He declined my requests for an interview, for reasons I could readily understand. During the two highly charged years of Watergate, Bush, who was then the chairman of the Republican National Committee, spent many months denying the significance of the scandal, before Nixon finally resigned. In early August, 1974, when the so-called "smoking gun" tape surfaced, showing Nixon ordering the Watergate coverup, Nixon's counsellor Dean Burch reported that Bush "broke out in assholes and shit himself to death!"

In the months leading up to Bush's attempt to win reelection in 1992, he had been flying high with the great success of the first Gulf War. His approval rating was nearly ninety per cent. And yet he was trailing his main opponent, Bill Clinton, on economic issues.

"I'm being hung out to dry by the political ambitions of George Bush," Darman said forlornly one August evening, when he arrived for dinner at our home near Annapolis. He was wearing a jazzy sports coat but looking dour.

"Very down," I wrote afterward, at the top of my memo. "Says directly that he worries that the U.S. government is in trouble, that the economy is in trouble. Individuals are correcting their balance sheets, but not the U.S. government."

"I'm supposed to be the chief balancer of the budget," Darman said, "and I'm not doing it." He seemed visibly depressed. Darman said he realized that over the past several years he'd struck what he called a "Faustian bargain"

with Reagan and then Bush. He confided in Elsa and me that at times he'd gone along with Administration decisions that he believed—and in some cases knew—were irresponsible, and now he feared that he'd compromised himself and sold off his soul. "I don't think I have," he added hesitantly.

"He has to keep asking himself, and recently asked himself again," I wrote in my notes.

The White House's bipartisan budget deal of 1990, when Darman persuaded Bush to break his "no new taxes" pledge to voters, was still overshadowing everything. In March, 1992, Bush admitted publicly that he made a mistake raising taxes. Darman felt "intellectually and morally" that it was wrong to issue this statement renouncing the budget deal. Darman said that Baker told him, "That admission is the worst political mistake I've ever seen." In the "Baker lexicon," Darman added, "there are never mistakes. You never say it was a mistake, period."

Darman told us that he'd gone to the President and offered to step down. "If you want me to resign, I will," he said. "I will be out of here in thirty seconds." He leaned across to me and said he didn't want to "pull a Richardson" and resign. A hint of his humor broke through the gloom.

"You really let him off the hook," I said, of Bush. "You should have put the monkey on Bush's back."

"I've been discredited," Darman said, shaking his head. Why stay on? To get my good name back, he said, answering himself. People often ask if I'm doing it for the power. I don't think so, he said. If I quit I couldn't do good things. There is good left to do, he continued, as if talking himself into it.

"Just the other day I asked if I am kidding myself," he said, spiralling into gloom again. He worried that he was becoming someone who would walk over anyone to achieve his objectives.

Darman said forcefully that the country needed a leader with "1. Vision; 2. Substantive Knowledge; 3. Guts."

“Clearly that person is not Bush,” I wrote in my notes. “Over all, this evening, Darman is mourning whether he has lost himself and his idealism. He keeps saying, ‘I feel I have more integrity than anyone realizes,’ as if it were being questioned.”

“Well,” Elsa said, “when a lie is told, something deceptive is done, you ought to resign.”

“If I had to resign when someone lied, I’d have to resign every day,” Darman replied.

Elsa left the table for her daily swim, and, most likely, to give Darman and me time to talk alone. But Darman followed her out and sat by the pool as she swam. When she paused, Dick would talk about regrets in his personal and professional life.

Elsa and I were both shaken by his sadness. At least he was aware. So many people make a deal with the devil, compromising their principles, and are not able to acknowledge it to others or to themselves. I admired him for confessing it.

Despite his fraying emotional state, I continued to push Darman for more insight into Bush’s economic policy. It was growing clearer that this would be the decisive issue in the election. Editors at the *Post* gave me the O.K. to report a four-part series on the economy. I told Darman.

“To come out before the election?” Darman asked, sounding bewildered and slightly worried.

Yes, next month, I said.

“That will mean the focus is Bush,” Darman said.

“Yes,” I told him. “I volunteered for it, as I have lots about the subject. The economy is topic A. I can write something that is factual, serious, and substantive.” I added that I would observe the deep-background rule of our interviews and reflect Darman’s point of view as budget director.

“There is not much I can do about it,” he said. “Any series certainly will not be in Bush’s interest.”

As you know, I have done extensive reporting and talked to many others in the Administration, I said. “I owe it to myself, and in some sense I owe it to you” to write what we know to be true.

“I hoped this wouldn’t be until after the election,” Darman said, but added, “You are free to do what you have to do.”

I knew that anything I wrote on Bush’s flailing economic plan would implicate Darman. He was at the center of the fractious and indecisive debates among members of Bush’s team and top aides over what the President’s economic policy should be.

“The reality is that the Clinton program is a sham and Clinton will be worse,” Darman told me. “He has gotten away with murder [on his economic proposals] and will be worse when he is President. He will bend to the left, worse than Bush has bent to the right.”

Darman’s tone suggested that he saw my focus on Bush and not Clinton as unfair, almost an injustice. “There is nothing like you on the other side,” Darman exclaimed, meaning that no one was examining Clinton’s economic policies.

I cannot control that, I said. I had to focus on the reporting I had done.

“You can talk about your own moral obligation,” Darman added miserably, suggesting that I was failing it here. He knew I was a bit of a crusader and viewed getting the facts and reporting as the most serious undertaking. I knew I could be self-righteous, often unpleasantly so.

“I was unequivocally led to believe it was for after the election,” Darman said. “You said you were doing a book not to come out for two to three years.”

Yes, but I am also a reporter for the *Post*. I had published numerous stories for which Darman had been a key secret source. The main difference was

that he was not individually or directly implicated as a subject in those stories.

This is a practical decision, I told him. As a journalist, I have an obligation to publish the economic series before the election, I said. It's too important to wait for the book.

Getting to the heart of the matter, Darman said, there is a conflict between our "friendship" and the "journalistic obligation."

I agree, I said.

The problem was that Darman and I had become so close and had so many discussions that we'd grown complacent. It was the "Dick and Bob Show." I believe Darman felt that because we were such close friends he could say anything and I would protect him from news where he was the subject.

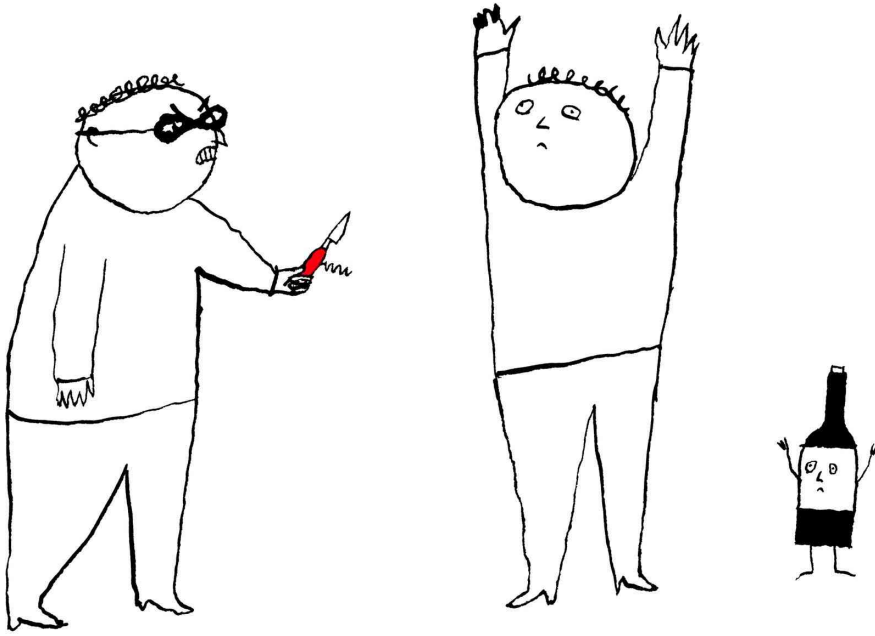
My constitution, however unfortunate, is to report good, verifiable information no matter who you are. I am a journalist. It is not just a job but who I am. I also see what a moralist I can be.

Darman said he was in a bind. He either urged things that were not accepted by Bush or "was a willing party to the decisions." This is the Faustian bargain I made, he said, to keep his position. I've compromised myself, he repeated.

I said I would contact him in several days to outline the stories in case he wanted to add something, repeating that I had talked to dozens of people about Bush's economic policy. This wasn't just about him.

That was September 26, 1992. A week later, October 3rd, I called him at 11:30 *a.m.*

Darman asked, Can you give me a summary of the four articles? They would start to appear in the *Post* the next day.



Cartoon by Roland High

The first article was about the origin of the “Read my lips: no new taxes” pledge, I said—the appeal of not raising taxes. The second was about how the no-new-tax pledge scuttled the mission of reducing the budget deficit—a key goal of Darman’s. The third article, I explained, was on how Bush decided to declare the pledge a “mistake” and urge new tax increases. It said that responsible economic policy required more revenue for the federal government—a position Darman had argued for passionately. And the fourth was about how Bush’s advisers fought bitterly and were split on economic policy. They had failed to develop a policy after nearly four years because of personal animosity and turf fights that were fierce even by Washington’s standards. It was a full dose of backstage conflict.

I appreciate knowing that, Darman said. He thought the fourth article, about the hostility and infighting among Bush’s team on economic policy—himself, the Treasury Secretary, Nicholas F. Brady, and the Council of Economic Advisers chairman, Michael J. Boskin—was “gratuitous.”

“I can’t understand the relevance of putting these stories out that hurt me and hurt Bush,” he said, and added, “Bush has lost the election anyway.”

Polls showed that Bill Clinton was well ahead of Bush. And yet it still astonished me to hear Darman acknowledge that he expected Bush to lose.

He was on a sinking ship. Publication of an article like this, Darman said, “may make it barely possible for me to stay in office.” He added that he thought writing about personal conflicts within Bush’s team was counter to the serious purposes I claimed in my journalism and would “only highlight the idea of ‘throw the bums out.’ ”

“I am sorry it has come to this,” he added with a sigh.

At the time, I was self-righteous. Darman was telling me that publication would hurt him and his career and that, as his friend, I shouldn’t publish. I was arguing that it was my job to publish and that I would. “How did I turn out to be the lucky man so you can prove, ‘I can attack friends?’ ” he asked.

That was painful to hear. It was not my purpose, but I could clearly see how it could look as though I was trying to prove my journalistic chops and independence. In a way, I was. The “just doing my job” argument would only go so far. The truth is, I saw a chance to write about the center of what was really going on in a way that I believed no one else had or was going to do. I reminded Darman that he had suggested I do a project on the economy.

“There is no enforceable contract on these things,” he said.

I knew that was right. My editors and I had the freedom to decide what to publish.

I said that the two of us had grown too close, given our jobs as journalist and high government official. “It was dangerous,” I said. “At times like boys playing with fire.”

“No,” Darman said, “the two of us did not get too close. Despite the portrait and the charges that I am Machiavellian and manipulative, in fact, I’m a fairly simple, ordinary person, and friendships are important.”

I believed that our friendship was as important to him as it was to me. I did not believe that he was “ordinary.” I don’t think he believed it about himself. He had spent his whole life proving he was not ordinary and had succeeded. He was a formidable force, and everyone knew it.

Sometimes people have a vision of themselves that just doesn't fit with reality. For some sources, reading their words and descriptions in my articles or books can be like holding up a mirror to themselves, and they don't always like or agree with what they see. The same goes for reporters. I have ambivalent feelings about the public portrait of myself as "all business" and cold, even though, when it comes to journalism, I want to appear distant and factual. But, when it comes to personal relationships, I hope to be the opposite—warm, caring, and attentive.

I had seen how Ben Bradlee's friendship with John F. Kennedy had tainted the *Post's* reporting on anything related to the Kennedys. I did not want my friendships to color or water down my reporting. Darman said his wife, Kathleen, held the view that all the policy abstractions he and I focussed on so urgently were "hypocritical." We should focus on the relationship between the two of us, she said. For her, that was so much more important than government policy and political discussions. But Darman and I would not be who we were if we weren't consumed by our work, the politics of the day, and ourselves.

"I try to figure out if it puts me in a position so I have to resign within a week," Darman said. "I'm going to be asking the question: what public interest was served in getting rid of Darman? It's going to be hard."

"Yes, it is going to be hard," I agreed.

My series on Bush's economic policies ran above the fold on the front page of the *Post* from October 4 to October 7, 1992, a month before the election. It was a devastating look inside the Administration's making of economic policy, and included the type of policy detail and all-encompassing scenes usually found in a book. The New York *Times* brought in two of its heaviest hitters, Maureen Dowd and Thomas Friedman, to write about my economic series. "Political circles were consumed with talk of recent articles in The Washington Post by Bob Woodward that offered a highly negative look at the troubled economic policies of the President's first term, compliments of Bush insiders," they wrote. The President "and his family were said to be furious about what they saw as the betrayals of senior aides who were willing to criticize Mr. Bush in articles published only a month before the election." They zeroed in on my sources, too: "Because the Post articles

strongly reflected the point of view of Mr. Darman and because Mr. Darman and Mr. Woodward are good friends, many in the Administration assumed that the budget director was the source of the biting commentary.”

A lead editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* described the series as “transparently Dick Darman’s attempt to set the tone of all future histories of economic policy during the Bush years.”

A syndicated column by Rowland Evans and Robert Novak pointed out, “Many argue that Darman has used the nation’s most renowned investigative reporter to relate his version of the budget deal at a moment of maximum political peril for the President.” I did not agree with this. I think Darman was really telling his version as he experienced it.

Clinton had centered his campaign on this very issue. Or as his lead strategist, James Carville, put it to the campaign staff, “It’s the economy, stupid.” As Darman had correctly forecast, Clinton beat Bush, winning 370 electoral votes to Bush’s 168.

My friendship with Darman was now over. This was hard for me and Darman, but also hard for Elsa and our children. Elsa urged me to try to reconcile. My daughter Tali and Dick’s sons could not understand why their fathers couldn’t simply “get over” the rupture. Fights among friends happen. Disagreements happen. Apologize. Get over it. Move on.

Four years later, in 1996, Darman published a book called “Who’s in Control? Polar Politics and the Sensible Center.” Darman sent Elsa and me an inscribed copy. “For Bob Woodward and Elsa Walsh, With appreciation for years of friendship. Best, Dick Darman.”

I was completely surprised. He was reaching out after four years. In his book, he revisited 1992, saying, “The end of the Bush term was not pretty.” He named me without naming me. “A longtime reporter-friend violated both a specific promise and a basic trust with a regrettable public account of the administration’s trials,” he wrote. This was milder than I deserved. The anonymity muted his criticism significantly. I am sure this was his point. He could have named me and really issued a full blast. But he did not do what I had done.

For the last ten years of his life, Darman stayed out of the public eye. He withdrew. The hurt he caused Bush was well known. We did not speak for more than a decade.

In 2007, at Elsa's strong urging, I contacted Darman's family after learning he was in Georgetown Hospital, probably dying. At 9 *p.m.* on Tuesday, December 11th, I went to see him. He was in intensive care. I had no plan about what to say—maybe that we'd had so many great years of friendship and we should remember them. I would always value those years. What does a bad ending to a friendship really mean? Does it nullify the friendship? Extinguish it from memory? For me, it did not.

Darman was not conscious or was so heavily sedated that he did not open his eyes or talk. As he lay there with every tube and monitor imaginable going in and out of his body, I talked, voicing deep regret that I had been out of the picture for so long. I let you down, I told him.

I never sought to repair the friendship. In the years since the articles, I had held my stubborn ground. I have never felt so stupid.

That painful experience changed my approach to friendship. I was more careful. My wife and daughters say I retreated within myself a little when I was engaging a source. If I became close to someone I might write about, I tried to make it clear that reporting was my business. Life was not off the record. Nor could it be or should it be.

In the hospital room, I approached his bed and kissed his forehead. He died the next month, on January 25, 2008. I never had another friend like Dick Darman. ♦

This is drawn from “[Secrets: A Reporter's Memoir](#).”

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

In a loft ten floors above the street-level din of downtown Los Angeles, Rafael Jaime, a thirty-seven-year-old Ph.D. candidate studying medieval and early modern English literature at U.C.L.A., was preparing, for the fourth time in seven days, to spend an evening lobbying for votes within the Democratic Socialists of America. The loft, which he shares with two roommates and a three-legged dog, has polished concrete floors, amber lighting, and mid-century-modern furniture. It was September 1st, and Jaime, who is just under six feet tall and sturdily built, with a thick beard and piercings in both ears, was at a dining-room table, staring at a spreadsheet of five hundred and forty-one registered D.S.A. members in L.A. Each person's name was color-coded to indicate the likelihood that, by midnight, they could be persuaded to support an endorsement of Nithya Raman, a progressive city councilwoman who was seeking the D.S.A.'s backing in her mayoral campaign against the Democratic incumbent, Karen Bass. Imagine, Jaime told me, "what it would mean to the organization to have a candidate running for mayor—the amount of people that would bring in."

By the standards of national political organizations, the D.S.A., with just under a hundred and thirty thousand members, is tiny. (The National Rifle Association, by comparison, is fifty times the size.) And yet, in the year since Zohran Mamdani, a member, was elected mayor of New York, a hundred and twenty-three D.S.A.-backed candidates have won primaries at every level—including nineteen nominees for Congress and five for statewide office—a breakthrough on par with the Tea Party's in 2010. What makes this momentum so striking is that the D.S.A.'s process for endorsing candidates is largely left to local chapters. Whereas the Democratic Party employs highly paid consultants to vet office-seekers and tailor campaign messaging, the D.S.A. relies on an unusually active and internally disputatious political culture; its members are forever arguing over which candidates to back, and under what conditions. Jaime thought that the conditions were right for a West Coast version of the Mamdani phenomenon. As in New York last year, L.A.'s sitting mayor is deeply unpopular, and the D.S.A., whose members occupy four of the fifteen seats on the Los Angeles City Council, has been slowly growing in influence.

“There’s often a focus on the purity of D.S.A.,” Jaime said. “But it’s about power.”

That Jaime thought the D.S.A. should be involved in elections at all put him on one side of a division in the organization. Within the left wing of the D.S.A.—arguably the leftmost extreme of American politics—are caucuses with names like Red Star and Communist Caucus, whose members tend to be focussed more on goals like radicalizing labor unions and expounding on Marxist theory than on engaging in “mass politics.” This summer, one of the D.S.A.’s two national co-chairs, Megan Romer, was widely ridiculed after appearing on Fox News and cheerfully affirming that socialists wanted to abolish ICE, national borders, and the Senate. A member of another D.S.A. caucus told me, “If you’re asking me how to make sense of Megan, my answer would be that she’s in Red Star and that’s how people in Red Star think.”

In Los Angeles, Jaime’s faction, the Socialist Majority Caucus, or S.M.C., had recently come into conflict with another influential caucus in the L.A. chapter, Groundwork, which, in August, announced that it would be opposing any endorsement of Raman. Groundwork’s members typically shared the S.M.C.’s enthusiasm for supporting far-left candidates. But, in a lengthy statement, they argued that Raman, an urban planner and housing advocate from Silver Lake who joined the D.S.A. in 2019, in the lead-up to her run for city council, “tends to dissemble” when asked whether she is a socialist. Raman was not “afraid of democratic socialism as a label or a political ideology,” the group noted, but, rather, “she does not believe in socialism as an ideology, method of analysis, or political movement.”

This debate, which had unfolded during the summer, often in prickly essays in an online publication called *Geese*, could sound esoteric, but it contained an essential question about political identity. How much ideological compromise was the D.S.A. willing to accept for political clout? “Nithya is just not a socialist,” Alejandra Quintero, a member of Groundwork who works in communications at a nonprofit, told me, noting that Raman rarely talked about the problems of billionaire influence or wealth inequality. “It’s, like, can you even name the opposition?” Most people seemed to acknowledge that, if the endorsement vote was held among only the most active D.S.A. members, Raman would lose. (The chapter’s bylaws require a

sixty-per-cent super-majority of members to vote for an endorsement.) For Jaime and the S.M.C. organizers, the trick was to reach as many members as possible, including those who were newer or less involved. “S.M.C. is great at whipping,” Quintero said. “I’ll give them that.”

Jaime had initially come to the D.S.A. through union organizing, where he had learned the practice of marshalling votes—one whip count after another. After moving to Los Angeles for graduate school, in 2016, he found that, even with roommates, his rent ate up about half of what he earned as a teaching assistant. Graduate students in California have a union, organized through the United Auto Workers, but at the time only about a third of those who were eligible had joined it. Jaime had worked to increase membership, and then helped launch a strike, in 2022, which won pay increases of between fifty-five and eighty per cent. He’s now the president of Local 4811, which represents sixty thousand higher-education workers across the University of California system.

In his loft, he counted nine other U.A.W. members on a Zoom call to coördinate the final push for Raman’s endorsement. Among them was Keshav Kundassery, an M.D.-Ph.D. student at U.C.L.A. who had formally introduced the resolution to endorse her. He was on vacation in Spain, but had volunteered to make some last-minute cold calls back to L.A. Jaime tends to speak about the work he is doing in practical terms; Kundassery is more interested in the big picture. “As an organization, we have very, very lofty goals,” he told me. To achieve them, he thought, required not being picky about ideology. “If we want to become the kind of organization that can actually not just elect Nithya, or not just elect Zohran, but become a mass socialist party that is regularly electing people into office while also playing an outsized role in the cultural and political transformation of the United States, we are going to have to shed some of those self-defeating habits and be ready to embrace the messy reality of what it actually means to get involved in politics.”

The endorsement vote, held through an online portal, closed that evening, at 11:59 *p.m.* By the following afternoon, the results were in: Raman had won sixty-six per cent of the chapter’s vote, and the D.S.A. had a candidate. From Spain, Kundassery expressed an incredible feeling of relief. The margin, he said, “tells me that the membership is ready to start thinking big

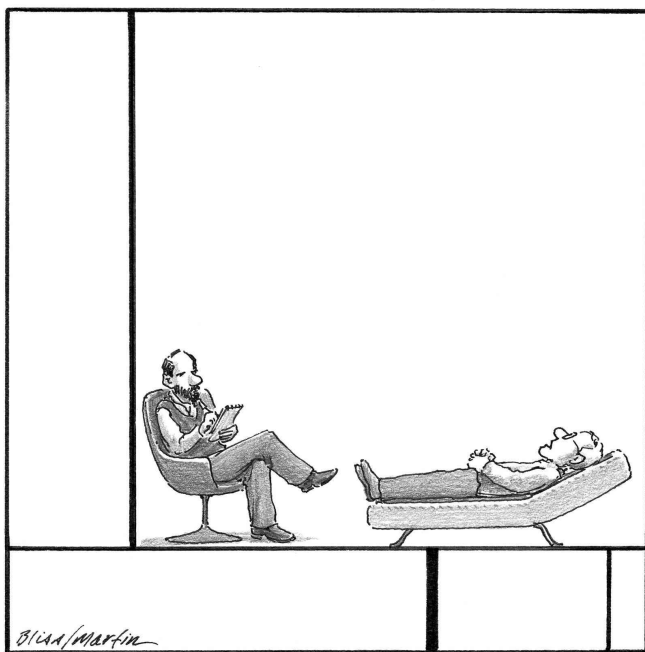
and thinking at the scale that would actually be required to build democratic socialism in America.” Jaime told me that people talked endlessly about whether Raman was another Mamdani, but that wasn’t the important point. “The point is, we can transform politics in L.A.,” he said. “We have the organization.”

Year Zero in the modern incarnation of the Democratic Socialists of America was 2016, when Bernie Sanders first ran for President. But the organization has a modest prehistory. The D.S.A. was founded, in 1982, following the merger of the New American Movement and the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee. The group’s most prominent member was the left-wing writer and social critic Michael Harrington, a national co-chair, whose book “The Other America” had helped inspire Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Harrington’s vision for democratic socialism—that it would operate as “the left wing of the possible” within the Democratic Party—reflected an understanding that no class revolution was on the horizon in the U.S., and that a third party was not viable. In practice, socialism operated more as a moral ideal for egalitarian liberals than as a discernible electoral strategy. The former New York mayor David Dinkins was a D.S.A. member, but he also fit comfortably within the post-civil-rights-era Democratic Party. Eric Blanc, a labor scholar at Rutgers, noted that, in 1984, the group declined to endorse Jesse Jackson for President, even though he had campaigned for universal health care, Palestinian statehood, and a federal-jobs program, “because that was seen as too ‘out there.’ ”

Socialists searching for analogues to the D.S.A. often point to the early twentieth century, when left-wing parties drew membership from industrial labor unions. Socialists held the Milwaukee mayor’s office for most of the first half of the twentieth century, and Eugene Debs, running on the Socialist Party ticket, won six per cent of the vote for President in 1912. But, even then, American socialists walked a fine line—they were considered too radical for the mainstream and a mere bourgeois affectation by committed class revolutionaries. In Leon Trotsky’s autobiography, he dismissed the leaders of the American Socialist Party, whose “solidarity of ideas usually serves as a screen for business connections.” He described one Party official as “the ideal socialist leader for successful dentists.”

By 2016, the D.S.A.'s presence in Los Angeles was barely visible at all. "Mostly they set up folding tables explaining socialism at Bernie events," Tal Levy, a software engineer for a sports-data company who joined the organization around that time, told me. At a new-enrollment event in January, 2017, he recalled, "there were four existing members and one hundred new members."

At the time, Kundassery was a high-school debater in Fremont, California, where his parents had moved after emigrating from India on H1-B visas. He found in the Sanders campaign a vision of social change which he felt Hillary Clinton's Democratic Party lacked. "He was speaking in terms of the utopian possibility of building the kind of country where everyone feels taken care of," Kundassery said. During his junior year, he phone-banked for Sanders most days after school. After the election, some debate friends on the East Coast recommended that he check out Marx. "They were, like, If you like Bernie, this is the real deal," Kundassery said.



"My problem is I see everything in black and white. And sometimes blue, red, and yellow."
Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

In retrospect, the fact that traditional liberals were losing high-school debaters and future M.D.-Ph.D. students—the striving, idealistic children of the Obama era—to what was then still understood to be a grungy left wing ought to have been a giant warning sign for the Democratic Party. By the time Kundassery was an undergraduate, at Vanderbilt, he was reading Lenin,

Rosa Luxemburg, and the Greek French philosopher Nicos Poulantzas, who theorized how a transition to socialism might be achieved in democratic societies. Kundassery began to attend socialist meetings—first, Vanderbilt for Bernie Sanders, then the Middle Tennessee D.S.A., then, as a graduate student, the Chicago D.S.A. The other attendees, Kundassery said, were generally “people like me, with a lot of degrees and relatively comfortable upbringings who might be facing—I’m not saying this applies to me, but as a class—the sense that our future lives might be a little worse than our parents’ were.”

D.S.A. members—the overwhelming majority of whom are college-educated—are often described in terms that emphasize the precariousness of their circumstances: they are called “downwardly mobile,” or, more poetically, “the precariat.” But neither appellation applies to Jaime, who leads a large union, or Kundassery, who plans to be an emergency-medicine doctor, or Quintero, the daughter of a custodian, who has a graduate degree from Cornell. They are ambitious young people with interesting careers ahead of them who are often choosing something other than the most obviously lucrative lines of work.

In big cities, people like this tend to pay rent, which often puts them—to borrow some Marxist terminology—in an antagonistic relationship with the local petite bourgeoisie. When the D.S.A. first began to focus on New York politics, in the late twenty-tens, it targeted districts where Sanders had performed well and where there was a large base of renters. Few established politicians were seeking the D.S.A.’s endorsement, so the organization often found candidates from within its own ranks and among tenant organizers. “We were really intentional,” Emily Lemmerman, a member of the national D.S.A.’s Socialists-in-Office Network Committee, told me. “We had particular people targeted for seats years out, and we would say, O.K., does this person need help with public speaking? Are they going to be able to get time off work? Will they be able to handle it when the *New York Post* publishes something horrible about them?”

Mamdani worked as a foreclosure-prevention counsellor before he won a seat in the New York State Assembly, in 2020. He was also a member of a D.S.A. electoral working group, through which he gained experience on left-wing campaigns. Lemmerman, who later served as Mamdani’s

communications director in Albany, said that the D.S.A. had long assumed that a socialist could run in what became Mamdani's district, in Astoria, Queens, because the state assemblywoman there was seen as friendly to landlords. "There was just kind of a consensus that this was a neighborhood where it doesn't make sense that it's represented by the interests of real estate," Lemmerman said.

By then, the D.S.A. had realized that although Democratic incumbents could seem formidable—raising a lot of money and drawing on deep community connections—their reelections depended on primaries, in which a very small number of people voted. In 2018, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, at the time a D.S.A.-backed former bartender, upset Joseph Crowley, a ten-term congressman with a leadership position in the House. Their primary race is still regarded as a historic political earthquake, but, in the final tally, Ocasio-Cortez earned fewer than seventeen thousand votes. She and Crowley, who received fewer than thirteen thousand votes, debated just once. And that was for a seat in the U.S. Congress. In races for state legislatures or city councils—the bodies that govern tenant law—a well-organized coalition of renters could have an even more outsized impact. There are now nine socialist members of the New York State Legislature. In places like North Brooklyn and inner Queens, D.S.A. members made so much progress that some began to dream bigger. As Sam Lewis, a former co-chair of a New York D.S.A. electoral working group, put it to me, "There are renters everywhere."

On a bright Friday in September, Nithya Raman met me outside the Taschen art-book stall at the Original Farmers Market, a century-old L.A. institution that now sits next to a high-end shopping mall. It is one of the rare spots in the city where thousands of people walk by. Eight months earlier, Raman was a relatively unknown city councilwoman with a wonkish focus on housing; now she had a decent shot at being the next mayor of Los Angeles. "A couple of people have, like, looked and waved," she told an aide at one point. "They've been very nice, so it's cute."

During the lead-up to the all-party primary, in June, the main issue in the mayoral election seemed to be Bass's response to the 2025 L.A. wildfires. (Unluckily, but also indelibly, the then seventy-one-year-old mayor was in Ghana when the fires started.) The noisiest challenger was Spencer Pratt, a Republican and a former cast member on the MTV reality show "The Hills,"

who had lost his home in the fires and whose first ad featured images of Raman's \$1.6 million home and the Getty House, where Bass, as the mayor of L.A., resides. "This is where I live," Pratt growled, standing outside of an Airstream trailer. He said that his political role model was Jesus Christ, and explored a dystopian boundary in American politics by promoting a flood of A.I.-generated ads. At the first debate, he outperformed both Bass and Raman, denouncing them as part of the same failed system, and, despite running in an overwhelmingly Democratic city, only narrowly lost out on a place in the November runoff.

Raman, who now occupies the insurgent role in the race, seemed to see the fires less as an indictment of the system than of Bass. "Just an astonishing failure of leadership," she said. In Altadena and the Pacific Palisades, the areas most affected, there were still many vacant lots. But, when I joined D.S.A. canvasses elsewhere in the city, the tragedy felt less central to the election. More people talked about homelessness and housing, the issues that brought Raman into politics and into the D.S.A. She decided to run for city council after organizing a group of East L.A. residents who were concerned about the number of people sleeping on the streets. They were hoping to mount a progressive response, but the sitting city councilman, she said, "did not consider my volunteer group part of the constituency that elected him—we were younger, we were more diverse, many of us were renters, and we felt that City Hall did not see the homelessness problem with anything like the urgency we did."

Two days after Raman announced her candidacy for mayor, in February, she invited three D.S.A. leaders to her home in Silver Lake. Leslie Chang, a co-chair of D.S.A.'s L.A. chapter and a member of the Socialist Majority Caucus, recalled Raman saying, "Because I'm a member, the D.S.A. is going to be linked to me now, whether you like it or not. And I'm going to be linked to you, whether I like it or not. So let's figure this out." (Raman confirmed this account.)

The group largely sat out the mayoral primary. Even still, Raman's association with the D.S.A. probably hurt her, given that it made her seem more radical than she actually is. In the runoff with Bass, where the question is more narrowly about change versus the status quo, the affiliation may help her, insofar as it suggests that she is more of an outsider than she actually is.

At the Original Farmers Market, I asked Raman, the first D.S.A. member elected to the city council, what had drawn her to the group initially. “I remember they were doing brake-light clinics for people who had been pulled over and were having negative interactions with law enforcement,” she said. “They were just really organized around doing things that were concrete.”

The first year of Trump’s second term provided abundant opportunities for such local acts of resistance. That June, *ICE* agents began to occupy Los Angeles in S.U.V.s and unmarked Penske trucks. D.S.A. members organized patrols of Home Depot parking lots, during which volunteers—wearing safety vests and clutching walkie-talkies—observed and reported *ICE* activity. To Kundassery, it seemed that he was witnessing the radicalization of the yuppie class. “Wine moms who had never heard of D.S.A. were now active members who were facing off against masked *ICE* agents and protecting our immigrant neighbors from getting kidnapped off the streets,” he said.

In Kundassery’s view, the Democratic Party had made a critical mistake in the first few months of 2025. “They were sort of bending over backward to what looked like the Trump cultural victory,” he said. “You had Gavin Newsom going on Charlie Kirk’s podcast.” The Democrats were ceding ground on immigration and deeply divided on Israel’s war in Gaza. The Party, Kundassery went on, “just completely misread where their own base, and to an extent the American people, were.” In the year since Mamdani’s election, the D.S.A. has gained forty thousand members nationwide. In one CBS poll this September, more than half of Democrats said that a D.S.A. endorsement would make them more likely to vote for a candidate, and only eight per cent said it would make them less likely.

The D.S.A. can be protective of this newfound clout. Mamdani is, as Kundassery put it to me, something like the “gold-standard cadre candidate,” in that he came from within the organization and made an unabashed case for socialism. When Raman is asked whether she is a socialist, she tends to say, “I am a member of the D.S.A.,” before turning the conversation toward more conventional aspects of her political identity—as a Democrat, or as an advocate for housing. Gabe Orea, a labor lawyer and a leader of

Groundwork, told me that, prior to joining the mayor's race, Raman "was two years behind on her dues."

At a closed-door town hall that Raman had held late in August, D.S.A. members were invited to challenge her on the issues. Many of the questions concerned Palestine, which dismayed Kundassery, who had prepped Raman for the session, both because the mayor of Los Angeles has little to do with Middle East policy and also because "she has no problem calling what Israel is doing a genocide," he said. But Raman had previously accepted the endorsement of a local pro-Israeli advocacy group, after which the chapter formally censured her. She had also voted to appoint a police chief who had cooperated with ICE during Obama-era mass deportations, and had backtracked on a tax for multimillion-dollar homes which she had come to think inhibited new development. "I'm a policy-focussed person," she told me. "I really believe in the things I believe in, and some of them are not one hundred per cent aligned with the D.S.A." By the end of the town hall, when D.S.A. members lined up to give alternating speeches for or against her endorsement, Quintero said, "the 'no' line was longer than the 'yes' line."

One reason D.S.A. members emphasize the endorsement process is that it is the moment when the organization has the most leverage over a politician. For the most part, once figures like Mamdani, Ocasio-Cortez, and Sanders win, they have more power to shape the preferences of the left than the D.S.A. does. After Mamdani's election, he retained his predecessor's N.Y.P.D. commissioner, Jessica Tisch, despite the fact that defunding the police had been a central issue for the New York chapter. Political success had a moderating influence; the calls for more revolutionary police reform from within the D.S.A. have, for now, largely faded away.

I met Raman three days after the D.S.A. had endorsed her. Already the balance of power had begun to shift. In backing Raman, the chapter had implicitly embraced her pro-building approach to housing, a choice, as Politico noted, that amounted to "nothing less than a fundamental redrawing of urban housing politics." During our interview, Raman mentioned the crises that Los Angeles has experienced since the pandemic—the wildfires, the ubiquity of homelessness, the *ICE* raids—and then described the D.S.A. as merely one of a broad front of progressive organizations that had stepped in to help. "They were outdoors every day volunteering, and that kind of

generosity to your community is beautiful,” she said. This was an ideologically denuded version of democratic socialism. But, as the possible next mayor of Los Angeles, Raman was testing how she might reimagine the D.S.A. in her own image.

The D.S.A. National Convention held in Chicago in the summer of 2023 was the first one that Leslie Chang attended in person, as a delegate from the Los Angeles chapter. Masks and proof of *covid* vaccinations were required. Mamdani, then a member of the New York State Assembly, spoke. The convention debated a resolution urging D.S.A.-endorsed candidates to support the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement against Israel. But Chang, who was then working for a solar-energy startup, found the proceedings unexpectedly disinterested in political strategy, even as the 2024 Presidential election was fast approaching. “The delegate body just absolutely skewered any effort to think about the need to run bigger electoral campaigns,” she said. (The following year, she added, some of those same national leaders dismissed worries about a Trump second term, “and would say, ‘Kamala’s going to be just as bad as Trump.’ And I was, like, ‘That is so unacceptable to me.’ ”) In Chicago, she met some members of the Socialist Majority Caucus. “They didn’t know me, but I was, like, ‘I’m a bit worried about how the convention is going,’ ” Chang said. “And they were, like, ‘We are, too. Come organize with us.’ ”

The vast majority of D.S.A. members do not belong to a caucus; joining one often requires interviews and recommendations from other members. At that time, the S.M.C.’s membership in L.A. totalled about sixteen. “That was this moment where I was, like, O.K., I have joined this organization because I am very serious about building power,” Chang said. “Now I am going to join another organization within this organization to try to move the particular flavor of politics that is important to me.”

At the end of 2025, Chang and an ally, a doctoral candidate in mathematics named Sean Wakasa, were elected to the L.A. chapter’s steering committee with the explicit goal of challenging Groundwork, and soon they became the chapter’s co-chairs. “Politics is about being opportunistic when it makes sense,” Chang told me, when we met for a drink at an outdoor bar in Altadena. She was wearing a yellow sweater and a white headband with a floral design. At the bar’s entrance, she had thrown an arm around a bouncer

and then ordered a tequila drink. Chang, alert to the ironies of being a down-to-earth person in a heady movement, told me at one point that she is excited about the prospect of an Ocasio-Cortez Presidential run in 2028 “because it would achieve our goal of transforming society but also because it would achieve our goal of bringing a bunch of normal people into the D.S.A.”



A canvasser distributing campaign literature for Nithya Raman and other D.S.A.-endorsed candidates in Los Angeles.

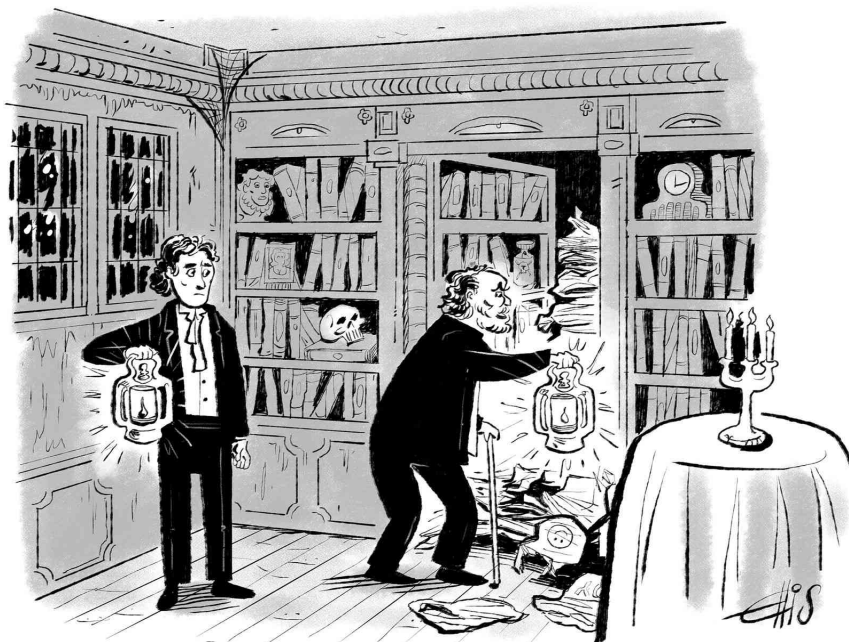
Chang, who is thirty-three, has been serving as a kind of informal consultant to Raman’s campaign. The basic problem that the D.S.A. faces, she said, is the seismic gap between the change it wants to see in the world and its extremely short roster of members. “We’re teeny-tiny—we’re a six-thousand-person chapter in a four-million-person city in a ten-million-person county,” she said. They could not afford to insist on purity. “When we run these types of campaigns, they will make us the chapter we want to become,” she said. “There is no other forcing function.”

It was a sentiment that I had heard in other cities, too. In August, I’d met up with Autumn Pickett, Milwaukee’s D.S.A. co-chair, who was helping to organize the insurgent gubernatorial candidacy of Francesca Hong, a D.S.A. state legislator and former restaurateur who had led in most polls through the summer. Hong had denounced the spread of A.I. data centers, even as she struggled to distance herself from past comments she’d made criticizing Thanksgiving as a celebration of colonialism. Pickett, who hoped to make

her chapter increasingly influential in elections—“We want to be the opposite of Occupy,” she told me—saw the race as a test of whether the D.S.A. could win voters in purple states, and of whether “we are ready for a Presidential run in 2028 by A.O.C.”

Hong ultimately lost the primary, in August, but her defeat didn’t seem to weaken the D.S.A.’s resolve: its members, who are mostly young and live in cities where many other people share their political views, tend to have a pellucid optimism. But this optimism also seemed to reflect a socialist world view, in which the odds were always in favor of the alienated masses—the tenants and the politically dispossessed—rising up to topple the powerful few. In Milwaukee, where I’d spent time door-knocking with an engineer and a computer programmer, I asked Pickett if the D.S.A. was really a working-class movement. It was, she said. “But, when I say ‘working class,’ I mean everyone who has to work.”

When talking to D.S.A.-ers, I often had the sense that they sincerely believed in a class revolution that they were not in any immediate way working toward. The Los Angeles chapter’s formal program, adopted in 2025, envisioned a “restructuring of the economic, political, cultural, and social conditions and relationships in our society” toward one in which “workers are in control of the means of production.” The document also proposed an expansion of public housing while denouncing private landlordship as an expression of “capitalist greed.” I mentioned to Chang that it was hard to imagine Raman supporting such transformational parts of the socialist project—what Groundwork had called the “rupture with capitalism.” Chang nodded agreeably. I asked, “Do you care about that, or do you not care about that?” Chang thought about it, but only briefly. “I sort of don’t really care about it,” she said.



*"This isn't a secret passage, either. It's just another closet filled with plastic bags."
Cartoon by Ellis Rosen*

Conservatives think of the D.S.A. as being defined by its ideological fixity. Older liberals see it as an expression of generational disaffection. Democratic socialists often view their movement in the context of class struggle. None of these perspectives quite captures the situation. Chang and the other D.S.A. members I met in Los Angeles represent a generation of highly engaged people who, in other circumstances, might have spent their lives as Democratic operatives or activists. But they had come to see the Democratic Party as careerist, cautious, and ideologically compromised, and what they were mostly trying to do was fashion a new political party within the Democrats—one that's more self-directed and idealistic.

The problem for the D.S.A. is it's often vulnerable to the same criticism that has plagued the mainstream Democratic Party—that its membership too narrowly reflects the perspectives of educated urban progressives. Dan Goldman, a Democrat who represents parts of lower Manhattan and downtown Brooklyn in Congress, lost his primary race this year to Brad Lander, a progressive former city comptroller who was backed by Mamdani—one of three upsets in congressional primaries that the Mayor had helped to orchestrate. But this Mamdani wave, as Goldman saw it, wasn't exactly a revolution of the marginalized. "In the poorest parts of the district, we won by fourteen points," he told me. Goldman is a self-described "proud

Zionist,” and Israel was a defining issue in the campaign. But he also noted that he had been a co-sponsor of what was, not long ago, the signature initiative of democratic socialism, Medicare for All. “I got smoked—I lost by thirty-two points,” Goldman told me. “But, whatever it was that came for me, it wasn’t the working class.”

The D.S.A.’s big kickoff canvass in support of Raman and a slate of other candidates took place on October 3rd, at more than a dozen locations across Los Angeles. That morning, I met Chang at a meetup in South Central, where she and about three dozen other D.S.A. members had gathered. It had been a few weeks since I’d met with Raman, but in that time a series of public polls had shown her with a significant lead over Bass, and the next day she was scheduled to deliver a policy speech downtown. Chang was still hesitant to believe that Raman was actually going to win, having watched Hong’s polling advantage in Wisconsin evaporate. But TMZ had just reported that Raman was being introduced to entertainment-industry leaders by Arnold Schwarzenegger, and her most recent ad had been voiced by the actor Bob Odenkirk. Suddenly, at least in L.A., the socialists didn’t really seem like outsiders at all.

It was a hundred degrees outside, and South Central was nearly shadeless; a D.S.A. member named Prit Patel was wearing a huge floppy hat as he made his way door to door. “You’re about to watch me speak some pretty terrible Spanish,” he said, before climbing up to the second story of a motel-style housing complex and explaining to the residents that Raman and two other progressive candidates had refused to take corporate money. Patel seemed to enjoy the process, even though many people did not answer their doors and most of those who did had not heard about the election at all. During the day, Patel works remotely in advertising from his home in Highland Park. He’d been a dues-paying member of the D.S.A. for a few years, but he’d only become actively involved after Mamdani’s victory in 2025. He appreciated the way that canvassing for the organization had deepened his sense of community in Highland Park. “You open these doors in your own neighborhood, and you can see that people might have a relative in a wheelchair living with them, or that they are really struggling,” he said. “It gave me a view into my own neighborhood that I never would have had.”

This winsome experience—socialism as socializing—has filled a gap left by the increasingly professionalized mainstream political parties. (A progressive operative in Wisconsin joked to me that the D.S.A. was “the cure for the male-loneliness crisis.”) It also demands a time commitment that is difficult to manage for people with children. I canvassed that morning with Marc Krause, a Groundwork leader who had been the L.A. chapter’s co-chair before the S.M.C.’s ascent. Krause, who described his origins as “a punk-rock kid from East L.A.,” had recently turned forty; he had a twenty-year-old stepson and a job working for the State Bar of California. “To be honest with you, I’m O.K. doing a little bit less,” Krause said. He had originally got into politics via the Occupy movement, but, he said, “eventually I realized that kind of horizontal model was never going to work.” Krause had not supported Raman’s endorsement, which still rankled him, but he seemed to recognize that a new logic was ascendant on the left. “It can feel like the electoral work, which is necessary, is at the expense of the organizing—for Palestine, for immigrants, for labor—that people come to the D.S.A. for,” he said, before knocking at an iron gate and, when no one responded, leaving some Raman literature on a decorative spike.

Each D.S.A. canvass ended in a social event at a bar, and most of the canvassers in South Central met up downtown at an open, airy space called Audio Graph. Marissa Roy, a Yale Law graduate and a D.S.A. member who is in a runoff for city attorney, told me that she used to host trivia nights there. Across the room, Chang was giving an interview to a reporter from the *Washington Post*. I sat next to Levy, the sports-stats guy, and a friend of his named Gabbie Metheny, a forty-two-year-old who was new to the D.S.A. Metheny told me that her family had been able to afford to live in L.A. only because of rent stabilization, and that she’d started worrying that her sons, who are eleven and twelve, would never be able to move out. “What I want is the furthest-left candidate who can win,” she said.

Later that day, Kundassery told me, “This might be a hot take, but I think Nithya has the power to improve the day-to-day lives of Angelenos more than Zohran can in New York.” He added that people call New York the greatest city in the world largely because of infrastructure developed there in the nineteen-thirties, through the partnership between Franklin Roosevelt and Fiorello LaGuardia, two legendary progressives, whereas L.A. “had specifically resisted Manhattanization in the seventies and eighties.” He

went on, “People who currently vote for mainstream Democrats think that Democrats are the grownups in the room, and that the D.S.A. is a bunch of disgruntled young kids who might have some valid concerns, but if we put them in charge they’re going to run everything into the ground.” If Raman won, and her administration was seen as a success, he said, “that whole narrative would flip on its head.”

We were sitting at an outdoor table behind a different bar, Sorry Not Sorry, on the west side of L.A., where Kundassery, wearing sunglasses and a crisp white T-shirt, had led a canvass. Three other west-side D.S.A. members—two students in their early twenties and a twenty-nine-year-old aerospace engineer—were listening attentively. There was excitement in Kundassery’s voice. He was saying that it seemed possible that the post-sixties alignments of U.S. politics might be changing. The migration of working-class and Hispanic voters toward Trump in 2024, which now appeared to be swinging back to the Democrats in the midterms, suggested an underlying instability. For the moment, Kundassery and his fellow-socialists felt they had something to offer young people that the Democrats did not: a way to structure their idealism.

“Here it is,” Kundassery said. On his phone, he pulled up a diagram from *Labor Notes*, a monthly magazine about workplace organizing, that showed the structure of a typical union—concentric circles in which the innermost was labelled “Core” and the outer two “Disengaged” and “Hostile.” Kundassery saw in it a model for a political movement. It was usually a waste of time to spend energy on the hostile, he said. “But the disengaged people you can turn into supporters, and the supporters into activists, and the activists into core members. So, if you have ten core members, and each of those converts ten activists, and so on, you can have a thousand new supporters.”

The other three D.S.A. members were leaning over the phone, as if they were locating themselves on the chart, and deciding who they wanted to be. ♦

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

There are a handful of truly monumental collective achievements in our history: Machu Picchu, the Great Wall of China, the Pyramids of Giza, and perhaps, if we're being generous, the Roman aqueducts. Modern global civilization has made one contribution to this eternal pantheon. It is not the moon landing. It is the semiconductor supply chain.

This strikes almost all of us as ridiculous. A microchip is a bauble of metal and refined sand. It doesn't appear to have epic proportions. Upon close examination, however, the epic proportions are there in miniature. Imagine a perfect replica of a sprawling metropolis, a Tokyo or a São Paulo, engraved at atomic dimensions on a tile the size of a fingernail. The urban details would be faithfully rendered to the last golf ball or egg—each reduced to approximately the bulk of a hemoglobin molecule, or the distance grown by a human fingernail every five seconds. If a chip were merely a sculpture, this chiselling would represent a considerable achievement. But a chip is, in fact, a functional city for a population of busy electrons. They buzz about, flying our airplanes, powering the stock market, and, increasingly, thinking on our behalf. Unlike rockets, which are produced in relatively meagre quantities, microchips are stamped out by the billion. This is the most impressive thing about them. Or, maybe, about us.

Microchips are mass-produced, like any tchotchke, at factories. Most of these factories, and the best of them, were once situated in the United States. By the nineteen-eighties, that began to change. American semiconductor firms were threatened by the emergence of Japanese rivals. Our domestic industry petitioned the government to intervene. Economists shrugged. The consensus at the time was in favor of free trade. If a good could be inexpensively produced elsewhere, everyone benefitted. American consumers deserved bargains on digital watches, pocket calculators, and primitive computers. The most legendary, if apocryphal, expression of this attitude was credited to a George H. W. Bush Administration factotum: "Potato chips, computer chips, what's the difference? They're all chips."



"My parents are gonna love you as soon as they calm down from hearing the doorbell."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

This wasn't entirely a joke. A columnist for the Los Angeles *Times* pointed out that the largest domestic chipmaker, Intel, was "roughly the same size as PepsiCo's Frito-Lay Inc. subsidiary, the largest potato chip maker." (An executive at Utz got defensive, complaining that "there's quite a bit of technology in modern potato chip manufacturing.") Widgets were widgets, was the point. If we didn't care about where salt-and-vinegar chips came from, why should we care about their silicon-flavored cousins?

Today, we very much care. Chips are the foundation of A.I., among other things, and A.I. is propping up our entire economy. The most valuable company in the world is the chip designer Nvidia. Last year, the company's stock single-handedly accounted for about fifteen cents of every dollar returned by the S. & P. 500. From an economic perspective, the problem with chips nowadays is that there are never enough. A car might contain two thousand of them. When the pandemic caused supply-chain issues, automotive manufacturers found that they'd neglected to reserve a sufficient number. The government pressured chipmakers to reprioritize order fulfillment, safeguarding the birthright of Americans to buy new trucks. The chips that make Claude and ChatGPT talk are more specialized than those in a Chevy, and the chip industry has responded by reallocating its resources to these product lines. If basic chips grow scarce, it will not be long before the

average homeowner cannot afford a dishwasher, let alone a phone. If the A.I. backlash seems fervent now, just wait until the dishes pile up.

But the financial interests pale in comparison with the geopolitical ones. The vast preponderance of the world's most advanced chips are made in Taiwan, a tropical island best known in America for its bubble tea, the Din Tai Fung restaurant chain, and its tense proximity to a superpower that regards it not as an independent nation but as a temporarily lost belonging. The prospect of a Chinese invasion has long loomed over Taiwan's horizon.

If China were to invade, or even throw up a naval blockade, life as we know it would continue for about the time it takes to manufacture a chip—a season or two. Then the inventory would thin out. The sticker price of an iPhone might be confused with that of a luxury watch. Not that anyone would care. Stocks of Wi-Fi routers, insulin pumps, pacemakers, and credit-card readers, along with cars and dishwashers, would dwindle and perhaps vanish. Tech equities—for all intents and purposes, the stock market itself—wouldn't be worth the paper they're printed on. Bloomberg Economics has estimated that just the first year of a war over Taiwan could cost the world economy \$10.6 trillion, or roughly a tenth of global G.D.P. Pat Gelsinger, a former C.E.O. of Intel, said to me, “You think the closure of the Strait of Hormuz was frightening? That was trivial. It's twenty per cent of the oil. Taiwan is eighty per cent of the supply chain of the world. A three-week brownout there would have a larger economic impact than the Great Depression.”

At stake, in a longer term that might not be so long, is the global balance of power. Chinese chipmakers remain about five years, if not more, behind their Western counterparts. Should American A.I. companies find themselves restricted to alternative outputs—to the small fraction of suitable chips produced in Korea or at home—our current lead in the arms race would almost instantly totter. It might not be the worst thing if our college students resumed writing their own essays. But a lack of chips might also spell the end of our military advantage.

As a result, Washington has recently come around to the idea that the provenance of semiconductors matters more than the provenance of Pringles. A nostalgic consensus has emerged in favor of their domestic production. To a casual observer, the construction of a chip factory might

seem straightforward: you buy some land and throw some money at a contractor to build a huge room to house some machines. It is, alas, not so simple.

Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company, or T.S.M.C., makes almost all of the world's advanced chips, and has a market capitalization of around two trillion dollars. Of the ten most valuable companies globally, it is one of only two that are not American tech giants. (The other is Saudi Aramco.) Unlike T.S.M.C.'s peers—household names such as Apple, Google, and Amazon—the company has never cultivated much of a public-facing brand identity. Its fabs, as the factories are called, are only begrudgingly opened to clients, and even they are afforded a look only at their own production lines. The extreme reticence is by design. Some of the chip designs that the company executes, like those which animate an iPhone or a Mac, are inestimably precious trade secrets. Others, like the patterns for Nvidia's top of the line, are treated like national-security assets, and are subject to American export controls.

T.S.M.C. is headquartered in the Hsinchu Science Park, a manicured enclave on the outskirts of a coastal city about an hour from Taipei. Its hulking fabs are neither hardened nor hidden. Some of them have panoramic views of white windmills, which dot the coastline of the Taiwan Strait like slender sentries. China lies a hundred miles or so over the water. The corporate nerve center is clad in the company palette of muted grays and bright-red accents. When I first approached the lobby, just before seven o'clock one humid morning in June, a maintenance man was showcasing the firm's attention to detail. He stood knee-high in a decorative pond, carefully pushing a waterlogged broom along its floor to sweep away invisible dirt from between elevated plinths bedecked in artificial roses. The interior décor consisted in its entirety of an oil portrait of Morris Chang, the company's founder. He appeared with his signature pipe, in an untidy study surrounded by piles of books and lit by a luminous silicon wafer.

A senior receptionist stood stern and unblinking behind an enormous desk, presiding over narrow entry turnstiles. Various items are prohibited across the complex, including phones, smartwatches, recording devices, and, curiously, blank double-sided pieces of printer paper. Given that I had yet to

proceed beyond the lobby, I ventured to ask permission to photograph the painting. The answer was an immediate, polite, and decisive no.

The original computers were essentially thickets of light bulbs. The basic logic of computing is that practically any set of instructions can be executed by an interconnected constellation of switches that can be turned on and off. Those first computers, developed during the Second World War, evoked the basement warehouses of a chandelier wholesaler. They required a platoon of soldiers to race around replacing bulbs as they burned out. In theory, these devices could accomplish tasks of great complexity. In practice, even a relatively basic job might result in a cairn of charred copper and broken glass.

After the war, at [Bell Labs](#), the physicist [William Shockley](#) and two colleagues invented a switch that was smaller, faster, and didn't explode. The transistor, as it was called, exploited the peculiar disposition of a kind of element known as a semiconductor: it could be flipped on to conduct electricity, the way a metal would, and it could be turned off to block the current, like glass. The little gizmo earned its inventors a Nobel Prize and almost immediately improved lives. The portable transistor radio, which appeared just in time for Christmas in 1954, became a consumer blockbuster. The computers of the future would no longer need to be enormous things that caught on fire. Their potential seemed limitless.

There was, however, a devilish obstacle. Computing relies on circuits, or transistors that have been wired together with other electrical components. The cleverness of a circuit depends on two factors: how many transistors it contains and how densely they are interconnected. Transistors, unlike light bulbs, could be added to circuit designs in promiscuous quantities. Unfortunately, they still needed to be soldered together by hand. This process took time and money and tended to be flaky. One little miswiring could ruin everything. As circuits got larger, the difficulty of the interconnective task increased exponentially. This was called the "tyranny of numbers," and it was demoralizing. By the nineteen-fifties, we knew that getting to the moon would require computer guidance. A circuit that could do it, with ten million components, could be sketched on paper. But no one could actually build it.

In the winter of 1958, two men independently figured out how these paper circuits could be made flesh. The old method assembled circuits from individual transistors, as if a jumble of disconnected body parts were stitched together. The new method took a monolithic piece of semiconducting material, as if it were a block of marble, and carved a figure out of it. Had the initial choice for substrate prevailed, the patch of cherry orchards around Palo Alto would be called Germanium Valley.

The origin story of Silicon Valley contains two contradictions. The first is about where it happened. One of its godfathers, Jack Kilby, was based not in California but in Dallas, at Texas Instruments. Silicon Valley was an idea, not a place. The second relates to the role of competition in innovation. The other godfather, Robert Noyce, began his career under Shockley, the transistor pioneer (and famed scientific racist). Fed up with Shockley's managerial despotism, Noyce—along with seven colleagues, who became known as the Traitorous Eight—defected to found a rival firm, Fairchild Semiconductor, and then defected again to found Intel. In the ensuing decade, lawyers at Texas Instruments and at Fairchild fought a bitter court battle over the patent. Subsequent generations of founders drew from these tales the moral lesson that every great company originates in betrayal and is sustained by combat. In fact, this wasn't at all how Kilby and Noyce felt. They cared more about solutions than about heroics, and were delighted to share the credit.

The first integrated circuits on the market were compact, trustworthy, and completely unaffordable. The only plausible customer was the one organization with the desire and the budget to pursue an irrationally difficult goal at any cost: the federal government. For the nascent chipmakers, the military-industrial complex was a godsend. Aerospace and defense contracts paid for the capital-intensive installation of a manufacturing base. But executives chafed at the limitations of Washington's monopsony: their engineers didn't like answering to bureaucratic brass; sectors overreliant on government largesse get flabby; and only widespread demand would allow them to achieve economies of scale. The executives courted commercial interest, and this order volume translated into improved efficiency, accelerated research, and lowered prices. In 1971, Texas Instruments released the Pocketronic calculator. It offered four cutting-edge features: addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. By the end of the decade,

according to T. R. Reid's "The Chip," the United States had more calculators than people.

In 1964, someone asked Noyce's colleague Gordon Moore to predict the technology's trajectory. He'd noticed that, in each of the previous few years, transistor density—the number that could be shoehorned into the same footprint—had doubled. Moore casually reckoned that this trend would continue. At the time, a state-of-the-art chip had sixty transistors. By his logic, the chip of 1975 would accommodate sixty-five thousand—a ludicrous estimate. When the bet was settled, the newest chips boasted sixty-five thousand five hundred and thirty-six. If the automobile industry had innovated at the same pace, Moore calculated a few years later, "we would cruise comfortably in our cars at 100,000 mph, getting 50,000 miles per gallon of gasoline." The wildest part is that the upgrades were essentially free. Moore went on, "We would find it cheaper to throw away our Rolls-Royce and replace it than to park it downtown for the evening."

The spell hasn't been broken. The phone in your pocket is several orders of magnitude more sophisticated than the computers used for the Apollo mission. One AirPods could easily calculate a path to the moon. A car-key fob would suffice. An electric toothbrush. There are Rolls-Royces that we do, in fact, routinely throw away. The Apollo mission's chips were less powerful than those currently inside a digital pregnancy test. We squander moon-landing capability to display a plus sign.

The Dutch city of Eindhoven was founded on the mastery of artificial light. In the late nineteenth century, two brothers, Gerard and Anton Philips, started an incandescent-bulb outfit that would eventually become one of the largest electronics conglomerates in the world. The first jerseys of the local soccer team featured a light-bulb emblem, and graffiti light bulbs are still spray-painted on the city's underpass walls. Nearby, the leafy suburb of Veldhoven is now home to ASML, Europe's most valuable company. What the firm sells is rarefied light.

ASML, originally named Advanced Semiconductor Materials Lithography, is perhaps best known for not ringing a bell. In 2024, the *Wall Street Journal* called it "the most vital company that you've never heard of." The firm wears its obscurity as a badge of honor. Alex Schafgans, an engineering

executive at ASML, told me, “Internally, there’s a pride in the fact that you have no idea how complicated what we do is. If someone at a barbecue asks me to explain my job, it takes me eight minutes.” A finished microchip from T.S.M.C. is the culmination of thousands of steps. Each is indispensable in its own way, but the most indispensable is the chip’s passage through an ASML machine.

Moore’s Law was never an actual law, like gravity, but an observed regularity. Chips improved on a regimented schedule. This observation became a promise: every two years, the industry would deliver a product that was twice as good, at no extra cost. The rest of the world came to count on this. Apple, for instance, takes for granted that it can design a new phone using powerful chips that do not yet exist. These fictional chips are then summoned into existence by the delusional commitment of more than two million chip-industry employees to the perpetuation of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

A chip’s transistors, for example, were once interconnected with microscopic lines of aluminum wire. As transistors got smaller, the channels between them became proportionally narrower, and aluminum’s performance hit a wall. Copper would have been a superior choice, but it leached into silicon and ruined chips; its very presence in fabs was strictly verboten. But I.B.M. researchers, inspired by the metalwork of medieval Damascene artisans, invented a technique to protect silicon from copper. Moore’s Law was given a reprieve.

The fundamental insight behind the mass production of semiconductors is that a chip can be printed, like a photograph, with light. A chip’s architectural blueprints are traced on a stencil, or “mask.” When light is projected through the stencil, like sun through a stained-glass window, the chip’s ghostly outline is inscribed on a slab of silicon that has been coated with a light-sensitive chemical. Gelsinger, the former Intel C.E.O., resorted to theological comparison: “At the center of a fab is lithography, and at the center of lithography is light, and God said, ‘Let there be light.’ ”

At the dawn of the industry, this procedure could be cobbled together from normal commodities. Noyce, of Fairchild, went to a photography store and found a few serviceable lenses in a crate of antique movie cameras. The

stencil could be outlined on a pane of conventional glass. The light source was a regular lamp. As transistors shrank and chips grew denser, the process called for greater precision. Chips could be destroyed by even a speck of dust, so factories became impregnable clean rooms, their workers clad in bunny suits. Janky store-bought components were replaced with custom materials and tools. Light was no exception. Lamplight was too coarse an instrument for fine patterns. At shorter wavelengths, however, the light could be wielded like a scalpel.

The industry marched its way down the spectrum to violet light, the shortest wavelength we can see, and then off the cliff of visibility. Beyond that was “deep ultraviolet,” where our reliance on God-given light gave way to excimer lasers made with krypton or argon-fluoride gases. This solved one problem but created others. The transient air pressure of a passing thunderstorm, or the excessive production of cow patties, spoiled the chips. These issues could be patched, but the underlying threat was existential. By the early nineteen-nineties, deep UV seemed like reality’s best and final offer. We were poised to carve greater detail into silicon until approximately 2005. The chips we had that year were going to be the best we’d ever have. In that event, we probably wouldn’t have the iPhone, not to mention Uber or Spotify or Netflix, which perhaps would’ve been for the best. But we’d also likely lack reliable five-day weather forecasts, automatic emergency braking, pocket ultrasound, rapid genetic sequencing for sick babies, and images of black holes.

The bulk of contemporary life rests on a decision to bet the farm on a technology that almost certainly could not be realized. Executives at Intel, with the federal government’s help, poured money into “extreme” ultraviolet light. There were about a million reasons it couldn’t be harnessed, among them the fact that the nearest natural source of EUV is the sun. Owing to both technical and political concerns—Japanese lithographers were off the table—the only hope was offered by ASML, then a relatively obscure shop. Jan Mulken, a physicist, joined the company during this tumultuous period. He’d left his first job interview, in 1992, thinking, *These guys are completely crazy. I must work here.* ASML runs on the belief that if you recruit people who don’t know enough to recognize that the job before them is hopeless, they might surprise you.

No single institution, no matter how crazy its employees, could do it alone. Even if you could somehow conjure terrestrial starlight on an industrial scale, it would immediately disappear into anything—a stray particle of air, say, or the glass lenses used to collect light. ASML collaborated with the storied German lens crafter Zeiss. Mulkens, who is also an amateur cyclist, despite having broken his shoulder four times, said, “It is five hundred and ninety-two kilometres to Zeiss, and I have done it more than one hundred times.” Jos Benschop, a sly, wolfish vice-president at ASML, assumed a mask of theatrical German intensity: “When you design things together, you need to see each other, you have to have almost daily contact—you need to look into each other’s eyes.” The collaboration produced mirrors that are the smoothest man-made objects in the known universe. If you blew one up to the size of the planet, the highest mountain would have the elevation of a face-down playing card. Other mirrors that Zeiss contributed could direct a beam of light to hit a dime on the moon; in fact, they could successfully target either the left or the right half of that dime.

In 2006, Samsung placed the first order for an EUV machine, but warned that the cost was worth it only if a certain number of chips could be printed per hour. A viable prototype needed to produce a minimum of a hundred watts of light. At the time, ASML was stalled out at five. The company blew the deadline by seven years. Samsung, understandably, began running out of patience.

By the finally final deadline, Schafgans, then a researcher, had been “fighting all these ghosts in the machine for years.” One day, at his wits’ end, he groped inside the machine for a little gauge that had been installed to control a particular setting. It wasn’t the sort of crank that was meant to be turned, but Schafgans had the impulse to monkey with it. He said, “Imagine me, in a clean-room bunny suit, holding my laptop with one hand, with the other reaching into that massive machine with a little screwdriver to adjust a dial that was never even meant to be adjusted.” His instinct was to turn it in what was, mathematically speaking, the obviously incorrect direction. For some reason that remains largely incomprehensible, it worked. Schafgans got a big promotion.

Three years later, in 2019, a package from Samsung arrived in Veldhoven. To the untrained eye, it was just a phone, but industry veterans saw

something inconceivable. A chip in the Apollo mission's guidance computer had six transistors, each roughly a third the width of a human hair. Inside the phone was the first EUV-printed chip, which had more than ten billion transistors, each of them narrower than a virus. When ASML was founded, one gigabyte of memory cost almost a million bucks. A gig of EUV-printed memory costs only a couple of dollars. Mulkens spoke as if these dizzying statistics were mere by-products of his colleagues' valiant struggle against the laws of physics: "Moore's Law, I do not give a shit about it. It's good for marketing. People who think about it never worked on it themselves."

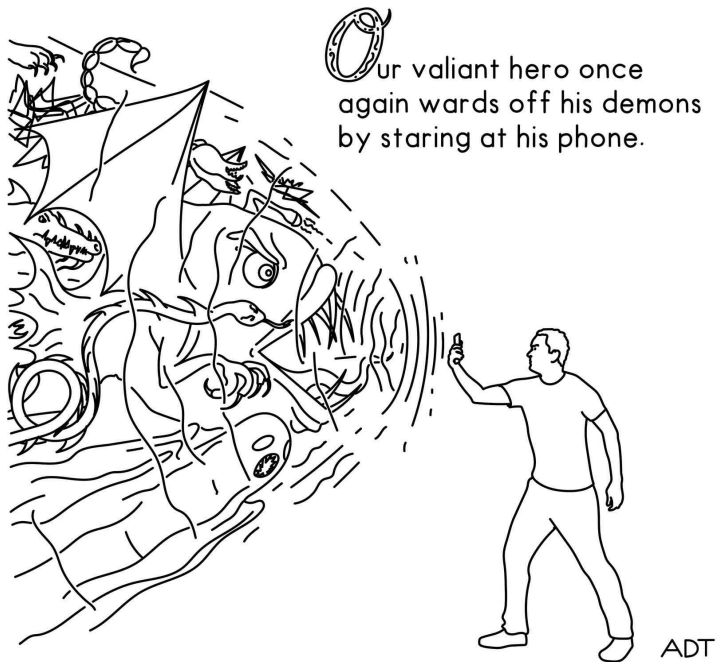
ASML's main plant is dominated by a forbidding tower of slate gray which looks like a giant chip, a resemblance that's perhaps a bit on the nose. Viewed from an observation deck, the campus is constrained between major roadways, with agricultural fields and gabled roofs beyond. At the company store downstairs, the most popular item is a Lego set of the EUV machine. The passion project of one employee, it has almost a thousand parts and costs two hundred dollars. The actual machine has millions of parts and costs up to four hundred million dollars.

No single person can claim to comprehend an EUV machine in its entirety. The apparatus is roughly the size of two stacked fire trucks and is delivered to customers, such as T.S.M.C., in a fleet of seven 747s. When installed, it's sheathed in cabinetry. A guide and I badged into one of a few dozen restricted cabins where the machine is assembled—an endeavor that takes about twenty weeks of round-the-clock work. The one before us was almost finished. Undressed, it had the appearance of a biomechanical hallucination: its monstrous exterior was trussed with a tangle of silver wires, cables, tubes, and dials, as if Optimus Prime had been put on life support. From a raised platform on the back side, a supervisor pointed to a small opening where some T.S.M.C. technician will begin the chip-printing process by feeding the machine an ingot of tin.

Tiny droplets of the molten tin are fired out of a cannon into a vacuum chamber, where they are shot—sixty thousand times a second—by unerring lasers. When the tin fog is ignited, the explosion produces a plasma fifty times hotter than the surface of the sun. The process, in other words, commences with the industrial production of miniature supernovas. These supernovas emit EUV that must be collected by Zeiss's mirrors, which

cannot function if their surface is marred by even a nanometre of tin debris. The only way to keep the mirrors pristine is to pump a continuous hurricane of hydrogen gas into the supernova's blast radius. The gathered light ricochets through a hall of mirrors before it is bounced onto the blueprint of the chip. Making this happen a single time took decades of research. The profitability of ASML's customers relies on it happening near-flawlessly twenty-four hours a day. Recurrent shutdowns, it's not much of an exaggeration to say, would derail the global economy.

A few days before I arrived in Veldhoven, an internal event featured a conversation between ASML's C.E.O., Christophe Fouquet, and Elon Musk. In the past, Musk has threatened to bypass any "rate limiter"—a "bottleneck" or "choke point" in chip production—with his own ingenuity. ASML is the sole purveyor of this particular tool, without which there are no advanced chips, and Musk was presumably referring to the fact that the company puts out only about fifty machines each year. He seems to regard the machines as overgrown photocopiers, and doesn't understand why the company doesn't make more faster. Musk isn't the only kibbitzer who believes that a European firm, with its soft Continental indulgence of extended summer holidays, has taken the future hostage. This summer, after the embattled A.I.-finance guru Leopold Aschenbrenner's hedge fund almost collapsed, he bravely coped by making a four-hundred-million-dollar investment in a U.S.-based lithography competitor. Frustrated American politicians, according to the Dutch journalist Marc Hijink, refer to ASML as "*that company*."



Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

The reason that nobody, in America or elsewhere, can “just” build an equivalent machine is that there’s no “just” about any of it. Some components are novel inventions. Others are transcendent renditions of existing products. A basic metal valve, for example, is available at any hardware store. The valves in ASML’s “droplet generator,” however, need to be able to handle molten metal under literally oceanic pressures, and to do so day and night for a year without wilting. The company had to find a supplier that could make such a valve. But vendors didn’t have a financial incentive to do so, since ASML wouldn’t be buying the widget in normal widget quantities. ASML’s ability to persuade a vendor anyway relied on an extended relationship, with accumulated reserves of trust on both sides. The basic model of competitive markets which one finds in an introductory economics textbook—where independent firms engage in cold arm’s-length transactions motivated by unadulterated self-interest—does not apply to the industry. It better resembles a kind of coöperative, or a planned economy.

There is a famous story about an ASML engineer who explained to his Chinese rivals that they couldn’t build an EUV machine even if they were handed the blueprints. Marc Assinck, a trim coffee obsessive with oversized Ray-Bans who has played multiple roles at ASML, told me that the very concept of such a blueprint is a fallacy: “There simply is no ‘file’ of our machines. The intellectual property is spread out across the entire system.”

He stopped in front of a glass machine component with recondite thermodynamic properties. “Zeiss doesn’t have this recipe,” he said. “Their glass supplier does.” Many of these parts have lead times of two years.

If many aspects of the industry can’t be matter-of-factly cloned, it’s because they’re not particularly industrial. Some of them are properly artisanal. Assinck said, “It relies on machinists, mechanics, and other craftspeople with unwritten knowledge.” He pointed to a recessed thingamabob supplied by a family shop nearby. Hundreds of pinprick holes had been bored into the metal undercarriage, and each one had to be deburred by hand.

A major module of the EUV machine is fashioned at an ASML facility in Connecticut that has the aura of an alchemist’s atelier. When I visited, in July, arcane prisms rotated on medieval-looking polishing machines. The facility hires the sorts of people who fix their own motorcycles. One young employee sat at a workbench in front of a block of milled amber glass that appeared extraterrestrial. The block, which bears a chip’s blueprint, levitates inside the machine. It moves with the precision necessary to trace a strand of DNA, even while enveloped in a robot that accelerates with forces great enough to tear an airliner apart nine times over. The entire apparatus is like an MRI machine that is expected to scan hairline fractures in the middle of a violent plane crash. The engineer proceeded by feel. He paused now and again to tap his fingers gently against a particular spot. It seemed less like engineering than like reflexology. This felt poignantly ironic. When you dig down to the very bedrock of A.I., you discover that underneath all of its cognitive power is a dude drumming his fingers with occult proficiency.

Just before 8 *A.M.* every day of the year, the gates of the Hsinchu Science Park are breached by a legion of commuters arriving on puttering scooters. T.S.M.C.’s home is lush and manicured, but it feels more like an autonomous zone than like a corporate complex. When I visited, this past summer, a guide pointed down the street to the National Experimental High School, from which his son would be graduating the next morning. We turned from Prosperity Road 1 onto Prosperity Road 2. Expert launderers of clean-room bunny suits careened by in branded wagons. There are administrative pavilions, post offices, banks, clinics, and two universities. Some employees live in dorms on site, and all of them have easy access to pools and fitness centers. You rarely have to walk more than a block to visit

a sparkling 7-Eleven. T.S.M.C.'s suppliers—tooling companies such as Applied Materials and Tokyo Electron, as well as software firms such as Cadence and Synopsys—maintain their own local embassies.

The visionary behind this vibrant terrarium is Morris Chang. Born in 1931 in the Chinese city of Ningbo, he was raised in wartime flight—moving from Nanjing to Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Chongqing, Shanghai—and resolved to find peace at a university overseas. He enrolled at Harvard, planning to study Shakespeare, but quickly realized that engineering was a more secure path for Asian immigrants, and transferred to M.I.T. At twenty-seven, he accepted a job at Texas Instruments, just in time for the invention of the integrated circuit. Chang was tasked with the problem of yield, or the percentage of finished transistors that worked. The production line that he was given had a yield of approximately zero. With his pipe in his mouth, Chang devoted himself to operational excellence. Within a few months, the yield exceeded twenty per cent.

Chang was steadily promoted before he was passed over for the position of chief executive, perhaps for bamboo-ceiling reasons. He was in his fifties, and figured that his career had peaked. In the early nineteen-eighties, though, the Taiwanese government recruited him to oversee a new technology initiative. On an episode of the podcast “Acquired,” the host David Rosenthal compared the plan to all the countries that say, “We’re going to build the next Silicon Valley in XYZ.” This, Rosenthal continued, was “probably not going to work.”

The postwar Taiwanese economy churned out low-margin goods, such as umbrellas and toys, for foreign clients. Mattel didn’t need domestic Barbie factories if a Taiwanese partner could produce dolls more cheaply. Such factories could also then amortize their fixed costs by making adjacent products for other brands. Chang proposed a semiconductor “foundry,” which would do for pricey chips what its predecessors had done for cheap junk. At the time, however, the market didn’t exist. Chipmakers had plenty of overseas help—in the book “[Chip War](#),” the scholar Chris Miller notes they were globalizing long before the word gained currency—but the industry was also known for vertical integration, and did the hardest parts in-house. “Morris, you’ve had a lot of good ideas in your time,” Gordon Moore told Chang. “This isn’t one of them.” Jerry Sanders, the C.E.O. of the

American chip company A.M.D., had once notoriously declared that “real men have fabs.”

Real men, as it happened, are delighted not to have to spend twenty billion dollars on a fab. By the end of T.S.M.C.’s first decade, the company was bringing in a billion dollars in annual revenue. In 1993, a young Taiwanese American named [Jensen Huang](#) had an idea for a specialized graphics chip, or G.P.U., to intensify the video-game experience, and founded Nvidia. It wasn’t long before design mishaps drove Nvidia to the brink of bankruptcy. Huang sent a personal letter to Chang, and got a call at his office a week later. (The story, in Stephen Witt’s “The Thinking Machine,” is that Huang yelled, “Everybody shut the fuck up—I’ve got Morris Chang on the phone.”) T.S.M.C. took a chance on his prototype. The specialized architecture of Nvidia’s chips turned out to be ideally suited to the development of A.I. In the meantime, Apple developed a novel chip for mobile devices and eventually asked T.S.M.C. to make it. The result was every generation of iPhone that has been produced since 2014.

T.S.M.C. is often described as the heart of Taiwan’s “silicon shield.” America’s unofficial doctrine on Taiwanese independence allows for “strategic ambiguity”—in other words, we might or might not protect the island in the event of a Chinese invasion—but we remain painfully aware of the domestic stakes. We probably need T.S.M.C. more than we need Boeing. Audrey Tang, a Taiwanese civic technologist and a former government minister, told me, “This work isn’t an abstraction to people—it’s literally what keeps Taiwan on the map.”

T.S.M.C. has come to embody national strength and national purpose. A shy, cerebral engineer named Nicholas Lee translates abstract research into procedures that can survive implementation on the factory floor. A machine might need to be tuned, for example, to compensate for low air pressure from an incoming typhoon. He joined T.S.M.C. four years ago, right out of a master’s program in chemical engineering at the preëminent National Taiwan University. When I asked how many of his classmates had done the same, he laughed and said, “At least sixty per cent.” He added, “Everyone thinks there’s something wrong with you if you don’t accept a T.S.M.C. job.” To enlist at T.S.M.C. is to give one’s parents the gift of familial honor. The company’s lower echelons, which tend to be populated by graduates of

vocational or technical schools that serve as T.S.M.C. feeders, have the same social coherence. Although it's a "very intense work environment," the challenges were eased by the fact that, as Lee told me, "we all grew up together." One in forty-six babies in Taiwan is born to a T.S.M.C. employee.

Without Morris Chang, we almost certainly would not be talking about A.I., and we probably wouldn't be talking about Taiwan as a sovereign state. When Chang invariably comes up in conversation at T.S.M.C., he is referred to as Founder Chang, or sometimes simply as Founder. Founder is ninety-five, and a folk hero. He now and then appears at the company's annual sports day, for which T.S.M.C. rents out a stadium. As Miller puts it, "Chang wanted to become the Gutenberg of the digital era. He ended up vastly more powerful."

T.S.M.C., I was told, was willing to take me on a tour of a fab called AP6 on two conditions: that I arrive bearing nothing but a passport, and that I dress in garments without so much as a fleck of metal—no zippers, snaps, chapes, grommets, aglets, or ferrules. (Sweatpants were technically acceptable, but might result in loss of face.) The fabs are kept about a thousand times cleaner than a hospital. Their security infrastructure is more impregnable than that of a bank.

T.S.M.C. is a hierarchical, ceremonial place, and the protocol demanded that we first join the fab director for a photo op. Once the picture was taken—the photo itself appeared to remain confidential—we were rushed along an anonymous corridor to a 9 *A.M.* handover meeting. Every incoming shift begins with a briefing from the outgoing one. Perhaps two dozen people sat in a situation-room arrangement; what I first took for a mirror was actually a video link to an identical configuration in another room in the same complex. Other screens displayed graphs and tables. Jack Chang, a young section manager with moussed hair and stylishly baggy clothing of advanced fabric, whispered to me, "Here, we monitor the efficiency of each production step." He continued, "At this meeting, we ask, Which step was lower than yesterday? Why? How do we minimize any production gaps?"

T.S.M.C. takes a silicon wafer, a shimmering disc with the diameter of a vinyl record, and proceeds to do approximately a thousand things to it. It is coated with an ultrathin film of glass or metal, glazed with photosensitive

chemicals, and then passed through a lithography machine. The chemicals are rinsed off, and the pattern on the exposed film is etched in relief by blasts of plasma before being gassed with other chemicals. The wafer is washed, polished, and inspected for flaws. For the most advanced chips, this gantlet is then repeated about a hundred times on a loop, as if an entire city skyline were being raised one story at a time.

If T.S.M.C.'s vendors supply the tools, the company supplies the ruthless optimization. Morris Chang founded the business on his faith in the "learning curve." This is an economic principle—put very simply, it's the idea that as you make more of a product, each one costs less—but it's also a cultural one. At a disciplined organization, every product you make is an opportunity to improve how you make it. If T.S.M.C. manufactures the best chips, it is because it has come to manufacture almost all of them.

This method works only as long as employees exercise constant vigilance—over the machines, themselves, and one another. Jack told me, "The culture of this place is that, when something didn't go well last night, you have to tattle to your boss." The meeting attendees at AP6 had the faces of people accustomed to scrutiny. Overnight, one of the polishing tools had experienced an idle time of two hundred and nine seconds. This wasn't an intolerable number of seconds, but it also wasn't ideal. That morning, the idle time was down to a hundred and twenty-one seconds. No one, Jack told me, was being yelled at today.

In the gowning area, three dedicated valets zipped and snapped me into a purple bunny suit. "Purple means customer or V.I.P.," Jack said. A fourth person handed me a pen and a bound sheaf of blue paper with a starchy crinkle. The booklet, contrived to shed no particles, said "Clean Note: The Highest Clean Level for Clean-Room Use." Once kitted out, we stepped on metal pads that recorded our individual levels of static electricity—stray bodily ions can invisibly crack a wafer's interior—and then proceeded to enter a sealed air-shower corridor, where tridirectional jets treated us to private tornadoes to remove residual impurities.



*"The doctor says I'll be fine if I can avoid unnecessary stress."
Cartoon by David Borchart*

AP6, which opened in 2023, was T.S.M.C.'s first fab devoted to the entire process of "advanced packaging," an innovation at the cutting edge of the industry. Advanced packaging interlaces several individual chips to form a composite superchip. The challenge is that chips are carved in the miniature realm where matter itself has the irregularity of wood grain. To be stacked together efficiently, they must be painstakingly paired for infinitesimal compatibility. Jun He, recruited from an aerospace shop to help direct the division, compared the manufacturing flow to running the world's largest dating site. He was promoted to vice-president in 2022, right before A.I. blew the roof off demand for the product and relocated his matchmaking service to Hell. He has had to functionally double T.S.M.C.'s advanced-packaging capacity each year since, and if yields are not nearly perfect his customers risk losing money. If he'd known how intense the industry would become, he'd recently told T.S.M.C.'s C.E.O., "I would not have taken this job."

A finished advanced package is typically about half the size of a deck of cards and can have the sticker price of a fancy car. Amy Tsai, a junior manager on the operations team, told me that the total clean-room space—with enough floor area to simultaneously host twenty-two immaculate soccer games—is used for "only our top five customers." She would never

name these customers, but there aren't many candidates; the shortlist includes Apple, Nvidia, and Broadcom, which designs A.I. chips for Google and Meta.

We emerged into a long corridor bathed in a sulfurous yellow glow. The floor panels were perforated with a dot matrix of vents that regularly replace all the air in the clean room. Above our heads, where twenty miles of rails had been installed for automated wafer transport, was the orderly traffic of inhuman motion. Robotic claws whispered along branching tracks, clutching boxy carriers beneath them like prizes in an arcade game. Inside the carriers were the prized wafers. This system, Jack said, had replaced an old method in which a person pushed the wafers in a cart. The human work was less stressful now, a colleague added. He'd once visited a fab with a sign that read "If you bump this cart, your pay will be docked X percent." The facility was so important, one employee later mentioned, that "we pray to the local gods for auspicious function."

Inside the halls, the overhead claws descended to insert wafers into one end of the machines and withdraw them from the other. The only visible evidence of a human hand was paper coverings, which had been taped on the machines to obscure their respective logos. Apparently, there are people who can eyeball an Nvidia Vera Rubin or an Apple M6 from the positioning of, say, a Canon FPA-5520iV LF in relation to a Surfscan SP5^{XP}, and T.S.M.C. had mistaken me for one of them. The machines themselves were perhaps less important than the choreography of their administration. As Jun He, the vice-president, put it, "Our key comparative advantage is the management of complexity."

The next day, my guides and I visited AP7, a partially finished facility an hour or two south. The tropical sun was oppressive, but company representatives were prepared with orange parasols, each with a dedicated barcode. Despite slight delays—the excavation of the site had turned up some priceless Neolithic pottery, and the company also had to establish a protected sanctuary for the ring-necked pheasant—the first phase had risen out of an old sugarcane field in only eighteen months. A wiry, blunt thirty-one-year veteran deputy director named K. H. Cheng had come in with a team of shock troops to supervise.

The second phase would come online in four to six months. At the loading dock, deliveries arrived in trucks lined up in a queue that had been planned a year in advance. The tools, Cheng explained, were accompanied by vendor emissaries who would stay to help for the year it took for T.S.M.C.'s technicians to understand them as well as, or better than, their makers. When I asked if this practice held for ASML's machines, he sighed. "Those people are here all the time, because only ASML's designers know everything," he said. He held up his index finger: "The only exception!" The companies in the industry form a continuum. Just as it's not always clear where Zeiss ends and ASML begins, the border between ASML and T.S.M.C. is fuzzy. The chipmaker's relationships with customers are similarly interlaced and sensitive. Two weeks earlier, Cheng told me, he'd hosted representatives from Apple. He said, "I try not to show too much to a customer. I show them as little as possible, because they always want more control."

For T.S.M.C., a new fab isn't just a giant, particle-free building with a twenty-billion-dollar price tag. It's an additional node in a network that extends across space and time. AP7's employees were camped out in temporary offices and bought snacks from a temporary 7-Eleven. Greater energy appeared to be diverted to a construction project across the street: another science-park high school, where the next generation would be educated to take over where the current one leaves off.

In 2023, President [Joe Biden](#) opened his State of the Union address by declaring that an injury had been done to our national pride. "These chips were invented in America," he said. "We lost our edge." An injury had also been done to the price of refrigerators and sedans. The remedy, the President said, was that "we're going to make sure the supply chain for America begins in America." The *CHIPS* and Science Act appropriated fifty billion dollars for the reindustrialization of the country on the back of the semiconductor. The second-largest award went to T.S.M.C., to build out a satellite complex in Arizona.

This was easier said than done. Unlike its kin in Taiwan, the T.S.M.C. fab in Phoenix took about four years to be completed. Permitting and regulations presented the usual challenges, but what seemed to slow down T.S.M.C. the most was that it couldn't rely on the construction pipeline it had cultivated at home. The first time a new contractor works for T.S.M.C., it's given a

relatively simple assignment, like a utilities building. The contractor is evaluated according to a set of standardized criteria, and if it does well it graduates to the next level. Cheng, the veteran deputy director, told me, “We do not make bets, and we do not take risks.”

The riskiest part, for a company with universally stringent expectations, was hiring. About half the initial workforce was sent over wholesale from Taiwan. During my visit, nobody wanted to be impolitic about the talents of my countrymen, but it was clear that they were dubious about our skill sets and work ethic.

I met Renee Tseng, a young woman in casually elegant denim, who was part of the first wave of Taiwanese employees sent to set up the Arizona operations. She works in the Yield Enhancement Department: before a wafer is routed from one stage of the process to the next, it is scanned by an electron microscope and assessed by an A.I. model, and any detected anomalies pop up on her screen for evaluation. (The company’s usage of A.I. effectively requires that it buy back its chips at a retail markup.) She had no formal training; in college, she studied foreign languages. But she’s been doing the job for sixteen years, which means that she can immediately distinguish between the curve-shaped scratch made by one tool and the star-shaped scratch made by another. Some people, she said with a shrug, have no aptitude for it: “They all look the same.” Others learn the trade, she continued, but it wasn’t exactly something that could be taught explicitly. As with many aspects of semiconductor manufacturing, there was a tacit knowledge that could be absorbed only by becoming part of a community of experienced practitioners. Hopefully, in time, her American counterparts would get their reps in.

Another tricky thing about the Arizona site was that it had been severed from its links to local merchants. On one of my fab tours, I’d seen employees push handcarts outfitted with special shock absorbers to protect components from vibrations. These, as far as Jack knew, were made by only one company, in Taiwan, and had to be shipped to the States. There was no clean-room laundry in Phoenix that met T.S.M.C.’s standards, so all the bunny suits were schlepped back and forth across the desert.

The catch, in the American attempt to make chips at home rather than overseas, is that chips aren't really made anywhere at all. A chip can cross international borders more than seventy times before it's shipped to a customer. T.S.M.C.'s part begins with silicon wafers, but these have their own far-flung prehistory. Leading-edge semiconductor-grade polysilicon must be purified to "eleven nines" (99.999999999 per cent), which only a handful of specialized companies—based in Michigan, Germany, and Japan—are poised to do. These silicon chunks are melted in bespoke crucibles made of the world's purest quartz, virtually all of which is mined from a solitary deposit in the mountains of North Carolina. This process, which generates perfectly crystalline silicon ingots to be sliced like fragile metallic salamis into thin wafers, is entrusted largely to one firm in Taiwan and two in Japan. Most of the steps along this chain are controlled by monopolies or duopolies. This isn't because of market manipulation. It's because each endeavor is so esoteric, so formidable, and so crucial that it makes sense for all the available expertise to be concentrated in one or two nexuses.

Just as important as the firms themselves are the associations between them. Toward the end of the Second World War, as the Red Army approached, the Allied powers moved Zeiss—even then, its lenses were strategically important—from its historic home in Germany's east to the other side of the country. Considered in isolation, the idea of securing some of T.S.M.C.'s operations out of harm's way, in Phoenix, makes similar sense. Broadly speaking, however, it's incoherent to consider any given chip-industry node in isolation. The semiconductor supply chain is a planetary superorganism with its own ecology. It's not like a plant that can be casually repotted.

Chips are products of an organizational culture—both within companies and between them—that encourages people to look beyond their own personal horizons. Jayson Stewart, a San Diego physicist who works on ASML's light source, told me that the firm's "time frames are very forward-looking. I'm somewhat young, and we're talking about 2050, things to come that are likely past my retirement." There are quite a lot of ASML employees, he continued, who measure their monastic tenure in decades. Some of them have sat in the same clean room in the same bunny suit working on the same little nozzle for fifteen years. He recalled, "When one guy retired, he said, 'Take care of my ASML'—not 'ASML' but '*my* ASML.'" To Schafgans, the engineering executive, even this felt too limited: "I'm grateful to be part of

the whole chain.” This might sound like brochure patter, but if so it’s not the self-promotion of an individual company but the gestalt of the entire industry.



*"It's all vegan, except for some of it."
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

When I spoke with Mike Schmidt, who ran the main Biden Administration team responsible for the implementation of the *CHIPS* Act, I expressed some skepticism about the idea that a domestic industry could be conjured ex nihilo in the Arizona desert. I mentioned the lack of a clean-room laundry, and he said, “I love that about the bunny suits! It just kind of goes to show how much the ecosystem matters, right? Part of it is that in order to do it you have to do it, and then it becomes self-reinforcing. Five years from now, someone will be making a killing with a clean-room-laundry business in Phoenix.” A plant or two in Arizona wasn’t the U.S.’s ultimate goal but, rather, an initial seed. In time, he hoped, the desert would bloom. This was, he said, “quite self-consciously a generational program.”

The best Chinese A.I. models lag behind our own by only three to six months. The near-parity in technical capabilities means little, however, as long as we retain our prodigiously advantaged access to chips. China lacks the virtuosity of T.S.M.C.’s process engineering, and it cannot yet match the lithographic capacity of even ASML’s older technologies, let alone its EUV machine. The country will catch up eventually. The rationale for the current

export-controls regime is that we might in the meantime build an insurmountable lead.

The U.S. government has prohibited the sale of ASML's flagship product in China, but it continues to export an earlier generation of its machines. The Trump Administration has expressed a strong preference for ASML to stop doing even this much. If the company chooses to obey, the Chinese might retaliate with the denial of crucial rare-earth metals.

Europe does not like being caught in the middle. In one recent scenario, European researchers ran a thought experiment in which the Pentagon ultimately identifies the loss of control over ASML's machines as "a threat comparable to the proliferation of nuclear weapons." Washington might then try to impose a joint-governance structure that would effectively nationalize a foreign company. Over dinner, I asked Benschop, the ASML vice-president, about the company's status as a "choke point." He said, "When I learned that word, I thought, I don't want to be choked."

There is no shortage of confident soothsaying about A.I. It will cure cancer; it will replace all jobs; it will transform the battlefield; it will guarantee our political dominance; it will usher in a golden age of superabundance; it will bring about our extinction. What such predictions have in common is an assumption that A.I. developers will enjoy ever-greater access to ever-better chips. That access might be undermined by China. This is a question of geopolitics, in the normal sense of the term. It might also be undermined by the exhaustion of Moore's Law. This, too, might be construed as a question of geopolitics. Moore's Law has survived only on the basis of unprecedented international confederation.

When elected officials or pundits talk about chips, they sound like they could be talking about oil or any other strategic asset that can be extracted. When people who know a lot about chips talk about them, they sound like they are talking about sacramental totems. The first point they want to make is always the same; as Dylan Patel, who runs the research-and-consulting firm SemiAnalysis, told me, "The main thing people don't understand is that semiconductors are the most complicated things people do." The second point they make, before there is time to articulate an objection, is that everyone's intuitive response is incorrect. Patel continued, "Rockets are

simple.” Brinton Johns, an investor at N.Z.S. Capital, said, of making chips, “It’s just so much harder. Rockets are an amazing accomplishment, yes. We don’t have a rating scale for complexity, but rockets are maybe a five or a six.” His investing partner, Jon Bathgate, finished the thought: “Semiconductors are an eleven.”

And yet we take it for granted that we can build them. We shouldn’t. The chief determinant of that unlikely success has been not individual genius in the lab, or individual prowess in the boardroom, but collective planning and coordination at a breathtaking scale. Globalization has become tainted in our eyes, as if it necessarily constitutes a zero-sum enterprise. And its mercenary form—which is also its most common form—has indeed inflicted harm. But the global semiconductor supply chain reflects an alternative pathway. It has united its participants in the pursuit of something profoundly difficult that could not have been achieved in the absence of intercontinental solidarity.

In its most spiritual version, Moore’s Law projected that our power would routinely double. But this idea was not original to Gordon Moore. It was Henry Adams, in 1904, who first proposed what he called the Law of Acceleration. The world’s output of coal, he’d noticed, had roughly doubled each decade since 1840. Should this rate hold, he imagined, an American in the year 2000 would have “unlimited” power and “think in complexities unimaginable to an earlier mind.” He’d been famously converted by an experience at the Paris Exposition’s great gallery of machines, where he perceived the towering inventions “as a moral force, much as the early Christians felt the Cross.” This devotion had sustained the generations who built the great cathedral at Chartres. What they had accomplished in the name of the Virgin was now accomplished in the name of the Dynamo. But what Adams took as objects of devotion might better be described as occasions for it. They have given vast numbers of individual people, largely unknown to one another, reason to collaborate on a project that they would not live to see completed.

Last year, I happened to be talking to a Dutch archeologist, Maikel Kuijpers, about Neolithic monuments. Stonehenge, he said, has frequently been investigated as a technological mystery. We look at the enormous rock slabs retrieved from far-off sites by archaic peoples and can’t help but suspect that these ancients availed themselves of some precocious technology lost to

history—a present from aliens, perhaps. But we know how they built it, Kuijpers went on. There isn't any mystery. They gathered as many people and animals as they could, and distributed ropes, and together they hauled those tremendous slabs a great distance. This didn't diminish their achievement. It made it, if anything, even more sublime. ♦

By [Nathan Heller](#)

It was the Friday before Labor Day, a lowering sun, when James Daunt, the most important man in bookselling, spilled off a train and turned to work. He had reached the end of the track in New Jersey. His destination, the Barnes & Noble in Eatontown, was three miles in from the shore. In the normal course of things, Daunt, who is tall and English and who often has the look of someone trying and failing to be invisible, would weave across the final stretch by bicycle—he has a folding Brompton—but the afternoon was muggy, and the traffic unkind, so he crammed into a rideshare car. On the map, Eatontown looked minuscule, but on the approach it unfurled: shopping mall after shopping mall, lawn after lawn, all cloverleafs and big-box stores and the straightaways that Bruce Springsteen, who grew up in the area, called “no place left to hide.” It was also, a lot of people would have said, no place to put a bookstore. To Daunt, it was the landscape for a new, improbable kind of success.

Though less known than many authors, Daunt leads a bookselling empire of unprecedented scale. For seven years, he has been the chief executive of both the largest bookstore chain in the United States, Barnes & Noble, and the largest in the United Kingdom, Waterstones. He is the founder of what may be London’s most beloved independent bookshop, Daunt Books, whose reputation extends so far beyond the literary world that, when the Victoria & Albert Museum mounted an exhibition of influential bags, in 2020, it included the Daunt Books tote alongside a specimen by Chanel. In recent years, the British chains Foyles and Blackwell’s, as well as other independent stores in the U.K., have come under Daunt. So have the Tattered Cover, in Denver, and Books Inc., a chain around the San Francisco Bay. Daunt oversees more than a thousand stores and nearly twenty thousand employees, and presides over four billion dollars annually in sales. “He controls more than twenty per cent of our entire market,” the publisher of a major American imprint told me. “He is, I think, respected—and feared.”

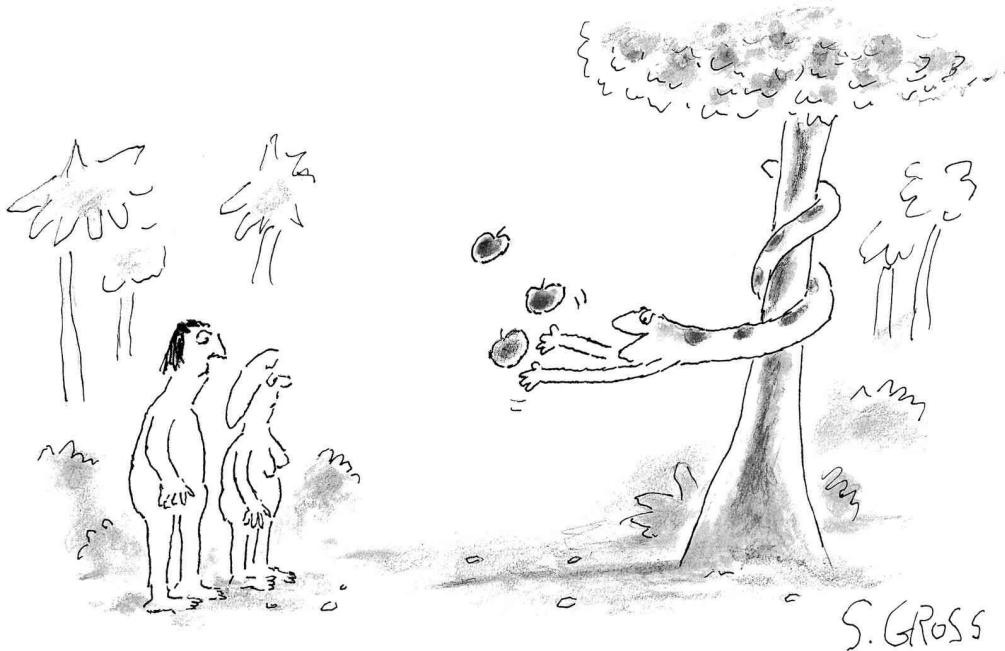
Unusually for an executive of such power, Daunt, who is sixty-three, spent more than twenty years running his own bookshops in the leafy parts of London—lugging boxes, placing orders, and performing other Meg Ryan-ish chores. But the two disparate halves of his career look startlingly the

same. As a global chief, Daunt gets around by subway and other unkingly conveyances. (Aside from monthly nighttime travel between New York and London, he flies coach.) At a time when the executive caste is often thought to carry élite managerial knowledge, he remains obsessed with details that concerned him when he ran his first independent shop. Dauntism—a set of precepts about the best way to stock, shelve, and display books, the best way to cultivate and promote booksellers, and the best way to appeal to readers—has radiated out to the whole of the U.K. and now, through Barnes & Noble, to places such as Wichita and Skokie, nurturing a spirit of renaissance in the trade. “I think many of us can remember a time, not so long ago, when Barnes & Noble briefly appeared to be evolving into a glorified toy store,” Jordan Pavlin, the publisher of Knopf, told me. “Now they’re bookstores again.” The author and former *Times Literary Supplement* editor Sir Ferdinand Mount, who used to be a neighbor of Daunt’s, wryly described him to me as “the most decent tycoon you could ever hope to meet.”

In Eatontown, Daunt got out of the car in a strip mall, to contemplate a mild calamity. The Barnes & Noble—a wide, flat building in gray brick—was obscured by an enormous construction crane. Fencing, orange cones, and loose gravel lay in a messy tumble beside its entrance; a tarp was draped, like a dishrag, across the roof.

“Holy, holy moly,” Daunt said.

The strip mall was owned by Kushner Companies, Jared Kushner’s family firm, which was remodelling it into a housing-and-retail complex. The demolition had surprised Daunt, because he’d seen no suggestion of it in the store’s sales figures. “I don’t think many retailers could expect people to come visit, basically, a construction site,” he said, and, as if registering a crime scene, he snapped a picture with a small Lumix.



*"Now that I've got your attention."
Cartoon by Sam Gross*

Outwardly, Daunt carries faint traces of the social caste that the Victorian critic Matthew Arnold facetiously dubbed “the Barbarians.” Lean and white-haired, he dresses in the subdued style of the office gentleman—dark jackets, gold cufflinks, shirts of forgettable color. He speaks crisply in what he describes as “this ridiculous sort of upper-class accent” and has the urbane English habit of conveying seriousness by tilting his head forward, locking his jaw, and smiling grimly: resting Brit face. When something entertains him, though, he squints and twinkles like an impish kid, a shift so marked that some of his friends experience it as a phase change. “Seeing him laugh is one of my favorite things, because his face disappears into his eyes, like the sun coming out from behind a cloud,” the actor Hugh Bonneville, who went to boarding school with Daunt and later roomed with him at university, told me. “Not that he looks like a cloud—but he’s otherwise quite hard to read.”

Inside, Daunt began to drift through the new-fiction displays, a candescently pale man among the Maillardized, sandal-clad shoppers of the Jersey shore. When he took the helm of the struggling Barnes & Noble, in 2019, his most urgent reform was to loosen centralized control, encouraging every store to select and present its stock as if it were an independent shop. The goal was partly to give booksellers a renewed sense of expertise and accountability.

But it was also about recognizing that what stoked the imaginations of Manhattanites might not suit the residents of, say, Henderson, Nevada. In Eatontown, Daunt was pleased that one of the booksellers had arranged the romance section according to her own taste. “They’re starting to realize they can do it,” he said.

Facing New Fiction, he ran his eyes over the shelves, where a great number of covers were turned outward—a signature of his shops. “What I’m looking at is Have the books got enough space allocated to them?” he murmured. “Is the choice sensible? Can I quickly and easily see the books that *should* be here?” He looked again. “So, for instance, you’d expect to see Rachel Cusk’s new novel. . . .” (“[Life of M](#),” Cusk’s book, created controversy for its treatment of a protagonist rumored to be closely modelled on the actor Natalie Portman.) “Is it sold out?” he said. “Or is it that we’re at the Jersey shore and nobody cares about Rachel Cusk?”

A stream of eager booksellers, who had recognized Daunt, began offering their services; he asked one whether they had a copy of the Cusk.

“I can check,” she said.

A few minutes later, someone reported that it wasn’t stocked—“We don’t have it”—and Daunt, with a tight smile, continued wandering the floor.

A reader of anything but books could be forgiven for thinking that we are living through a low point in literacy. It has been less than a year since the *Reader’s Digest*, noting statistics about pleasure reading, declared a “reading slump.” In May, [the Wall Street Journal bemoaned](#) a crash in the market for “dad books”: histories, theories, bewigged biographies. A summer *Atlantic* cover, with the headline “[The Age of Reading Is Over](#),” channelled fears that we have entered what it called a “postliterate era,” as a consequence of phones, screens, and the rest of it. This month brought James Marriott, a British columnist, warning, “As reading declines, the result, evident all around us, is the intellectual hollowing out of our society.” That’s from “[The New Dark Ages: The Death of Reading and the Dawn of the Post-Literate Society](#),” a Substack polemic that Marriott expanded into, of all things, a book. How dead can the nonfiction market be?

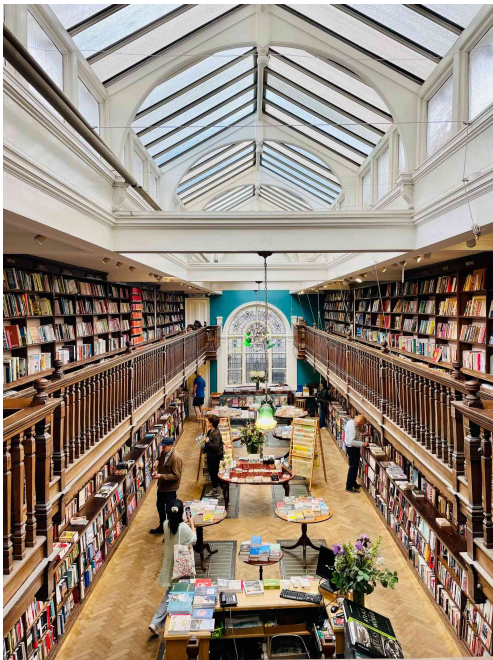
Actually, in America, the reading of books is up. Sales of print books have increased nearly twenty-five per cent from a decade ago. The number of independent bookstores in the United States has climbed steeply since 2009, with a seventy-per-cent increase since 2020. A survey by the Pew Research Center found that thirty-eight per cent of American adults read one to five books in 2025, and fourteen per cent read at least twenty. The global book market is expected to grow five per cent annually for the next several years; for the generation now entering college, book sales are at a lifetime high.

In its lament for fading literacy, the *Atlantic* mentioned current data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, whose reading survey of thousands of students began in 1971. “Just 35 percent of high-school seniors were ‘proficient’ at skills such as analyzing complex fictional themes and evaluating the effectiveness of an author’s argument,” the magazine’s staff writer Rose Horowitch observed. That sounds bad, but the same figure a decade ago was thirty-seven per cent—just two points higher—and in the gloriously unwired age of 1992 it was forty. And the survey’s broad news was good. American nine-year-olds performed much better on reading assessments in 2025 than in 1971, and thirteen-year-olds’ performance held steady. The reading skills of English learners have risen in the past two decades, and, unlike in 1971, the top quarter of Black and Hispanic students today out-read the average white child.

“I thought that piece in the *Atlantic* made some good points, but the idea that reading has finished and we have moved into a kind of post-literate dark age strikes me as absurd,” Robert Darnton, a historian of the book and a former director of the Harvard University Library, told me. “I have a little collection of jeremiads, and one is from 1928, when Walter Benjamin said, ‘Everything indicates that the book is nearing its end.’” He added, “There’s this unprecedented change in the technology of reading, and people are naturally reacting to that, because it’s disorienting. How do we make sense of changes that have hit us so fast?” “Every decade, there is a new scapegoat for why the reading public is diminishing,” Nancy Bass Wyden, who owns the Strand Book Store, told me. “The fact of the matter is that books are one of our most enduring forms of human expression.”

The illusion of decline might come in part because people consume books differently. Pew reported that, in 2025, the number of adults who read a print

book during the year was eight percentage points less than it was in 2011—but that the number who read an e-book and the number who listened to an audiobook each increased by almost double the same proportion. (Other studies turn up a similar result; the National Education Association, whose 2022 survey the *Atlantic* cited as its first data point for decline, noted in its own material that factoring in audiobooks eliminated any significant downturn.) Joel J. Miller, a former book editor and the author of a book about books (“[The Idea Machine](#)”), pored over data about the ostensible nonfiction crisis on his blog, Miller’s Book Review, this year, and found what he described to me as a dubious “confirmatory pattern that everything’s going to hell in a handbasket.” The media started measuring a decline, he noticed, at the peak of the pandemic, when adult-nonfiction sales had risen to unprecedented heights. When he zoomed out on the time span, total print sales came out slightly higher than they were before the pandemic. He factored in e-books and audiobooks, and they went higher still. The picture wasn’t of a crash but of a steady, gently climbing line with an anomalous hump in the middle.



The double-height main room of Daunt Books, which opened in 1990, on Marylebone High Street, in London. Photograph by Carrie239 / Shutterstock

When I brought up the subject of reading decline one day with Daunt, he laughed. “*Such* nonsense,” he said. “It’s ‘Policemen always get younger’—we just go through an arc of life. Every single year of my bookselling life, somebody has popped up and said, ‘Literary fiction is dead!’ Now it’s

‘Nobody is reading nonfiction!’ ” His stores suggested the opposite. One of Barnes & Noble’s pandemic best-sellers had been “[Middlemarch](#),” bought largely by people younger than forty-five. At all six stores in New York this summer, one of the top-selling books—helped along by Hollywood—was Emily Wilson’s twelve-thousand-one-hundred-and-ten-line verse translation of the *Odyssey*.

We were sitting in the company’s headquarters, which Daunt had consolidated into two floors above its flagship store, in Union Square. His office, behind a warren of cubicles, was smaller than most bedrooms in a Manhattan walkup, with just enough room for a book-covered desk, some shelves, and a round café-size table, where we sat. The sills of two high windows had been covered with short, neat piles of books (“[Sour Cherry](#),” “[Radical Duke](#),” “[Paul Celan: A Life](#)”). The space seemed curiously provisional. Since taking over at Barnes & Noble, Daunt has spent three weeks a month in the U.S. and one in London, where he is temporarily renting a flat with his wife; their house in Hampstead, where they reared two daughters, is being renovated. “All the things we’d put off for twenty-five years—plumbing, that sort of thing—turned out to be in a dire state,” he said. His conversations about bookstores tend to also have a diagnostic air. When he began at Waterstones, in 2011, the chain was going bankrupt. He turned it around to the point where it was opening dozens of new stores. The idea had been to do the same with Barnes & Noble when he arrived. Then the pandemic hit.

“I had just barely got my feet under the desk, and suddenly we were closing stores left, right, and center,” Daunt said. “It was just, like, *Oh, my God*.”

He managed to use the unexpected closures to accelerate his own reforms. Daunt’s idea of good bookshops—welcoming, browsable retail spaces that are also singular and carry human fingerprints—became the template for remaking more than six hundred Barnes & Noble stores. “My argument to the money people was that it will cost that much more, but we’re going to be so much better when we reopen,” he said. In 2021, after eight years of negative revenue slopes, the company saw positive growth, and it has continued to gain speed, adding sixty new stores last year. Elliott Management, the hedge fund that owns Waterstones and Barnes & Noble, is widely expected to take both of them public next year at a total valuation of

at least three billion dollars—a startling resurgence for the sort of brick-and-mortar chain bookstore that, fifteen years ago, was supposedly being devoured by Amazon and the apps.

Daunt holds that a literary culture is something booksellers are well placed to build. “Books aren’t a fixed market,” he told me in his office. “The more bookshops there are, the more people will read. The better bookshops are, the more people discover things. Online is an efficient place, but it’s not a place that can excite in itself.” He paused, and added, “I believe that we make our own luck.”

Chain bookselling is an artifact of nineteenth-century rail travel, replacing the work of booksellers who had previously moved city to city with their stock. “The economic advantages,” the scholar Andrew Pettegree explains in [“The Bookshop,”](#) his new history of the trade, included “economies of scale, central stocking, the ability to promote high-performing staff from within the organization, and most potently, the capacity to extract from suppliers higher discounts for larger orders.” The bookselling Brentano family began its chain in 1883; within half a century, it had some thirty rivals across the United States. Chain bookselling, which enabled the unification of the reading market, was one of the first heralds of a globalizing age.

Achilles James Daunt was born in Sussex, in 1963, to parents whose adulthoods coincided with the international reading culture that resulted from this expansion. Timothy and Patricia Daunt had met in Turkey, where they were stationed for diplomatic work. “They were chalk and cheese,” the younger of Daunt’s two sisters, Alice, recalled. “Our mother was a force of nature—loved a good story, no problem exaggerating—and our father was very precise and reserved, very steely.” What they shared was a penchant for reading (“Our birthday and Christmas presents were almost always books,” Daunt’s other sister, Eleanor, said) and travel, the more adventurous the better. In the eighties, the Daunts returned to Turkey, where Timothy served as the British Ambassador; he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth.

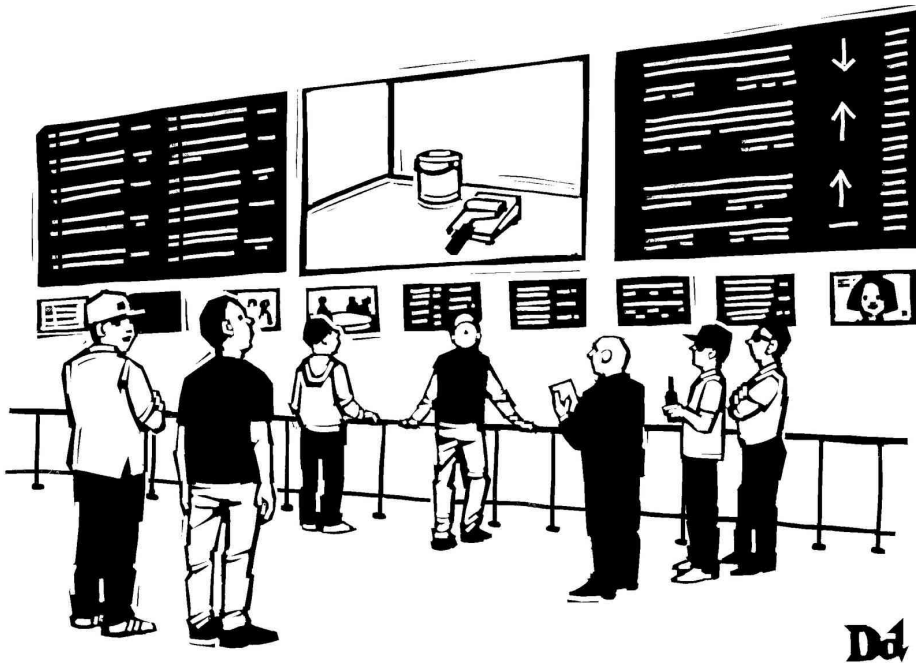
Daunt, the eldest, was sent away to boarding school at the age of seven. At thirteen, he entered the Sherborne School, in Dorset, where his father had gone. He was a good, if obstinate, student. Attending chapel was obligatory, but Daunt found it pointless, so he accepted weekly detention instead. He

distinguished himself on the rugby pitch. “The first time I saw him playing, he received a crunching tackle,” Hugh Bonneville recalled. “But then he picked up the ball and started running, streaming down the wing, and scored a try. That’s the image I have of James—a sudden turn of speed.”

At Pembroke College, Cambridge, Daunt lived off campus and almost immediately fell in love with a young woman, Katy Steward, whom he met at a party; she later became his wife. It was a lively time in the arts around the university. Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, and Emma Thompson were in the sketch-comedy troupe the Footlights. A newly relaunched *Granta* magazine was making its name. Daunt was not involved in those endeavors. He studied history with the Mediterranean medievalist David Abulafia, focussing in part on the Crusades, which he regarded as an entry point to medieval Islam. “As a reader of history, James had that thing of being able to cut through and grasp the salient point,” Brett Wolstencroft, one of his roommates, said. “And, whilst most of us had quite small worlds, maybe because of his upbringing he was already interested in a wider one.”

Every summer, Daunt bought a junker of a car and, with a rotating cast of friends, organized a road trip from Brussels, where his parents were then stationed, to the Middle East, passing through the Iron Curtain into Hungary, traversing Transylvania, dipping down to Turkey, and entering Syria—a Crusades route—reading prolifically along the way. In the fall, the group would return home, tired, sunstruck, and bursting with tales of arrests, accounts of car trouble, and what his younger sister called “the most dreadful lavatorial stories,” the result of eating roadside watermelon in Syria.

For Cambridge graduates of that era, employment was hardly a question, because companies recruited on campus. “A great number would offer you a job,” Daunt said. “You just had to say whether you wanted to be a lawyer or a banker or something else.” He noticed that American banks paid very well, and he liked the idea of being in New York, so he accepted a post as a junior banker at the Morgan Guaranty Trust Company (now J. P. Morgan). He worked on corporate mergers and restructurings, whose stakes and puzzle solving he enjoyed, and he spent his nights at restaurants and jazz clubs. “It was a young city, and you were being paid stupidly,” he recalled. “The party was on.”



*"Watching paint dry was boring, until they legalized betting on it."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich*

Daunt might never have left the bank had it not been for Steward. She had fallen in love with a diplomat's son, an adventurous student of history. The prospect of spending the rest of her life with a man who nattered on about yield curves filled her with despair. Daunt weighed his options. "I thought, If I'm going to take myself out of an office job, I have to do something for myself and tie it to my interests," he said.

He liked to read, he reasoned, and he liked to travel. When he planned a trip, the first thing he did was to go to the bookstore and immerse himself in the area's history and literature. Usually, that meant a search through both the history and fiction sections, each a jumble of books from everywhere and every age. "If you read 'Suite Française,' the Irène Némirovsky novel, well, then you want to read about the Occupation, you want to read about collaboration, and so on—but nobody put those books together," he said. What if there were regional sections in which all these elements—novels, poetry, histories, guidebooks—were grouped? Daunt likes to describe this as the moment when he set his mind on the idea of a bookstore, though Bonneville recalls it differently. "My abiding memory at university is of him saying, 'I'm going to get a job in the city for a couple of years, learn about business, and then open a bookshop,' " he told me. "I said, 'Don't be ridiculous.' "

In 1989, Daunt, back in London, toured the run-down site of a former antiquarian shop on Marylebone High Street—a long, double-height chamber with stained glass and skylights, a balcony-like mezzanine, and light pouring onto two stories of bookshelves. “There it was, dusty, full of crap,” he told me. “Bookstores are usually just shops that you convert, but this one was *purpose-built* for bookselling.” He opened his shop that winter. He was twenty-six and, as he put it to me, “quite interested in trying to make a different kind of bookstore work.”

One Sunday morning in August, I stopped by the original Daunt Books twenty minutes after opening. The store was already crowded. In the double-height room, the dark-wood shelves were labelled, in gold capitals, with the regions of the world (“CZECH & SLOVAK REPS,” “POLAND”). A middle-aged woman sat in a high-backed armchair and read a few dozen pages of Rachel Blackmore’s novel “[Costanza](#).” On the mezzanine, young people alternately browsed and posed for Beatles-style photographs taken from below. At the “ITALY” shelves, a young American girl intoned to her father from an introductory Italian-language book: “*Io sono alta, ho i capelli castani e un po’ lunghi.*”

When Daunt Books opened, on the Ides of March, in 1990, it was an inauspicious moment to start an internationally themed bookstore. Less than a year earlier, two London shops had been bombed for selling Salman Rushdie’s “[Satanic Verses](#).” But Daunt thought that reading was headed in a global direction, and, broadly, time proved him correct. Successful authors once boasted of the number of languages into which they were translated, but that is no longer seen to be a marker of ubiquity—not because English-language work isn’t read but because the Anglosphere has grown. By 2045, in some projections, a plurality of English readers will live in China.

None of that helped the store’s début. “It was a disaster,” Daunt recalled. That year, the United Kingdom tipped into recession, and Marylebone High Street became a retail wasteland. “It was a staff of three or four of us in this quite big shop,” Wolstencroft, who is now the manager of the Marylebone store, told me. He had been training to be a lawyer when Daunt enlisted him to help set up the place, and he never left. No one had experience in the trade, and most of the shop’s signature features emerged from trial and error and the uncertainty of the market.

At the start, they placed their titles cover out because they didn't have enough stock to fill their shelves. They began arranging books on tables, in a set of stacks known as "the pyramid." Circular tables were ideal, they found, because customers passed them in a rounding motion, keeping their attention on the surfaces for longer. Daunt deplored the dingy norm of London's independent bookstores and spent months keying up his lighting. Then he niggled with the shelves. An incline of exactly three degrees, he discovered, put books in the optimal path of light. (At Waterstones, the angle was revised to 4.5 degrees.) To fill gaps and corners, he made display risers covered with a very British William Morris fabric involving leaves, flowers, and uneasy-looking birds. ("Those patterns are, like, lodged in the back of my brain," the literary agent Juliet Mushens, who has spent a lot of time in Daunt's shops, told me.) Wolstencroft and Daunt noticed that pedestrians tuned out cluttered shop windows, so they loaded theirs with a single title at a time, and decorated them thematically, like department stores'. In the early days, London was still a city of smokers, and Daunt would count cigarette butts on the sidewalk to gauge how many passersby had stopped to look.

What emerged was a model of bookselling both knowledgeable and precisely retail-focussed. Laura Macaulay, a bookseller in the two-thousands, recalled Daunt telling her, "Everything we do has to make a profit." Staffers were encouraged to read prolifically as a quality check: every lemon on the shelves was a reason for a customer not to return. Weak covers were missed opportunities; to this day, Daunt remains one of the few people in the industry who can get the jacket of a major book redesigned.

Daunt Books grew for years as a quiet shop with a devoted following. "You felt the people who worked there were believers," the actor Bill Nighy, a regular since the nineties, said. (He continues to give people its book-subscription service at Christmas. "If anyone knew how much time and money I spend in bookshops, they would say, 'What the *fuck*?' " he said. "It is made more delicious by the fact that books were dead, officially, about ten years ago.") In 1995, Daunt opened a second branch, in Belsize Park, and proceeded to expand to four more locations. He was dubious about publicity, so his booksellers, such as Diana Liu, learned to rustle up attention in other ways. In 2006, Liu, after being approached by Re-Wrap, a women's textile coöperative in India, helped design the famous tote, which has an outline of the Marylebone shop façade. Alice Daunt, now a travel agent, told me that

she had no idea her brother's shop was a success until she spotted a Daunt Books bag hanging from a housekeeping cart "at some dreadful hotel in Antigua," filled with soaps.

Buying a book demands an unusual commitment from the customer—hours, days, or even weeks of attention, and a measure of heart besides. Because the investment is great, the sales numbers can seem small. To reach the *Billboard* Top Ten, a music album often must sell about thirty thousand units a week; a book can make it to the *Times* best-seller list with a mere five thousand. An individual Barnes & Noble store might sell two dozen copies of a best-seller a week, and a "steady seller" might mean fewer than ten weekly sales.

Daunt Books' figures, in this light, could be extraordinary. When the shop gave a paperback the treatment—a window, a display, and bookseller effort—it could expect to move a hundred and thirty copies a week. Once in a blue moon, a hardback attained those sales, too. The shop put on the map books such as Alexander McCall Smith's "[The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency](#)," a previously obscure crime novel set in Botswana which became a best-selling series and a TV show. After Daunt came in one day buzzing about "[Two Jews on a Train](#)," a collection of the French Hungarian writer Adam Biro's folksy tales, his sellers got behind the book so enthusiastically that he asked the publisher, University of Chicago Press, for thousands more copies. The press refused, suspecting that the request was a hoax. Daunt suggested that Liu, who had moved to London from San Francisco, call them. "He said, 'Will you talk to them in American?'" she told me. "I said, 'I'm standing here, selling these books.' And they asked, 'Why?'"

"James was quite outspoken about the idea that many publishers didn't really know what they were doing," Macaulay, who is now the publishing director at Pushkin Press, told me. In 2010, he asked her to launch an imprint, Daunt Books Publishing, that would focus on out-of-print material and new manuscripts; she spent her first year in the publisher's job filling in as a bookseller and found it instructive. "Standing behind the counter, you have thirty seconds or less to say the right formulation of words that will make the customer pick up *that book* and take it home," she said. Even now, the shop floor must sign off on the imprint's acquisitions and covers. "I have

to think, What will a bookseller be excited to sell?,” Marigold Atkey, the current publisher, explained.

As a book buyer, Daunt had exceptional confidence. “James discovered that you could go to the publisher and say, ‘Will you give us better terms on this book?,’ ” Wolstencroft told me. During one standoff, as he recalled it, Daunt threatened to send the books back. (Daunt disputed the memory, denying that he would have done this.) “It seemed remarkable at the time, not just to me but to other people in the trade,” Wolstencroft said. “Other people prefer a collegial sort of management.”

Before the nineteen-nineties, bookselling wasn’t a business predicated on growth. There were chains (Brentano’s, Foyles), big chains (Borders), and really enormous stores (Powell’s, the Strand), but all of them expanded linearly. That changed in 1995, when Jeff Bezos launched his online bookstore, Amazon, on the theory, as the reporter Brad Stone put it in “[The Everything Store](#),” that books “were pure commodities.” Though Bezos was technically a bookseller, his interest was in infrastructure. If you could sell people books efficiently, he thought, you could sell them laundry detergent, tube socks, and printers. Bezos spent a lot of effort, and magnitudes of capital, building a proud, sleek, global machine for frictionless selling. Its product was anything and everything—basically, stuff.

The idea that consumer companies are in the stuff business is still Amazon’s longest shadow. Enterprises plowing the creative fields now call their products “content.” People who might once have referred to books or photographs or rom-coms find themselves obliged, at least once a quarter, to speak of content as a kind of goo subjected to important active verbs. We generate content, publish it, surface it, and deliver it. Since “content” encompasses mystery novels, cheesecake recipes, “[Soul on Ice](#),” breaking news, red-carpet commentary, videos of twerking cats, and the late writings of Heidegger, those verbs are the important thing. If goods are interchangeable—if it’s all just stuff—then market success must be the result of efficiencies in the delivery systems, and we are wise to focus on those, not the qualities of individual works.

By 2011, Daunt had developed a different philosophy. He had spent two decades on the shop floor, studying what customers bought and didn’t buy

and why. Books, he knew, were not like laundry detergent. Decisions rarely happened categorically or in bulk; everything came down to whether the specific thing in front of you—*that book*, this shop—was good enough to draw you in. If powerful growth was to be had in the book business, that specificity would have to remain central. It was around this time that Daunt's colleagues noticed a distance in him. "He's ambitious," Liu told me. "And I could suddenly feel that he wasn't going to be held by Daunt Books."

Only Wolstencroft knew that Daunt had by then spent two years trying to line up a purchaser for Waterstones, which operated some three hundred stores. The chain had been taken up into a conglomerate called the HMV Group, which, rattled by Amazon, had centralized warehouse operations and optimized pipelines. But those efforts failed to attract customers, and Daunt watched as Waterstones' sales went into free fall, threatening to pull down much of the publishing industry with it. He took it upon himself to intervene. In early 2010, he got a call from Dennis Stevenson, a member of the House of Lords.

"I am literally having a cup of tea with a Russian businessman," Stevenson said. "I've explained that there's a bookseller who thinks that Waterstones can be saved. Why don't you pedal over here and see whether you can interest him?"

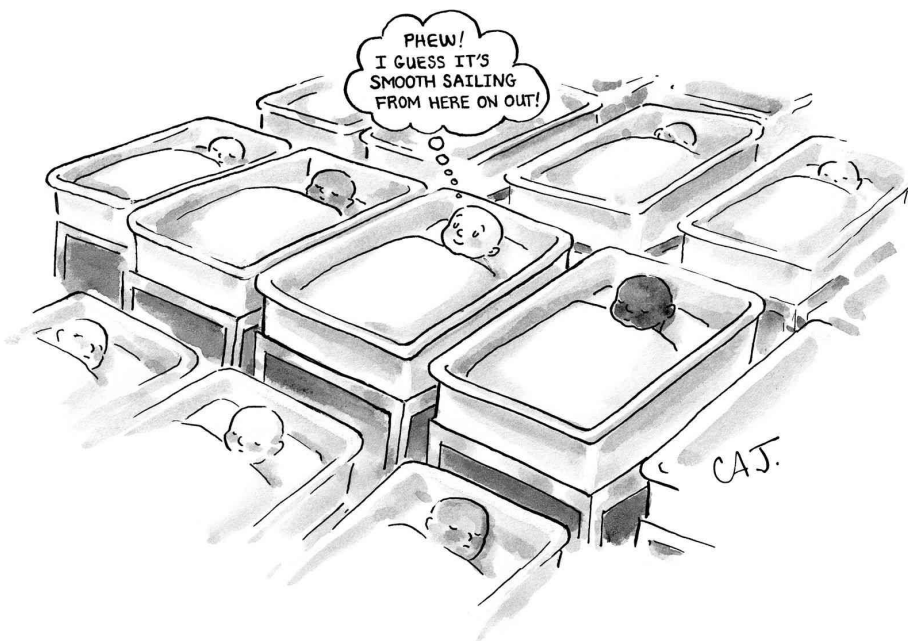
The Russian, Alexander Mamut, was not an obvious savior. In the nineties, he had been known as "the Yeltsin family banker," and emerged with fingers in the usual pies: fuel, telecoms, media. He was alleged to have been implicated in the Bank of New York money-laundering scandal—which transferred Russian capital through U.S. bank accounts—though nothing was proved. (Mamut denied any knowledge of the illegal money transfers.) He was also a prolific reader who, in 2004, had invested in the Moscow chain Bookberry. For two years, he had been quietly buying up shares of HMV, trying to precipitate a Waterstones deal. Daunt made a simple pitch about Waterstones' shops: "If we save them, then we've got a perfectly nice little business, and we can turn a dime on it as well."

Mamut asked how much it would cost. When Daunt said forty million pounds, the businessman looked pleased. "That's less than Fernando

Torres,” he later said. (His fellow-oligarch Roman Abramovich had signed Torres, a soccer player, for Chelsea F.C.) “It’s not even half a boat,” he added. Daunt recognized the signs of a man talking himself into a large purchase.

In the end, Mamut’s fund bought Waterstones for fifty-three million pounds. Daunt took Liu and Wolstencroft to a pub lunch and told them that he would be leaving Daunt Books to become Waterstones’ managing director. (He continues to own the Daunt shops.) “I was, like, ‘Oh, God, the banker within you is coming out,’ ” his sister Alice told me.

At Waterstones, Daunt spent three months interviewing employees—“Just, ‘What do you do?’ ” he said. He asked all four hundred employees in the home office to reapply for their jobs, and fired two hundred. “There’s nothing good—ever—about sacking,” he told me, sounding only slightly defensive. “The narrative is that everybody is a fantastic bookseller, loving books, but it isn’t the case. You have a disenchanted, unempowered, fairly miserable group of people, some of whom really are not good at their roles and are actively counterproductive. These people have to be moved on if you want to run a good shop. It’s a brutal process, and the store managers will never do it.”



Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

In Daunt's view, Waterstones' trouble was that its previous owners had run it as a stuff company, where books were mixed with things like scented candles and decision-making was centralized. But he did notice exceptions. One day, he visited a Waterstones in Horsham, south of London, and caught the manager, Kurde Atfield, unawares. Her store was, as she puts it, eccentric. Her displays didn't feature approved books, and they were decorated with handwritten signs and dusty plastic flowers. "A customer once said to me, 'It's like coming to my aunt's house,'" she said. "I thought, James Daunt is going to go a bit mad."

Daunt did go a bit mad in Atfield's store ("Every time you walk in there, you just hold your head in your hands," he has said), but he also thought she was a genius. The shop had become a community hub, with a strong sense of Horsham's local interests and taste. He looked for other sellers at the company with similar instincts.

"James scythed through the head office—they didn't understand what we were doing," Luke Taylor, a quick-talking manager in his forties, told me in Waterstones' six-floor Piccadilly store, above which Daunt had moved the company's headquarters after closing remote offices. Waterstones had previously churned through young employees, so Daunt set up six major promotion points, with salary increases at each, allowing the most talented booksellers to grow across a full career. Taylor, an early beneficiary of these reforms, had been promoted to the position of retail director. "In 2012, there was an ice-cream freezer in the front and a wall of clearance DVDs right here," he said, gazing out across the main floor, now filled with Dauntian round tables stacked with books.

By the numbers, the Waterstones turnaround was remarkable. Returns, the unsold books that shops send back to publishers, fell from twenty-five per cent of the stock to four per cent. The company's forty-three-million-pound loss in 2011 became an eighteen-million-pound profit by 2017. Daunt eliminated "co-op"—the long-standing practice by which publishers would pay for placement in a bookstore. Instead, booksellers ran with their own ideas. To sell Gabrielle Zevin's "[Tomorrow, and Tomorrow, and Tomorrow](#)," a novel of gaming, in 2022, Waterstones' flagship set up an arcade machine loaded with Donkey Kong. For the release of "[Land](#)," Maggie O'Farrell's new potato-famine-and-cartography novel, it hired a fiddler to play in the

window. This year, after hundreds of Waterstones booksellers voted to bestow the chain's Debut Fiction Prize on "[May We Feed the King](#)," a novel by the poet Rebecca Perry, the book landed on the British best-seller lists and was short-listed for the Booker Prize. To Daunt's admirers, this is democratization. "In the pre-James world, when the books were chosen by a center, you couldn't really have those surprise hits in the same way," the chain's head of books, Bea Carvalho, who also runs the prizes, said.

Yet publishers complained to me about a new consolidation of power. To keep returns low, Daunt shops often placed tiny initial orders, a wan show of confidence that risked seeping down to the fragile economy of the writing life. Jordan Pavlin, the Knopf publisher, described it as "challenging": "We have to remain undeterred by those initials—we have to maintain our conviction and our vision for a book's ultimate potential."

As time went on, Waterstones seemed to put Daunt's roles as a bookseller and a businessman into collision. In 2019, a platform called Organise approached employees to help them arrange a campaign to increase wages among entry-level booksellers to nine pounds an hour (slightly more in London), which fewer than half of Waterstones' employees were earning. They circulated a petition, which received ninety-three hundred signatures. A second petition carried the signatures of twenty-four hundred writers, including novelists such as Sally Rooney. Daunt offered the employees a four-per-cent bonus but denied the base-wage increase. "The booksellers we were working with decided that they'd said what they wanted to," Usman Mohammed, a founding member of Organise, said. "But they still weren't happy with their pay."

When I asked Daunt about his handling of the dispute, he told me that he saw nothing exceptional in it. "Pay is a zero-sum game," he said. "If I'm going to pay one person more, I have to pay another person less. Are we putting that money into base pay, or into the career ladder?" (Mohammed called this "textbook corporate speech, where they draw a false binary.") Daunt described himself as sympathetic, but told me, "The brutal economics of it is Sorry, our priority is the career."

In 2014, [Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula](#), and Western banks pulled back on lending to Russians. Waterstones, under Mamut, was unable

to get the loans that British booksellers typically use to stock their shelves. “We needed a strong partner that would open the doors to the banks to us,” Marina Grönberg, who oversaw the day-to-day of Mamut’s businesses outside Russia, told me. In April, 2018, Mamut sold Waterstones to the private-equity arm of Elliott Management for a hundred and ninety million pounds, nearly a hundred and fifty million more than he had paid. In financial terms, the deal was an apparent victory, but Mamut took it as a bittersweet loss. “Alexander didn’t want to sell control—he hoped to remain with fifty-one per cent,” Grönberg told me. “Also, the reputation of Elliott is not necessarily of a friendly investor.” The firm had made its name as an activist hedge fund investing in distressed sovereign debt.

Mamut and Grönberg were persuaded by Paul Best, a new arrival at Elliott, who believed that the eclipse of brick-and-mortar retail by online commerce had been overstated, and that certain chains could flourish if well capitalized. Waterstones was his first acquisition. A source close to the deal said that Daunt was seen as key to the chain’s prospects. “In a lot of businesses, like fashion, you have the designer and then you have the C.E.O., a left brain and a right brain,” the person said. “He has both. If you put him in a room full of booksellers, they think he’s one of them, because he is. If you put him in a board meeting, he can talk about productivity, inventory turns, return rates.”

What followed was an astonishing period in which almost all British chain bookselling consolidated itself under one man. That September, Waterstones bought the troubled Foyles. In 2022, it bought Blackwell’s, too. Both of their owners, Christopher Foyle and Toby Blackwell, had contacted Daunt personally to offer him their failing enterprises; Daunt had come up with a rescue method. “Do nothing for a year,” he explained. “Let the shops get over the horror of being owned by a chain or whatever it is. Then say, How are you going to run this place properly? You didn’t go bankrupt because you were *such* a good bookstore.” Only then did Daunt put money in, to sparkle up the facilities.

Barnes & Noble, a publicly traded company that had begun its own stock-market slide, had been in Mamut’s sights before his exit. In 2019, Elliott contemplated an acquisition. “I think it’s doing the same things wrong that

Waterstones was,” Daunt told Best. Elliott took Barnes & Noble private, for six hundred and eighty-three million dollars, inclusive of debt.

The American publishing industry watched the transaction with both relief and trepidation: it had heard the buzz of private-equity chainsaws on its grounds before. In 2006, in a notorious case, Pershing Square Capital Management, the hedge fund founded and managed by the billionaire Bill Ackman, had begun taking on a plurality stake in Borders, which operated about a thousand book-and-music stores. Pershing Square saw it as an undervalued asset. Yet, when Borders put itself up for sale during the credit squeeze of 2008, it got no offers. Pershing Square extended more debt. In 2010, Ackman made a failed bid to merge Borders with Barnes & Noble. That holiday season, Borders stopped paying some landlords and suppliers on time, and, in February, it filed for Chapter 11. Soon a thousand American bookstores had disappeared.

The prospect of Daunt’s leadership struck publishers as a flash of hope. “I’m generally not a booster,” one said. “But, you have to understand, we’ve had so much worse, just a legacy of morons and horrible people.”

Daunt told me, “Barnes & Noble *shouldn’t* be owned by private equity.” He saw it as a safe haven for a company that had needed to find its footing before proving itself. A few years ago, the podcaster Nigel Beale asked him whether Paul Singer, Elliott’s founder and president, was a lover of books. “No, he’s a lover of making money,” Daunt shot back, with what sounded like pride. At a moment when anything to do with reading or literature tended to be presented as a sympathy cause, like saving the whales, he’d got bookselling enshrined as that truly unassailable thing: a lucrative American business.

Yet public trust has not entirely followed him. Last spring, a mild fracas erupted when Daunt was quoted as saying that Barnes & Noble would stock and sell books written by A.I. “What I actually said was ‘We *don’t* sell A.I. books. We go to extreme lengths not to,’ ” he told me. “Then the next question is ‘Would you *ever*?’ ” He told me he said yes with a thought to word-game compilations and other non-narrative materials that publishers might churn out using A.I.

The tenor of alarm about new technologies was familiar. When Daunt arrived at Waterstones, bookselling was in a panic about the Kindle, said to be poised to replace paper books. Daunt was doubtful: he'd used the product. And he'd seen the advent of the personal computer during his time as a banker, when the arrival of the I.B.M. XT had carried him and his peers up the ranks. But books were more like rubber bands or bottle openers than like computers: their form was largely unimprovable for their function. Daunt had the Kindles displayed in every Waterstones. They sold quickly at first, then slowly, and then, booksellers told me, Kindle buyers began returning for books. Today, the e-reader market has plateaued at some ten per cent of traditional publishers' revenue, while about seventy-five per cent comes from paper books, a technology essentially unchanged since the nineteenth century.

Now we are having a Kindle moment with A.I., which has seemingly started to affect the sales of self-help and pop-business titles—the kinds of books, Joel Miller pointed out to me, that present themselves as answers to such prompts as “How do I” or “I want to.” But the claim that A.I. writing threatens to replace novels, archival histories, reported narrative, and so on, seems a naïve insult to readers, and major publishers have avoided A.I. work. As far as the shelves of the bookstore are concerned, A.I. writing is a technology without a market.

The future of an industry is harder to judge. An enterprise consolidated under a single deft leader is secure until that leader leaves; then it's just consolidated, and vulnerable. When I asked Daunt about succession, he insisted that he had stocked the upper ranks of both Waterstones and Barnes & Noble with like-minded booksellers who would carry on without him—unless, that is, a new owner did as he had done, and cleared the decks before charting a new course. Daunt told me he was sanguine. “If the whole thing is working well enough, they'll let you get on with it,” he said.

Daunt spends most weekends when he's in the U.K. at a house in Suffolk, a bike ride's distance from the English shore. One morning, he met me at the end of the Darsham station's platform with his car, an electric Polestar that was dark navy and caked in dust. “The filthiest car in Britain!” he announced and put the vehicle in gear.

East Suffolk, a windblown span of marshy coastland, has a reputation for stark, mournful beauty, and for drawing creative people with a taste for isolation and escape. This is the place that W. G. Sebald described, in “[The Rings of Saturn](#),” as “dry, empty stretches of land which, by the end of a long summer, are almost like a desert.” Benjamin Britten’s opera “Peter Grimes” was set nearby. Daunt and Steward’s house is on what he describes as the emptier, inland side of the highway. Until the Waterstones job, which he accepted when his daughters were out of primary school, he would take off all their school vacations, and the family would travel together, often far afield. “We would go to Georgia, Nicaragua, Cuba, Ethiopia, and have a good, nice, proper, adventurous holiday,” he said. (“He’s what I call a *SFOG*, a smug father of girls,” said his sister Alice, who summarized his preferred style of travel less romantically: “At best, a really shitty tent.”)

Now Daunt gazed ahead as he followed the curves of road toward Southwold Books, a Waterstones shop that operates under its own name. Southwold is one of Britain’s affluent seaside getaway towns, filled with Range Rovers and sunburned Londoners. Daunt made a series of small groaning noises on the approach. “Obviously, I’ve gone into the grubby world of commerce,” he told me. “But whether you’re a civil servant, as my father was and my elder daughter is, or a schoolteacher, as my grandfather was, or someone who works with hospitals, like my wife”—a policy expert who sits on the boards of an N.H.S. mental-health trust and the U.N. Refugee Agency—“public service seems to be what we gravitate toward.”

Daunt likes to think of his own service as the preservation of a kind of literary and civil space. He has been a noisy critic of closing libraries in Britain. His acquisitions have invariably been of cherished bookshops about to shutter, and he has pulled Barnes & Noble out of real-estate deals—recently in Washington State—on discovering that they would threaten an independent shop nearby. In Southwold, he backed delicately into a parking space along the town’s central embankment. The waves below were an uncouth olive-brine brown.



"Let's take up the full width of the sidewalk so everybody knows how in love we are!"
Cartoon by Ellie Black

"Did you bring your swimming trunks?" Daunt asked merrily, and led me in a zigzag through the parking lot of the Adnams brewery, then out to the bookshop, a chip-shop-size storefront with a blue exterior. Inside, I saw what looked like a very fine small store. Daunt saw an array of signs and symbols that he could read. He noted where abutting shelves were set at different heights, signalling divisions in the stock. He clocked, from several feet away, a paperback from McNally Editions and a few hardcovers from Slightly Foxed, a more obscure house.

"You can see it's got lots of tiny publishers," he said excitedly, half to himself. "Quite an eccentric stock as you start looking." He approached the checkout counter, where a young bookseller in a gingham dress was ringing up customers. "I wanted to introduce myself," he said, placing all five fingertips on his chest. "I'm James Daunt."

"Oh, my goodness!" the bookseller, Nina Wilkins, said, perhaps not entirely joyfully. "Oh, my *goodness!*"

"Nice and busy in the morning, isn't it?" Daunt said. "And the shop's looking lovely."

Wilkins said, recovering, "Shall I call my manager, Steph?"

As Daunt waited, he checked the pyramids. Early on at Daunt Books, he and Wolstencroft found that, if they placed unknown début-fiction titles on their own, people shied away, but, if they interposed known books of a similar flavor, customers bought both. Presenting the new in the context of the old allowed readers to orient themselves.

The manager, Steph Burridge, appeared, her blond hair half gathered into a top bun. “Congratulations,” Daunt, who congratulates everyone, said.

“We pick a book, and it just flies,” Burridge said.

“I always say that, in small shops, you can be talking to somebody and selling the book to three other people,” Daunt said. He paused. “Anything for me while I’m here?”

“I think the shop should have an awning,” Burridge said. “I mentioned it, and I just got completely—”

“Would you e-mail me?” Daunt said. “You don’t need to say, ‘Hi, James, the weather’s lovely, blah blah blah.’ Just write an e-mail that says—”

“Awning,” Burridge guessed.

“Awning,” Daunt said, with a smile.

For most of us, ideas about the state of literature are the result of a cohort experience. Reading is private—or has been since at least the sixth century, before which the Western habit was to read everything aloud. But conversing about reading is a social activity. If you were of a certain cohort in a certain time, you might remember everybody talking about “[Primary Colors](#),” or “[Guns, Germs, and Steel](#),” or “[White Teeth](#).” To be ensconced within a reading cohort is bliss, and falling off the cart can be demoralizing. “Within the industry, we’re very used to there being a golden age and it being just over,” one publisher told me dryly. “The moment of decline usually depends on the age of the person telling the story.”

It is also true that cohorts used to be mostly local, made up of people you could meet for lunch. Now they are, like everything, atomized and diffuse. “Readers are connecting with each other in small communities scattered all

over the internet,” Kris Austin, the C.E.O. of the self-publishing platform Draft2Digital, which serves more than three hundred thousand authors, told me recently. “The big gatekeepers are less major players than they used to be, and authors are finding readers directly—or readers find *them*, and tell each other on social media.” It is easy to be snide about the way that taste hierarchies flatten on social media, but any writer who genuinely connects with readers isn’t working in vain. “A romance author might be able to release a book a month, and, if they have a thousand people who will buy all of their books, they’re making a good living,” Austin said. Rarely, somebody breaks out and gets picked up by a publisher, as with the best-selling romance writer Colleen Hoover. But a lot of reading today happens in diverse pods below the publishing industry’s waves.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

These reading habits often reach booksellers through BookTok—an ecosystem of literary influencers across social media. Barnes & Noble shops sometimes include BookTok recommendations on dedicated tables, which have helped move books; TikTok has translated into fifty million book sales across Europe, according to Nielsen. Still, these displays are not universally adored. (“I think it’s lazy bookselling,” Victoria Harty, the chain’s New York retail manager, told me.) Most BookTokers are young, and appeal to readers in the eighteen-to-forty age range. “I think people much older than me

maybe wouldn't see that their tastes align with mine," Jack Edwards, a twenty-seven-year-old BookToker with four million followers, said.

Edwards, who recently reviewed both Alexandra Romanoff's romance "[Big Fan](#)" and John Berger's "[Ways of Seeing](#)," began posting as a student at Durham University, in the U.K. He told me that a great number of his followers were interested in writing in translation. (Half of all translated fiction is now bought by people between the ages of thirteen and thirty-four.) "I think the reason is that we've grown up in the digital landscape and are used to scrolling on our phones and seeing people from many different countries," he said. "We don't question reading a book from Nicaragua or Ethiopia or Sri Lanka." They are also tired of their feeds. Recent years have brought a huge market for books with decorated edges and embossed covers, and major fantasy books now sell out in large luxury editions—an enthusiasm that the agent Juliet Mushens, who represents a lot of best-selling fantasy books, attributed in part to Daunt's emphasis on visual display.

"People are ravenous for content that isn't on their laptop or their phone," Eden Yonas, another preëminent BookToker (twenty-five years old, half a million followers), told me. "I love that now, when I'm sitting on the train in New York, I can look up and, instead of seeing people on their phones, see them reading a book. Three, four years ago, I didn't see that." Every bookseller I spoke to reported increased book-buying among young customers.

It is puzzling, then, that the world is filled with professors reporting that students can barely muddle through the reading on their syllabi. That complaint was the focus of Tyler Jagt's recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* [essay](#) "My Students Can't Read," which provoked a flurry of responses. Dorian Thornley, the proprietor of Westsider Rare and Used Books, on Manhattan's Upper West Side, gives a basic literary-knowledge quiz to the young college graduates applying to work there, and has been appalled at the results. "They don't know who wrote 'Moby-Dick,'" he said. "They don't know who wrote 'The Magic Mountain.'" It's not that they aren't reading. (Thornley's own teen-age son, he told me with a sigh, reads almost exclusively "politicized Y.A., over and over again.") It's that their canon is illegible to older readers.

The new reading wars, in that sense, are largely about the primacy of taste. “The confusing thing for people in the business is that the books folks love and want to recommend are not the books that people wanted to catch fire,” Michael Cader, the founder of *Publishers Lunch*, a publishing-industry newsletter, said. Felicity Blunt, a prominent literary agent at Curtis Brown, told me, “We are discovering that people are reading things that we weren’t expecting—and we are behind certain curves.” One of the most-read genres in the United States right now is romantasy, or romance in fantasy worlds; at bookstores, readers across the country queue down the sidewalks for midnight releases of new titles. Earlier this month, “[Threshing Day](#),” a short-story collection by the romantasy writer Rebecca Yarros, debuted at No. 1 on both the print and the combined print-and-e-book *Times* best-seller lists, having sold, according to *Publishers Weekly*, nearly nine hundred thousand copies of its special-edition release in its first week, superseding a new John Grisham novel for the first time in four decades—a moment of generational change in best-seller publishing.

Romantasy is not many people’s idea of great literature. But, then, neither is a lot of “literary fiction.” “How many of these books will actually command a place on our shelves in ten years?” Daunt said of this year’s best-sellers. “*Very* few. But, boy, do you know them when you find them.” He recalled his thrill on reading “[Tinkers](#),” Paul Harding’s slender début novel centered on the memories of a clock repairman, which was published by a small press and, in 2010, won the Pulitzer Prize.

The truth is that the distance from romantasy to “Tinkers” can be small. Most readers don’t cut their teeth on Robert Caro or Proust; they begin with the Sweet Valley Twins or Agatha Christie, and the habit of reading propels them toward more remarkable work. “If you’re strictly a romance reader, I’ll be, like, ‘Have you ever read Jane Austen?’ ” Yonas said. In London, the writer Tom Willis has become known for organizing the Soho Reading Series, a slate of literary readings and parties that have drawn more than ten thousand attendees over the past few years, feeding what he describes as an enormous appetite for a real, welcoming literary culture among the young. “I’ll put on a reading with a writer like Rob Doyle”—the Irish novelist—“and, after it, people are queuing up with their eyes lit up like in the frigging olden days,” he said. He launched a literary talk show this fall—one more person trying to make even the screens a bookish place.

“Reading, right now, feels like resilience,” Edwards told me. “It feels revolutionary to choose friction in a world increasingly being designed to reduce it through ChatGPT.”

In garrulous moods, Daunt likes to impart advice for young travellers. Make an effort with the lexicon: a hundred words of any language will get you far. In remote terrain, speak whatever language you speak worst: you’ll use more gestures and expressions, which will make your message clearer. (Daunt speaks Turkish in rural Japan.) Travelling, like reading, is a reminder of the impossibility of communicating across territories—but also evidence that, somehow, we always do.

The politics of bookselling, as Daunt sees them, are pragmatic and pluralist. “I think booksellers, as a tribe, almost universally believe in principles of liberalism, which means that we’re politically of the left—not in a punching-with-Bernie way, though plenty will be, but in a commitment to diverse societies,” he said. Under his aegis, Barnes & Noble has joined with publishers to wage legal battles against content restrictions in Texas and Virginia, like those used to limit the distribution of L.G.B.T.Q.-themed books. But it has also supported its shop in Cheyenne, Wyoming, which mounted a display of *MAGA* books: the local taste. “We can’t believe in free speech and the importance of resisting censorship and then censor ourselves,” Daunt said.

Back on the road, in Suffolk, he told me that Barnes & Noble was the most engaging work of his career. “Waterstones was a bigger train set: more tunnels, more things to set up. And then, when you get to Barnes & Noble, it’s a *whacking* big thing,” he said. We were stuck behind a slow truck on a two-lane highway; I could sense him waiting to lay into the pedal for a burst of speed.

We reached the town of Lowestoft. Once a thriving fishing center, it was now a place without an industry. The Waterstones shop sat on a wide main street of drugstores and budget-clothing chains in whose windows everything appeared to be on sale. “This is the less affluent white U.K. you’re seeing,” he said. “The places that have been left behind, that become breeding grounds for Reform”—the British far-right party.

The store was neatly ordered, with a table of romances near the entrance and a bright-emerald carpet: a relic of an older style of décor. Daunt had said before we entered that, of all the shops he was responsible for, those like Lowestoft were the ones of which he was proudest. “There will always be some version of a Southwold Books,” he said. “But no one today is opening a bookshop in Lowestoft. If this one leaves the high street, it’s gone.” As we watched, the manager, Alison Mason, went from table to table, adjusting books, as if preparing a home for a visiting friend.

Before Daunt left, he made a slow round of the store, studying its displays and stopping at the children’s section, into which, Mason said, kids and teenagers flocked daily after school. In the early days, at his own shop, he had been known for his laconic style of selling. “Booksellers can sometimes say too much about a book, but James would never say too much,” Wolstencroft told me. When showing visitors around, Daunt would seem to notice a book on a table and ask whether they had read it. When the answer was no, he’d pick it up and appear to examine it, as if it were the only thing in sight, a precious object borne across the world. Then he would hand it over. “Just read it,” he’d say. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [The Perils of Time Travel](#)

Neil and Brenda met just days after Neil invented his time machine, which proved to be a handy access pass. They watched the Beatles play at the Cavern Club. They figured out which religion's version of God was the right one. They prevented the Hindenburg disaster. They watched the Ashton Kutcher film "The Butterfly Effect," and undid their undoing of the Hindenburg disaster.

Eventually, they fell into a peaceful routine. Brenda would ask, "What should we do tonight?," knowing that Neil would reply, "Sal's?" To which Brenda would add, "2004." (Sal's was much cheaper in 2004.)

"I want to take you somewhere," Neil said one night, after an expensive 2078 visit to Sal's.

"Where?" Brenda asked.

"I want you to meet me as a kid," Neil said. "There's something I think about a lot, and I feel like you'd understand me better if you saw it for yourself."

Neil and Brenda climbed into the time machine, and he set it to 1995. A lot of people think that time travel is instantaneous, but it literally takes six hours to fly a plane across the country. Why would time travel be different? It takes three nanoseconds to go back to 1995, then six hours to travel from Boston, where Neil and Brenda lived, to Los Angeles, where Neil grew up.

"I wish we could've Ubered to your house," Brenda joked as she got out of the thirty-minute cab ride from LAX, which cost eight dollars.

"Sh-h-h, don't let them hear us," Neil whispered, gesturing to little Neil, who stood in a circle with four taller boys. In the center was an injured bird. Boy No. 1 taunted little Neil, "What, are you too scared to put it out of its misery?" Boy No. 2 shouted, "I want to see bird guts!" Boy No. 3 blew a raspberry. And Boy No. 4 did not know how to bully.

Little Neil mustered his courage and brought a hammer down on the bird. The boys' callousness quickly turned to disgust, their contempt steadily

aimed at Neil.

“You see?” old Neil asked Brenda. “It’s funny, watching it now as a thirty-six-year-old man. That bird obviously wasn’t going to make it. It honestly looked kind of dead before I even hit it with the hammer. What a relief. I’ve felt guilty about that forever.”

“You should,” Brenda replied. “That was majorly fucked up.”

“Wh-what?” Neil stuttered.

Just then, little Neil approached the couple and, through his tears, mumbled, “Excuse me. I don’t mean to bother you, but you both look upset.”

“Murderer!” Brenda yelled.

It was an awkward cross-country flight and then time travel back to Boston, 2026. As soon as they got home, Brenda packed her things and left. Neil didn’t go on another date for ten years; he time-travelled to 2036, to speed up the wait.

In 2036, Neil met Florence, who was born in 2009, if you’re keeping track. A few weeks in, Neil posed the question “Can I take you somewhere?” Soon enough, Neil and Florence stood in front of Neil’s childhood home, in 1995.

“What are those kids doing over there?” Florence asked.

“Don’t mind them!” Neil said. “Watch, she’s about to do it.” From behind a tree, Neil and Florence observed Brenda scolding little Neil. “She calls me a murderer and everything!” he said. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it for ten years. Now you can finally understand this part of me.”

“Wow. You’ve been thinking about another woman for ten years?” Florence asked. “By the way, what you did to that bird was seriously fucked up.”

After Florence left him, Neil gave up on love for ten days. He paused time so that he could grieve properly.

Then Neil met Carrie. “Why’d you want to show me this?” she asked Neil, after he’d taken her back to the bird-killing scene, in 1995. “That second bitch was right. Hell, if you brought me back in time just to watch another woman leave you, you’d damn sure better feel like crap. Also, I’m sorry to bring this up on vacation—but I don’t think this is working.”

“You brought me here to watch someone dump you for bringing her here to watch someone dump you?” Hannah, Neil’s next girlfriend, asked. By this point, Neil had learned from his mistakes. He’d tinkered with the time-travel machine so that the only way his fellow-traveller could make it back safely was in his warm embrace. Hannah chose to stay in 1995.

Neil planned one final trip. Because of all the Boston-L.A. travel, he had lots of Delta SkyMiles, so he often got upgraded. He comfortably cruised back to L.A., 1995, the day before the whole bird incident. He took the ailing bird from the drawer that little Neil had been keeping it in, and hid it in a nearby forest.

When Neil got back to 2026, he had no memory of killing the bird. Brenda had left him for some other reason, probably because he built a time machine that he used only for dates. ♦

Fiction

- [“Appeasement, Ohio”](#)

[Fiction](#)

Appeasement, Ohio

By [George Saunders](#)



Photograph by James L. Amos / Getty

Yeow, the old Ohio place. My cousin Maribeth looks about the same. Her son Kip's a man now: big boy, around two-fifty, thick pink arms like tattooed hams.

I meet Carl, Maribeth's third, possibly fourth, husband: nice guy, sprig of hair on the front of his head like a Kewpie, but white hair, not blond.

Also Mick, a pal of Kip's.

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

"Eggs?" Carl says.

"No, thanks," I say.

"I will," Kip says.

"Scrambled," Mick says.

“Unless you boys no longer believe in eggs,” Carl says. “Or chickens. Mick, still believe in chickens?”

“Yes, sir, still believe in chickens,” Mick says, maintaining discipline.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to George Saunders read “*Appeasement, Ohio.*”](#)

“Upstairs, in the attic?” Carl says. “Kip? A box of Civil War coat buttons, from your great-great-whoever. Plus his bayonet.”

“Anyone can make a button,” Mick says.

“Anyone can put a bayonet in an attic,” Kip says.

“Look how I trained him up,” Mick says.

I’m trying to connect the beaming giant that is Kip with the shy little guy I used to carry up to bed.

Carl sets down a plate of toast.

“Food for the brain trust,” he says.

“You’re being sarcastic,” says Mick.

“Ma’s a believer,” says Kip.

“Well, you kids make a strong case,” Maribeth says.

“For example,” says Kip, spinning his Dell around.

Headline: “*Gettysburg Archaeology Proves No Battle.*” Author: “Ned.”
Photo: metal detector leaning against a palm tree. Nailed to the tree, a laminated sign: “Locale: Gettysburg, PA.”

“Zero palm trees in Pennsylvania,” Carl says.

“That you know of,” Kip says.

“That anyone knows of,” Carl says.

“What’s your source?” Mick says in a faux-military voice.

“Having been there many times,” Carl says.

“Have you walked literally every square foot of the state?” Mick says.

“Shit’s sake,” Carl says.

“Language,” Maribeth says. “We don’t swear in this house.”

After my diagnosis, I e-mailed Maribeth, not asking for anything, just sharing. Within an hour she wrote back: “I’ll do screening, also Kip will.” A week later: “I’m not right, but Kip says no problem.” “It will be a true honor,” Kip wrote. “Remember how fun when you lived with us, just super happy memories of what was otherwise rough time for me as kid.”

Not painful supposedly.

Still: *micro-slice, eyeball, hypodermic, inject.*

Imagine the generosity of that.

Kip runs upstairs to get ready. Mick refills his plate, drifts outside. Maribeth and I sit at Grandma’s old table.

A few things hang in the air between us.

From her side: *You never stayed in touch. You been making decent money all these years. We never heard from you. At all. Until now. Now you show up? Because you need us? Except once you sent him a screwdriver set. And a postcard from Hawaii and one from France. Like that shit helped.*

From mine: *I was dealing with Karla’s eating disorder, my tinnitus, her affair, the divorce, having to learn every stupid feature of every used car that came in. Also: balding, knee surgery, the deaths of two dogs, another knee surgery, this idiotic eye thing.*

From hers: *Kid was crazy about you. And you were crazy about him. If you didn't love him back then, who did you ever? You could've done more. You should've. But you vanished.*

From mine: *I never thought about it like that until just now.*

“Family,” she says. “Hug it out.”

We hug it out.

Kip comes slamming down the stairs, this huge mass barely staying upright by repeatedly grabbing the railing just in time.

“Leo, let's hit it,” he says. “Get you that new eyeball or whatnot.”

Afterward, I take the whole crew to lunch at the PigHip in Rosemont.

Least I can do.

Our table's right under the big metal Pig. The Pig's got a motor in its groin area that makes its hips swivel. Every rotation its hips go *grrWHOP*, *grrWHOP*.

“You dudes resemble matching pirates,” the waitress says.

“Eye graft,” Kip says. “Me to him.”

“Eek,” she says.

“Lincoln,” says Carl. “In on it?”

“Don't get me started,” says Mick.

“Take him off the goddamned penny,” says Kip.

“Language,” says Maribeth.

“I'll just say this,” Mick says, putting his hand on top of Kip's head like it's a basketball he's palming. “Locate this monster on one end of a rope and a

Lincoln statue on the other? Big effing statue comes *down*, people. And the top hat breaks off.”

Out of his pocket Kip pops what looks like a top-hat fragment.

“You did that?” the waitress says.

“Is this something we want to be discussing in public?” Carl says.

“I could do an even bigger one,” Kip says shyly.

“Our ass-kicking giant,” Mick says. “Frigging force multiplier. High hopes for this brute.”

“Not a brute,” Maribeth says to the waitress. “Very gentle.”

“Slavery,” Carl says. “Real or no?”

“Hard to say,” Mick says. “Looking like no.”

“I can find you ten thousand books that say it was,” Carl says.

“I can find you ten thousand books that say it wasn’t,” Mick says.

“Actually, you can’t,” Carl says.

“Watch me,” Mick says. “I’ll go on Amazon. Or, if not, that totally proves my point. Who stopped all those books from being published? Why aren’t there, like, an equal number of books?”

“Leo,” Carl says to me. “You’re an educated person. Care to weigh in?”

“He’s smart, he’s staying out of it,” Maribeth says.

“Who makes up a war?” Carl says. “How? Why?”

“Apply your rational thinking mind, Carlifier,” Mick says. “Who benefits? Who does everyone suddenly feel sorry for? Who gets all the sympathy? Plus the power? People *enslaved* other people? Come on. Does that seem like something people would actually do? Or allow someone to do to them?”

“Jesus,” says Carl.

“You’re welcome,” says Mick.

“*GrrWHOP*,” says the Pig’s hip.

Maribeth leans over to me reassuringly.

“Kip has friends of all colors,” she says.

“He has exactly one friend,” Carl says. “This goof. Who looks pretty much entirely white to me.”

“I am, no worries,” Mick says. “I did GeneJourney. Like six times.”

“Did you not get the answer you wanted at first?” Carl says. “Or are you just constantly seeking confirmation?”

“Do the work, Carl,” says Mick.

“For you two to talk about work is rich,” Carl says. “Which, neither one of you has lifted a goddamned finger in a year.”

“Harsh, Carl,” says Maribeth.

“And in no way invalidates our findings,” says Mick.

Kind of quiet on the way home.

Here’s PornHole, the Evangelical MaxChurch, the old town hall, which got converted into a disco during the seventies, then burned halfway down and got condemned, and then part of it was rebuilt in the nineties and that rebuilt part is now the showroom for Dansen-Thymer Chrysler.

I’m up front with Maribeth. Carl’s in back with Kip and Mick, who look like two kids we’re dropping at a sock hop except they’ve got stubble and are dressed all military, as if about to parachute out.

“Swanky car,” Mick says. “Get it free? From your dealership?”

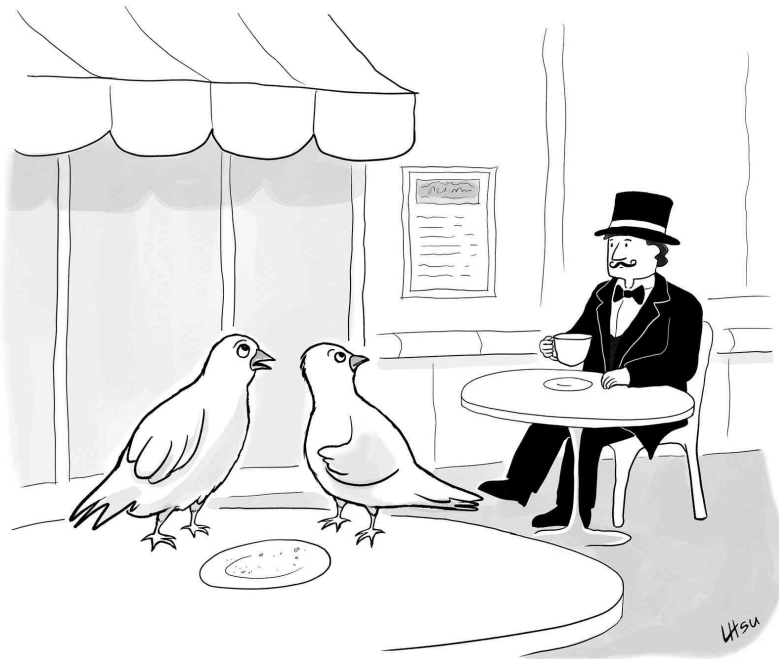
In fact, yes. Eugene, who runs the dealership, let me start using it. After I quit my book club, busted my hump, had a killer month.

“Why go after Leo?” Maribeth says. “He just got here.”

“To me, it’s more of a spacecraft feel,” Kip says.

“That’s how they get you,” Mick says. “Slip you some shiny toy, let you play Mr. Hot Shot. That’s what’s called a Deceptive Comp. Or Luring Comp.”

“Where’s it called that?” Carl says.



"You'd think after ten years working in that guy's sleeve he'd recognize me."
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

“In my book,” Mick says.

“His literal book,” Kip says.

“Love to read that,” Carl says.

“Oh, you will,” Kip says. “Someday everyone will.”

“I, for one, will not,” Carl says.

“Leo, look, I get it,” Mick says. “My dad sold Fords. Until the bitter end. Died in the showroom. Holding a brochure or a coffee mug or some such shit. Total waste of a life. I told him that. On his deathbed. Maybe, like him, you’re caught up in what’s known as the Accomplishment Mindweb.”

“If your dad died in the showroom, how’d he also get a deathbed?” Carl says.

“Hey,” Mick says.

“Why ‘hey’?” says Carl. “It’s logic, simple logic: How can a guy die in a showroom and on a deathbed? Unless he somehow died twice.”

“Carl, rude,” Kip says.

“Doghouse for you, Mister,” Maribeth says.

“Woof,” says Kip.

“Speak, Carl, sit,” says Mick.

I’m thinking fondly of my condo in Wichita: looking out the cracked sliding glass door at the supersized flag that flies perpetually, even in the pouring rain, over Bins&Stuff, no talking going on whatsoever.

On the other hand, Boxton syndrome. That’s what I’ve got, per Dr. Penn back in Kansas. What I need? A double Hex-Graveson.

“If not?” he said. “Blind within a year. Well, worse than blind, in a way. Things will seem to be zinging suddenly out at you from various fields of utter darkness.”

“Wow,” I said.

“Yes, we don’t love that,” he said, then referred me to Eye-to-Eye, this national support site. Most depressing thing I’ve ever read: people who’d flown donors in from China, liquidated life savings, sold off vacation cottages, traded kidneys, boats, vintage cars.

Lucky for me, there was Kip.

Carl asks to be dropped at the foundry for his half shift. The foundry's been decommissioned and he's part of the crew stripping out the old equipment. He's hoping to be part of the crew that'll tear the building down. After that he's hoping to be part of the crew that'll come back at the end and jackhammer up the parking lot.

After that, that's it for Carl.

"What's next, eyewise?" he says jovially, trying to get de-dogoused.

"Just letting the graft kick in," I say.

"May it grow like a mother," he says.

"Do good," Maribeth says.

"I'll try," he says, then just stands frozen, like the part of him that knows how to walk through a gate into a failed foundry's suddenly gone on the fritz.

"Go," Maribeth says. "Go in."

"Boys, I want to apologize," he says. "I spoke out of turn. Manners maketh man. Could be I view things too much in terms of yes or no. I'm perhaps a bit behind the times."

"You think?" Kip says.

"But listen," Carl says. "Shiloh?"

"Fake," Kip says.

"Chickamauga?" Carl says.

"Chicka-whoga?" Kip says.

Carl lowers his head like a hitter hit by a pitch, then rouses himself and breaks into a stiff, elderly trot, shooting a salute over at whoever's inside the tilted little guard hut.

"I know he goes overboard," Maribeth says. "But you boys do tend to bait him."

"We do," Mick says.

"We love it," Kip says.

"Carl's a turd clinging to the side of the toilet of received wisdom," Mick says.

"Well, that seems harsh," Maribeth says. "He does pay for everything."

"Don't you think we know that, Ma?" Kip says. "Don't you think we know who pays for stuff?"

"Someday he'll thank us for setting his bony ass down on the right side of history," Mick says.

"By letting him pay for stuff," Kip says.

Maribeth cuts her eyes over at me to see how all this is landing.

I stay neutral. Which seems to bug her. She reaches over, gives me a poke in the eye patch.

"Guess I didn't realize these units were going to be involved," she says.

Well, it was in the e-mail, I think: *protective eye covering to minimize post-procedure infection risk*.

"Don't mean to make you feel guilty about it," she says.

She pulls the strap back, lets it pop.

"And yet I am," she says.

Pops it again.

“Ma,” Kip says. “He’s driving.”

“No worries,” she says. “Me and this kid go way back.”

Yes, we do.

Kip’s dad split after Maribeth started having her issues. At one point, she wrestled Kip’s art teacher to the floor in front of the whole class. Next day, Kip opened his lunchbox to find a cube of hash in there, with a fork, a spoon, and a napkin on which she’d written “*MY ROCKING ANGEL*.” I wasn’t doing so great myself at the time: lawn-mowing, sitting around the library applying for government jobs until three or four, when it was time to get catastrophically bent at the Aero with Eli and/or Bryant. When Maribeth went into rehab, I took the bus out here from Kansas. Cooked for Kip, helped him with homework, tucked him in, walked him to school in the morning, giving him little pep talks on the way—joy, not fear, and so on. Mornings, I’d find him asleep on the bench by the front door, coat, hat, and backpack all on. That’s how scared he was of being late. I’d haul him upright by a strap, give him a hug, tell him I knew it was hard but he had to keep going.

So it’s not like I never did anything for them.

Just not all that much recently.

“Nice lunch, I’m about to bust, ugh,” Maribeth says.

Right on Coulter, left on Freeley.

Once had a bad date at this Galveston’s. Once sat on that exact bus bench listening to a series of very blah carols coming over from Alliance of God, which is now twice the size it was and has an outdoor climbing wall.

Here’s the house.

“What’s that up in the gutter?” Maribeth says.

“When he was a child, he thought as a child,” Mick says.

“No more gliders, Ma,” Kip says.

“I just bought that for you like last month,” she says.

“Then get it down yourself and you play with it,” Kip says.

Mick and Kip climb out of the car and stretch at their leisure like a couple of young kings.

“Pretty negligible back seat,” says Mick.

“Bundy time,” says Kip.

In we go.

Apparently, as Ted Bundy, Kip’s been Paused since last night, hiding under the porch of an attractive law student who’s suddenly on to him.

“I have to either Sprint Toward Car or End Her,” he says. “The thing is, based on some trophies in there, she may know karate.”

Mick and Kip bound upstairs.

“It’s a killing game but he knows it’s not real,” Maribeth says.

“I know it’s not real, Ma!” Kip shouts from the landing.

From upstairs comes the sound of the two of them fighting for the roller chair.

“Just so you know,” Maribeth says. “I’m not saying the Civil War didn’t happen. Just that it might not have. Because how would we know? You know? There’s so much bullcrap out there.”

We were always the two gentlest cousins. The others were ruffians, teasers, always angling to drink whatever was left in some grownup’s glass. When the party got too wild, Maribeth and I would drift away to read under a

willow that's still out there beyond the oval in the grass that marks where the pool used to be.

Sometimes we'd put down our books, discuss our Future Elephant Clinic. Where we'd care for sick elephants. Elephants too ill for their zoos of origin. Also, there'd be a dolphin pool. Our dolphins wouldn't be sick, just super intelligent. Like Flipper. If either of us wanted to get married, the spouse-to-be would have to sign a form promising to (1) recite the Elephant Care Vow daily, and (2) live at the Clinic forever.

What I mean to say is we were strange kids together and I loved her.

Love her.

She's changed, sure.

Never fully blossomed or whatnot.

But what am I? Some glorious flower of fulfilled potential? I left Toyota after a dustup with Ross, then left Subaru after Kent misunderstood me completely. Eugene took me on at Buick as a favor to his dad, who I knew from high school. My office, the smallest of all, looks out on the Shake Shack drive-through, staffed exclusively, far as I can tell, by three Christian siblings. All day long from over there it's "Straw's in the bag, Jesus is Lord." The other day, the older sister caught me looking her way and did this magic-wand wave at me with a crucifix she apparently keeps handy, as in "Believe unto Him and even one as lowly as yourself may be lifted up."

Also, haven't sold a car in three months.

"I don't even really mind that you were gone all that time," Maribeth says. "I'm just glad you're back."

"Same," I say.

"You and me against the fruitcakes," she says.

Which is a thing we used to say.

Just then there's a knock on the door.

Shave-and-a-haircut, side-fist.

She goes to the window, looks out.

"Cop," she says. "I hate cops. Because of my past."

This cop, tall and thin, is looking for Kip.

"We have a report that he may have been among those who pulled down the town's Lincoln statue," he says. "Using, allegedly, a rope."

"When was this?" I say.

"Friday," he says.

"He was with me literally all day Friday," I say.

I get out the parking receipt from the clinic, hide the time stamp with my thumb, show the cop, on my phone, a picture of all of us at PigHip, Kip pointing at my eye patch, me pointing at his.

"Brave kid," I say. "Imagine doing that for someone."

"Yes, wow," he says. "To have surgery on one's eye, in order to help out someone having trouble with his or her own eye, is, in terms of bravery, something I would put right up there."

"That's him, that's the kind of kid he is," I say.

"And this was Friday," he says.

"Friday," I say.

Off he goes.

Maribeth steps out of the hall closet.

"That was just super cool of you," she says.

Kip leans down from the landing.

“Badass!” he says. “You a sly one!”

Just flat-out lied to the police, I think. Haven’t done that in a bit.

“I’m going to step out,” I say.

The screen door does the same two-pitched squeal as always, which Grandpa used to say sounded like an elevator operator announcing, *BACKyard!*

Same old picnic table, newish recliner.

In a drawer in Wichita I’ve got a picture of the whole mob of us back here: Grandma and Grandpa, their three kids, all fourteen grandkids, and Floyd II, their dog, leaping out of the frame as if it’d just dawned on him that it might be wise to go in search of a different family. Even then things were sketchy. Uncle Gus was suing the railroad. Aunt Kay was dating two ex-cons at once. Sometimes Grandpa would have Old Sven from the fire department over, and Old Sven would make a big show of drinking a whole thing of cough syrup, then pass out on the couch, and, once, we kids put banana peels all over him and when he woke up he didn’t even notice.

I drop into the recliner and before I know it I’m asleep, dreaming of being a kid again, only I’m more sure of myself and always do everything right and everyone admires me.

I sleep most of the afternoon.

Then go in, sit at the kitchen table, remembering.

Where’ve I been all these years?

Kip and Mick seem to have cleared out.

“Morning, sunshine,” Maribeth says, coming out of what used to be Grandma’s bedroom, her eyes still sleep-squinty. “You being here must’ve wiped me out.”

Then she heats up coffee, and we sit there quietly a while.

Nice.

I find it amazing that in this day and age a man can arrive home from work with his face as gray and sooty with whatever is all over Carl's face as Carl's face is as he comes in from his half shift.

"How went the day?" he says.

"Cops came," Maribeth says.

"For?" Carl says.

"Kip," she says.

"About?" he says.

"Statue," she says.

"They take him?" he says.

"Thanks to Leo, no," she says.

Carl sidles over, gives my neck a grateful squeeze.

"Where's the lad?" he says. "He remorseful?"

"At Frisbee," she says.

"With the appendage?" he says.

"Yes," she says. "Oh, Leo. You were parked behind me. So I let them take yours."

"Ah," I say.

"Your keys were on the pass-through," she says. "Hope that's O.K."

Meaning: O.K. given that, earlier today, he let some of his dear young eye get scraped out for you.

“Sure,” I say. “All good.”

Carl takes off his shirt, gives it a snap. A handful of metal shards tick-tick to the floor.

“And another thing that chaps my ass,” he says.

“Ugh, here we go,” Maribeth says.

Per Carl, this Frisbee kick that Kip and Mick are on? Practice, go to South Bend for a tournament, buy a Corvette with the prize money? Is another example of a Big Crappo Plan (BCP). Per Carl, Kip and Mick are kings of the BCP. They had a BCP to open a car wash. A BCP to start a podcast about werewolves. A BCP to use Maribeth’s Discover to bring over Russian brides. A BCP to convert the basement into a home gym, which only got as far as them tearing up some perfectly nice carpeting and putting in a shower that’ll never work because it would cost thirty grand to even run a water pipe over to it.

“Well, at least he’s trying new stuff now,” Maribeth says. “Getting out of the house more.”

Carl drops onto the couch, pulls Maribeth down on top of him.

“Rapist,” she says.

“Leo, join us,” he says. “We’ll scooch.”

They scooch. I join them.

On TV’s a commercial for a pill that, put in one’s rear, helps one get off opioids. The pill’s large, a voice-over explains, but not that large: about the size of a grape. We see a couple boating, running across a field of daisies, operating a drone, coming out of a restaurant, being confronted by a seedy-looking guy who offers the husband some opioids, which the husband refuses, which seems to turn the wife on. As they walk away, the husband

casually readjusts one of his butt cheeks, as if to say, “Thanks, large-but-not-that-large pill, for making this beautiful new addiction-free life of mine possible.”

“Although now he’s addicted to having that pill up his ass,” says Carl.

“At least that’s legal, though,” Maribeth says.

“Ah,” Carl says, deferring to her superior knowledge of the drug world.

A spider’s hot-stepping in one corner of the screen as if fired up about the prospect of getting on that anti-opioid pill the minute a spider-ass-size version becomes available.

Then it’s a NewsFlash NewsMoment.

“Oh, crap, boring,” Maribeth says.

“Food in the pipeline?” says Carl.

“Ton of PigHip in the fridge,” Maribeth says. “So.”

A reporter’s up on the steps of the Vestige Falls Battlefield Visitor Center. I used to take Kip out there whenever Maribeth was having one of what she called her Badger Mornings.

One day a duck zinged out of the river, nipped at his Mini-Whopper.

“Just a duck,” I said.

But after that he’d never go back.

“Tensions are rising,” the reporter says, “on this battlefield that, in its heyday, was no stranger itself to rising tensions, in those olden times.”

“Allegedly,” the anchor says.

“Allegedly, correct,” the reporter says. “Hence the raging debate playing out right now in this hallowed place that some claim is fake, Jerry. Did the Civil

War actually happen? The jury, for many? Is still out.”

“Won’t the lads be mad they missed this shindig,” Carl says.

“Right up their alley,” says Maribeth.

The camerawork gets shaky. Somebody in the crowd shouts that it’s time to go in, clean out the propaganda, eliminate the Civil War agitprop, restore this place to a place of truth.

A docent steps out, little guy in red glasses and a tight cardigan.

“Look at that stiffie,” Maribeth says.

“Sorry, closed,” the docent says.

“It’s the middle of the day!” someone shouts.

“Just doing his job,” says Carl.

“What if I want a site map?” shouts someone else.

“Or souvenir?” shouts a third person.

“Snob!” shouts a fourth.

“Élitist!” shouts a fifth.

“Pretty dumb job,” says Maribeth.

Then a pole or stick or staff flies at the docent like a spear and bonks him square in the forehead so comically, with such a distinct little pop, and he sits down so promptly, so like an unstrung puppet, that a wave of laughter ripples through the crowd.

A big guy lunges forward, grabs the docent by the collar, hauls him to his feet.

“Is that Kip?” says Maribeth.

“Our Kip?” says Carl.



“Where to, friend?”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

“What about their Frisbee whatever?” Maribeth says.

“Deceived again, Mother,” Carl says.

“It is, it is him,” Maribeth says.

The docent attempts a hand-rake across Kip’s face. Kip tosses him aside. A cheer goes up. The docent, red glasses in hand, slumps against the old-time cannon. Below the knee, his right leg seems to have acquired an extra joint. He makes a noise hard to describe, then passes out across a pile of cannonballs labelled “*Actual Cannonballs.*”

“Stay down!” someone shouts at him.

“This is not who we are!” shouts someone else.

Maribeth calls Kip.

“Not picking up,” she says.

“Probably busy,” Carl says.

“What do we do, what do we do?” she says. “Should we go out there?”

“We are not going out there,” Carl says.

Her phone rings.

She puts it on speaker.

“Ma,” Kip says. “I just now did something.”

“We saw,” she says.

“You saw?” he says.

“On TV,” she says.

“Actual TV?” Kip says.

“Where are you, kid?” she says. “We’ll come get you.”

“Did you tape it?” Kip says.

“Where’s Mick?” Carl says. “Is Mick with you?”

“Mick had to go,” Kip says. “To Cleveland. His grandma’s sick.”

“I thought his grandparents were dead,” Maribeth says.

“Oh, yeah, huh,” Kip says.

“Tell us where you are, Kippie,” Carl says.

“Don’t make it worse,” Maribeth says. “Don’t go after anybody else.”

“Don’t hang up,” Carl says.

Kip hangs up.

“Man the fort,” Maribeth says to me.

“If he comes back, don’t let him leave,” Carl says.

Off they go into the night, no coats, cross-talking like crazy.

On TV comes a variation of the commercial re: the guy with the anti-opioid pill up his ass, in which the couple is racing go-karts. The woman makes a gesture meaning, *Comfortable enough on that little seat, with that pill up your ass, hon?* The man gestures back: *Never better!*, then swerves into a cone.

Maribeth’s phone buzzes.

Text from Kip: “Ma, in my room,” he texts. “Under bed. Some shit there that CAN’T get found. Get rid of it. Will they put me in jail you think even though was total ACCIDENT?!?”

I go up.

Under his bed: an archery bow, a ton of lint, an old Monopoly game, a stocking cap, a portfolio covered with stickers. “I’ll Have the Freedom, Thanks,” says one. “Like Cathedrals? Thank a Caucasian,” says another.

Inside the portfolio: some typed-up notes on the main access/egress to the National Civil War Museum, in Harrisburg, an estimate of the amount of C-4 needed to demolish the Lincoln Memorial, a thick binder-clipped document titled “Prospectus for Bulldozing Entire of Antietam.”

Yikes.

In comes a cat. I didn’t even know they had a cat. This one has the coloration of a Holstein. It looks at the portfolio, gives me this placid eyeblink, like, *Well, so now you know.*

But what do I know, really? Seems like another Big Crappo Plan. That’ll come to nothing. Because Kip and Mick are both doofs.

At the PigHip, they had this big discussion about whether a person with no driver's license could rent a car. Mick said yes, but first the guy would have to sign an affidavit that he wouldn't wreck it. Kip said yes, as long as the guy was born in that exact same state. Then the check came and I paid it. Carl said thanks and Maribeth said thanks and Kip and Mick sat there discussing how places these days never give you enough sauce.

Then Kip caught himself and, by way of saying thanks, rubbed his belly, smiled big, gave me the finger.

Some kids come into this life and catch all the breaks and start making money and going places and radiating confidence and functionality and the world opens right up to them.

Not Kip.

Not poor Kip.

I really did use to love him.

As a kid, he was meek, chubby, bullied, helpful around the house, always apologizing for things he hadn't done. Once, back then, he left me a note: "You do so much, Leo. I truly appreciate it!" He went through a penny-collecting phase, a phase of sending congratulatory letters to astronauts, a phase during which he was obsessed with measuring and remeasuring the porch with a yardstick. I remember him lying head down at the bottom of the swing-set slide, giving each leaf a different name as it fell. I thought, This kid, in school, must be doomed.

I take the portfolio out to the alley, toss it in the dumpster, drape over it a tattered raincoat with a salsa gob on it, put over that two flattened Amazon boxes and a big wad of three taped-together bubble-wrap strips.

Just saved you from possible domestic-terrorism charges, kid, I think. Still, you assaulted a guy, so.

I stand out there in the yard a bit.

Who thinks of Ohio skies as wide? But tonight, sheesh. Up there like the queen of it all is this big platelike moon with a sliver out of it at the three-o'clock position. A wash of stars across the blue-black up there looks like somebody did it with a quick flick of a giant paintbrush.

Text comes in. From Kip.

"Leo, brother," it says. "Freaking out a little here. Can this be dream? Ma not answering. Am in Witness Park, by tennis court, holing up in tornado slide."

I text back: "I just got rid of that thing. Under your bed."

He texts: "Oh you read my text 2 ma."

"Yes," I text.

"Will never forget this," he texts. "Promise you that. Someday world will know what you did here 2day."

"That's O.K.," I text. "No need. Maybe keep that between us (?)"

"Yes," he texts. "Like secret."

"Don't tell Mick," I text. "Don't tell anyone."

"Already did sry," he texts. "Been texting w/him."

"His grandma ok?" I text.

"I guess?" he texts.

Then I think, Wait a minute, hey.

"Where's my car?" I text.

He sends a *GIF* of a stick-thin Appalachian woman with tears pouring down her face.

"Mick has?" I text.

“Sorry,” he texts. “Did not plan for it to go down like this.”

“Where?” I text.

“Unknown,” he texts.

“Cleveland?” I text.

“Not Cleveland,” he texts.

“Tell him bring back,” I text. “This not ok.”

“No worries, he is always man with plan,” he texts.

“Plan for my car?” I text. “No. No good. Send me his number.”

No answer.

“Send number,” I text. “Seriously. Now.”

Nothing.

I call, but he doesn’t pick up.

I leave a message, the gist of which is:

Enough’s enough. Time to grow up. Your future depends on what you do tonight, right now. You’re going to get arrested, for sure. They could shoot you, kill you. Or you could come home, we could help you turn yourself in. Easier that way, safer. Think about your mother, Kip. Time to leave behind this Mick idiot, who’s been filling your head with this stupid, indefensible shit. You’re better than that. In your heart of hearts, you know you’re on the wrong path. Look deep, kid. This is it. I know I bailed before. But I’m here now and I’m telling you something real.

In comes a text: “Roger that, brother.”

Good, there we go. That did the trick. Though harsh. Maybe because harsh.

Sometimes a person has to be bold and trust that the person he's being bold to will rise to the occasion.

I know this. Or used to.

Finally, maybe, I've done the kid some good.

I'm about to start crying in the yard.

Text comes in: "Sorry couldn't help you load," it says. "Glad you got goods. See u soon. Am over by swings. Let's rock."

"Goods?" I text.

"Oops Leo that not for you," he texts.

"What goods?" I text.

"N mind," he texts.

Then: "Fuck just accidentally texted Leo about guns."

"Still me," I text.

"Leo please forget all texts," he texts.

"Guns?" I text.

"Zero guns ha jst joking," he texts.

Guns? In my car? Mick's coming to get Kip? So they can "rock"?

Aren't I now, as of right now, an accomplice?

Or accessory? Or whatever?

Shit.

I call 911.

“Guns, oof,” the operator says. “That’s bad. Also sounds like they’re more or less stealing your car.”

“Only the one guy,” I say. “Mick. The other guy, the one hiding out in the park? Good kid. Unarmed.”

“Unless the other guy already got to him with the guns,” she says.

“Maybe get over there quick,” I say.

“Good idea, sir,” she says. “Normally, in cases where we’ve been looking for a guy and someone tells us where he is, and that there might now be guns involved, what we like to do is wait, like, three hours.”

“Sorry,” I say.

“You’re good,” she says. “Just saying. Long shift.”

Is it right? That I’ve called it in? Ratted Kip out? Maybe. Maybe, in a few years, here’s Kip, out of jail, doing dishes. His kids are in the yard, his wife’s on the couch. He’s thinking, Wow, can’t believe I used to think the Civil War was fake. But now look at me: a husband, a father. How’d I get here? Who helped me? By calling the cops on me that time I was hiding out in Witness Park and sending me to jail, which turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me?

Leo did. Leo saved me.

With his love, his tough love.

In April, I had my third Boxtan Event (BE), my worst one yet: three pyramidal blobs came zinging at me as I sat in the showroom reading the Buick paint guide. Around that same time, near my house, this guy who’d had Boxtan’s for two years BE-ed badly as he and his wife drove across the Elbow River Bridge. Into the Elbow they went. The guy went right to shore, the wife drowned while paddling around looking for him.

That’s where I’m headed.

I ask the operator: Once they get Kip, might I bail him out? Bailed out, might he be allowed to come down to the clinic? Just for, say, three afternoons, for the one remaining left-eye graft, then the two right-eye grafts?

The cow-cat, sitting in the window, gives me a look, like, *Leo, really? Thinking about our eyes at a time like this?*

The operator seems to feel the same way.

“Not following, sir,” she says. “That sounds like *you* stuff. This is *law* stuff. Let me get off, put this thing in motion.”

There are moments in life when suddenly there you are, the real you. Here I am. All those years, I had no use for these people. Then I did. Now I don’t. With Kip on his way to jail, I don’t.

I don’t actually, to tell the truth, think all that highly of them.

I love them but don’t think that highly of them.

This is going to be in the papers. And on the internet. And we get the paper at the dealership. And have the internet. Eugene reads the paper every morning. Sometimes while on the internet.

And I’ve just lost his loaner.

Time to clear out.

Maribeth’s got me in the downstairs bedroom that Grandma used to call Crap Central.

Grandma’s old sewing machine is in here, plus a treadmill, a wedding arch, years of tax returns in boxes, and, hanging down from the ceiling, a sheet of sheer red fabric from back when Maribeth ran her low-rent puppet theatre, Hands Within. On a shelf is a photo of Grandpa in his Army uniform, in Europe, just after he and his pals liberated some minor death camp he always claimed he couldn’t remember the name of.

I drag my duffel into the kitchen, take a last look around.

Goodbye, old house. Probably never see you again.

Maribeth and Carl burst in.

“He’s nowhere,” she says.

“Total madhouse at the battlefield,” Carl says. “Cops outnumbered by three to one. Then the mob went in and nabbed the books out of the gift shop. And knocked down the history plaques. After which three drunk gals loaded the old cannon up in their big-ass Silverado.”

“Oh, God, Carl, stop talking, make yourself useful,” she says. “Go take out the garbage or something. Jesus H. Christ. Let me think.”

“On it,” Carl says, and scoots off in search of some garbage.

I need to tell her.

That I just ratted out her kid.

Seeing her now, beside herself, cheeks hot, hair all over the place, I realize, not only do I love her, I do think highly of her.

I do.

Dear Maribeth.

So unlucky.

My phone rings.

“That him?” she says.

It’s Dr. Dalwani, from the clinic.

I step into Crap Central, take the call.

“So, your first set of slides are in,” Dalwani says. “Very happy results. Your left eye is now like the proverbial wise bridesmaid: attentive, amenable, ready to receive. Tomorrow we’ll grab the second left-eye graft from that enormous cousin of yours. Quite a character, that one. Did you know, he told me he thinks the Civil War wasn’t real? Crazy stuff.”

Then seems to catch herself, in case I’m also a nonbeliever.

“I hope I haven’t offended,” she says.

“Not at all,” I say. “I know the Civil War was real.”

“Well, I agree with you on that one,” she says.

Then a little silence, as in: Let’s reflect a bit on how interesting it is to have to even say that.

“See you tomorrow,” she says.

Don’t have the heart to say, “Actually, you won’t. My donor is, right this minute, being arrested.”

“Let’s do this! Let’s avert some blindness,” she says.

Kip knew, he knew how much I needed this. And still went out to that battlefield and did his silly shit.

Idiot.

Selfish idiot.

This is on him.

Carl leans in, a triangle of packing peanuts on his shirt, one arm behind his back.

“Dumpster was full,” he says. “To get our crap in, I had to move some junk around. And *voilà*.”

From out behind his back comes Kip's portfolio.

I try to look like I haven't seen it before.

"Especially please note this," he says.

Tucked in a slit in the back cover is a Cabello's receipt for six rifles, ten smoke grenades, two hunting knives, a hundred zip ties, three KitKats. Stapled to the receipt: a Polaroid of the rifles, grenades, knives, and zip ties piled up on a table in what looks like a storage unit. Kip's leaning into the frame, giving a thumbs-up, one of the KitKats in his mouth like a cigarillo.

"Bad, yes?" Carl says.

I show him Kip's texts.

"Lord God," he says. "They're on the move."

"I called it in," I say.

"Good to know I'm not the only non-nutjob in this household," he says.

"You two get lost?" Maribeth yells.

"Right there," Carl yells.

"Because look who the cat dragged in," she says.

Which is funny, because the cat-cow's here in Crap Central with us, licking something off Carl's boot.

Mick and Kip are out there eating from the same huge bag of chips.

Carl doesn't miss a beat, just charges right over.

"Guns, geniuses?" he says. "I don't believe it."

"False, defamatory," says Mick.

"Guns?" Maribeth says. "We don't do guns in this house."

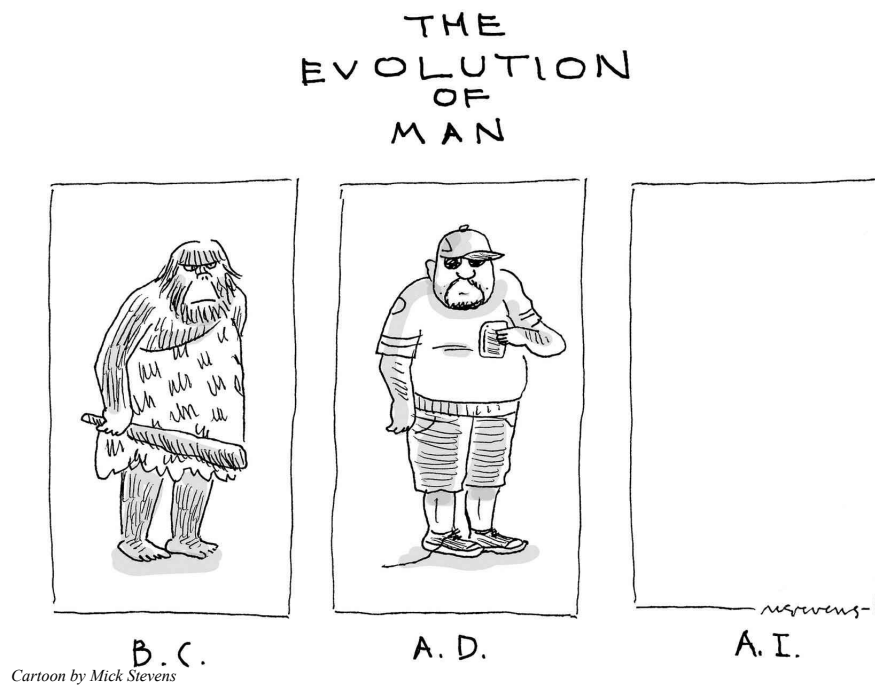
“Says the lady who once put drugs in my lunch,” Kip says.

“Hash is not guns,” she says.

“Well, obviously, but,” Kip says.

“Read it and weep,” Carl says, slapping the Polaroid down on the table.

“It’s six frigging guns, Ma,” Kip says. “We need to be able to defend ourselves. People are nuts, people hate what we stand for.”



“I get that,” Maribeth says. “But you could’ve asked me first. That would’ve been polite, that would’ve been good manners.”

“Time’s short,” Mick says. “Notebook.”

“Don’t boss her,” says Carl.

Maribeth gets a notebook out of the junk drawer.

“No, a real one,” Mick says. “With a lock on it.”

“Like a diary,” says Maribeth.

“Not like a diary,” Mick says. “The exact opposite of a diary.”

Then a little silence, as we try to figure out what the exact opposite of a diary is.

“Oh, never mind,” says Mick. “Your one’s fine.”

Mick sits, curls his arm around the notebook, scrawls something down.

“I, Leo,” he reads aloud, “hereby gift my car to Kip and Mick, attesting that they did not steal or take it without my consent written permission.”

“A document like that could have what possible earthly legal validity?” Carl says.

“Jesus, speak English, Carl,” says Kip.

“I’m not signing that,” I say.

“Add whatever your last name is,” Mick says.

“Not happening,” I say.

“Might be,” he says.

And pulls a gun out from his jacket.

Small gun. Like a derringer.

Still.

Puts it to my head.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” says Maribeth. “Absolutely not.”

“In the old days,” Mick says, “men were routinely executed for the crime of treasonous betrayal.”

“Had to be you, Leo,” Kip says. “Nobody else knew where I was. If Mick hadn’t come cruising into that playground, lights off? I’d be fried right now.

Because of you.”

Tough love, I try to say.

But my mouth’s gone dry, very dry.

“That closeness?” Kip says. “Back in the day? Was real. But now? You don’t know me. Do you think you know me?”

“No,” I say.

Something in the way I squeak it out seems to get to him, and, for a second, there it is, flickering across his face, the old sweetness. He’s sad to see me like this, pressed against the fridge, gun to my head. He’d like to say something to stop Mick from killing me.

But for some reason can’t.

Or won’t.

Anyway, doesn’t.

Just gives me a wink.

He never could wink right. Only with both eyes at once.

“Leo, sign, I beg you,” Carl says. “It’s not worth it.”

He’s right. It’s stupid, means nothing.

And I want to live.

I sign.

“Pretty shaky hand there, hoss,” Mick says.

Then points the gun at the ceiling, pulls the trigger.

It just makes that click.

“We always both knew it wasn’t loaded,” Kip says. “That’s why I was winking!”

“And you find that funny?” Maribeth says.

“Behold the downfall of a childhood hero,” Mick says. “The revolution topples another false idol.”

Carl stumbles over, tries to pry the gun away from Mick. I have no idea why. We all know it’s not loaded. They wind up in this tepid wrestle-off which indicates that neither has ever come close to fighting anyone before.

“Carl, I love you, but stand the fuck down,” Kip says, and grabs Carl by the shirt collar. Carl slips, falls. His head hits the table, a pitcher drops to the floor and explodes.

“If this is love,” he mumbles.

He’s on the floor, head in his hands.

“Sorry, man, did not mean for that to occur,” Kip says.

Carl’s phone is on the pass-through. Maribeth’s is on Grandma’s old table, where the same three coffee rings from the sixties still make the same old accidental partial Olympic symbol.

Mick sweeps both phones up.

“Leo?” he says. “More heroics?”

I hand mine over.

“Now you’re getting it,” Mick says. “We’re going to be taken seriously around here. And everywhere.”

“That gal is so hot,” Kip says.

Up on the little kitchen TV is Eden Rodenhigh, of “Past/Not Past.”

Eugene sometimes puts her on in the showroom after we close, just to make fun of her.

“Looks like a vampire,” says Kip.

“In a porn,” says Mick.

“Exactly,” says Kip.

Breaking news tonight, Rodenhigh says: In a secret vault in Baltimore, a stash of notarized documents has been found, signed by Civil War veterans, who, at the end of their lives, fessed up to the big scam. Also a list of the true names and addresses of all former slaves, along with their actual occupations and 1858 yearly incomes, which, surprising no one, were right on par with the incomes of similar whites.

“That’s it, there it is,” Kip says. “She just up and says it. What everybody’s thinking.”

“See, Carl?” says Mick. “Interesting ideas. Reasonable lady. Not some stupid bigot.”

“Wait, that’s me,” Kip says.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Maribeth says.

Up on the TV, footage of Kip tossing the docent; a shirtless guy tearing off the cover of a book about Fort Sumter; three drunk ladies giving the finger to the historical cannon; Kip tossing the docent again, this time in slow motion.

“Tonight, in the heartland,” Rodenhigh’s saying, “homegrown patriots demonstrated a love for country seldom seen in parts of the nation dominated by the Brainwash Cohort.”

“Dude, you’re anointed,” says Mick.

“I cannot believe Eden frigging Rodenhigh knows who I am,” Kip says.

“And many more will soon know it,” Mick says.

“You have to admit,” Maribeth says, and trails off.

Kip goes over, takes her by the shoulders, and they do this weird, affectionate head bump that it seems they must do pretty often, given how naturally she lowers her head to receive it.

“Be proud, Ma,” he says. “Of me coming awake. And having a view not many can have.”

The drunkest of the three drunk ladies gives the historical cannon a kick, then does some comical hopping around, indicating, Ouch, my foot.

Then: an American flag in a wadded-up heap; the Visitor Center door lying splintered in the grass; a guy setting a pile of books aflame with a psychedelic-themed lighter.

“Ah, perfect, a book burning,” says Carl.

“Not a book burning, Carl,” says Mick.

“Fraudulent claim,” says Kip.

Mick goes over, raises his leg, drops his booted foot square on top of Carl’s head.

I can see from the look on Carl’s face that he’s thinking something like, If books are being burned, isn’t that, de facto, a book burning?

But he just closes his eyes, sits there quietly.

I close mine, too.

Dark, dark, dark. Good practice for what’s coming. At least nothing’s zinging suddenly out at me from various fields of utter darkness. Not yet.

“Let’s hit it,” Kip says.

The screen door cries *BACKyard* more peevishly than usual.

Maribeth drops into a chair, misses it, hits the floor.

“Oh, God, my baby,” she says.

Carl crawls to her, wraps his arms and legs around her.

“I’m here,” he says. “Right here with you, doll.”

“Air,” she says.

He unwraps his legs, leaves the arms. She squirms free. He drops a foot in her lap.

“Oh, Leo, your eyes,” she says. “I’m so sorry. If I could do it for you, I would. You know I would.”

And I do know it. If she could do it, she’d do it in a heartbeat. Because, once she decides she loves you, she never stops loving you, no matter what.

We need to call the cops now.

But don’t have a phone among us. ♦

By Deborah Treisman

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The Secret History of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock

At the Met, a landmark exhibition doesn't just show that the painters were equals. It makes it impossible to imagine their art existing without their marriage.

By [Zachary Fine](#)



Pollock and Krasner in Springs, New York, in 1949. The couple lived and worked in a small farmhouse nearby. Photograph by Martha Holmes / LIFE Picture Collection / Shutterstock

New York City, 1936. A party around Christmas at the Artists Union on Ninth Street. One imagines a sugar-dusting of snow on the ground outside and “Santa Claus Is Comin’ to Town” on the radio. A man, drunk, swaggers over to a couple on the dance floor and inserts himself between them. He takes the woman in his arms, presumably to start dancing, but instead rubs his body onto hers and says, “Do you like to fuck?” She slaps him in the face.

And so begins the story of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock. Well, sort of—Pollock sobered up and attempted to charm Krasner, and at the end of the night they went home together. An encounter like that would be memorable for most people, but somehow the pair forgot about each other for five years.

Then, in 1941, the painter and writer John Graham invited Krasner to exhibit a piece in a show with works by Picasso, Braque, and Derain, along with a few American artists, including one called Pollock. The name didn't ring a bell, but after Krasner learned that he lived around the corner from her, on Eighth Street, she paid him a visit:

When I knocked, he opened. I introduced myself and said we were both showing in the same show. I walked right in. What did I think? I was overwhelmed, bowled over that's all. I saw all those marvelous paintings, I felt as if the floor was sinking . . . He was not a big man, but he gave the impression of being big. About five feet eleven. . . . His hands were fantastic, powerful hands. I wish there were photographs of his hands.

Krasner fell in love with Pollock on the spot. He took a bit more time to warm to her, but once he did she made everything possible. She introduced him to key artists and critics, such as Willem de Kooning and Clement Greenberg, nudging Pollock's work forward and helping to secure his fame. She lobbied fiercely for him to gallerists and patrons, including Sidney Janis and Peggy Guggenheim. When Janis first came to see Pollock's art, Pollock sat quietly in the corner, and Krasner explained what made the paintings valuable. May Rosenberg, the wife of the critic Harold Rosenberg, once visited Krasner's studio and assumed that the man hanging around in dungarees, not saying much of anything, was an intellectually disabled janitor. For years, Pollock's brother Sande had nursed him through alcoholism and breakdowns, but then Krasner stepped in. She bought his groceries, washed his clothes, cooked his food, and handled administrative tasks and emotional crises. She also sacrificed her painting. Krasner was the more trained and established artist, but, after she met Pollock, she barely finished a piece for three years.

The blockbuster that just opened at the Met, "Krasner and Pollock: Past Continuous," is probably, canvas for canvas, the best painting show in America this year. It does something I thought impossible, which is make Abstract Expressionism—the most fossilized of American art movements—seem new again. The curators, David Breslin and Brinda Kumar, don't accomplish this with appeals to timeliness or relevance but with a mighty selection of pieces—more than a hundred and twenty, from eighty-two

different institutions—and smart exhibition design. The show is circular, starting and ending with Krasner, and roughly chronological, with a few exceptions. It begins in the nineteen-fifties, with some Krasner paintings that incorporate strips of Pollock's own—a collaging of their life and work, the show's main theme—then goes back to their apprentice days, in the thirties, when Krasner received her first dose of European modernism through Hans Hofmann, and Pollock, after wriggling from the grip of Thomas Hart Benton, the American regionalist painter, worked through Mexican muralism, American Indigenous art, and Picasso to find a style better suited to his psychosexual torments. In 1942, Krasner and Pollock shack up on Eighth Street, and the show takes off.

Pollock's first batch of distinctive work appeared shortly after, with "Stenographic Figure" (1942), "The Moon Woman" (1942), and "Male and Female" (1942-43). Standing in a room with them, you'll see the tension building between figuration and abstraction, between a descriptive line and a self-governed one. In "Stenographic Figure," a painting that Peggy Guggenheim described as "dreadful" and that Mondrian called "the most interesting work I've seen so far in America," Pollock paints a lively dinner-table exchange between two creatures with swirly arms. Inspired by a Miró retrospective from earlier that year, and having learned about Matisse via Krasner, Pollock trials a variety of marks, from broad, clean planes of blue, orange, and black to jazzy calligraphy. "Male and Female" pushes the blended approach further, with little ketchup and mustard tantrums set off by a crisp chalkboard column of numbers—the style, like the equation, not adding up. The one piece in the room that suggests what's to come is "Gothic" (1944), in which scythe-shaped lines swing through the composition. There's a two-stage process at work here: a black line that flows through the painting expressively, followed by a regulation of that flow with blue, orange, and pink highlights. There are no math problems or mangled body parts or other intimations of reality. The whole piece is about the free and rigorous interplay of line.

In 1945, Krasner and Pollock married and moved to Springs, a town in East Hampton, where they purchased a run-down farmhouse on a small plot of land. With only a few hundred locals and one saloon in town, there wasn't much distraction. Their new life came with a couple of eccentricities, like a blowtorch they used to melt frozen toilet water in the winter and a pet crow

named Caw-Caw, but the setting led to the most fruitful period of their relationship. In 1946, Krasner began working on a series of small, densely loaded canvases called “Little Images.” After years of angular still-lives and nudes, she broke into all-over abstraction, caking her surfaces in color. Some of these canvases are built up with choppy brushwork, as in “Shattered Color” (1947); others are covered in what looks like a macerated and pastel pulp that has been attacked with the tines of a fork. The most surprising development, though, are the drizzles of paint. Right as Pollock was making his famous pivot, so, too, was Krasner.

From 1946 to 1947, Krasner and Pollock tilted their paintings from a vertical axis to a horizontal one: Pollock from easel to floor, performing his “drip” technique on unstretched canvas in a converted barn; Krasner, with pre-stretched canvas, working on a table in an upstairs bedroom of the house. All of the grandeur and energy of Pollock’s looping brambles and cords are clenched in Krasner’s versions. In two pieces from 1947 and 1948, she primes the canvas with smudges of blue, green, and orange, then rains down a comprehensive drizzle of black and white, choking all the color. The one that caught me off guard was “Abstract No. 2” (1946-48). Its white drips have the fluency and thickness of Pollock’s line, but they’re delivered with a strange twist: a web of black paint that obscures the rest of the canvas. It’s almost like you’re squinting at a Pollock with your eyelashes gating your vision. Was there something about the drips that Krasner didn’t want to see, or wanted to push away?

What happened next is now ancient chronicle: Pollock showed his new work at the Betty Parsons gallery in 1948; *Life* asked if he was the greatest painter in America; and the center of cultural gravity swung from Europe to the United States, from the Old World to the New. The provocation of Pollock’s work was so accessible, so instantly recognizable, that it’s easy to forget why the drip paintings weren’t just controversial but a referendum on the state of art, the nation, and the modern soul. Interpretations ran the gamut.

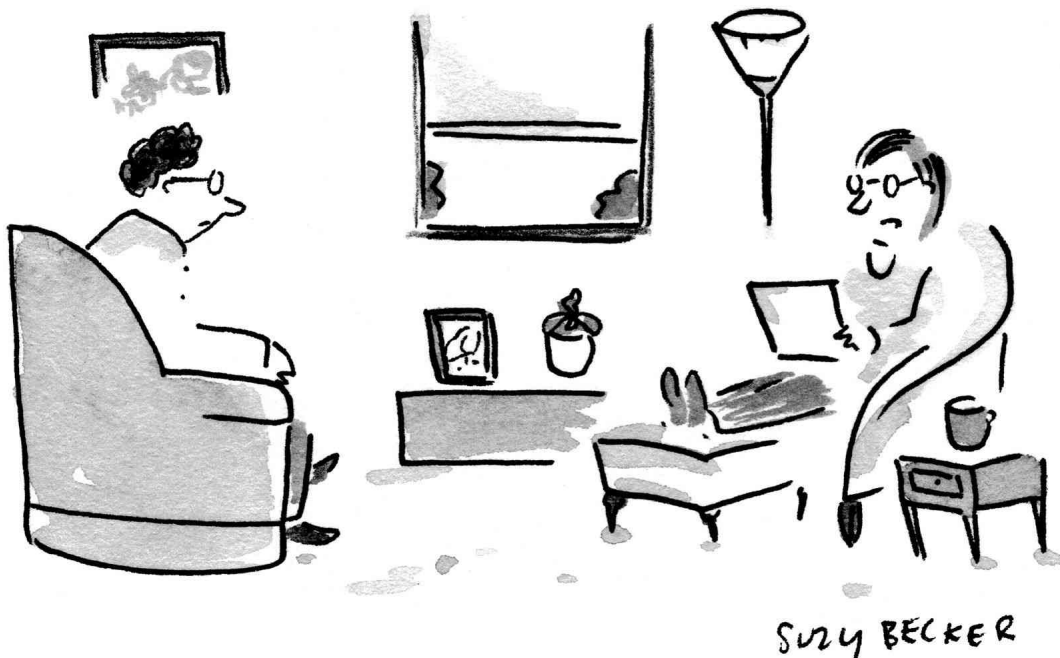
Were the paintings acts of negation—attempts to destroy figuration, to bring the history of painting to its knees—or triumphs of creation and renewal? Were they anti-capitalist traces of raw selfhood, or C.I.A.-boosted symbols of American freedom? Were they life-affirming “actions”—performances for which the paintings were just an interesting residue—or intricate

exercises in self-conscious form? If your frame of reference was the Second World War, they might be images of the body blasted apart by shell fire. If your frame was psychoanalysis, they were glimpses of that dark, wordless corner of the mind called “the unconscious.” Some people experienced them as a purely optical means of aesthetic transport; others found in them tactile accumulations of crust, carnage, and debris. What made them so exciting, either way, was the immediacy they implied. The frozen velocity of paint whipped across a canvas suggested a new visual metaphor for intensity, aggression, violence, virility, force, energy, music, and ecstasy, a more efficient representation than any previous word or picture had managed.

Because we’ve cycled through all the responses to Abstract Expressionism, it would be easy to glide through the Met show in a reverential but dispassionate mood, feeling that every emotion is an ersatz emotion, every thought a rehashed one. But there’s a welcome lightness to the work in 2026, something you can find instantly in the show’s most spectacular room. Loosely modelled off “The Ideal Museum,” an unrealized gallery plan that Pollock developed with an architect and a friend, it features his colossal drip pieces—including “Lavender Mist,” “Autumn Rhythm,” and “One: Number 31, 1950”—and eight large canvases by Krasner. Each painting hangs on a freestanding wall, so you can pinball your way around them, discovering and rediscovering things. Standing just two feet away from “One,” I felt the wonderful disorientation that comes from looking at a Pollock: the disruption of a horizontal image by the memory of its vertical process. The frenzy of black, white, and turquoise fills your gaze with a completely weightless and floating image, just as you notice how every rope and droplet of paint has been pulled down by gravity into the fabric. Your mind’s eye is standing on the wall, but you’re still here, on the ground.

The other side of the room has eight of Krasner’s collage paintings, all produced in a sprint in 1955. Each is almost seven by five feet, and most establish a broad field of color—blue, crimson, orange—across which migrate sharp and irregular shapes, some like long teeth or spears, others like shards of obsidian. Together, they amount to a daring raid on the standard-bearers of Abstract Expressionism. By the late forties, many of the Ab Ex artists had regulated the expressive element of their style into signature trademarks—think of Rothko’s soft bars of color, Robert Motherwell’s enlarged ink stains, Adolph Gottlieb’s celestial orbs, Clyfford

Still's crags. In a savvy deflationary move, Krasner sliced and diced the machismo of Ab Ex into her own configurations. The vertical stripes in her paintings recall Barnett Newman's "zips," the black occupying shapes have a touch of Motherwell, and some edges are jagged enough to be by Still. The most provocative move is in "Bald Eagle" (1955), with fragments cut right out of a Pollock drip painting and packed into a mosaic—Krasner reclaiming her husband's free-form mark with a blade. The critic Arthur Danto once wrote that, in Krasner's work, "there are only shadows of other selves, the echo of other voices," implying that she was doomed to be derivative. That not only ignores the cross-pollinating exchange with Pollock but also fails to see how her absorption of other modes, and her studied replication of expressive signatures, anticipates what was shortly to be celebrated as "postmodern" in the work of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg.



"Oh—I stopped listening after you said 'needless to say.'"
Cartoon by Suzy Becker

Even as fame and alcoholism sunk Pollock in the fifties—his production tapered, and his affairs all but destroyed the marriage—he and Krasner started painting more like each other, not less. Compare Krasner's "Untitled" (1951) to Pollock's "Easter and the Totem" (1953), in which Krasner's distinctive palette of Pepto-Bismol pink, pale orange, chalk white, and black gets reprised by Pollock, who also borrows some of his partner's curvy Matisse-like forms. After Pollock spent years trying to keep the figure out of

his pieces, recognizable lumps and body parts reëmerged, such as the whirlpool of drowning eyes in “Ocean Greyness” (1953), and the same ocular shapes rolled into Krasner’s work a few years later, in “Embrace” (1956). They both had a symbolic fetish for eyeballs, and it’s hard to tell if it was pantheistic or paranoid—every particle of nature seeing itself or watching them.

Greenberg said Pollock began to wobble at the end, and you can see why. There’s a tackiness to some of his final gestures, like “The Deep” (1953) and “Portrait and a Dream” (1953). “The Deep” I instinctively like: it has an almost baptismal quality, as though you’re lifting your head out of a bath of milk to see the night sky. But there’s also a melodrama to the way Pollock uses white paint to surround a black chasm that runs through the picture’s center, as if it were a wound or an existential abyss. Three years after making it, while driving drunk in East Hampton, Pollock crashed his car, killing himself and one of the passengers, Edith Metzger. (The other, Ruth Kligman, with whom he was having an affair, survived.) Krasner was in Paris, and Greenberg called her to deliver the news.



Krasner's "Bald Eagle" (1955). Art work by Lee Krasner / Courtesy © 2026 Pollock-Krasner Foundation / ARS

But Krasner’s life kept going, and so does the exhibition. After Pollock died, she moved her studio into the barn at Springs and started painting on a grand scale, with pieces like “The Seasons” (1957), which is almost seventeen feet

wide and eight feet tall. Filled with magnified pink and green foliate shapes, it's like pressing your face into a basket of flowers or ripe fruit; the painting doesn't turn inward to mourn but rather outward to nature. "I remember sitting with Jackson on our country porch," Krasner said, "sitting there for hours, looking into the landscape, and always at dusk, when the woods ahead turned into strange, mystifying shapes."

Unlike Pollock, who tended to settle into a style, Krasner stayed restless. In the sixties, she painted brown and stormy abstractions, where paint seems spit out of a fountain pen, as well as works of unbounded color and fluorescence, such as "Combat" (1965); in the seventies, she started cutting up a cache of her own charcoal drawings, and gluing them into fractured Cubo-Futurist collages. Until her death, in 1984, she was always casting back and lunging forward, tracing and retracing her steps. At the Met, one gets the impression that Pollock was a fascinating passenger whom Krasner picked up, travelled with for fifteen years, and kept talking to even once he was gone. After all, they were painters in love. They poured themselves into each other, and the show makes it impossible to think of them apart. ♦

[Books](#)

Frank Capra's Mythmaking Magic

A new biography of the great director inspires wonder at his irresistible vision of America and his immigrant journey.

By [Anthony Lane](#)



Capra in 1939, on the set of "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." Photograph from Everett Collection

It happened one day, let us say, in the nineteen-eighties. You were checking into a hotel in La Quinta, half an hour or so from Palm Springs. As you entered the lobby, you were met by an in-house greeter: a funny little guy in a loud shirt, with a jacket and smile to match. Name of Frank. He was a regular there—been coming to the hotel forever. Back in the nineteen-thirties, he stayed there in what he called “a red-tiled adobe cottage” with a pal of his named Bob. They played a lot of tennis (Bob always won) and worked outside, in the sun, on a script for a movie. Frank said that they laughed so much, as they wrote, that they annoyed the other guests. You might recognize the title of the film: “It Happened One Night.”

The movie did O.K. Released in 1934, it earned a fistful of Academy Awards—the full hand, including Best Picture. Its stars, Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, were crowned Best Actor and Best Actress, respectively. Robert Riskin’s screenplay was victorious. The Oscar for Best Director was

handed to his tennis buddy, Frank Capra, thereby satisfying a long-held hunger. “I wanted an Academy Award very badly,” Capra confessed. “All nutty people think that way.”

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The story of his nuttiness has been told before. Capra’s autobiography, “The Name Above the Title,” was published in 1971, dedicated to—among others—Aristotle, Leonardo da Vinci, and Jean Harlow and prefaced by a canticle of praise from Capra’s fellow-director John Ford. “There isn’t a dull paragraph in the entire book,” Ford wrote. So suspect was the lack of dullness that a stern corrective was required, and it arrived with “Frank Capra: The Catastrophe of Success” (1992), by Joseph McBride, who compiled a thorough and chastening tally of Capra’s flaws, both personal and political. The author of “The Name Above the Title,” McBride warned us, was not a man to be trusted:

One of the ways Capra made his fairy-tale account of his life seem believable was by mingling self-serving episodes with ones that gave the impression of ruthless candor toward his own failings but that actually served to paper over even more damning aspects of his life, the

parts he found unspeakable, the parts the book was concocted to conceal.

Whoa. McBride returned to the fray in 2019, with “Frankly: Unmasking Frank Capra,” in which he detailed the dastardly efforts of his publishers to hamper and curtail (or, as some would say, edit) his prolonged undoing of the Capra myth in his earlier book. It was as if the emotional lifeblood that courses through Capra’s most rousing film, “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington” (1939)—a fable of one hardy fellow railing against a corrupted system—had leaked into the soul of his biographer. Why the transfusion? Many directors, heaven knows, make it their lucrative business to get under our skin or clutch at our hearts, but there is something about the person of Capra, as disclosed in his memoir and in his uneasy masterworks, that seems uniquely calculated to enrapture and disturb.

Now we have a fresh take on the issue. “Frank Capra: A Life” (Harper), by Sam Wasson, is hefty and dense, like “The Catastrophe of Success,” but altogether less corrosive in its tone. You can tell a fair amount about a biography from its opening chords, so it’s notable that McBride starts with a “ferocious attack of diarrhea” that was suffered by Capra when, as a movie director of global renown, he went back, in 1977, to the village where he was born. Wasson, by contrast, kicks off by quoting three letters from prisoners in San Quentin, from 1947, addressed to the warden. All of them praise a film that has recently been shown at the jail—Capra’s “It’s a Wonderful Life,” with James Stewart. “It gives rhyme and reason for existing,” one inmate writes. And the moral is: like a movie star, Capra can be shot from multiple angles. Take your pick.

In theatrical terms, the life of Frank Capra had a hell of a run, like a Broadway musical that never seems to close. Born in 1897, as the Klondike gold rush was swelling into a stampede, he didn’t expire until 1991. Like many of those who believe, with evangelical fervor, in the gospel of American opportunity, Capra sprang from elsewhere. His full name was Francesco Rosario Capra, and he came from Bisacquino, a village in Sicily. Head north from there, toward Palermo, and you find yourself going via the town of Corleone—the cradle of another kid who went west and made it big.

Capra's father, Salvatore, an impoverished farmer, possessed what McBride calls "the poetic soul of a troubadour." Translation: he was a bum. But the boy's mother, Rosaria, was a do-it-all force of nature, and it was she who shepherded five of her flock—Salvatore, Francesco, and three of her daughters—all the way to California, in 1903, where one of her older children, who had emigrated five years before, awaited them. Unlike the curiously pristine ship that brings the future patriarch of the Corleone clan into New York Harbor in "The Godfather Part II," the S.S. *Germania*, which bore the Capras across the Atlantic, was a lurching tub of horror. Capra recalled "thirteen days of stench and misery in steerage."



Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert, in Capra's "It Happened One Night" (1934). Photograph from Everett Collection

Wasson is unambiguous about the state of mind in which the young Capra disembarked in the New World. "Francesco had no home, no memories of value," he writes. "What he had was hate." Strong stuff, and the biographer backs it up with extra psychological unpeeling: "In his mother and father, in what their peasant heritage and personal failures had deposited in him, lay the seeds of self-loathing, Capra's wellspring of preternatural ambition and its shadows, the fear of being returned, like a bad avocado, to the peasant class he came from." So now you know. As the kid grew up in Los Angeles, shining shoes, selling newspapers, and vowing, unlike the rest of his family, to get an education, one impulse drove him on. He would not just be top banana. He would be a premium-grade avocado.

At the age of twelve, Capra went to Manual Arts High School. From there, in 1915, he went on to Throop Polytechnic Institute (soon to become Caltech), a move that inspires Wasson, peering into his hero's internal superstructure, to channel Ayn Rand: "Engineers, not priests, bent the universe to fit the dreams of men. Skyscrapers, bridges, foundries!" Capra won a travel scholarship—Buffalo, Boston, New York City!—and, the following year, wrote an essay about film. Its bombast suggests that Capra, too, had a rash of Randian fever:

The motion picture will be, and is now, a very vital modifier of social, and consequently, of economic conditions, and its influence is going to be for the better of humankind.

In the meantime, however, humankind was not there to be bettered. It was there to be worsted, sweet-talked, and conned. After surviving the Spanish flu and polishing his skills as a wandering huckster, selling flaky mining stock to the gullible, Capra jammed a foot in the door at Montague Studios, in San Francisco, and ended up directing a one-reeler, "Fulta Fisher's Boarding House" (1922), less than twelve minutes long and based on a poem by Rudyard Kipling. Though the actors are not so much hammy as salt-encrusted, Capra keeps them bustling about within the frame. This was not his first experience of the trade; in 1919, he had briefly worked at a studio in Los Angeles, but the toil had been janitorial—"cleaning up the horseshit," he said. Now, even if he hadn't yet made something of himself, he had at least made *something*. It was better than manure.

Why is it that tales of the infancy and the adolescence of Hollywood retain their zest? "Frank Capra: A Life" is more than six hundred and fifty pages long, and it has much to say about Capra's activities during the Second World War—among other projects, he made seven propaganda films under the banner of "Why We Fight"—and the oddly changing fortunes of "It's a Wonderful Life" (1946); yet what grabbed me, above all, was the legend, reported by Wasson with a raised eyebrow, of Mack Sennett's coming to Los Angeles in 1912 and starting to shoot the first Keystone comedy *half an hour* after arriving in town. The very creation of the industry was verging on the comic in its breakneck brio. It was as if Henry Ford had begun building his first Model T while he was already on the road, merrily adding doors and gears as he rolled along.

On Thanksgiving Day, 1923, Capra married an actress named Helen Howell. The following year, thanks in part to a recommendation from his best man, he was hired as a gag writer. He worked for Hal Roach, who would later oversee the glorious ascension of Laurel and Hardy. From there, Capra went to Sennett, in whose domain the pressure to provide a stream of funny business, on tap, was unrelenting. In such an environment, Capra's college degree meant less than nothing. One of Sennett's mantras was "No gags in books."

In spite—or because—of that emphasis on the purely physical, Capra thrived. In the words of a colleague, "When he wanted to get over how funny a plumber could be, lying on his back under a kitchen sink, he would sprawl on the floor and make like a plumber." The next step was the most perilous stunt of all: Capra would make like a director. One of Sennett's stars was Harry Langdon, the definition of what Macbeth calls a "cream-faced loon." To our eyes, his eminence is baffling, but Capra got the point. "Chaplin *thought* his way out of tight situations; Keaton *suffered* through them stoically; Lloyd overcame them with *speed*. But Langdon *trusted* his way through adversities," Capra wrote in his memoir. Armed with that acuity, he directed Langdon in "The Strong Man" (1926) and "Long Pants" (1927). Then, with the insouciance of Daniel strolling into the lions' den, he went to work for Harry Cohn.

So much has been written about Cohn, the roaring beast who ran Columbia Pictures, that it's easy to overlook his genius for finding and fostering talent. The studio was on Gower Street, off Sunset Boulevard, which meant that it was on Poverty Row, which in turn meant that—unlike M-G-M, say, or Paramount—its facilities were crummy and its budgets were laced up tight. But, as Capra conceded to Cohn, the personnel were great. "You can bet your Aunt Tilly's tits they're great," Cohn replied, adding, "Get to work, you damn Dago." Cohn was a comprehensive bastard with a mouth like a soil pipe, and the way to deal with him, as Capra rapidly twigged, was to stand up straight, take your lumps, and lump him right back again. What got you fired (as opposed to being merely in bad odor, which would wash off after a while) was indecision, and one thing that rises from Wasson's pages is Capra's knack for seizing the initiative, marshalling his troops, and marching on.

One example: on Monday, July 9, 1928, Capra surprised the cast and crew of “Submarine,” a new Columbia production, by showing up on set and assuming control. The previous director had been sacked over the weekend, and Capra had read the script on Saturday. In short, if your movie needed saving, he was your guy; if someone else had chickened out or lost the plot, he would chicken in. He had already done so for “The Strong Man,” and he would do it again for “American Madness” (1932), one of his finest early pictures, for which he insisted on reshooting everything that had been filmed by other hands and even on having the set rebuilt. Henceforth, the movie would be molded by *his* hands. Among those observing the process was the film’s sound man, Edward Bernds, who later said, “I fully realized, for the first time, what directing really was.”

Given such authority, it’s no wonder that Capra could command enduring loyalty. Bernds, who collaborated with him through to “Mr. Smith Goes to Washington,” was one of the gang. Others included the editor William Hornbeck; the assistant director Art Black, an ex-plumber who was famous for the candor of his instructions on set (“Don’t just stand there like somebody’s milking you”); and the screenwriters Riskin and Jo Swerling — “a squat, heavy-set, seething young man, furiously chain-smoking strong White Owl Cigars,” as he is described in “The Name Above the Title.” With a lovely Dickensian flourish, Capra adds, “One got the odd impression the cigar was smoking the man.” McBride is indignant on behalf of these and other invaluable folk, accusing Capra of sidelining their contributions to the films he directed. Ingratitude is indeed sharper than a serpent’s tooth, and McBride isn’t wrong, but since when has Hollywood not been a pit of snakes? Every year, as we see Oscar winners churning out thanks to their agents, their deities, and everyone in between, we can’t help hearing the chant inside their heads: “This is all mine and not yours.”

In his autobiography, Capra is, without a doubt, a hundred times less reliable than Wasson and McBride. The darnedest thing is that he’s also ten times zippier. (“As with heroin, the antidote for film is *more* film,” he tells us. “It bosses the enzymes.”) What matters to Capra diehards is that, when you treat yourself to almost any of his features from 1930 to the outbreak of war, you feel swept along by the efforts of a well-drilled outfit. Was it a happy ship? Not in the case of “Lost Horizon” (1936), for sure, which was about a quest for Shangri-La, and which, thanks to reshoots and overruns, cost twice

its original budget. On the other hand, don't forget a handsome tribute that was paid by Clark Gable, who was loaned out by M-G-M for "It Happened One Night." He showed up at Capra's office drunk, but soon realized that the change of air might just do him, and his image, good. According to Berndt, "I think what Gable felt when he came to Columbia was, 'Jesus Christ, picture making can be fun!'" Two weeks into the shoot, Gable said to his co-star, "You know, I think this wop's got something."

If that movie doesn't give you a healthy jolt, ninety-two years on, you should probably try another art form. What hits you, aside from its momentum and the lightness of its wit, is how absurdly beautiful it is, and with what ease the beauty kindles a sensuality so unexpected that it's virtually a twist. The celebrated haystack sequence, in which a roguish reporter (Gable) fashions a couple of scratchy beds, by moonlight, for himself and a wealthy heiress (Colbert), who lies there and looks over her shoulder at him in a trance of desire, belongs to the world of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The resident Titania is Joseph Walker, Capra's favored cinematographer and, for what it's worth, a hero of mine.

Born in Denver in 1892, Walker had a feline taste for the dark, especially if the silk of it was shot through with light. To double the magic, running water could be added to the mix. Check out Jean Harlow and Robert Williams, in Capra's "Platinum Blonde" (1931), leaving a bright soirée for a shadowy garden, the better to make out behind a fountain that transforms their kisses into a rippling blur. (Williams, who used his dialogue to muse aloud and fast, as if life were on the verge of comic verse, died of complications from a burst appendix days after the movie opened. His loss was, and remains, a calamity.) Walker was also a dab hand at hats, the gradual disappearance of which from American heads has been indisputably bad news for motion pictures; what could be nobler than Gary Cooper, in Capra's "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" (1936), gazing down at Jean Arthur with raindrops gleaming on his trilby's brim?

Hang on, though. Given that a similar rain drips from Cary Grant's hat in Howard Hawks's "Only Angels Have Wings" (1939), during an unforgettable deathbed scene, and that Walker was the director of photography on both films, what's so special about Capra? Aren't both masters being served by the same supreme technician, and doesn't he

deserve the credit? True, yet each movie has a distinct social mood—tenser for Capra, looser for Hawks—and it is Capra who seems more discernible, so to speak, at the forefront of the action, whereas Hawks is content to hang out behind the arras.

For further proof, I refer you to a couple of trailers from 1941. First, Hawks's "Ball of Fire," which begins with the phrase "What a Pair of Gams!" blazoned across the screen before glancing at the plot and announcing the leading players, Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck. Only in the last ten seconds does Hawks rate a mention. Compare this to Capra's "Meet John Doe," released a few months before. It, too, stars Cooper and Stanwyck, but they get second billing in the trailer. Instead, in gigantic letters, up come the words "Frank Capra," followed by a slow crawl of the kind that we associate with "Star Wars," listing the director's earlier triumphs in chronological order. Then, at the end, a homely touch—"It's *your story, and it's great!*"—and a final plug for Capra. You get the feeling that, as far as he was concerned, his name belonged not just above the title but before, after, and practically instead of it.

It is the puff of that self-belief, in part, that provokes the ire of Capra's detractors. "One man, one film," he said, and in that preëmptive claim to the status of an auteur he left himself open to censure. Yet Capra's movies from his golden years *do* look and sound like his and nobody else's, with their signature blend of blends: the loner and the bunch of pals, the cracker-barrel and the wisecrack, and the accelerating narrative that finds time to stop and stare. For Capra, as for Dickens, a mob could be either a chorus, pleading for justice, or a milling source of dread. Death itself could be used as a tool. Near the start of "Meet John Doe," a journalist played by Stanwyck (the archetypal Capra actress) chatters like a ticker tape about her fancy plan—find a hobo to play a hobo who might jump from the top of City Hall. It's really no joke, but the glee of her riff somehow turns it into a lark.

Nothing about Capra is weirder, to be honest, than the way in which, from one film of his to the next, suicide tugs at our sleeve. In "The Bitter Tea of General Yen" (1933), the tea is lethal, and the General knowingly drinks it; in "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," a disgraced senator pulls a gun on himself and cries, "I'm not fit to live!"; and, in "It's a Wonderful Life," James Stewart, as George Bailey, leans over the parapet of a bridge with

maddened eyes, while the river roils below. How did such a nightmare end up as America's most beloved Christmas movie? Because George is saved by an angel, I guess, and by generous mounds of cash.

As for Capra's politics, search me. Readers of McBride's 1992 book were alarmed by the revelation that Capra was a flinty Republican who voted against Roosevelt "because I thought he was getting too big for the country's good." However, as Wasson informs us, when the first of the "Why We Fight" documentaries, "Prelude to War," was shown at the White House, in 1942, all of Capra's reservations dissolved with one shake of the President's hand. ("Every man, woman, and child in the world must see this film," F.D.R. said to the assembled gathering.) Bernds reckoned that Capra was "muddled and reactionary." To the screenwriter Julius Epstein, he was "a right-wing populist." At the same time, Epstein said, "I was not sure how he felt outside his pictures."

There's the rub. It's the pictures that do the talking, and the raging, and—if Cooper is around—the keeping mysteriously quiet. The fact that Capra's political persuasions, such as they are, fail to square with the deeds of his protagonists is more of a relief, I'd say, than a reason to charge him with hypocrisy. Who wants to watch a film that unwaveringly demonstrates the voting intentions of its maker? The crazed filibuster that concludes "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" (Stewart, as Jefferson Smith, had his throat dabbed with dichloride of mercury to make him hoarse) sounds more ominous than uplifting in the age of Donald Trump, and the reactions to the film were equally nuts. James F. Byrnes, a Democratic senator from South Carolina, protested that "the thing was outrageous, exactly the kind of thing that dictators of totalitarian governments would like to have their subjects believe exists in a democracy." Wrap your head around that.

"Mr. Smith" was written by Sidney Buchman, a card-carrying Communist. Riskin, who wrote for Capra to miraculous effect for a decade, starting in 1931, was snappier, subtler, and less ideologically heated, but he, too, was nonetheless a man of the left. (He was also a swell; he dated Carole Lombard and married Fay Wray, which must have been a scream.) The point is that Capra surrounded himself with the best and the smartest, whatever flavor they came in; Stanwyck, Colbert, Gable, Cooper, and Stewart were all solid Republicans, and it's unlikely that Capra gave more of a damn about

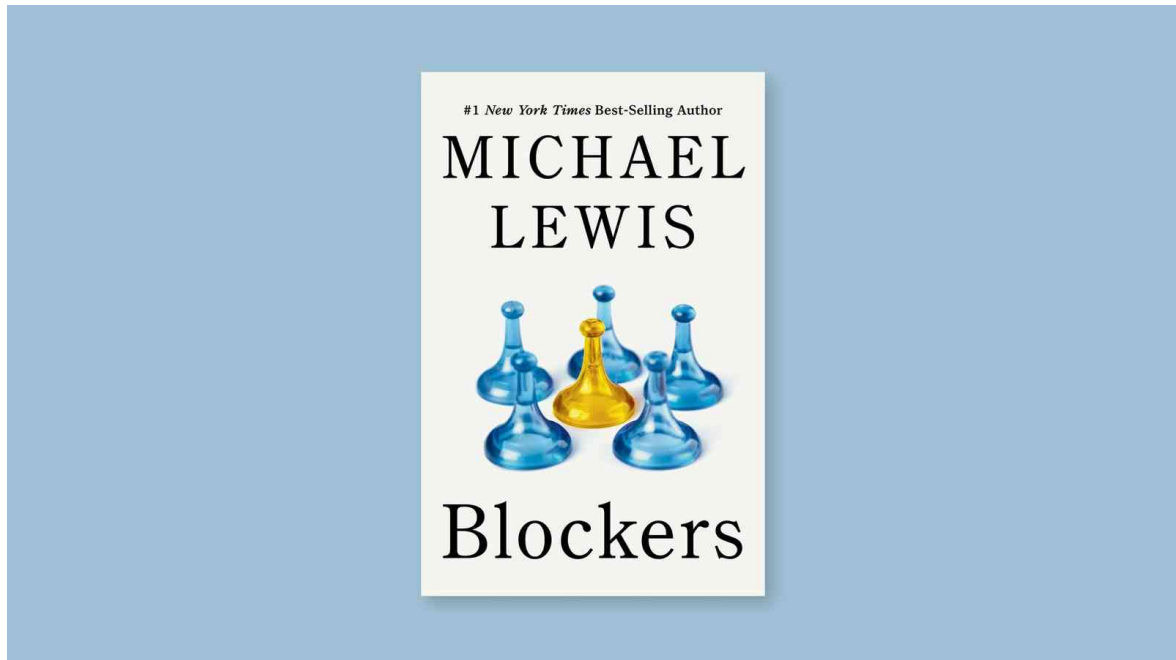
their politics than their adoring public did. A movie screen is a dream, not a pamphlet. “What did Capra want to say in his films?” McBride asks, but we don’t watch them for the sake of the saying. What they bequeath to us is not a set of ideas but the fluent, rhythmical beat of a story and a treasury of looks.

The decline of Capra, in the wake of the Second World War, was a sorry spectacle. He made many films after “It’s a Wonderful Life,” but the wonders pretty much ceased. In 1951, he was invited by the president of Caltech, his alma mater, to join a secret Cold War think tank, but was denied security clearance; in a bid to prove his worthiness, he named the names of left-wing sympathizers, including Buchman. (Among the sins of which McBride accuses Capra, this midlife ratting may be the gravest.) Ornerly, unwanted, and adrift, Capra found his schemes for movies running out of gas. A bio-pic of St. Paul, starring Frank Sinatra, was never going to fly, though I can’t help imagining the result (“How ya doin’, Colossians?”).

Yet all was not lost. With his second wife, Lucille, whom he had married in 1932, after his first marriage foundered, Capra went to live on a ranch that he had bought in Fallbrook, a hundred miles from Hollywood. He planted fruit trees and produced his own olive oil. Later, the Capras moved to Palm Springs, where he played golf with Gerald Ford and Barry Goldwater. That may not be everybody’s notion of delight, but each to his own. There is a heartening swing, too, in the final chapters of Wasson’s book, as we learn that the maker of “American Madness” got to watch “Mean Streets”—“a helluva beautiful picture,” he called it—and, after the publication of “The Name Above the Title,” began to revel in the company of students, who lapped up his tales of times past (or, for McBride, “his self-aggrandizing pseudopersonality”). For their benefit, he would take apart the mechanism of an old movie, like a clockmaker, and explain how it had been put together.

What kept Capra all wound up and ticking? Wasson detects a lingering resentment in the poor Sicilian kid gazing up at the idle rich. “He would get them. If it would take his whole life, he would get them,” Wasson writes. But where, exactly, is that hatred to be found in the films? They seem tolerant rather than vengeful, and a movie like “Platinum Blonde” is far more amused than appalled by the antics of the well-to-do. Where Capra did strike back was in the sheer vigor of his anti-idleness; he did so much so

well, and, if he was amazed by the country he lived in, and confused by what sort of place—horrific or tranquil—it might yet become, well, he is hardly alone in his bewilderment. It was John Cassavetes, a director about as distant from Capra as one can be, who delivered the most haunting homage of all. “Maybe there really wasn’t an America,” he said. “Maybe it was only Frank Capra.” ♦



[Blockers](#), by Michael Lewis (Norton). In the early months of 2025, Elon Musk, then a consultant for the Trump Administration, launched the Department of Government Efficiency (*DOGE*), with the aim of cutting two trillion dollars in federal spending. A cohort of a few dozen tech workers and entrepreneurs who “seemed to share his pleasure in the idea of people being afraid of them,” as Lewis puts it, rallied to *DOGE*’s cause and led a “slash and burn” assault on U.S. government institutions. In this punchy history, Lewis chronicles the experiences of a handful of public servants on the receiving end of this onslaught who refused to comply with the often illegal mandates of *DOGE* personnel, even at the cost of their jobs, and careers, in government.

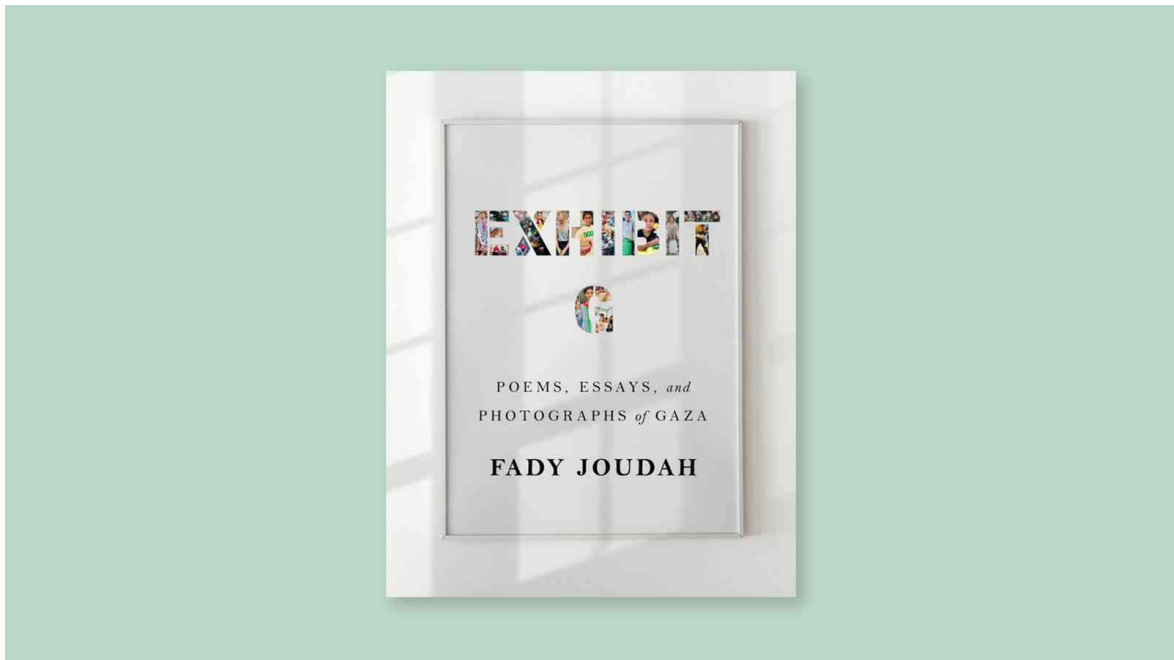


Exhibit G, by *Fady Joudah* (Milkweed). “What image of childhood is enough for a people to stay alive?” Mournful questions like this one undergird Joudah’s collection, a finalist for the National Book Award, which bears witness to violence in Gaza. The book’s poems and essays are interspersed with photographs, many of children: some hauling jugs of water; some, despite their circumstances, smiling and flashing hand gestures for victory or peace. Even as Joudah examines the ways that exile, destruction, and the “white noise of genocide” warp language and the experience of time, he also condemns the tendency to fetishize hope. “A child’s smile triumphs over terror as Icarus triumphed over gravity,” he writes.

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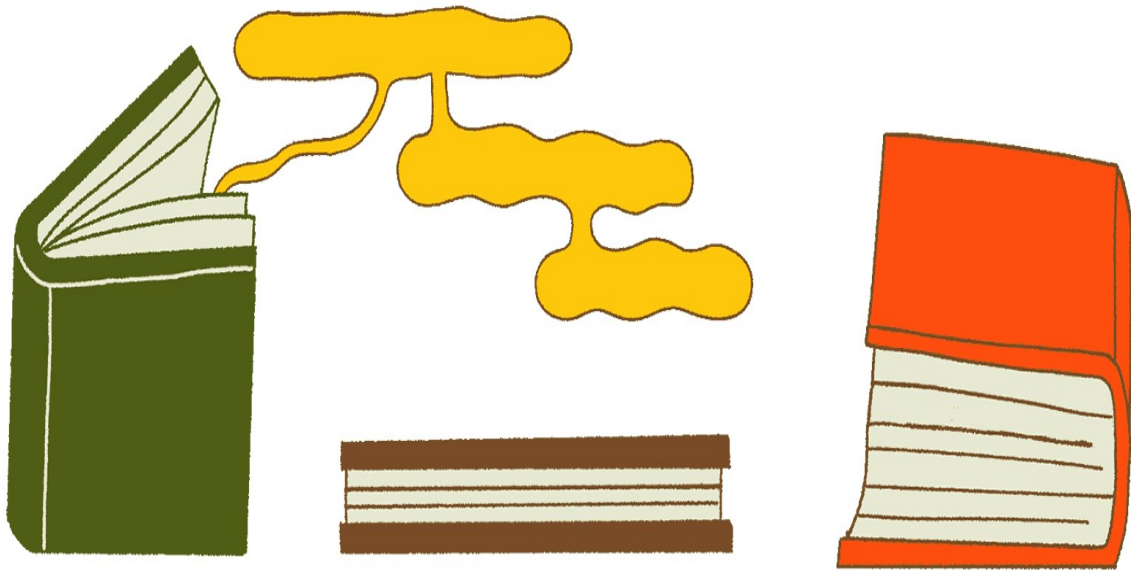
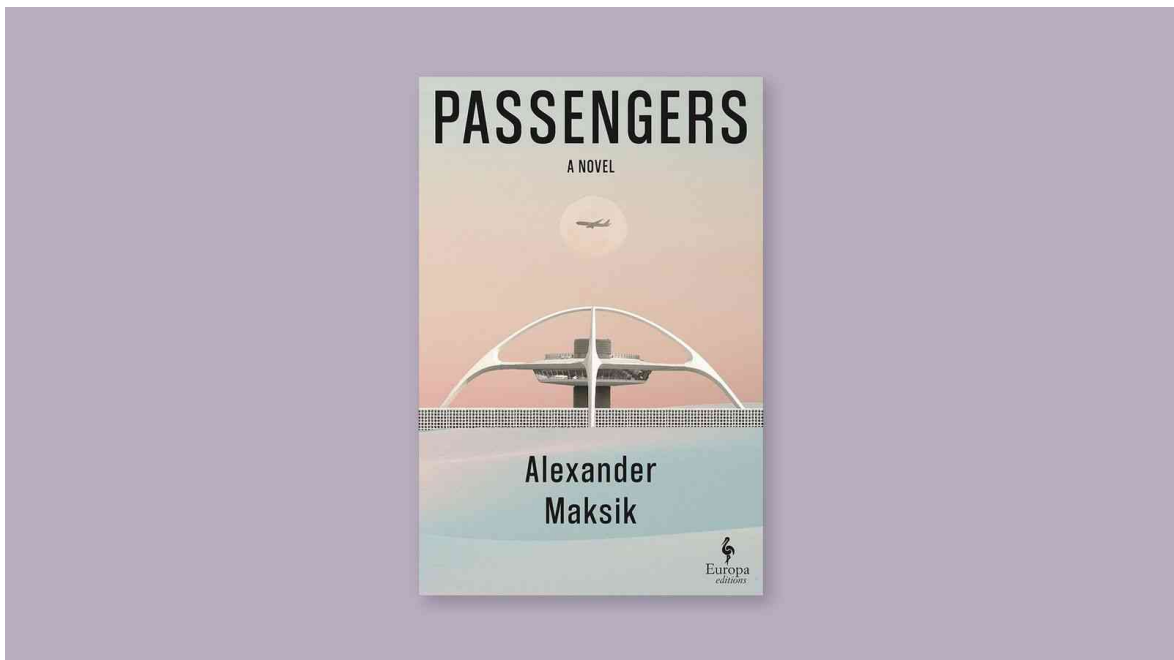


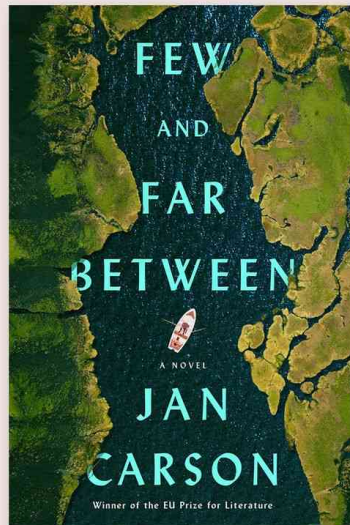
Illustration by Henri Campeã

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[Passengers](#), by *Alexander Maksik (Europa)*. Ivan, a central character in this quietly surreal novel, is determined to show his cynical twentysomething daughter, Nina, “another way of being alive.” There’s no better place to do this than Paris, Ivan has resolved, and we meet the pair in a departures terminal at LAX. Nina, with whom Ivan has a strained relationship, is quick

to kick off the banter that functions as their “common language.” While they exchange insults and memories, their flight—along with all the others due to take off—becomes infinitely delayed for reasons unknown. More troubling still is that their grasp on time, then their very consciousness, begins to break down. Completely cut off from the world outside, Nina and Ivan find themselves “bound together in ways they’d not been since she was a girl.”



[Few and Far Between](#), by Jan Carson (Scribner). This work of alternative history tells the story of the Ark, an archipelago of islands created when Ireland’s largest lake, Lough Neagh, was partially drained, in the nineteen-sixties, as part of a plan to create a seventh county in Northern Ireland. During the Troubles, the Ark became a kind of utopian sanctuary inhabited by “families who’d been persecuted out of their communities” and by those who “upset the status quo.” In the wake of the peace process, however, the Ark depopulated, leaving but a few residents, who now live in fear of a new plan to flood the Lough in order to rid it of a toxic algae bloom. Carson draws parallels between the familial traumas of those who remain and the broader societal wounds of a province still healing from decades of sectarian violence.

[Books](#)

Is God Another Addiction?

A remarkable memoir recounts a writer's struggles with alcoholism and religious faith—and the unsettling ways in which each has fed her longing for the other.

By [James Wood](#)



In "Will and Attention," Meghan O'Gieblyn explores a disturbing paradox: the substance that has ruined her life also offers the surrender of self that she could never achieve through worship. Illustration by Melek Zertal

"God does not and cannot exist," Iris Murdoch once wrote, "but what led us to conceive of him does exist, and is *constantly* experienced and pictured." You could hang that sentence—epigraph, baleful blessing—over Meghan O'Gieblyn's memoir, "[Will and Attention](#)" (Doubleday). In some ways, it resembles a conventional addiction memoir: an alcoholic in her twenties, O'Gieblyn got sober, flourished for more than a decade as an essayist and critic, and then started drinking again during the pandemic. She vividly recounts her year of secrecy and collapse, followed by rescue and restoration. The fractions of fall and rise are in order: the book's existence attests to the recovery.

But "Will and Attention" is more complex and surprising than its form suggests. An anguished engagement with theological and philosophical

texts, above all the writings of Simone Weil, it is closer to an unfinished spiritual diary than to the familiar sort of sculpted redemption story. O’Gieblyn was raised in a fundamentalist Christian community on Lake Michigan and intended to enter the ministry. She lost her faith in her early twenties, relatively late for a loyalist. (Losing one’s faith, like discovering an aptitude for music or sports, tends to happen early or not at all.) You may wonder whether she only mislaid it. She certainly does: “I want very much to live a good and virtuous life, without alcohol and drugs, which have made my life miserable. And I still long to believe in God, despite the resounding silence that suggests that he does not exist, or is not interested in us, or in me specifically.” Perhaps her book is really a memoir of her addiction to God. More anguishing, to a God who does not and cannot exist.

A sentence of Weil’s provides the book’s title. On the wall above her desk, O’Gieblyn tells us, is a line from the French thinker’s notebooks, collected in “[Gravity and Grace](#)”: “We have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will.” O’Gieblyn is in pained and plaintive agreement with Weil, who goads her throughout the book. She shares Weil’s suspicion of the will, but has doubts when it comes to her own powers of attention. Her account opens with an acute examination of the paradoxes of willing (an example of how boldly this memoir follows its philosophical interests). Experience has taught her that you cannot will yourself out of addiction, or into religious faith. At twenty-eight, she started treatment for alcoholism, but only when she had reached the very bottom—she was living out of her car, having “lost basically everything and having refused the interventions of everyone who’d previously tried to help.” This turn to sobriety felt less like determination than like surrender, a failure of will. She notes that “will” means both desire (to want something, to will it) and the faculty used to control or cancel desire (will power). So “the will is both the problem and the solution to the problem.” O’Gieblyn considers her alcoholism and her loss of faith to be failures of will, yet she grew up hearing worshippers testify that their conversion to evangelical Christianity came through a surrendering of the will, a submission to God’s grace. At the wooden tabernacle where congregants gathered on summer evenings beside Lake Michigan, the pulpit bore a sign that read “*LET GO AND LET GOD*.” She remains “fascinated with this idea, despite having no metaphysical beliefs to support it.”

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If O’Gieblyn’s self-diagnosis is right, the collapse of will that led to her loss of faith is awkwardly close to a collapse of will that might lead to her return to faith. A failure of will is not quite a surrender of will; a voluntary submission might be seen as some noble version of willing, a willing away of will. Nevertheless, we seem to be in a strange twilight realm in which religious success may resemble secular failure.

In 2018, this former evangelical Protestant, who had studied at the Moody Bible Institute, in Chicago, found herself wandering into the Catholic St. Mary’s, “a large and beautiful church on our side of town.” (O’Gieblyn lives in the Midwest but does not name the town.) She is winningly honest about classic conversion narratives that somehow fail to persuade, and modest about her ability to account for her own urgings. So she cannot say exactly why she started attending Mass, except that she remembers being “overcome one spring with an inarticulate but decisive need to worship something.” The nature of the object wasn’t especially important; she simply wanted to kneel before something beautiful, to lose herself in it. The large Catholic church was drowned in golden light, and she was transfixed by the priestly mummery (her word is “pageantry”—a moment when the author and a certain kind of reader may diverge at supersonic speed), by “the

senseless, hexlike redundancy of the Nicene Creed.” This worship began to take on the shape and the dynamic of her former alcoholism: she kept the visits secret, as if they were shameful, from her husband and her closest friends. By the fall, these services became “the most intensely sensuous experience” of her week; “there was nothing more desirable, more perfect, than to lose myself in a trance of senseless movement.” There’s a deliberate hint here, I think, of Emma Bovary’s secret raptures, her own wayward Catholic sensuousness.

As O’Gieblyn started going to church, she stopped going to the recovery meetings that had sustained her for years. She collapsed back into religion and then into drinking. When she eventually tells her husband, Barrett, that she has started drinking again, he calls her secrecy a kind of “infidelity.” Attending Mass had been the first infidelity. The “success” of religion led to the “failure” of alcohol. She now sees that the return to church “was just a veiled desire for intoxication, that the experiment with Catholicism served as a gateway back into drinking.” She was returning to “the things that had ruined my life before: alcohol and institutional religion.”

As in “[Madame Bovary](#),” the priests are a mite disappointing, even if the cloaks and swirling stoles enchant. O’Gieblyn starts talking to the church’s pastor, whom she calls Father Aaron. He is intelligent, well read, respectful of the writer’s doubts. Shrewd, too: he gently parries her desire to become “a Catholic atheist,” and asks, “Why would you have a desire for something that doesn’t exist?”—the very question that O’Gieblyn can’t stop asking herself. It’s a version of C. S. Lewis’s insistence that an unappeasable yearning points to the existence of something beyond this world. O’Gieblyn concedes that this “shapeless longing for nothing I could locate, which I took to be a yearning for God,” has intermittently possessed her all her life —“and religion has never cured it.” Nor does religion offer a cure at St. Mary’s. She and Father Aaron get bogged down in orthodoxies both doctrinal and political (he asks her about the Catholic sacraments, and why she hasn’t had children), and the fever slowly cools. She confesses her secret churchgoing to Barrett, who calls it “addict behavior.”

This particular “addict behavior” is a heart murmur against the turbulent pulse of the actual addict behavior. Unappeased by religion, O’Gieblyn’s “shapeless longing” restlessly seeks its familiar object, its proper location,

its old home. Soon, the pandemic brings its own kind of turbulence, vitally evoked here in bold Didion-like strokes: “I remember thinking that we were all slowly losing our minds. I remember the day that the heat broke and the entire city was loosed into the streets The evening when all the businesses downtown simultaneously boarded up their storefronts and tacked BLM posters to their doors, as though it were calf’s blood, hoping to be passed over.” In 2021, she publishes a book, resumes travelling, gives talks and readings. Airport bars, foreign cities, lonely hotel rooms: the sour reek of temptation. In Helsinki, she falters; at the Nashville airport she goes under and drinks three white wines, followed by vodka at O’Hare. The degradation is shameful, and shamefully compelling to read about. O’Gieblyn falls back into old tricks that come as easily as “riding a bicycle.” Drinking at home, she knows how to disguise her flushed cheeks and the smell of booze before Barrett returns: she takes a hot bath. One night, while he is sleeping, she slips out of the house to find another drink—or thinks she did, because the next morning she can remember only standing at the door, about to leave. But Barrett heard her, and he asks what’s going on. The culminating scene of confession and forgiveness is at once domestic and utterly religious. She’s on the threshing floor, saved and abased: “It is the only moment in my life when I have felt loved so completely, loved in the depth of my wretchedness and failure.”

One fascination of this brave book—brave in its disclosures but more so in its demands, its spiritual rigor, and its ardent intellectualism—lies in watching the eloquent, intelligent sufferer steadily entrapping herself. I don’t mean the obvious entrapment by her twin poisons, alcohol and institutional religion. I mean something more fundamental and less fathomable: her theology of alcoholism. The association of intoxication with religious ecstasy has a long history; its terrible force here comes from O’Gieblyn’s sense that the substance that has ruined her life also grants the surrender she was unable to achieve through worship. When she was young, she writes, she could never relax into God’s presence. The bustling ego, the barging will, always got in the way. “Alcohol is the only thing that has ever allowed me to rest happily in the presence of God,” she writes. Her drinking days in her twenties, and their morning hangovers, “were the closest I have come to the experience of enlightenment.” Her recent relapse, despite the secrecies and shame, was also a time of bliss. Alcohol offers her mystical release. Drinking, she can annihilate the self as the ancient mystics did, and as a

modern one, Simone Weil, commands. The will recedes, peace and freedom suffuse her soul, and she glimpses the “nothing”—the God, the absent God—that her “shapeless longing” is always seeking. She experiences not the warm secular blur that most of us feel but “a bolt of religious rapture that makes you want to sell all your possessions and hole up in a cave with your one precious pearl.” In this theology, alcoholism represents not just fallen addiction but also religious application; she reminds us that “addiction” descends etymologically from the Latin verb *addicere*, to devote.

On this point, O’Gieblyn is movingly, almost repetitively, adamant. I should say that I’m largely immune to seeing alcohol or drugs as vehicles of religious insight: I think spilt religion should be cleaned up. Shouldn’t we avoid trading in substitutes, in transferences? But, as someone who, like O’Gieblyn, grew up in and *came through* an evangelical upbringing, I comprehend the longing that compels her to seek a godly non-God, a presence that may be an absence.

Still, the cost of persistently naming these experiences as religious would seem to be very high. If you can encounter God only by drinking to oblivion, every religious success is an abject secular failure. So is drinking O’Gieblyn’s problem, or is God? Which intoxication comes first? O’Gieblyn recognizes this dilemma (though she wouldn’t put it exactly like this) but remains in thrall to the longing that sustains it. Although she presents herself as having lost her faith, she can’t help wanting to return to it. Just when she thinks she’s out, God pulls her back in.

There is a telling moment when she considers her religious youth and ruefully wonders whether she ever had any true faith “in a heavenly Father.” “I had not been born again,” she wittily decides. “I had only been born.” But, a page later, she writes, “A friend of mine who left the church says that every liberatory deconversion narrative obscures a tragedy about failing to believe.” Does it? Can’t it just be liberatory? Surely O’Gieblyn sees that her friend is ruling out what we might call good-faith faithlessness. It’s as if we catch her revising her jest: *I had not been born again, but it’s a tragedy that I wasn’t.*

A tormenting syllogism seems to grip the author: she longs to encounter God; to do so, she must escape her will; to escape her will, she must drink.

Therefore she drinks. Or she *drank*: this beautifully sober book describes her release from that prison. But her tradition does appear to have bequeathed her a powerful suspicion of the will. As she concedes, Christianity has reasons to denigrate human will, making it the source of disobedience and an explanation for much of the world's evil. Salvation comes instead through God's grace, the unearned gift that saves us from ourselves. Assigning responsibility for evil to human will also helps to absolve God. Yet understanding this religious inheritance, as O'Gieblyn so lucidly does, offers little assurance that one can escape its hold.

In practice, she treats the will, even the ego, as a sly old enemy to be outwitted or annihilated: "What I drank for was the peace and freedom from my own will." Weil offers an extreme version of this hostility to the self. She was a daring mystic, but her pursuit of selflessness assumed the punitive intensity of a kind of ego-starvation: literally and theologically, the self was always too large. "Gravity and Grace" presents an exacting vision of kenosis, or self-emptying, in which an ideally voided ego will learn how to worship an ideally voided God. "To empty ourselves of the world," Weil writes. "To take the form of a slave. To reduce ourselves to the point we occupy in space and time—that is to say, to nothing."

O'Gieblyn's memoir ends with a glimpse of serenity in freedom and something like redemption—a renewed sobriety, rooted in attending to the good, to the beautiful, to the world. (She uses Iris Murdoch's writing about the good to soften some of Weil's religious ferocity.) "Attention" replaces the feeble or malevolent "will," as Weil says it should. For O'Gieblyn, "the good" also seems to replace "God." On holiday in Italy, swimming regularly, alert to herself and to the beauty of her surroundings, she hopes that she is "no longer trying to obliterate my ego," and begins to doubt "whether this was really the goal of spiritual life." The reader who has journeyed this far with O'Gieblyn hopes that it is indeed a release and not merely a reprieve, that the old grinding syllogism will not return. Yet this reader can't help noting that O'Gieblyn's "attention," which she and Weil offer as the alternative to will, sounds an awful lot like *willed* attention: "I was attuning my mind to the good. I was teaching myself, through daily acts of attention, to want it." It's one of the many ways that this remarkably honest spiritual journal seems alarmingly open and unfinished. ♦

[Books](#)

The Old-School Ambition of “The Brightness”

In his sweeping new novel, Chad Harbach studies the crisis of being a college student in 2015—and of being a writer trying to redeem realist fiction.

By [B. D. McClay](#)



Harbach has a rare talent for depicting the love, envy, and delusions that flow between friends. Illustration by Bryce Wymer

Pella and Irma, two classmates at Westish College, in Wisconsin, are the best of friends. Pella, a newly engaged divorcée and former wild child, has just graduated. Irma, several years younger, is a rising academic star, a scholarship student from a rural Catholic family, so unhip that her lack of touch is its own form of cool. Together, they’ve been in weekly independent-study sessions, reading authors such as Edith Wharton, for the past three years. But if they’re such good friends—why aren’t they talking? Sure, Pella is planning her friend Owen’s wedding, and Irma is gearing up for her senior year. But that doesn’t explain the sudden distance between them, or why the reclusive Irma made the uncharacteristic decision to go to the big parties that open Westish’s school year without telling Pella.

“The Brightness” (Little, Brown), Chad Harbach’s new novel, clocks in at nearly seven hundred pages, but the bulk of it follows Pella and Irma over the span of a few late-summer days in 2015. At Owen’s wedding, Pella’s engagement falls apart and her friendship with Irma seems to reach a breaking point. At Westish, Irma participates in a prank that is meant to draw awareness to sexual assault on campus. The rest of the book covers the subsequent nine months, in which the two women navigate the fallout of these events, Pella from New York and Irma from Westish, only to be reunited toward the end.

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By this point, they have assumed the same aimlessness. Pella isn’t getting married, Irma isn’t going to grad school, and neither of them has a job, let alone a career. Unlike other people they encounter throughout the book—people who have shaped themselves and climbed professional heights—there is something unfinished about Pella and Irma. They’re always becoming, never being. Usually, when people don’t grow up, something has gone awry: they didn’t get to, they didn’t plan to, or they have simply delayed as long as possible. With others, though, resistance to a sleek and

defined persona is fundamental. Like curly hair that must be ruthlessly flat-ironed into submission—both our heroines have such hair, though Irma’s is “frizzy,” which means curly but unhappy—these people push back against any form in which they find themselves, even if they chose it.

Readers of Harbach’s first novel, “The Art of Fielding” (2011), will recognize some of these names: Pella, Owen, Westish College. That’s because “The Brightness” is its metafictional sequel, with the premise that the previous book was written by Owen as a roman à clef. This conceit allows Harbach to trace the development of not just his characters but his own work, through the reception of Owen’s book and through the way Westish students discuss his other authorial proxy, Edith Wharton. Irma, for instance, adores Wharton but nonetheless engages in a little trash talk: “Wharton’s world is too narrow. . . . I mean, Wharton is flawless at describing the world she sees—but the world she describes is restricted to what she *can* see, and see readily. She never gropes around in the darkness—she never reaches toward the numinous.”

Throughout “The Brightness,” characters dismiss ambitious realist novels, whether historical or contemporary in concern, as “not exactly the news about how we live” or as bland, “mashed-potato realism.” The middlebrow realist is a master technician, a superb replicator of experience, but neither more nor less than this. These statements—coming as they do in the pages of a large, enjoyable novel that could be called quasi-historical and even accused of having a “whole boring ‘plot’ ”—begin to suggest a preoccupation with whether such novels are worth anyone’s time. The existence of the book says yes; the characters within it say maybe.

Irma has been avoiding her friend for a simple reason: she’s been busy planning her prank. At the parties that ring in the school year, two of her accomplices apply temporary tattoos that say “RAPE VICTIM” onto passed-out athletes’ foreheads. Then Irma publishes a manifesto in the campus newspaper under the moniker Witches of Westish. Once a video of one of the athletes freaking out goes up online (“I’M A DUDE! I WAS *NOT* SEXUALLY ASSAULTED!” he screams), what starts as a feminist protest becomes a national story, with one of the victims appearing on a Fox News show hosted by a floppy-haired man named Hunter Stroman.

Perhaps because it avoids a situation in which someone is actually raped, “The Brightness” portrays this particular kind of youthful political action with a touching mixture of the high-mindedness, impishness, bravado, self-aggrandizement, and pointlessness that such events really contain. The Witches of Westish want attention, which they get but are unprepared to handle; the athlete who goes on Fox News wants his pride back but instead swings a national spotlight onto Dahlia, a prankster who is suspended; the college administration just wants this whole problem somehow not to be a problem, which is impossible. Celebrities get involved—Lana Del Rey wears a sweatshirt that says “FREE DAHLIA”—as do feminist media startups (such as the titular Brightness), but, as far as campus-rape prevention goes, nothing is accomplished. Some people make money, some people use the buzz to shore up a brand, and some people get their lives wrecked, but who falls into this last category comes down to bad luck more than to justice.

Irma views both herself and her friends as bystanders to the main issue, campus rape; they are raising awareness but otherwise not involved. As events get out of control, though, Irma realizes that her friend Dahlia *wants* them to. Whenever offered a chance for rapprochement, Dahlia escalates. Her chosen victim, earnestly seeking to understand why she did what she did, tries to have a conversation with her, but she refuses so that he will take his complaints to the administration. Irma’s slow recognition that Dahlia has something different at stake here, as well as the inevitable reveal of what that “something different” happens to be, is delayed because Irma, for all her intelligence, can’t put together why an upbeat, confident classmate might suddenly become moody and self-destructive. Irma lives in a world in which people are fundamentally kind and good. There are things she cannot see and does not understand. Instead, what she sees when she looks at Dahlia is somebody who is fearless to the point of neglecting herself, and part of their friendship lies in how comforting this lack of comprehension is for Dahlia.

The fictional models Harbach cites, both within the text (such as Wharton’s story “The Pelican”) and in interviews (such as “Anna Karenina”), are attentive to social judgments and situations. They are about just and unjust ostracism, the delicacy of one’s reputation, who gets away with things and who doesn’t. They understand that human relationships and human interiority both exist within a world, and this world constrains not only what

people do but what they can even regard as possible. Harbach is a gifted observer of undergraduates, their pathos and their comedy, but his Westish is a gentle and perhaps too-good-natured institution, where even the jocks are nerds. This means that the larger social dynamics created by rape—even the prospect of rape—in small, intimate communities go unconsidered. There is no one genuinely malicious at Westish, and thus none of the moral compromises one finds at an actual college: the friends who take sides, which usually means picking the person who's less trouble; the real but unspoken feeling that sexual assault may be an inevitable part of freewheeling social life; the surreal experience of being in a class about "Tess of the d'Urbervilles" with someone you know to have hurt other people. The singular strangeness of studying at a small college is striving *not* to know what you know about somebody else, for the sake of higher learning, or at least for the peace of the classroom. These kinds of forces, which explain why students behave in the self-warping ways that they do, are missing, as is the sense that people are ever constrained by something beyond their own quirks of personality or individual delusions.

Meanwhile, back at Owen's wedding, old friends and enemies reunite, dance, drink too much, and go to bed with the wrong people. Here, again, Harbach demonstrates a profound gift for observing individuals and their relationships. His depiction of the wedding is replete with the sort of tiny triumphs and failures of these occasions: comparing yourself with an old classmate and feeling like a loser, comparing yourself with a younger person and feeling like you wasted your potential, ending up in a group at the end of the night you'd never have chosen and will never see again. Pella, for her part, spends the night obsessed with proving herself to be a flourishing adult. She helped Owen write his book, and helped him plan this wedding, but knowing that she "had once again played the supportive editorial role" means that she is filled with a sense of resentment. She fawns on an old high-school friend, then steals the attention of a guy the friend likes. She is embarrassed by her fiancé's physical unself-consciousness—he's at peace with his balding and weight gain, his sunscreen is applied all wrong—as if this somehow reflects poorly on her. Can she really be impressive if she's with a man who just wants "a grilled cheese of a woman, salty, filling, and cheap"?

Collapsing relationships are the bread and butter of many an insightful novel. But Harbach also captures a more delicate thing in his depiction of Owen and Pella: the frustration that exists between a successful artist and a less successful friend who feels instrumental to that success. Pella envies Owen and secretly enjoys things like a negative review that compares his book to morphine, even as she lives vicariously through the praise and attention he receives. She knows that Owen hasn't done her dirty, professionally speaking, but still feels neglected.

Once again, though, there's a social aspect to the proceedings that Harbach avoids, this time not by leaving things out but by insufficiently considering what he's put in. As mentioned, "The Art of Fielding" is a real novel in "The Brightness." Various lines make clear that it should be regarded as nearly identical to Harbach's book. That means it's a book about two things: first, Henry Skrimshander, a talented Westish shortstop who gets the yips, and, second, Owen's love affair with the president of the college (who was also Pella's father). Owen seems to have made no changes to events as they happened. Nevertheless, his "Art of Fielding," like Harbach's, is treated by critics as a "roseate" work of old-fashioned realism.

The problem is that Owen's book would not be received as comforting and old-fashioned. It would be seen as a work of merciless autofiction in the vein of Karl Ove Knausgaard, and it would be discussed, as his books are, as aggressive, antisocial, and spiteful. Despite almost everyone at the wedding having read Owen's novel, he faces no social fallout: there is no frustration at his depiction of the school and his peers, and no paranoia about whether he'll expose them further. More to the point, such a book would simply not be described by critics as full of "comforts," and "The Brightness" is too concerned elsewhere with the way discourses play out online to ignore the debates a work of barely disguised fiction about sleeping with your closeted college president would create. The only person who responds to it in a way that seems even remotely accurate is, oddly, Hunter Stroman, who calls it a novel about being "groomed for gay sex by the sixty-year-old president of [Owen's] college."

"The Brightness" suffers from its own problems with thin disguises. The *Times* is the *Times* in this book, *Vice* is *Vice*, the TV show "Girls" is the TV show "Girls," and Lana Del Rey is Lana Del Rey. On the other hand, there

are women's websites named the Termagant and the Napkin, a designer label named Jane and Janet, a publication named the *SoHo Review*, and, of course, a Fox News host named Hunter Stroman. Every time a new, media-adjacent name appears, it's unclear whether what you're encountering is a fictional invention or an inside joke. In a conversation before Owen's wedding, a character dismisses a forthcoming novel as a "period piece" by quipping, "The characters are always humming old advertising jingles. And the price of everything is repeated ad nauseam: 'Oh goodness! Three shillings six for a jiggery-joo!'" But if such an effect was what Harbach sought to avoid by not saying "Jezebel," "The Hairpin," or "Tucker Carlson," he sacrificed a much more important sense of social reality. The titular Brightness, for instance—a women's media startup that was founded by an actress, and that publishes a mixture of glossy fashion content, aggregated slop, and barely edited confessional pieces—represents a kind of corporate girl power that the reader, sitting at the lofty vantage point of ten years later, knows isn't heading anywhere except off a cliff. For the characters, though, it's just a website, and, as glamorous as the media world it represents seems, neither Pella nor Irma wants to join it. It is neither an aspiration nor a temptation; it is not a friend or an enemy; it is just indistinctly there.

These flaws are all the more frustrating because so much of "The Brightness" is beautiful and perceptive. Irma, in particular—who has abandoned her rural Catholic roots but still appears to others as a confusing aesthetic mix of Fox News and flower child, "starch and eccentricity . . . shrewdness and innocence"—is a wholly convincing portrait of someone who is fiercely loyal to her family and their values (despite being at odds with them) but who also feels alternately freed and imprisoned by her own singularity. She is depicted without a trace of condescension, and her struggles with her identity can't simply be chalked up to a restrictive childhood. They are existential problems that are represented seriously:

You couldn't be a sexual being and also be Irma; you couldn't be a woman and also be Irma; you couldn't slash your hair in the darkness and also be Irma. You couldn't be an intellectual and also a sexual being, or a woman, or a slasher of hair in the darkness. You could be an intellectual and yourself, but not without an irksome sense of narrowness, penury, and incompleteness. You couldn't enjoy, relax, have fun, take pleasure, cut loose, party, whatever you wanted to call it,

embrace certain deep and Dionysian aspects of your being, without suspending your moral sense, and all too often it seemed your moral sense was all you had.

Passages like this one are not only a joy to read—they convey something fundamental about people, who are always in conflict with themselves, managing a jumble of desires that pull in wildly different and sometimes mutually exclusive directions. Irma is not going to resolve her dilemma by having sex or cutting loose, nor by renouncing such pastimes and doubling down on intellect. Her need to be multiple represents the tension that will run through the rest of her life, not something that can be reconciled to create a new, final, and perfect Irma. When she does have sex, she experiences the aftermath, too, as doubled: “a kind of grief-in-love, a losing-in-the-having. . . . A new kind of unloneliness, which now she could never unknow.”

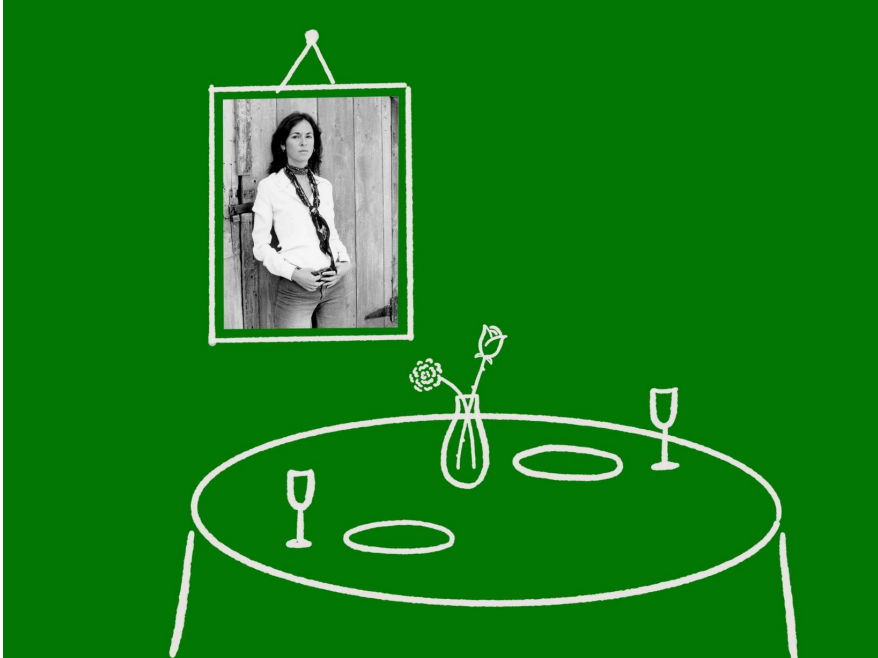
The accusation levelled within “The Brightness” against novels that are stuck in the past, whether formally or through their subject matter, is that they are “not exactly bringing the news.” The proper response to this complaint is that novels do not bring the news; the news brings the news. This is as true of art that is experimental and political as of art that is old-fashioned. While in New York, Pella becomes smitten with the work of a feminist artist named Sylvie, especially a film called “Death of My Husband.” In it, Sylvie talks directly to a man standing behind her camera, who asks, “Would you consider killing one’s husband a revolutionary act?” Sylvie replies, “Revolutions just go round and round. I’ve been trying to become an artist.” At the end of the film, pregnant by a man she despises, Sylvie says simply, “There’s no way out.”

Art like Sylvie’s inherently contains two messages. Even if there’s “no way out,” the film’s existence says, “You’re not alone.” An artist is always becoming an artist, the same way Pella and Irma will always be becoming Pella and Irma. All works of art are addressed in part to people they cannot know, with problems they cannot understand. To prove that an old-fashioned book can be excellent, it isn’t necessary to dramatize arguments about the form. You need only a prose style, an interest in people, and a sense of society. In art as in sports, the best defense is a good offense. ♦

Louise Glück's Life in Restaurants

The Nobel Prize-winning poet made an art of being a regular.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



Glück was a fixture at Celeste, a tiny restaurant in Somerville, Massachusetts. "If anything was off—the salt, the lime, the fish—I would get a text," the owner said affectionately. Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin; Source photograph by Gerard Malanga

If Maria Rondeau and JuanMa Calderón were literalists, they might have put nasturtiums on the menu at Rosa y Marigold, the Peruvian restaurant they opened in April, in Boston. They took the name from the novella “Marigold and Rose,” the final book published by their friend Louise Glück, the Nobel Prize-winning poet, before she died, in 2023. The story is told from the perspective of infant twins with divergent personalities—Rose is unguardedly buoyant, whereas Marigold is watchful and introspective. “The garden relied on nasturtiums, which Mother and Father ate,” the narrator observes. “It was strange to see the grilled fish with nasturtium butter melting over it. . . . But once you try it, Mother said, the taste is magic. The twins knew what magic was. It made the sun rise. Now they knew it had a taste.”

Rondeau, who grew up in Guatemala, is an architect; Calderón, her partner in life and in restaurants, is a filmmaker and chef from Peru. In September, I

sat at Rosa y Marigold's sleek U-shaped bar with Rondeau and the poet Dan Chiasson, a regular contributor to this magazine and another close friend of Glück's, sharing thin strips of charred beef heart, tendrils of squid blanketed in a silky, lavender-hued olive mayonnaise, and a formidable mound of *chaufa de mariscos*—Chinese Peruvian seafood fried rice. To drink, Chiasson ordered his usual, a gin Martini, recalling fondly how Glück would fish the olives out of his glass. As an epileptic, she abstained from hard liquor, but she loved the flavor.

"The whole book is about this idea of duality," Rondeau said. "It's an allusion to her two grandchildren"—Glück's only child, Noah Dranow, is the father of twins—"but it's also Louise. I think many people are two sides." Rondeau designed Rosa y Marigold's dining room to have two sections, each with a mirrored-steel slab hanging overhead, slightly angled to offer a glimpse of the other side.

That afternoon, we'd visited Celeste, the couple's first restaurant, which they opened in the spring of 2018 in a tiny triangular storefront in Somerville. Glück, whose apartment was nearby, soon became a regular, with a regular order: a cold beer, the arugula salad with lime and Parmesan, and the ceviche, sometimes followed by the *sudado de pescado*, a Chinese Peruvian dish of steamed fish and vegetables. She always came with a friend, occasionally two, and often requested that the music be turned down.

The couple knew little about her until, one day, Glück left behind an envelope return-addressed to Yale, and Rondeau looked her up, to get it back to her. After that, Glück made her reservations with Rondeau directly. "If anything was off—the salt, the lime, the fish—I would get a text," Rondeau said affectionately. "She had a perfect palate!" Chiasson added. "She was our in-house critic," Rondeau continued. "And I would always be extremely grateful, because she kept it real."

One evening, Rondeau and Calderón mentioned that they'd been approached about writing a cookbook. The next time they saw her, she handed them a typewritten foreword, detailing how she'd first encountered Celeste in *Boston* magazine, which had published a photo of the ceviche. "It was a summer day and I wanted that ceviche immediately," she wrote, admiring how it was "not drowned by the chef's noisy creativity in shards of coconut

or a confetti of pomegranate seeds / A very pure looking dish of glistening blue cod.” At the restaurant, Glück became “more like a citizen” than a regular, she wrote. “And Celeste is a world. But a world so much more wonderful and reliable than our real world.” Glück ate dinner at Celeste on the day she won the Nobel, surrounded by friends of Rondeau’s and Calderón’s, whom they’d invited to insure her privacy.

I first learned about Glück’s passion for restaurants in the spring of 2020. At the time, I was this magazine’s weekly restaurant critic, and I had shifted, suddenly, from dining out all over New York City to chronicling the industry’s attempts to stay afloat during lockdown. Glück e-mailed me to commiserate, and to ask if I had ideas for how to help. “Among so many horrors, the collapse of these enchanted worlds seems somehow desperately poignant,” she wrote.

I was lightly shocked to hear from her. I knew and revered her as one of the great living poets, and imagined her as particularly godlike, too high-minded to care about something as earthly as food. There was also the fact that she had struggled with anorexia as a young woman, which she wrote about in her 1989 lecture “Education of the Poet.” We struck up a sporadic correspondence. “I love to cook and have been a terrific and fastidious home cook,” she wrote with refreshing candor, but she yearned for the ritual of dining out. (Later, I learned that she’d bought a heat lamp for Celeste so that she could eat there outdoors.)

In “Education of the Poet,” Glück, who was born to a wealthy family in New York, in 1943 (her father, a Hungarian Jewish immigrant, helped invent the X-Acto knife), described her anorexia as an attempt to “establish a self with clear boundaries.” “The conflict played itself out most fiercely with my mother,” she wrote, who “only wavered when I began to refuse food, when I claimed, through implicit threat, ownership of my body, which was her great accomplishment.” By all accounts, Glück’s mother, Beatrice, was a wonderful cook; Glück’s papers, archived at Yale’s Beinecke Library, make clear that she grew up among people who loved to eat. In one letter from summer camp, addressed to her younger sister, Tereze, Glück wrote, “I miss —sundaes, shrimp cocktails,” next to tiny sketches of each.

Glück recovered from anorexia through years of psychoanalysis—years during which she also studied poetry with Léonie Adams and Stanley Kunitz. She published “Firstborn,” her début collection, in 1968, when she was twenty-five. Later letters detailed lavish hotel meals in Europe with her first husband and dinner parties in Plainfield, Vermont, where she taught writing at Goddard College and worked part time at a café, baking pastries in exchange for child care. (Noah, her son, grew up to be a sommelier.)

In 1980, John Dranow, Glück’s second husband and the director of the writing program at Goddard, co-founded the New England Culinary Institute, a small cooking school that operated restaurants in Montpelier. Glück sat on the board of directors until the nineties, when they divorced and she moved to Cambridge. In one poem from “Meadowlands,” an unsparing, darkly funny collection from that time, an unidentified husband and wife argue over food. “I stopped liking artichokes when I stopped eating / butter. Fennel / I never liked,” he says. “Living with you is like living / at boarding school: / chicken Monday, fish Tuesday.”

“Why do you call it rigidity?” she retorts. “Can’t you call it a taste for ceremony? Or is your hunger for beauty / completely satisfied by your own person?” The husband has the last word, accusing her of joyless pleasure-seeking: “When you make artichokes, / make them for yourself.”

The word “poet,” Glück wrote, “must be used cautiously; it names an aspiration, not an occupation. In other words: not a noun for a passport.” She could go years without writing, though she rejected the notion of writer’s block, perceiving instead a liminal state of waiting for poems to arrive. During fallow periods, Glück occupied herself with teaching, which she loved, gardening (she claimed to have read nothing but catalogues for two years), and eating at restaurants. “Dinner takes a certain shape,” the poet Katie Peterson, who ate with her frequently at Chez Panisse when Glück taught at Stanford, observed. “A familiar menu is like a rosary.”

In Cambridge, Chiasson pointed out Koreana, the restaurant where he, as a worshipful Harvard grad student, had first spotted Glück, in 1997, having dinner with the poets Robert Pinsky and Frank Bidart. (Bidart, Chiasson’s mentor, eventually introduced them.) Chiasson showed me an unpublished poem that he’d written for Glück after she died: “back before anything

happened / yet it was still the bitter end / three poets sat around a lazy susan
/ kimchi, Tsing Tao, bibimbap, gossip.”

Earlier that day, we’d dropped in on the poet Henri Cole, in Boston’s South End. The two men, who had each shared countless meals with Glück, but never together, delighted in comparing notes, remembering her habit of sampling several wines before inevitably choosing something crisp and dry; her insistence that no meal was complete without greens; and the decisiveness with which she could turn on a place she’d loved. She almost always ordered the fish. She almost never ordered dessert, but would happily pluck the raspberry off of someone else’s crème brûlée. She preferred to eat early, and would wait outside her home, ready to be picked up.

Chiasson and Cole had last seen each at La Royal, another of Rondeau and Calderón’s restaurants, at a memorial for Glück, packed with her dinner companions. When Rondeau first told Glück, in 2021, that she and Calderón were considering opening a new place, Glück advised against it, then immediately changed her mind on a visit to the empty storefront, in a beautiful brick building from 1910, facing Royal Avenue in Cambridge. Not long before she died, Glück weighed in on the menu—both the dishes served and the printed layout—and chose the restaurant’s name.

Chiasson theorized that his friend’s love for both restaurants and poetry stemmed from her interest in “primal urges.” “We build these institutions to contain them and express them,” he said. “Marriage, restaurants, homes—they’re frames for containing all this passion.” In 1999, Glück imagined a creation story of sorts, describing small worlds that appeared in the fissures of a larger, shattered one. “On Huron Avenue they became / a block of stores,” she wrote, “whatever / they were or sold, they were / alike in their function: they were / visions of safety. Like / a resting place.” She called the poem “Formaggio,” after her favorite cheese shop, in Cambridge. ♦

Close to Christmas in 1968, the journalist Mike Wallace went to Atlanta, Georgia, to the home of Martin Luther King, Jr. Earlier that year, King had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. Now Wallace, filming a segment for a new magazine-style news program called “60 Minutes,” on CBS, sat on the King family’s handsome couch with one leg perched on the seat, looking somewhat ill at ease. A well-appointed Christmas tree feebly defied the air of sorrow in the room. Across from Wallace sat Coretta Scott King, the Reverend’s widow. The King kids were quiet and poised, letting the camera inspect their faces, putting on a show of mild bravery for the nice reporter and all the people out there watching at home. Wallace asked after the family. Was the season sad? Then, zooming out:

WALLACE: I think that some of us . . . wonder if the death of Martin Luther King didn’t leave the civil-rights movement, for a lot of people, leaderless, rudderless.

KING: I don’t think that this is so—I think that if we are looking for another Martin Luther King, we won’t find him. Because he comes once in a century? Maybe once in a thousand years. But there are many other persons now who will come forth, I believe. . . .

WALLACE: . . . We hear in the papers, see on television, more about the young Black militant leaders. We hear names like [Stokely] Carmichael and [H. Rap] Brown and [Eldridge] Cleaver and [Huey P.] Newton and [Bobby] Seale. And you begin to wonder if perhaps they aren’t getting more followers than some of the older civil-rights leaders.

King answered in her artful way, assuring Wallace that there were “many more people” who shared her husband’s commitment to nonviolent struggle than there were young Black radicals of various stripes ready to resort to violence.

The King-shaped moral vacuum had given Wallace a kind of civilizational anxiety. Without the charismatic clergyman, what kind of unruly Black-underclass anger would take the stage? That fear didn’t belong solely to Wallace. “60 Minutes” had come along at just the right time to draw a picture frame around a particularly perilous passage in the landscape of the

country. Part of its purpose, from the beginning, was not only to deliver new facts but to interpret ragged events for a nervous audience of relatively prosperous, largely white viewers who shared Wallace's concern about the shape and tenor of the future. That cohort's curiosities and anxieties were, it seemed, the unspoken rationale for the new show's existence. Could America, they all seemed to be asking vicariously, through Wallace's stentorian voice, ever just be normal again?

The fifty-ninth season of "60 Minutes," which premiered in September, arrives at a similarly disorienting juncture in the life of the American polity. CBS, the country's unofficial home for geriatric entertainments—stuff like "NCIS" and the shuffling-zombie game show "The Price Is Right"—has become an unlikely protagonist in a morphing media scene. Last summer, its parent company, Paramount, completed a merger with Skydance Media, an outfit founded by David Ellison, an actor turned media mogul whose father, Larry Ellison, happens to be one of the richest people on the planet. Ellison *fil's* most high-profile hiring decision was to enlist Bari Weiss—the former *Times* Opinion editor and founder of the center-right publication *The Free Press*—as editor-in-chief of CBS News.

Weiss has her own particular vision of American and international normality. Last year, not long after assuming her role atop CBS News, she appeared on a panel at the conservative Jewish Leadership Conference. She understood her new job, she said, as an opportunity to "speak for the seventy-five per cent" of people on the center right and the center left, marginalizing figures like the leftist streamer Hasan Piker and the former Fox News star Tucker Carlson. She wanted to invite into "the room"—the great national agora symbolized by CBS's airwaves—eminences who could stand at the "forty-yard lines" of reasonable discourse. She'd recently hosted a debate between the permanently discontented lawyer and Epstein pen pal Alan Dershowitz and the conservative polemicist and former N.R.A. spokeswoman Dana Loesch. You know, people like that.

This deserving three-quarters of the population, as construed by Weiss, includes people who don't believe in "the world as propagandists and ideologues imagine it to be" but want to know "what's actually going on in the world"—a world that "used to just be *normal*." As my colleague Clare Malone has reported in this magazine, Weiss first came to public attention in

college, as a consequence of her support for Israel and consistent denigrations of the Palestinian cause. But perhaps she has always, more fundamentally, been auditioning for a role as a propagandist for a dusty vision of a bygone postwar United States, whose faintly familiar personae and aging slogans masquerading as common sense—“individual responsibility,” “the American project,” “Alan Dershowitz”—are putting up a well-funded fight against the fiercer energies of the age.

You can detect the strain of the effort to erect this cardboard version of the country in the early episodes of the new “60 Minutes,” helmed by executive producer Nick Bilton, who, like Weiss, is a *Times* alum. Visually, the show looks a lot like it did before. Each hyper-competently produced segment opens with a journalist standing with wary authority like the Ghost of Christmas Future, inviting viewers to cross the threshold into some harrowing or heartening new way of apprehending reality. The first segment of the new season, hosted by Norah O’Donnell, was about a fighter pilot, code-named Bravo, whose plane was shot down over mountains in Iran. His interview with O’Donnell relates his story—a faulty parachute, a tough crash, a long bloody hike, and survival until he was rescued by an American plane—in a genuinely moving way. Pete Hegseth is interviewed, too, recalling his reaction to the news of Bravo’s crash—“Shit!”—and insuring that the tale is interpreted as an instance of American power wielded nobly and bravely, with a masculine, sporting élan. Early in the segment, O’Donnell calls the ongoing war with Iran “unpopular,” but the rest of the story does nothing to interrogate just why an American fighter jet was zooming through Iranian skies, and whether the exercise was, in the end, worth the very possible loss of Bravo’s life.

One of Bilton and Weiss’s signature new on-air hires is the conservative writer Ross Douthat, formerly an opinion columnist for the *Times*. His method is often to approach cultural or political phenomena, progressive or reactionary, with a mix of Gen X irony and sincere moralism which, by degrees, subtly shifts the frame of the discourse to the right.

A few episodes into the new season, Douthat interviewed the Republican senator Thom Tillis, of North Carolina. Tillis is the rare Republican lawmaker who has put up some measure of resistance to Donald Trump, opposing the President’s One Big Beautiful Bill. Recently, he called

Hegseth's initial plan to publicly execute the Fort Hood shooter, Nidal Hasan, "beyond disgusting." Douthat's interview portrays Tillis as a robust, independent-minded figure, the kind of guy you might dream up in a fugue state of acutely missing John McCain. At one point, Tillis dares Douthat to jump across the tracks of Congress's private subway system. Douthat, not known for his athleticism, makes it across. So does, of course, the hale Tillis, whose physical fitness, at sixty-six, is mentioned more than once in the segment. Tillis, scrutinized in this very friendly way, seems like the ideal political representative of Weiss's "seventy-five per cent," a guardian of an order whose foundations have long since rotted away. In the version of America in which, say, Mitt Romney hadn't been exiled from the good graces of the Republican base, Tillis might be gearing up for a successful, quite "normal" bid for the Presidency. As the real world stands, he is a man without an obvious wider constituency, whose highest feasible ambition might be the continued admiration of Douthat and Weiss.

On a recent episode, the longtime correspondent Lesley Stahl reported from the West Bank, where a group of Israeli shepherds called the Hilltop Youth have carried out a series of violent attacks against Palestinian families, attempting to take and settle their land by force. It's an excellent report, framed by the imminent elections in Israel and the U.S., drawing an implicit portrait of an uncertain but surely bloody future. Soon after that episode aired, it was reported by the media newsletter *Status* that the in-house screenings for Stahl's segment had grown "extraordinarily contentious," with Weiss taking a "very, very hands-on" role in fisting the piece, causing Stahl to consider joining her onetime colleagues Cecilia Vega, Sharyn Alfonsi, and Scott Pelley (who have all been fired since Weiss took over) as former employees of "60 Minutes." (CBS News has denied the *Status* report, and defended its own editorial rigor.)

The fracas makes sense: the war in Gaza, with its wake of corpses and depths of ongoing violence, suggests no neat, reassuring, or "normal" solutions. To move forward and, one day, make reparation would surely mean including voices that might have made Mike Wallace nervous, and perhaps fall well outside Weiss's favored forty-yard lines. To make "60 Minutes" worth the cost of so much reliable prime-time air would be to admit that we will need to envision, together, somewhere down the line, a new world. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the timing of Nick Bilton's departure from the New York Times.

Poems

- [“Shortcut”](#)

By [Diane Mehta](#)

I stretch the shortcut days with sound
sashaying to the wind's largesse,
humming to bee buzz and the hoots,

my lonely intervals, the hour's echo,
something understood; maybe
this world sorrow will leave off

but not yet, not here. I can't stop
crying. It is so starched out here,
low notes and woodsmoke,

my old stutter returning.
I can't remember how to reach
the end of my own sentences

because they keep tuning
and retuning the beginning sense
as if I may never glide another tone

into the rhythm of my spine
holding words up, grinding a design.
Such surplus there is already.

Cartoons

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- [Cartoons from the Issue](#)

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, October 13, 2026](#)

By [Matthew Stock](#)

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By Patrick Berry

By Mollie Cowger

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