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# NEW YORKER



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- Goings On
- The Talk of the Town
- Reporting & Essays
- Takes
- Fiction
- The Critics
- Poems
- Cartoons
- Puzzles & Games

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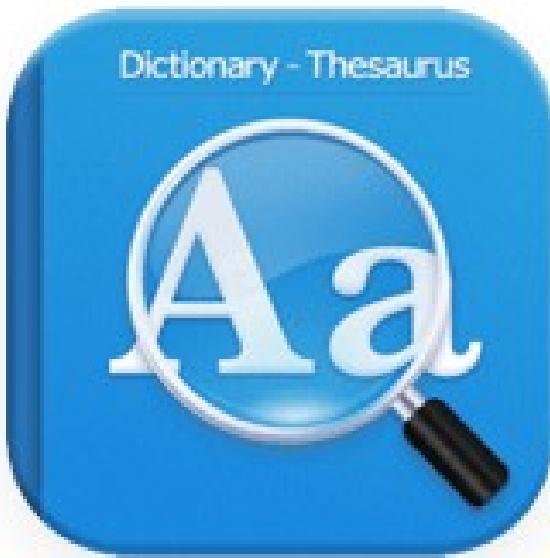
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# Goings On

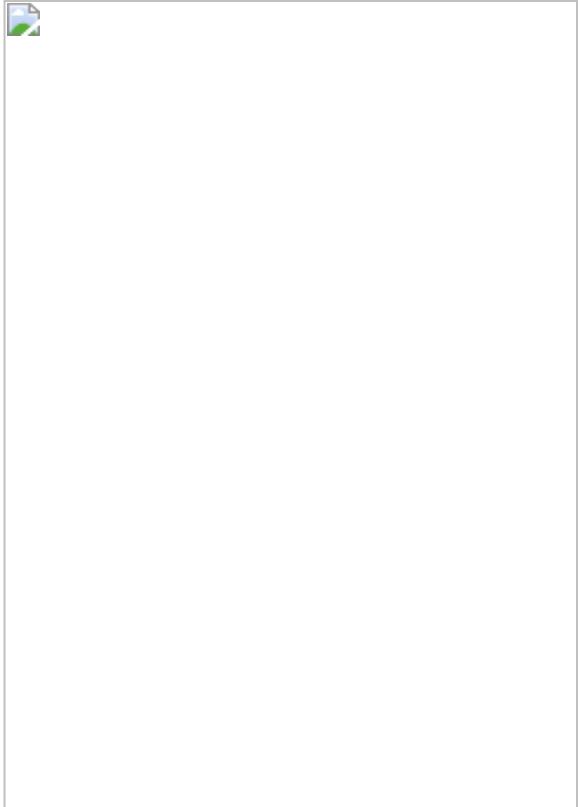
- [The Mesmerizing, Hard-Edge Paintings of Fanny Sanín](#)
- [Anne Enright's Literary Journeys to Australia and New Zealand](#)

Goings On

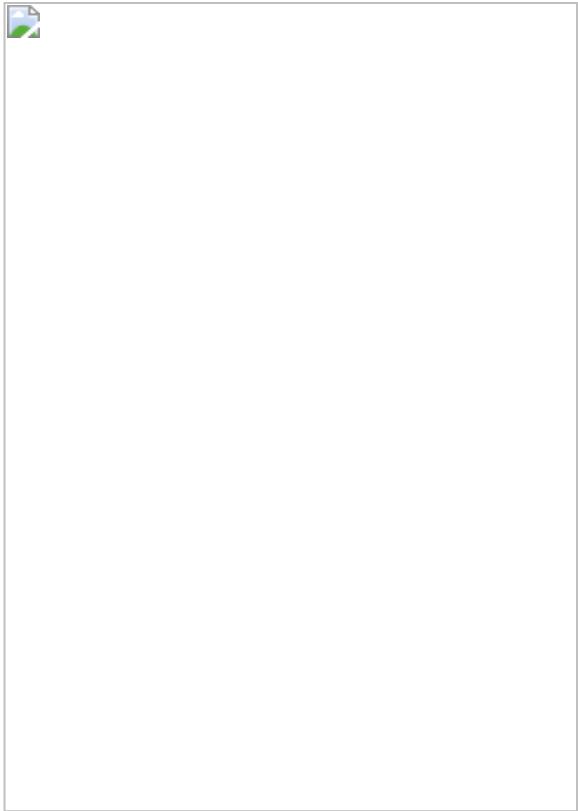
# The Mesmerizing, Hard-Edge Paintings of Fanny Sanín

Also: Staffers' favorite Brad Pitt movies, Carnegie Hall performances in the parks, the stargazing rap of Ab-Soul, and more.

By Jillian Steinhauer,Brian Seibert,Helen Shaw,Sheldon Pearce,Jane Bua,Richard Brody,Rachel Syme June 27, 2025



The Colombia-born artist [Fanny Sanín](#) has lived and worked in New York since 1971, but she has never had a museum survey in the city. Unfortunately, such neglect isn't unusual for a Latin American woman, but in Sanín's case it may also be a product of her style: geometric abstraction. She makes colorful, hard-edge compositions of lines and shapes. They're the kind of paintings that had their heyday in the nineteen-sixties but haven't been in vogue since (except for the revival of another Latin American woman painter, Carmen Herrera, in the early to mid-two-thousands). Americas Society's "[Fanny Sanín: Geometric Equations](#)" (through July 26), curated by the art historian Edward J. Sullivan, is far from a full-on retrospective, but it's a great step toward bringing her mesmerizing paintings into wider view.



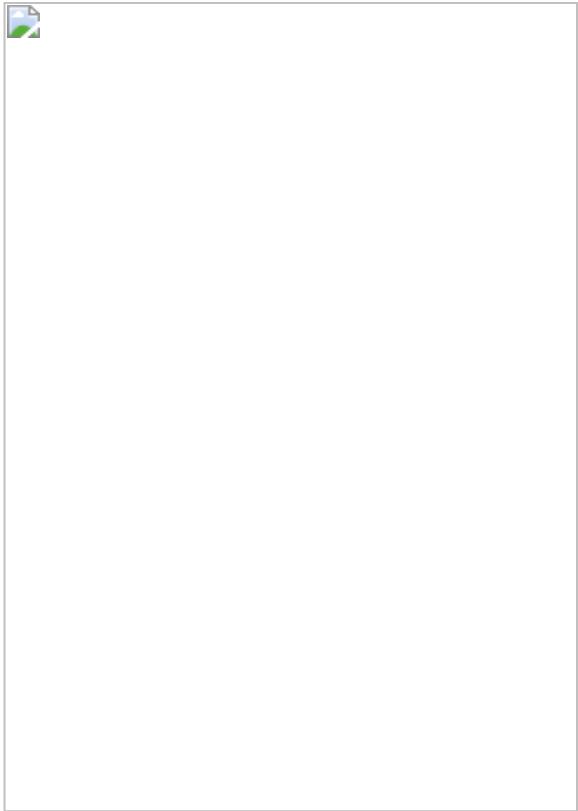
Sanín studied art in Bogotá, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, and London—and lived in Monterrey, Mexico—before settling in New York. You can trace connections between her work and that of predecessors ranging from Piet Mondrian (Dutch) and Frank Stella (American) to Lygia Clark (Brazilian) and Carlos Rojas (Colombian). But after experimenting briefly with Abstract Expressionism, Sanín developed a painting language that remains entirely her own. You can observe its hallmarks and evolution in this show.

Sanín's works are all color and form; there's no white space or perspective, no attempt at optical illusions. She initially focussed on vertical stripes of different widths, then complicated things by introducing rectangles and

blockier forms—and, eventually, triangles and diagonals. Her compositions are often symmetrical but rarely simple: paintings such as “Acrylic No. 3” (1974) and “Acrylic No. 1” (2024) keep your eye moving around. Sanín’s palette, especially, is remarkable: she mixes the hues herself, creating hybrid, in-between shades whose appearances are continually surprising within her rigid format.

All this speaks to Sanín’s masterful ability to create harmony out of tension. Her paintings are a delight to look at, with pleasure arising from the complex interplay of colors—say, black against red against orange—or subtle variations in adjoining geometric shapes. It’s no wonder that Sanín makes many preparatory studies, some of which are on display: her work is exacting. But the feat is that it’s also affective—out of meticulousness she creates an abundance of feeling.—*Jillian Steinhauer*

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## About Town

Dance

The **Mark Morris Dance Group** returns to the Joyce for two weeks with two programs, each featuring a première. First comes “You’ve Got to Be Modernistic,” set to rollicking compositions by the stride-piano master James P. Johnson, transcribed, arranged, and played live by Ethan Iverson. In the second week, the mood mingles a little with “Northwest,” set to a

suite of Alaskan Indigenous dance songs, adapted for harp and percussion, by John Luther Adams. Both premières are surrounded by variegated repertory gems, from beloved staples like “Going Away Party” to rarer works such as “Silhouettes” and “The Argument.”—*Brian Seibert ([Joyce Theatre](#); July 15-26.)*

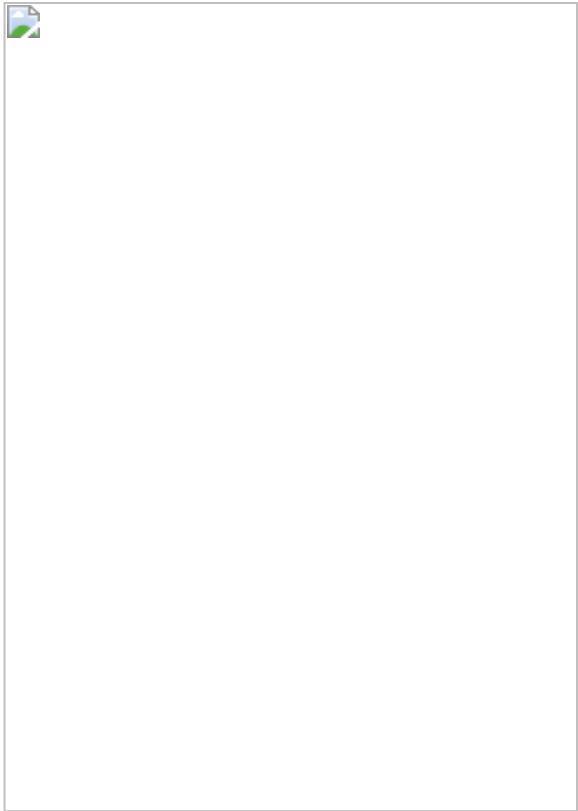
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Off Broadway

Jordan Tannahill’s intermittently incredible “**Prince Faggot**” imagines a future for the British crown, offering its young heir (John McCrea) a gay first love, and—given Shayok Misha Chowdhury’s kink-filled, frequently naked production for Soho Rep—a robust budget for ropes. When the prince brings boyfriend Dev to meet his royal family, their aristocratic inertia threatens the young love. (“You know what your parents are thinking? Shit, we’ve got another Meghan,” Dev says.) Tannahill clearly despises the whole monarchical framing because whenever he can, he has the superb cast turn and talk to us as, seemingly, themselves. Each of these clothed encounters feels far more intimate than the most explicit sex scenes, simply because there’s no generational wealth masquerading as fairy tale getting in the way.—*Helen Shaw ([Playwrights Horizons](#); through July 27.)*

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Hip-Hop



The independent hip-hop label Top Dawg Entertainment is best known for producing rap's philosopher-king Kendrick Lamar, the generational R. & B. voice SZA, and the budding phenom Doechii. T.D.E.'s tendrils have spread to Chicago and Chattanooga, but the label was built on a diverse cast of L.A. County lyricists including Carson's own **Ab-Soul**. The stargazing artist's early catalogue fixated on unspooling the mysteries of the universe. The 2012 album "Control System" christened Ab-Soul one of rap's most far-out thinkers, its third-eye verses forming a galaxy-brain doctrine. On more recent LPs—the self-titled "Herbert" (2022) and "Soul Burger" (2024), an homage to a dead childhood friend—he has become more grounded,

focussing his inquisitive mind inward.—*Sheldon Pearce ([Music Hall of Williamsburg](#); July 14.)*

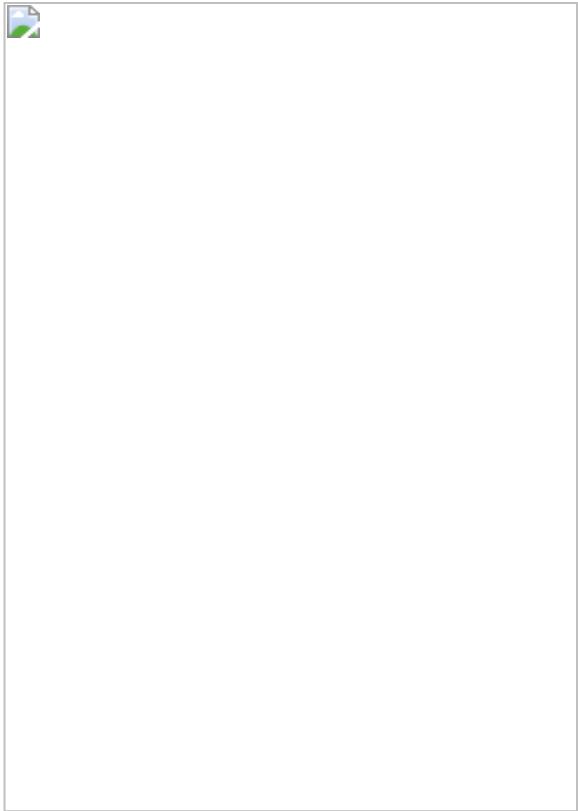
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Classical

The **Toomai String Quintet** refuses to accept the limited amount of repertoire available to its ensemble type, spotlighting inspired arrangements for five and commissioning new pieces, with a focus on Latin American composers. For an appearance in this year's Carnegie Hall Citywide series—a bountiful tradition of free concerts across the boroughs—the program boasts arrangements of Villa-Lobos's engaging “Saudades das selvas brasileiras” (“Longing for the Brazilian forests”); Tania León's punctuated “Tumbao”; Ernesto Lecuona's style-bending “Danza lucumí” from Danzas Afro-Cubanas; and more. Other Citywide performances throughout the summer range from the jazz vocalist Cécile McLorin Salvant, in Bryant Park (July 25), to the Symphonic Brass Alliance—a quintet of another kind—on Staten Island (July 26).—*Jane Bua ([Madison Square Park](#); July 9.)*

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Off Broadway



Emmanuelle Mattana's "**Trophy Boys**," a longish seventy-five minutes spent with an élite boys' high-school debate team, captures the pogo-stick bounce of teens on a deadline: given an hour to build a case that "feminism has failed women," they ricochet from idiocy ("I love women," contributes Louisa Jacobson as cool-bro Jared) to rehearsed definitions of intersectionality by team nerd Owen (Mattana herself). The director Danya Taymor flings the drag cast of non-binary and femme performers into dance breaks, seemingly so that Scott (Esco Jouléy) has an excuse to flash his impressive biceps, yearningly, at Jared. When the play gets serious, the tonal shift is nails-on-a-chalkboard painful; before then, the evening is lofted

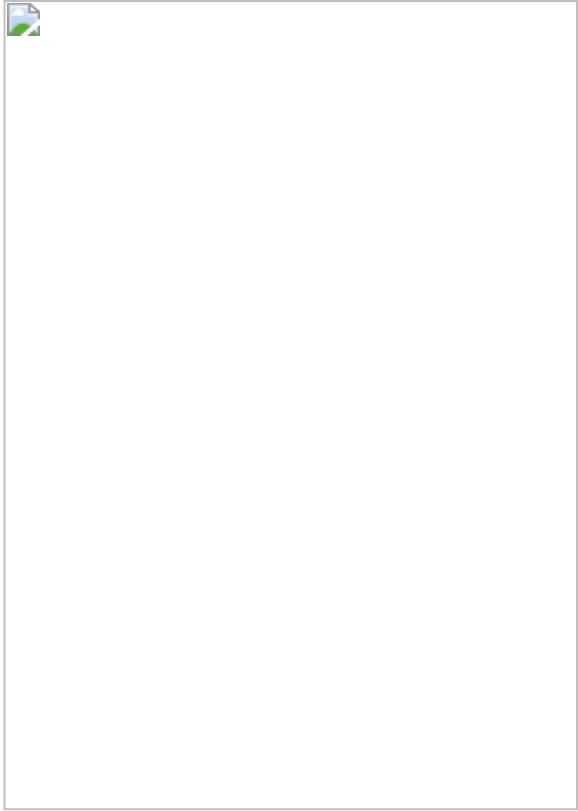
along on a delightful, somehow even more damning esprit de boy.—H.S.  
([MCC](#); through July 27.)

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Movies

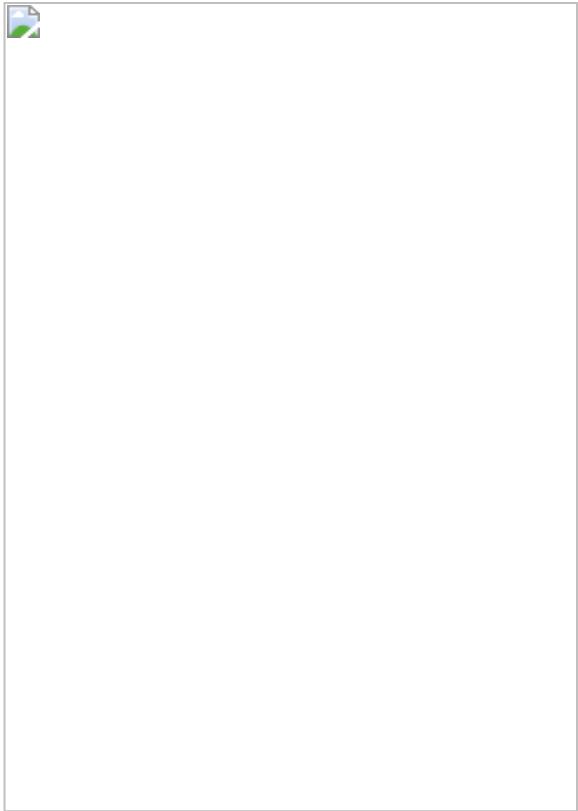
George Hickenlooper and Fax Bahr's newly restored 1991 documentary "**Hearts of Darkness**" is based mainly on footage shot and on diaries kept by Eleanor Coppola during the production, in the Philippines, of her husband Francis Ford Coppola's acclaimed but calamitous Vietnam War drama "Apocalypse Now." That colossal production, which involved the construction of villages in which to film and the onscreen involvement of the host country's armed forces, began as a lark and turned into an albatross. Coppola's struggles with the script, the weather, the cast, and his own perfectionism made the movie go over time and over budget, and the documentary unfolds depressing tales about the chaos of the shoot, which both fuelled the intensity of the performances and overwhelmed the finished film's drama.—Richard Brody ([Film Forum](#).)

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## On and Off the Avenue

*Rachel Syme on the return of jelly shoes.*



You never forget your first pair of jelly sandals. I got mine when I was thirteen, in the mid-nineties, at a discount-footwear emporium in Albuquerque, called “Shoes on a Shoestring.” Leading up to this acquisition, I’d been begging my mother for months, but kept hitting an impasse: she thought the shoes were ugly and impractical (she was not wrong!), and I insisted that my desire was not about aesthetics or comfort. It was about the fact that *everyone else had them*, which, as it turns out, is a compelling teenage-girl tactic: what mother wants to deny her child the chance to fit in, especially if that chance is on deep sale? And so, she caved, and I proudly paraded around the public pool all summer in half-price PVC platforms. They were made of lavender plastic with flecks of silver glitter, smelled like

an old inner tube, gave me oozy blisters, and, if I made the mistake of leaving them outside, the straps slightly melted. I never loved a shoe more. Now, if the [trend reporters](#) are to be [believed](#), [jellies](#) are [back](#). (This was also declared in [2017](#), then [2021](#), and again [last summer](#), when The Row released a version, so who knows?) What makes this craze different, perhaps, is that grown women are leading the charge for cheap plastic thrills, shopping their way through an intense nostalgia wave. Jellies—the name alone evokes the winsome wobbliness of childhood—are the closest thing to footwear candy: bright-colored, low-cost, empty-caloried. But the craving is insatiable. Nearly every national retailer has a take: [Old Navy](#) sells them, so does [J. Crew](#), [Target](#), [ASOS](#), [the Gap](#), [Tuckernuck](#), [Vince](#), and [Zara](#). There are jelly flats, jelly fisherman sandals, jelly Mary Janes, jelly mules, even [jelly sneakers](#). Endless choices are beckoning; will you cave?

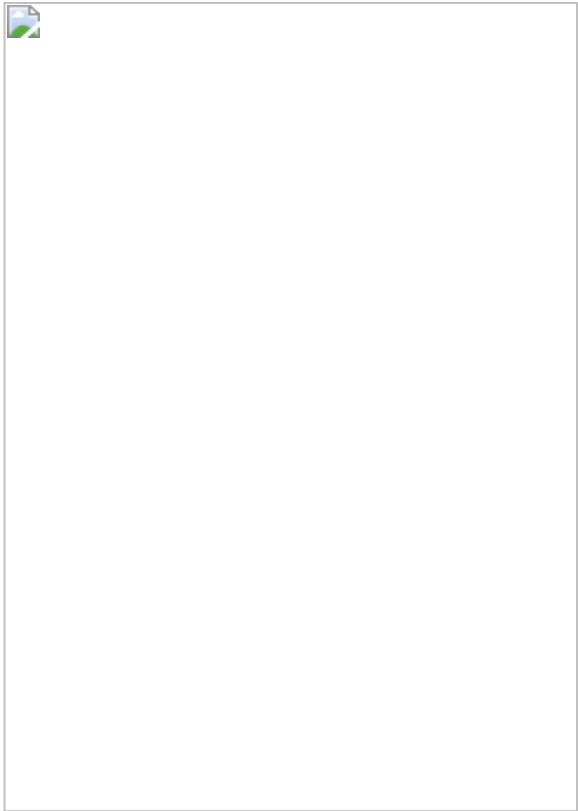
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## What to Watch

*The summer blockbuster “F1”—starring Brad Pitt as an aging Formula One racecar driver, and recently [reviewed by our film critic Justin Chang](#)—opens this weekend, so we took this opportunity to ask our colleagues to share their favorite Brad Pitt movie.*

I once was at a dinner during which guests tried to recount, from memory, the plot of “[Meet Joe Black](#).” Their recollections amounted to something like: “Brad Pitt has bad bleached hair, eats a lot of peanut butter, briefly speaks in a problematic Jamaican accent, and, also, is Death personified.” Need I say more?—*Emma Allen, humor and cartoon editor*

“[Thelma & Louise](#)” was a breakout role for Pitt, and, though it’s directed by Ridley Scott, the actor is filmed through a female gaze: he’s pure beefcake, a dreamy one-night stand. But those all-American good looks are not to be trusted.—*Michael Schulman, staff writer*



There is a scene in “[\*\*A River Runs Through It\*\*](#)” that has stayed with me for decades: Pitt’s character, a brilliant young fly fisherman destined for a tragic end, hooks a giant trout in a rushing Montana river, lets it drag him downstream, and disappears underwater, only to end up triumphant, trophy fish in hand, beaming that megawatt smile, his dimples like headlights. In voice-over, the narrator says, “At that moment, I knew, surely and clearly, that I was witnessing perfection.” Few other actors could warrant such apt appraisal.—*Rachel Syme, staff writer*

“[\*\*The Tree of Life\*\*](#)” is a truly perfect movie—the kind of film that makes you rethink your entire life—and features a perfect performance from Pitt,

who plays the strict patriarch of a suburban family in nineteen-fifties Texas. Pitt always seemed more interested in promoting “[Moneyball](#),” a movie that premiered the same year, making me wonder if he fully understood the masterpiece he’d been a part of.—*Tyler Foggatt, senior editor*

You could make a movie of Pitt eating things in movies, and nowhere is his caloric intake higher and more artful than in “[Ocean’s 11](#),” in which he almost never appears onscreen without nibbling fruit salad, lapping ice cream, slurping shrimp cocktail, or pounding a cheeseburger. I sometimes wonder if George Clooney dared him to create a character using only licks on a lollipop and hand wipes on a napkin. Even his burger-induced burp, in the final scene, is insouciant and cool. It makes you want to burp like that, too.—*Zach Helfand, staff writer*

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#### P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [\*The A.I.-fuelled hive mind\*](#)
- [\*Gull crime is on the rise\*](#)
- [\*The elusiveness of a nineties summer\*](#)

# Anne Enright's Literary Journeys to Australia and New Zealand

The Booker Prize-winning author recommends three works by writers who, thanks to geography, may have never received their due.



Not long ago, the Irish writer [Anne Enright](#) visited Australia and New Zealand. When asking for a local recommendation at the Potts Point Bookshop, in Sydney, she was encouraged to pick up Charlotte Wood's novel "[Stone Yard Devotional](#)." "That was a very good steer," Enright said. She loved the book and soon struck up a correspondence with Wood, who went on to send her a box of fiction from that part of the world. Enright has since spent time catching up on books that she suspects may have been overlooked because of their authors' distance from the centers of literary influence. "Reading is about elsewhere, and about elsewhere coming back to you and illuminating your life in some way," she said. She joined us recently to discuss a few favorite discoveries. Her remarks have been edited and condensed.

# Monkey Grip

by Helen Garner



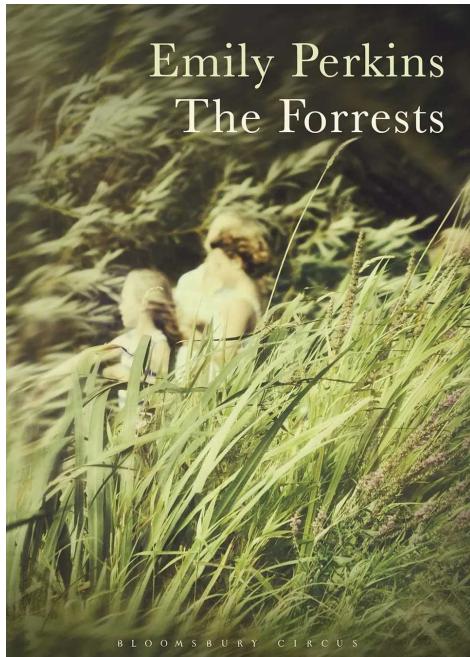
[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

As soon as I got back from Australia, I read the reissues of the [Helen Garner](#) books that came out in the U.K. preceding the publication of [her collected diaries](#). I started “Monkey Grip” not expecting to love it, because “[The Children’s Bach](#)” is the one that people go on about. But I didn’t want to put it down.

The book is about a woman, Nora, who is a single mother living in a communal house in Melbourne, as Garner did. And she is in erotic thrall to a guy named Javo, a heroin addict. The question of this book is, Is there no epiphany? Or is it all epiphany? There’s a wonderful sense of a kind of transparency of the world. The way the story progresses, it doesn’t really resolve, it doesn’t tie up the ends, but you get a real sense of someone coming through experience and being changed by it. It’s so fresh with insight and full of felt experience. And it’s written in such beautiful, supple, gleaming prose. It’s simple and clear and emotionally unafraid—it has the ability to express feeling without being mawkish or fuzzy in any way.

# The Forrests

by Emily Perkins



[Amazon](#)

This is a novel about two sisters, Dorothy and Evelyn Forrest. They have these feckless American parents who have some kind of family money for a while, which runs out. They go to live on a commune briefly, and then they settle in New Zealand.

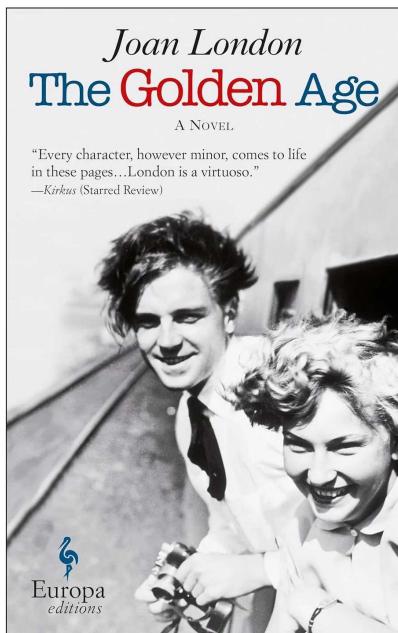
The style is extraordinarily present and alive. “The Forrests” is just good old-fashioned literary fiction, and I’m kind of nostalgic for that. Perkins is particularly brilliant on domestic moments, including the daily wrangle that is raising small children. As in “Monkey Grip,” there is a beautiful guy who is the wrong guy, and both sisters love him. Most of it is focussed on Dorothy’s life, following her from an early age. In the last chapters, Dorothy has dementia and is approaching death, and the images of her life make sense to her—they kind of cohere into a story at the end.

It reminded me a little bit of Carol Shields’s “[The Stone Diaries](#),” in the way that the story just goes through a life. There’s some integrity to that, I think.

Normally, I hate when writers kill characters off. But this time it feels right. The book is about span, about love, about love that doesn't go away. Anyone who's been in an old folks' home talking to someone who's talking to their long-dead mother will recognize that, at the end, Dorothy has a cast of characters with her, and that that's what the book has been about.

## The Golden Age

by Joan London



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

The polio epidemic and T.B., as fictional subjects, are both really interesting to me, because stories about them are often about people in hospitals, and are focussed on the drama of being outside of things. That is intensified in this book, because the characters include Hungarian Jews who have been brought to Australia after the Second World War—people who have already been displaced.

“The Golden Age” is set in Perth in the nineteen-fifties. It’s a love story about two adolescents, Frank and Elsa, falling in love in a polio hospital. I don’t know if it’s just that I’m getting sentimental in my old age, but it’s

very nice to read about characters for whom there are people they meet in early life whose importance is hard to describe, and does not go away.

Frank and his parents went through everything in the war. When the family arrives in Perth, there's this amazing sense of space, and sometimes of excitement. You just know that the sky is a bigger, stranger, bluer sky than the European one. But the parents are damaged by what they've been through, and, though they are in a new place, don't really dare to hope—and then Frank, who is their only child, gets polio.

The book has a really wise sensibility. It's generous without being over the top. I sometimes think that the colder side of literature stops at trauma, or circles inside trauma, whereas these books are about coming through. Frank and Elsa go through an immense amount of painful physiotherapy, and you see them start to walk, go home, and begin to make their own lives again. It's a very hopeful book set in extremely difficult times, and I loved it.

# The Talk of the Town

- [Trump, Congress, and the War Powers Resolution](#)
- [Jeff Bezos's Big Fat Geek Wedding](#)
- [Ready, Set, Libretto! Jesse Eisenberg Speed-Writes a Musical](#)
- [MAHAThe TV Dinner Goes MAHA](#)
- [Curtain Up at the New Delacorte](#)

Comment

# Trump, Congress, and the War Powers Resolution

How we got to a situation where a President can reasonably claim that it is lawful, without congressional approval, to bomb a country that has not attacked the U.S.

By Jeannie Suk Gersen

June 28, 2025



Two interrelated fears that have caused mounting public alarm with respect to the Trump Administration involve unchecked executive power and the erosion of the rule of law. These worries have intensified in debates about the legality of President Trump's decision to bomb Iranian nuclear facilities more than a week into Israel's war against Iran. Members of both houses of Congress had introduced resolutions to try to prevent Trump from taking such military action without its authorization. But the energy that some lawmakers had mustered for a rare attempt to assert Congress's constitutional power against Trump seemed to dissipate, at least while they expected a ceasefire between Israel and Iran to hold.

One would normally look to Supreme Court precedents to determine the constitutionality of a Presidential action. But no cases provide legal answers about the permissibility of attacks like the one on Iran. The only relevant case from the Court dates to the Civil War. It states that Congress has the sole power to “declare war,” but that, in the event that a foreign nation invades the U.S., congressional authorization is unnecessary and the President’s constitutional power as the Commander-in-Chief is sufficient to take action. The Court noted that the President cannot “initiate the war,” but it has never provided an authoritative definition of “war,” as opposed to armed conflict.

Congress has not formally declared war since the Second World War, but it has sometimes authorized Presidents to use military force in conflicts colloquially known as wars—for example, in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq. But, when Congress has given no such authorization, Presidents have often turned to the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel. O.L.C. issues opinions that are not binding law, but which attempt to present legally correct boundaries that the President should respect. Presidents have regularly acted unilaterally to enter significant hostilities on the basis of those opinions, including in the Korean War, in Kosovo, and in Libya.

Congress, in the War Powers Resolution of 1973 (enacted over the veto of President Nixon, who thought it unconstitutional), aimed to check the unilateral Presidential use of force, requiring, among other things, that the President consult Congress before sending armed forces into hostilities and obtain congressional approval to deploy troops in conflicts for more than sixty days. But both Democratic and Republican Presidents have not fully complied, and Congress hasn’t done much about it. In recent weeks, some lawmakers proposed new War Powers Resolutions to prevent Trump from attacking Iran again unless Congress authorizes it, but the House Speaker, Mike Johnson, resisted the idea and declared that the existing War Powers Resolution was an unconstitutional infringement of the President’s power as Commander-in-Chief.

During the past several decades, O.L.C. has produced opinion after opinion that has been staggeringly expansive with respect to that power. Each armed conflict that a President undertook without congressional authorization

became a precedent that further enlarged what the executive branch considered constitutionally permissible. That is how we got to a situation in which a President can reasonably claim that it is lawful, without congressional approval or even consultation, to drop bunker-busting bombs on a country that has not attacked the U.S. One might assume that Trump wouldn't care a whit about precedent, but the telltale way he described the operation in a letter to Congress days after the strikes suggested that he was closely informed by past executive practice. He alluded to key formulations from previous O.L.C. opinions, stating that his strikes "discretely targeted" Iran's nuclear facilities, were "limited in scope and purpose," and did not involve ground forces—meaning that the operation fit the criteria of what O.L.C. has said falls short of war, such that congressional authorization was unnecessary.

Trump's justifications also reflected O.L.C. precedents maintaining that a President can unilaterally use military force abroad to pursue "national interests" and "collective self-defense." The office has construed "national interests" very broadly, to include "ensuring the safe delivery of food and medicine in Somalia," under the first President Bush; "assisting an ally or strategic partner," Iraq, under President Obama; and deterring "the use and proliferation of chemical weapons," in Syria, during Trump's first term. And "collective self-defense" can mean not only repelling an imminent attack but also warding off future attacks and defending allies.

Jack Goldsmith, a foremost expert on war powers and a professor at Harvard Law School, wrote, in October, 2023, that, under the body of O.L.C. opinions, "just about any conceivable circumstance" in which a President "would think it prudent to use force in the Middle East" can be justified. Slowing down Iran's ability to create nuclear weapons would satisfy the "national interests" test as well as the "collective self-defense of our ally, Israel," as Trump put it. More recently, Goldsmith rued the troubling reality that "there is no constitutional rule that would answer the question" of whether the Iran strikes were unlawful. But some lawmakers may believe that it is time for Congress to rethink the acceptance of past executive-branch practice as a justification for future unilateral military actions. Not least because a leaked preliminary Defense Intelligence Agency report suggesting, to Trump's ire, that his attack had not "completely and totally obliterated" Iran's nuclear capabilities, if proved correct, may lead him to

feel that it is in the “national interest” to try again. (The Administration said that it might now limit the intelligence it shares with Congress.)

The courts largely stay out of war-powers debates because those debates are often deemed to entail policy questions rather than legal ones. So if Congress persists in not checking the President’s use of the military, or even believes that such checks are unconstitutional, his unilateral power will remain nearly unlimited. Before the Iran strikes, concerns about Trump and the military were focussed on his federalization of the California National Guard, which the Administration justified on the theory that violent incidents among those protesting *ICE* in Los Angeles had turned into a “rebellion” against the U.S. The Ninth Circuit found that Trump’s actions were likely consistent with a statute stipulating that the President may take such steps when “unable with the regular forces to execute the laws of the United States.”

We are learning that, at home and abroad, the ability to curb the most dangerously consequential uses of Presidential power relies mostly on the self-restraint of the Commander-in-Chief. Law gets us only so far, or, sometimes, nowhere. ♦

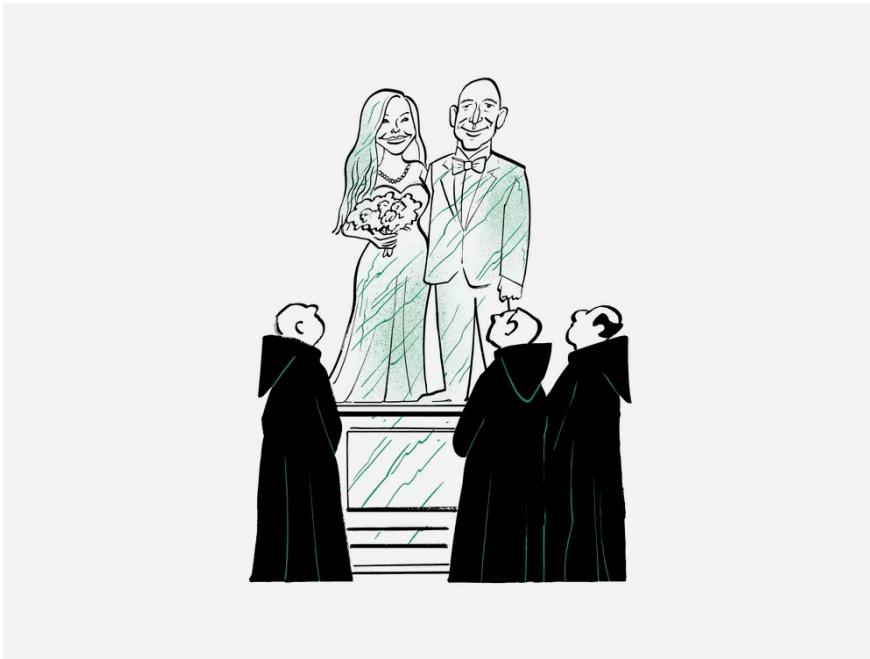
Venice Postcard

# Jeff Bezos's Big Fat Geek Wedding

The monks of Venice's San Giorgio Maggiore have hosted Cosimo de Medici in exile and a papal conclave, but they won't be throwing any rice at Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sánchez.

By Max Norman

June 27, 2025



From the bell tower on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore—just a third of a mile, but centuries away from the selfie sticks of Piazza San Marco—you can see nearly all of Venice. And all of Venice can see you. So activists discovered when, on June 12th, they ascended the structure and unfurled a huge banner bearing the word “BEZOS,” which had been crossed out with a big red “X.” The image went straight from the campanile to CNN.

Jeff Bezos was set to celebrate his lavish wedding to Lauren Sánchez at the Fondazione Cini, a cultural institution on the island which occupies a large part of a Benedictine monastery established there in 982 A.D. The bell tower still belongs to the monks, who have lived on the island for more than a thousand years. They've hosted Cosimo de Medici in exile and a papal

conclave. They've endured wars and plagues, the Fascists and the cruise ships. But the impending visit by the world's third-richest man had infuriated some of the locals, who regard the blowout as another indication that the city prioritizes rich V.I.P.s over real Venetians. "Couldn't he have chosen an isolated villa in Beverly Hills?" the monastery's abbot, Stefano Visintin, asked an Italian reporter.

The three monks who currently reside on San Giorgio didn't seem too concerned. On the Sunday before the wedding, two of them—the abbot emeritus Padre Norberto Villa and his colleague Padre Paolo Maria Censori—filed into the Chapel of the Dead to celebrate Mass. Robed in white, they walked over marble tombs containing the bones of their predecessors and got to work beneath Tintoretto's "Entombment of Christ" (1594). Was it coincidence that, after Mass, Dom Norberto, still riffing on his homily about God's power to satisfy spiritual hunger, invoked the digital networks that built Bezos's fortune and those of so many of his wedding guests?

"It's not 5G that connects us," Dom Norberto said, walking up the stairs to the refectory. "It's the network of the Holy Spirit." There, he and Dom Paolo—who have lived on San Giorgio since 2018 and 2013, respectively—were joined for lunch by Carmelo Grasso, a personable Sicilian who heads the monastery's nonprofit arm and also curates "Art Saves Art," which places contemporary works in the basilica. On a table sat a basket of walnuts and, for nutcrackers, two pairs of pliers.

"Our life is very well organized," Dom Norberto, who is seventy-six, said. The order's rule book, written by St. Benedict in the sixth century, governs everything from guests ("Welcome them as if they were Christ") to jokes ("We ban such things from all places"). Food is to be simple and indulgence shunned. "Frugality should be the rule in all circumstances," St. Benedict writes. (The Bezos wedding invitation did stipulate: "No gifts.")

The fathers would brush aside questions about Bezos renting their island, which the founder of the Cini envisioned as "one of the principal centers of Venetian spiritual life." Instead, Dom Norberto talked about his faith. "Benedictine spirituality isn't divided into parts," he said, drawing a circle in the air. "It's—"

“It’s circular, fluid,” Grasso offered.

“Yes, it’s totalizing,” Dom Norberto said. “The monastery is stable.” He punctuated the word with a slap on the table. “It’s a reality that’s stable. You know that you can find a life there, a word, a revelation, an inspiration, a dialogue.”

Lunch was served—tomato risotto followed by boiled beef with tomatoes and basil, with a side of roasted peppers, and a chocolate and Amaretto pudding for dessert. Fiorello Pellizzari, the monks’ chef since 1994, ate in his white tunic and blue apron. “They should thank their lucky stars as long as I’m here,” he said, when asked about his handiwork. Dom Norberto drank Rubidus, a red wine his brothers produce in Praglia, near Padua; the others drank a fizzy, pink Praelatus. “This wine doesn’t pair with the dishes you made,” Grasso told the chef, with a twinkle.

Coffee and a bag of chocolates were brought out, and Dom Norberto unwrapped one from its foil. “We’ve melted here,” he announced. It was decided that the chocolates would be put in the freezer. “I’m a man of emergencies,” he said, with a sigh. “I don’t solve any problems, but I’m always surrounded by emergencies.”

Like the anti-Bezos protests?

Grasso said, of the activists, “We tried to make them understand that this is a public space that can’t be privatized or occupied.” He went on, “We called the police, and they intervened. They re-established order.”

“We don’t have anything to do with this whole thing,” Dom Norberto said.

“*He’ll* decide where to celebrate and what *he’ll* do,” Grasso said. “He” was, of course, Bezos, though it might well have been God. (Later, Visintin, the abbot, said, “The personality of the man is attracting contestation. You cannot call him a private person.”)

After a pomegranate amaro, Dom Norberto pulled out a copy of “Like a Drop of Dew,” a collection of devotional poems and paintings that he published in 2009. Example: “Unlivable, for me, is the house / globalized by

the inhumane economy . . . Unthinkable is the culture / debased by dominant opinion / Look to Heaven and count the stars.”

“On eBay, you’ll find it for ten euros,” Grasso said. For a new copy, try Amazon. ♦

The Boards

# Ready, Set, Libretto! Jesse Eisenberg Speed-Writes a Musical

The “Real Pain” director teamed up with the TV writer Meredith Scardino to compete in the 24 Hour Musicals, for charity. Their muse? A West Elm lamp.

By Emily Nussbaum

June 30, 2025



Jesse Eisenberg and Meredith Scardino were trying to come up with an idea for a musical, in a conference room in midtown, one recent Sunday. Inspired by a heap of props, they tossed out vague prompts. “That van Gogh vest—I was thinking about how sad van Gogh would be if he saw that,” Scardino, a comedy writer who created the sitcom “*Girls5Eva*,” said. Eisenberg, whose most recent film is “*A Real Pain*,” yes-anded her: “Yes, like Beethoven being turned into a ringtone.”

The two had met an hour earlier, during an orientation for the 24 Hour Musicals, a yearly creative challenge that is a bit like the Pomodoro

Technique for the theatre-kid soul. The charitable event, which launched in 2006 as an offshoot of the 24 Hour Plays project, has strict rules. Each year, teams of strangers—a composer, a writer, a choreographer, and a director—create a musical at breakneck speed. Actors audition, offering up eccentric props and singing sixteen a-capella bars of their choosing. (One did an orgasmic rendition of the “Woody Woodpecker” theme.) Each team selects a cast using a draft-pick system, then pulls an all-nighter, with scripts and scores due at 6 a.m. The actors rehearse all day and perform that night for a paying audience. Then the musicals disappear, popping like soap bubbles.

Eisenberg’s family were 24 Hour regulars (his wife, Anna Strout, was this year’s honoree); Scardino has done the play version once. At Funkadelic Studios, a run-down room furnished with a drum kit and a string of bright-white Christmas lights, they quickly hit on a pragmatic idea: since the production’s sets had been donated by West Elm, their musical would be set at a West Elm outlet. Two actresses (Alexis Floyd and Isabel Hagen) would play lovers, or maybe roommates, who get into a fight there. The comedian Rachel Dratch would play a store employee—or maybe a life coach?—who breaks them up. Beyond that, the details were foggy. Should the pair be buying a new lamp?

“Maybe the lamp is magic,” Scardino said.

Eisenberg liked that, but he didn’t want literal magic. He was hunting for themes: “Like, maybe this shallow thing can actually fix the deep thing?” He slid into a deadpan, self-effacing riff: “And this will be perfect for tonight, with Israel and Palestine, tariffs, and ‘No Kings’ day. *This* can help heal our problems.”

Scardino had a better idea: Dratch’s character would trigger the breakup so that she could sell West Elm products for two different apartments.

“So this was her plan all along!” Eisenberg said.

“She’s a Willy Wonka type,” Scardino said.

Eisenberg added, “She seems benign, but she’s ultimately revealed as a trickster. We can write in isolation a bit.”

The hours ticked by. Eisenberg, who was composing the songs, wore headphones and hummed, rocking as he jammed on a keyboard, jotting lyrics on his laptop; Scardino, who had a chiller vibe and the glossy hair of Veronica Lodge, tapped out scenes, experimenting with conflicts between the roommates, who had evolved into grad students. Eisenberg completed an eerie song praising West Elm as an oracular realm, then asked Scardino to write a short monologue to set it up.

“Keep it hallowed,” he said. “Keep it sanctimonious.” Earlier, he had suggested a Brechtian frame for the musical, and he pitched a speech for Dratch’s character using the word “dialectic.”

Scardino smiled. “I’m not good at that fancy language,” she said. “I’m not good at the—”

“Pretense?” Eisenberg cracked.

By dawn, they’d cooked up a series of musical vignettes: the jazzy “West Elm” theme, a codependent duet called “We Finish Each Other,” a darker and stompier breakup reprise, and then the reveal. In the final number, Dratch’s character sang, “A duvet cover and a herringbone lamp / A picture of a haystack that’s just this side of camp / Customers come in and I give them ammunition / . . . I’m just a little lady working on commission!”

It felt miraculous, but Eisenberg, who has built a career playing self-abnegating neurotics, wasn’t sold. He insisted that his gift for songwriting had faded. “I’m objective,” he said, slumped on a bench. “I was open-minded, free! I became stifled. But that’s O.K. I got good at other things.”

When he read Scardino’s script, however, he grinned. “This is great!” he said. “Really funny!” As 6 a.m. approached, the two were trimming Dratch’s lines, worried that it was a lot to memorize.

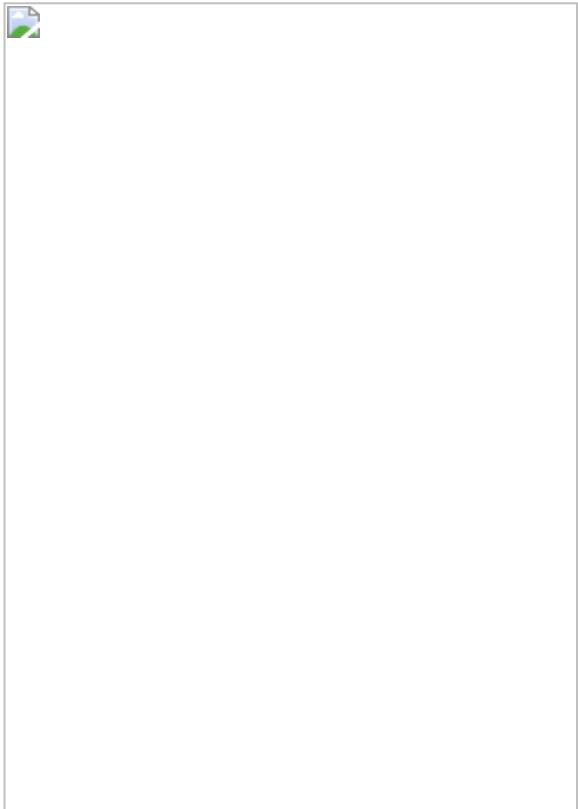
They headed out to their day jobs: Eisenberg was editing a film in which Julianne Moore plays a shy woman who busts out in community theatre; Scardino was consulting on a comedy starring Daniel Radcliffe and Tracy Morgan. But, that evening, they both got gussied up to see their baby musical, “Desire Under the Elm.” It killed. ♦

Brave New World

## The TV Dinner Goes *MAHA*

Crave New World has been testing out its new anti-woke microwave meals—no seed oils!—on hungry frat brothers.

By Sheila Yasmin Marikar June 30, 2025



Given the alternatives—farm to table, app to front door—can the microwavable meal compete? Since debuting in March, a company called

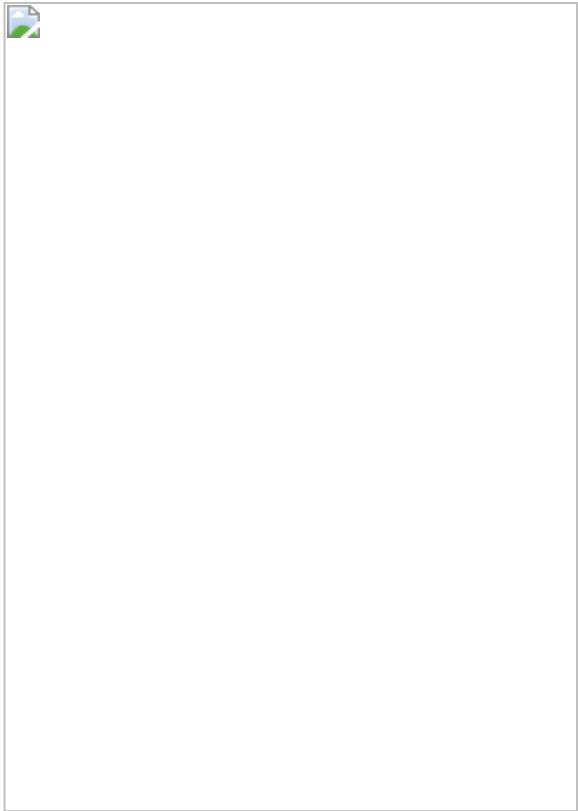
Crave New World has been hawking its next-gen TV dinners on college campuses, even brokering a deal with fraternities and sororities: free food to fuel a social-media competition (the prize: tickets to the N.C.A.A. Final Four).

“People in the house liked them so much, we almost didn’t have enough to make the TikToks,” Jacob Avram, a University of Michigan sophomore and a Delta Chi chair, said recently. He played director for his frat brothers: “Take a bite, say ‘Mmm.’ Act like it tastes good.”

“I have a lot in common with them,” Matthew Brag, the company’s founder, said of the frat guys. He was in a flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots, driving an S.U.V. up the 101 Freeway to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where he was going to pass out samples. “I didn’t eat fruits or vegetables growing up,” he said. “Stouffer’s was, like, sixty per cent of my diet.” Owing to what he calls food-related O.C.D., Brag, who is thirty-six, didn’t eat a salad until four years ago—“a Caesar, and even then it was a process,” he said. “It wasn’t like I woke up the next day saying, ‘Hand me the fucking kale.’ I woke up saying, ‘What are healthier versions of things that I’ve had for three decades?’ ”

Lasagna, mac and cheese—the sort of stick-to-your-ribs grub forsaken, Brag said, by “New Age, direct-to-consumer companies launched in the zero-interest-rate years.” A former investment banker, Brag helped Warren Buffett acquire Heinz in 2013. “Those brands,” he went on, “came with all this associated life-style virtue signalizing—‘Eat this, and also practice Transcendental Meditation,’ all this super-patronizing B.S.”

Eating healthier, in Crave’s world, means high fibre and no seed oils; the meals also avoid dairy, “an allergen,” Brag said, to capture “as wide a market as possible.” Last year, Brag spoke to dozens of consumers, focus-grouping his frozen meals. “We asked what their favorite comfort-food dishes were,” he said. “They just started crying,” reminiscing about what Mom used to make. In September, Crave will hit the shelves in a thousand Kroger grocery stores and other retailers.



On campus in Santa Barbara, having weathered some anxiety about a bake sale that had set up next to Crave's red-white-and-blue booth, Brag explained that he'd hired two young women who could pass as current coeds to hand out the samples. "They're going to do a better job than I ever could," he said.

A bro with a bike and wavy hair ambled over. "Would you like a free sample?" one of the women asked. "It's free of seed oils, high in protein, low in calories, and high in fibre."

The bro took a paper cup of mac and cheese. “I think if it had a little bit of seed oil it would be better,” he said, chewing. “Maybe some sunflower oil, or just dip it in canola.”

“Kids,” Brag said from the sidelines.

A guy carrying a skateboard sidled up to the other server, looking ambivalent.

“Just have one,” the woman said. “It’s breakfast.” (It was past noon.)

“Aw, hell,” the guy said, and theatrically took a bite of mac and cheese.

“Honest rating?” Brag asked.

“Two.”

Other testers were more expansive. “Delicate noodle taste,” a boy in a hoodie said.

“It’s a good level of spice,” a girl in sweatpants offered.

“They have such a complex language about it,” Brag said. “I’d be, like, ‘This good, this bad.’” He went on, “College is not actually my demo—it’s their parents. It was supposed to create a flywheel effect”: kid tells Mom, Mom adds to cart. “We’ve had a lot of website inquiries from parents being, like, ‘My kids keep talking about this. How can I send it to them?’ That part, at least, has worked.” ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the name of Crave New World in a subheading.*

Face-Lift Dept.

# Curtain Up at the New Delacorte

Central Park's beloved open-air stage has had some work done (eighty-five million dollars' worth). Streep and Pacino may have moved on, but the raccoons stuck around.

By Michael Schulman

June 30, 2025



In the nineteen-fifties, Joe Papp, the founder of the Public Theatre, would travel the five boroughs with a flatbed trailer hitched to a garbage truck, offering free Shakespeare to all New Yorkers. “The myth, which is sort of true, is that the truck broke down by the side of the Turtle Pond, so he just decided to squat here,” Oskar Eustis, Papp’s modern-day successor, said one afternoon in Central Park. He was standing on the site where, in 1962, Papp —after a multiyear standoff with Robert Moses (who dismissed him as “an irresponsible Commie”)—inaugurated the Delacorte, the open-air home of Shakespeare in the Park, with “*The Merchant of Venice*. ”

“He fought that fight so that we didn’t have to,” Eustis said. The amphitheatre is now an institution, where James Earl Jones, Meryl Streep,

and Al Pacino have braved rain, heat, and scene-stealing raccoons. But, a decade ago, Eustis realized that it needed a makeover. There were accessibility issues, leaking issues. “The dressing rooms, which generations of artists have been kind to us about, were wet,” he said. “The wiring conditions—now that they’re gone, I can tell you—were quite improvisatory. The relationship of electricity and water probably should not have been allowed.”

Then, there was what Patrick Willingham, the Public’s executive director, called “over-all aesthetics.” He remembered, with a shudder, overhearing a tourist in the Park wondering aloud whether the theatre was a derelict baseball stadium.

And so, last summer, the Delacorte went dark for an eighty-five-million-dollar revamp. (A more ambitious plan, adding a roof for year-round use, had been jettisoned. Eustis: “The opposition from many, many different quarters was fierce.”) Workers were now applying finishing touches, with a show-must-go-on deadline: “Twelfth Night,” starring Lupita Nyong’o, is scheduled for August. Eustis and Willingham were joined by Stephen Chu, the renovation’s lead architect, and the songwriter and performer Shaina Taub, who adapted two Shakespeare comedies for the Delacorte. They put on Public hard hats. It was rainy, but in Delacorte fashion the tour pressed on.

The group approached the rounded façade, which has been spruced up with reclaimed redwood from New York City water towers. “Oskar always wanted a redwood theatre,” Chu said.

“My Bay Area days,” Eustis mumbled, over the din of drills. A wooden canopy on the outer rim had been extended, Willingham added, providing more space for spectators to shelter from downpours, and the showmanship of a “grand entrance.” Beneath the seating area were now hard-walled operations rooms and a concessions kitchen. “This was a chain-link fence with a tarp over it,” Willingham said. “If it was raining outside, it was raining in here.” Down the hall were dressing rooms, refurbished with showers, gender-neutral bathrooms, and air-conditioning.

“Wow. Huge,” Taub said. “There will be some very happy actors.”

Willingham pointed out a cinder-block wall—“We lovingly call it the Raccoon Wall”—designed to keep the Delacorte’s furriest denizens from sneaking backstage. (Taub remembered playing a scene under blinking lights because raccoons had chewed through the wires.) There would still be no way to keep them from getting onstage. “This is their home,” Eustis said. “The one thing I promise young actors when they first come here: if they don’t know what raccoon sex sounds like, they will by the end of the summer. It does not sound consensual, but I’m assured that it is.”

They emerged into the theatre, where crews were laying down flooring on the stage for “Twelfth Night.” There were new seats, including bariatric chairs for larger playgoers, plus prime wheelchair spots. They’d also added a ramp to the stage, as well as accessible dressing rooms. “When we did ‘Richard III’ a few years ago with Ali Stroker, who’s in a chair, we had to build separate dressing rooms for her, and that felt shitty,” Eustis said.

Suddenly, a raccoon popped out from the bleachers, sauntered over the actors’ entrance tunnel, and vanished under a seat. “I was not sure he was going to make his cue!” Eustis said.

Past the stage—now waterproofed to protect the space below—the group came to what Willingham called a “Klondike village of sheds” off stage left, used for offices and wardrobe.

Eustis nodded at a picnic table and said, winking, “There are never, ever poker games that happen here.” Channelling his populist predecessor, he insisted that the facilities would retain a “communitarian feel”: “There are no star dressing rooms.” Once the show starts, the architecture would melt away. “This is an airy nothing,” he went on. He was reminded of Prospero, in Act IV of “The Tempest”: “The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself, / Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve.” ♦

# Reporting & Essays

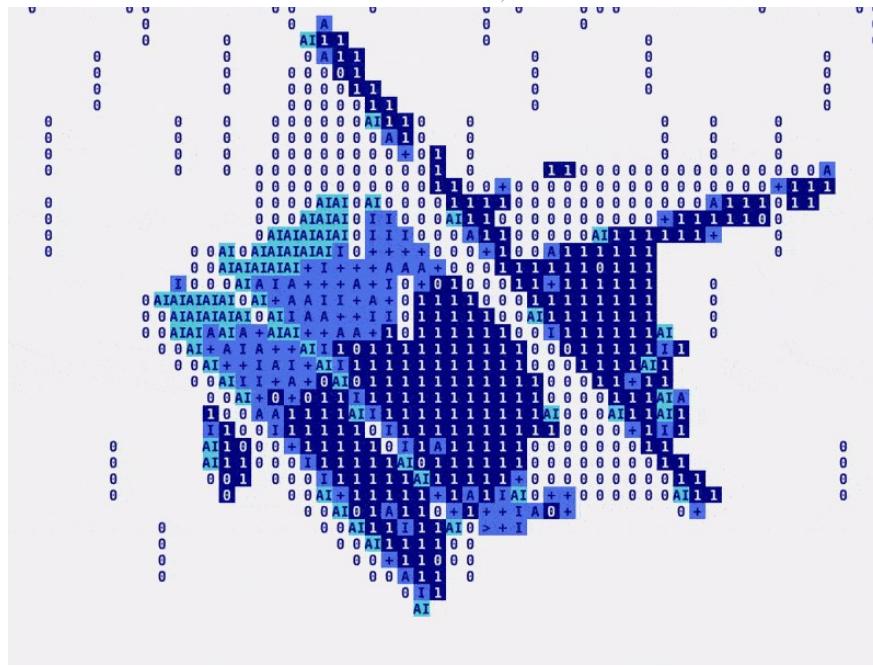
- [What Happens After A.I. Destroys College Writing?](#)
- [Finding a Family of Boys](#)
- [An Artist's View of the Riches of New York City.](#)

# What Happens After A.I. Destroys College Writing?

The demise of the English paper will end a long intellectual tradition, but it's also an opportunity to reëxamine the purpose of higher education.

By Hua Hsu

June 30, 2025



On a blustery spring Thursday, just after midterms, I went out for noodles with Alex and Eugene, two undergraduates at New York University, to talk about how they use artificial intelligence in their schoolwork. When I first met Alex, last year, he was interested in a career in the arts, and he devoted a lot of his free time to photo shoots with his friends. But he had recently decided on a more practical path: he wanted to become a C.P.A. His Thursdays were busy, and he had forty-five minutes until a study session for an accounting class. He stowed his skateboard under a bench in the restaurant and shook his laptop out of his bag, connecting to the internet before we sat down.

Alex has wavy hair and speaks with the chill, singsong cadence of someone who has spent a lot of time in the Bay Area. He and Eugene scanned the menu, and Alex said that they should get clear broth, rather than spicy, “so we can both lock in our skin care.” Weeks earlier, when I’d messaged Alex, he had said that everyone he knew used ChatGPT in some fashion, but that he used it only for organizing his notes. In person, he admitted that this wasn’t remotely accurate. “Any type of writing in life, I use A.I.,” he said. He relied on Claude for research, DeepSeek for reasoning and explanation, and Gemini for image generation. ChatGPT served more general needs. “I need A.I. to text girls,” he joked, imagining an A.I.-enhanced version of Hinge. I asked if he had used A.I. when setting up our meeting. He laughed, and then replied, “Honestly, yeah. I’m not tryin’ to type all that. Could you tell?”

OpenAI released ChatGPT on November 30, 2022. Six days later, Sam Altman, the C.E.O., announced that it had reached a million users. Large language models like ChatGPT don’t “think” in the human sense—when you ask ChatGPT a question, it draws from the data sets it has been trained on and builds an answer based on predictable word patterns. Companies had experimented with A.I.-driven chatbots for years, but most sputtered upon release; Microsoft’s 2016 experiment with a bot named Tay was shut down after sixteen hours because it began spouting racist rhetoric and denying the Holocaust. But ChatGPT seemed different. It could hold a conversation and break complex ideas down into easy-to-follow steps. Within a month, Google’s management, fearful that A.I. would have an impact on its search-engine business, declared a “code red.”

Among educators, an even greater panic arose. It was too deep into the school term to implement a coherent policy for what seemed like a homework killer: in seconds, ChatGPT could collect and summarize research and draft a full essay. Many large campuses tried to regulate ChatGPT and its eventual competitors, mostly in vain. I asked Alex to show me an example of an A.I.-produced paper. Eugene wanted to see it, too. He used a different A.I. app to help with computations for his business classes, but he had never gotten the hang of using it for writing. “I got you,” Alex told him. (All the students I spoke with are identified by pseudonyms.)

He opened Claude on his laptop. I noticed a chat that mentioned abolition. “We had to read Robert Wedderburn for a class,” he explained, referring to the nineteenth-century Jamaican abolitionist. “But, obviously, I wasn’t tryin’ to read that.” He had prompted Claude for a summary, but it was too long for him to read in the ten minutes he had before class started. He told me, “I said, ‘Turn it into concise bullet points.’ ” He then transcribed Claude’s points in his notebook, since his professor ran a screen-free classroom.

Alex searched until he found a paper for an art-history class, about a museum exhibition. He had gone to the show, taken photographs of the images and the accompanying wall text, and then uploaded them to Claude, asking it to generate a paper according to the professor’s instructions. “I’m trying to do the least work possible, because this is a class I’m not hella fucking with,” he said. After skimming the essay, he felt that the A.I. hadn’t sufficiently addressed the professor’s questions, so he refined the prompt and told it to try again. In the end, Alex’s submission received the equivalent of an A-minus. He said that he had a basic grasp of the paper’s argument, but that if the professor had asked him for specifics he’d have been “so fucked.” I read the paper over Alex’s shoulder; it was a solid imitation of how an undergraduate might describe a set of images. If this had been 2007, I wouldn’t have made much of its generic tone, or of the precise, box-ticking quality of its critical observations.

Eugene, serious and somewhat solemn, had been listening with bemusement. “I would not cut and paste like he did, because I’m a lot more paranoid,” he said. He’s a couple of years younger than Alex and was in high school when ChatGPT was released. At the time, he experimented with A.I. for essays but noticed that it made easily noticed errors. “This passed the A.I. detector?” he asked Alex.

When ChatGPT launched, instructors adopted various measures to insure that students’ work was their own. These included requiring them to share time-stamped version histories of their Google documents, and designing written assignments that had to be completed in person, over multiple sessions. But most detective work occurs after submission. Services like GPTZero, Copyleaks, and Originality.ai analyze the structure and syntax of a piece of writing and assess the likelihood that it was produced by a machine. Alex said that his art-history professor was “hella old,” and

therefore probably didn't know about such programs. We fed the paper into a few different A.I.-detection websites. One said there was a twenty-eight-per-cent chance that the paper was A.I.-generated; another put the odds at sixty-one per cent. "That's better than I expected," Eugene said.

I asked if he thought what his friend had done was cheating, and Alex interrupted: "Of course. Are you fucking kidding me?"



As we looked at Alex's laptop, I noticed that he had recently asked ChatGPT whether it was O.K. to go running in Nike Dunks. He had concluded that ChatGPT made for the best confidant. He consulted it as one might a therapist, asking for tips on dating and on how to stay motivated during dark times. His ChatGPT sidebar was an index of the highs and lows of being a young person. He admitted to me and Eugene that he'd used ChatGPT to draft his application to N.Y.U.—our lunch might never have happened had it not been for A.I. "I guess it's really dishonest, but, fuck it, I'm here," he said.

"It's cheating, but I don't think it's, like, *cheating*," Eugene said. He saw Alex's art-history essay as a victimless crime. He was just fulfilling requirements, not training to become a literary scholar.

Alex had to rush off to his study session. I told Eugene that our conversation had made me wonder about my function as a professor. He asked if I taught English, and I nodded.

“Mm, O.K.,” he said, and laughed. “So you’re, like, majorly affected.”

I teach at a small liberal-arts college, and I often joke that a student is more likely to hand in a big paper a year late (as recently happened) than to take a dishonorable shortcut. My classes are small and intimate, driven by processes and pedagogical modes, like letting awkward silences linger, that are difficult to scale. As a result, I have always had a vague sense that my students are learning *something*, even when it is hard to quantify. In the past, if I was worried that a paper had been plagiarized, I would enter a few phrases from it into a search engine and call it due diligence. But I recently began noticing that some students’ writing seemed out of synch with how they expressed themselves in the classroom. One essay felt stitched together from two minds—half of it was polished and rote, the other intimate and unfiltered. Having never articulated a policy for A.I., I took the easy way out. The student had had enough shame to write half of the essay, and I focussed my feedback on improving that part.

It’s easy to get hung up on stories of academic dishonesty. Late last year, in a survey of college and university leaders, fifty-nine per cent reported an increase in cheating, a figure that feels conservative when you talk to students. A.I. has returned us to the question of what the point of higher education is. Until we’re eighteen, we go to school because we have to, studying the Second World War and reducing fractions while undergoing a process of socialization. We’re essentially learning how to follow rules. College, however, is a choice, and it has always involved the tacit agreement that students will fulfill a set of tasks, sometimes pertaining to subjects they find pointless or impractical, and then receive some kind of credential. But even for the most mercenary of students, the pursuit of a grade or a diploma has come with an ancillary benefit. You’re being taught how to do something difficult, and maybe, along the way, you come to appreciate the process of learning. But the arrival of A.I. means that you can now bypass the process, and the difficulty, altogether.

There are no reliable figures for how many American students use A.I., just stories about how everyone is doing it. A 2024 Pew Research Center survey of students between the ages of thirteen and seventeen suggests that a quarter of teens currently use ChatGPT for schoolwork, double the figure from 2023. OpenAI recently released a report claiming that one in three college students uses its products. There's good reason to believe that these are low estimates. If you grew up Googling everything or using Grammarly to give your prose a professional gloss, it isn't far-fetched to regard A.I. as just another productivity tool. "I see it as no different from Google," Eugene said. "I use it for the same kind of purpose."

Being a student is about testing boundaries and staying one step ahead of the rules. While administrators and educators have been debating new definitions for cheating and discussing the mechanics of surveillance, students have been embracing the possibilities of A.I. A few months after the release of ChatGPT, a Harvard undergraduate got approval to conduct an experiment in which it wrote papers that had been assigned in seven courses. The A.I. skated by with a 3.57 G.P.A., a little below the school's average. Upstart companies introduced products that specialized in "humanizing" A.I.-generated writing, and TikTok influencers began coaching their audiences on how to avoid detection.

Unable to keep pace, academic administrations largely stopped trying to control students' use of artificial intelligence and adopted an attitude of hopeful resignation, encouraging teachers to explore the practical, pedagogical applications of A.I. In certain fields, this wasn't a huge stretch. Studies show that A.I. is particularly effective in helping non-native speakers acclimate to college-level writing in English. In some *STEM* classes, using generative A.I. as a tool is acceptable. Alex and Eugene told me that their accounting professor encouraged them to take advantage of free offers on new A.I. products available only to undergraduates, as companies competed for student loyalty throughout the spring. In May, OpenAI announced ChatGPT Edu, a product specifically marketed for educational use, after schools including Oxford University, Arizona State University, and the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Business experimented with incorporating A.I. into their curricula. This month, the company detailed plans to integrate ChatGPT into every

dimension of campus life, with students receiving “personalized” A.I. accounts to accompany them throughout their years in college.

But for English departments, and for college writing in general, the arrival of A.I. has been more vexed. Why bother teaching writing now? The future of the midterm essay may be a quaint worry compared with larger questions about the ramifications of artificial intelligence, such as its effect on the environment, or the automation of jobs. And yet has there ever been a time in human history when writing was so important to the average person? E-mails, texts, social-media posts, angry missives in comments sections, customer-service chats—let alone one’s actual work. The way we write shapes our thinking. We process the world through the composition of text dozens of times a day, in what the literary scholar Deborah Brandt calls our era of “mass writing.” It’s possible that the ability to write original and interesting sentences will become only more important in a future where everyone has access to the same A.I. assistants.

Corey Robin, a writer and a professor of political science at Brooklyn College, read the early stories about ChatGPT with skepticism. Then his daughter, a sophomore in high school at the time, used it to produce an essay that was about as good as those his undergraduates wrote after a semester of work. He decided to stop assigning take-home essays. For the first time in his thirty years of teaching, he administered in-class exams.

Robin told me he finds many of the steps that universities have taken to combat A.I. essays to be “hand-holding that’s not leading people anywhere.” He has become a believer in the passage-identification blue-book exam, in which students name and contextualize excerpts of what they’ve read for class. “Know the text and write about it intelligently,” he said. “That was a way of honoring their autonomy without being a cop.”

His daughter, who is now a senior, complains that her teachers rarely assign full books. And Robin has noticed that college students are more comfortable with excerpts than with entire articles, and prefer short stories to novels. “I don’t get the sense they have the kind of literary or cultural mastery that used to be the assumption upon which we assigned papers,” he said. One study, published last year, found that fifty-eight per cent of students at two Midwestern universities had so much trouble interpreting the

opening paragraphs of “Bleak House,” by Charles Dickens, that “they would not be able to read the novel on their own.” And these were English majors.

The return to pen and paper has been a common response to A.I. among professors, with sales of blue books rising significantly at certain universities in the past two years. Siva Vaidhyanathan, a professor of media studies at the University of Virginia, grew dispirited after some students submitted what he suspected was A.I.-generated work for an assignment on how the school’s honor code should view A.I.-generated work. He, too, has decided to return to blue books, and is pondering the logistics of oral exams. “Maybe we go all the way back to 450 B.C.,” he told me.

But other professors have renewed their emphasis on getting students to see the value of process. Dan Melzer, the director of the first-year composition program at the University of California, Davis, recalled that “everyone was in a panic” when ChatGPT first hit. Melzer’s job is to think about how writing functions across the curriculum so that all students, from prospective scientists to future lawyers, get a chance to hone their prose. Consequently, he has an accommodating view of how norms around communication have changed, especially in the internet age. He was sympathetic to kids who viewed some of their assignments as dull and mechanical and turned to ChatGPT to expedite the process. He called the five-paragraph essay—the classic “hamburger” structure, consisting of an introduction, three supporting body paragraphs, and a conclusion—“outdated,” having descended from élitist traditions.

Melzer believes that some students loathe writing because of how it’s been taught, particularly in the past twenty-five years. The No Child Left Behind Act, from 2002, instituted standards-based reforms across all public schools, resulting in generations of students being taught to write according to rigid testing rubrics. As one teacher wrote in the *Washington Post* in 2013, students excelled when they mastered a form of “bad writing.” Melzer has designed workshops that treat writing as a deliberative, iterative process involving drafting, feedback (from peers and also from ChatGPT), and revision.



"If you assign a generic essay topic and don't engage in any process, and you just collect it a month later, it's almost like you're creating an environment tailored to crime," he said. "You're encouraging crime in your community!"

I found Melzer's pedagogical approach inspiring; I instantly felt bad for routinely breaking my class into small groups so that they could "workshop" their essays, as though the meaning of this verb were intuitively clear. But, as a student, I'd have found Melzer's focus on process tedious—it requires a measure of faith that all the work will pay off in the end. Writing is hard, regardless of whether it's a five-paragraph essay or a haiku, and it's natural, especially when you're a college student, to want to avoid hard work—this is why classes like Melzer's are compulsory. "You can imagine that students really want to be there," he joked.

College is all about opportunity costs. One way of viewing A.I. is as an intervention in how people choose to spend their time. In the early nineteen-sixties, college students spent an estimated twenty-four hours a week on schoolwork. Today, that figure is about fifteen, a sign, to critics of contemporary higher education, that young people are beneficiaries of grade inflation—in a survey conducted by the *Harvard Crimson*, nearly eighty per cent of the class of 2024 reported a G.P.A. of 3.7 or higher—and lack the

diligence of their forebears. I don't know how many hours I spent on schoolwork in the late nineties, when I was in college, but I recall feeling that there was never enough time. I suspect that, even if today's students spend less time studying, they don't feel significantly less stressed. It's the nature of campus life that everyone assimilates into a culture of busyness, and a lot of that anxiety has been shifted to extracurricular or pre-professional pursuits. A dean at Harvard remarked that students feel compelled to find distinction outside the classroom because they are largely indistinguishable within it.

Eddie, a sociology major at Long Beach State, is older than most of his classmates. He graduated high school in 2010, and worked full time while attending a community college. "I've gone through a lot to be at school," he told me. "I want to learn as much as I can." ChatGPT, which his therapist recommended to him, was ubiquitous at Long Beach even before the California State University system, which Long Beach is a part of, announced a partnership with OpenAI, giving its four hundred and sixty thousand students access to ChatGPT Edu. "I was a little suspicious of how convenient it was," Eddie said. "It seemed to know a lot, in a way that seemed so *human*."

He told me that he used A.I. "as a brainstorm" but never for writing itself. "I limit myself, for sure." Eddie works for Los Angeles County, and he was talking to me during a break. He admitted that, when he was pressed for time, he would sometimes use ChatGPT for quizzes. "I don't know if I'm telling myself a lie," he said. "I've given myself opportunities to do things ethically, but if I'm rushing to work I don't feel bad about that," particularly for courses outside his major.

I recognized Eddie's conflict. I've used ChatGPT a handful of times, and on one occasion it accomplished a scheduling task so quickly that I began to understand the intoxication of hyper-efficiency. I've felt the need to stop myself from indulging in idle queries. Almost all the students I interviewed in the past few months described the same trajectory: from using A.I. to assist with organizing their thoughts to off-loading their thinking altogether. For some, it became something akin to social media, constantly open in the corner of the screen, a portal for distraction. This wasn't like paying someone to write a paper for you—there was no social friction, no aura of

illicit activity. Nor did it feel like sharing notes, or like passing off what you'd read in CliffsNotes or SparkNotes as your own analysis. There was no real time to reflect on questions of originality or honesty—the student basically became a project manager. And for students who use it the way Eddie did, as a kind of sounding board, there's no clear threshold where the work ceases to be an original piece of thinking. In April, Anthropic, the company behind Claude, released a report drawn from a million anonymized student conversations with its chatbots. It suggested that more than half of user interactions could be classified as “collaborative,” involving a dialogue between student and A.I. (Presumably, the rest of the interactions were more extractive.)

May, a sophomore at Georgetown, was initially resistant to using ChatGPT. “I don’t know if it was an ethics thing,” she said. “I just thought I could do the assignment better, and it wasn’t worth the time being saved.” But she began using it to proofread her essays, and then to generate cover letters, and now she uses it for “pretty much all” her classes. “I don’t think it’s made me a worse writer,” she said. “It’s perhaps made me a less patient writer. I used to spend hours writing essays, nitpicking over my wording, really thinking about how to phrase things.” College had made her reflect on her experience at an extremely competitive high school, where she had received top grades but retained very little knowledge. As a result, she was the rare student who found college somewhat relaxed. ChatGPT helped her breeze through busywork and deepen her engagement with the courses she felt passionate about. “I was trying to think, Where’s all this time going?” she said. I had never envied a college student until she told me the answer: “I sleep more now.”

Harry Stecopoulos oversees the University of Iowa’s English department, which has more than eight hundred majors. On the first day of his introductory course, he asks students to write by hand a two-hundred-word analysis of the opening paragraph of Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man.” There are always a few grumbles, and students have occasionally walked out. “I like the exercise as a tone-setter, because it stresses their writing,” he told me.

The return of blue-book exams might disadvantage students who were encouraged to master typing at a young age. Once you’ve grown accustomed

to the smooth rhythms of typing, reverting to a pen and paper can feel stifling. But neuroscientists have found that the “embodied experience” of writing by hand taps into parts of the brain that typing does not. Being able to write one way—even if it’s more efficient—doesn’t make the other way obsolete. There’s something lofty about Stecopoulos’s opening-day exercise. But there’s another reason for it: the handwritten paragraph also begins a paper trail, attesting to voice and style, that a teaching assistant can consult if a suspicious paper is submitted.

Kevin, a third-year student at Syracuse University, recalled that, on the first day of a class, the professor had asked everyone to compose some thoughts by hand. “That brought a smile to my face,” Kevin said. “The other kids are scratching their necks and sweating, and I’m, like, This is kind of nice.”

Kevin had worked as a teaching assistant for a mandatory course that first-year students take to acclimate to campus life. Writing assignments involved basic questions about students’ backgrounds, he told me, but they often used A.I. anyway. “I was very disturbed,” he said. He occasionally uses A.I. to help with translations for his advanced Arabic course, but he’s come to look down on those who rely heavily on it. “They almost forget that they have the ability to think,” he said. Like many former holdouts, Kevin felt that his judicious use of A.I. was more defensible than his peers’ use of it.

As ChatGPT begins to sound more human, will we reconsider what it means to sound like ourselves? Kevin and some of his friends pride themselves on having an ear attuned to A.I.-generated text. The hallmarks, he said, include a preponderance of em dashes and a voice that feels blandly objective. An acquaintance had run an essay that she had written herself through a detector, because she worried that she was starting to phrase things like ChatGPT did. He read her essay: “I realized, like, It does kind of sound like ChatGPT. It was freaking me out a little bit.”

A particularly disarming aspect of ChatGPT is that, if you point out a mistake, it communicates in the backpedalling tone of a contrite student. (“Apologies for the earlier confusion. . . .”) Its mistakes are often referred to as hallucinations, a description that seems to anthropomorphize A.I., conjuring a vision of a sleep-deprived assistant. Some professors told me that they had students fact-check ChatGPT’s work, as a way of discussing

the importance of original research and of showing the machine's fallibility. Hallucination rates have grown worse for most A.I.s, with no single reason for the increase. As a researcher told the *Times*, "We still don't know how these models work exactly."

But many students claim to be unbothered by A.I.'s mistakes. They appear nonchalant about the question of achievement, and even dissociated from their work, since it is only notionally theirs. Joseph, a Division I athlete at a Big Ten school, told me that he saw no issue with using ChatGPT for his classes, but he did make one exception: he wanted to experience his African-literature course "authentically," because it involved his heritage. Alex, the N.Y.U. student, said that if one of his A.I. papers received a subpar grade his disappointment would be focussed on the fact that he'd spent twenty dollars on his subscription. August, a sophomore at Columbia studying computer science, told me about a class where she was required to compose a short lecture on a topic of her choosing. "It was a class where everyone was guaranteed an A, so I just put it in and I maybe edited like two words and submitted it," she said. Her professor identified her essay as exemplary work, and she was asked to read from it to a class of two hundred students. "I was a little nervous," she said. But then she realized, "If they don't like it, it wasn't me who wrote it, you know?"

Kevin, by contrast, desired a more general kind of moral distinction. I asked if he would be bothered to receive a lower grade on an essay than a classmate who'd used ChatGPT. "Part of me is able to compartmentalize and not be pissed about it," he said. "I developed myself as a human. I can have a superiority complex about it. I learned more." He smiled. But then he continued, "Part of me can also be, like, This is so unfair. I would have loved to hang out with my friends more. What did I gain? I made my life harder for all that time."

In my conversations, just as college students invariably thought of ChatGPT as merely another tool, people older than forty focussed on its effects, drawing a comparison to G.P.S. and the erosion of our relationship to space. The London cabdrivers rigorously trained in "the knowledge" famously developed abnormally large posterior hippocampi, the part of the brain crucial for long-term memory and spatial awareness. And yet, in the end, most people would probably rather have swifter travel than sharper

memories. What is worth preserving, and what do we feel comfortable off-loading in the name of efficiency?

What if we take seriously the idea that A.I. assistance can accelerate learning—that students today are arriving at their destinations faster? In 2023, researchers at Harvard introduced a self-paced A.I. tutor in a popular physics course. Students who used the A.I. tutor reported higher levels of engagement and motivation and did better on a test than those who were learning from a professor. May, the Georgetown student, told me that she often has ChatGPT produce extra practice questions when she's studying for a test. Could A.I. be here not to destroy education but to revolutionize it? Barry Lam teaches in the philosophy department at the University of California, Riverside, and hosts a popular podcast, Hi-Phi Nation, which applies philosophical modes of inquiry to everyday topics. He began wondering what it would mean for A.I. to actually be a productivity tool. He spoke to me from the podcast studio he built in his shed. "Now students are able to generate in thirty seconds what used to take me a week," he said. He compared education to carpentry, one of his many hobbies. Could you skip to using power tools without learning how to saw by hand? If students were learning things faster, then it stood to reason that Lam could assign them "something very hard." He wanted to test this theory, so for final exams he gave his undergraduates a Ph.D.-level question involving denotative language and the German logician Gottlob Frege which was, frankly, beyond me.

"They fucking failed it miserably," he said. He adjusted his grading curve accordingly.



Lam doesn't find the use of A.I. morally indefensible. "It's not plagiarism in the cut-and-paste sense," he argued, because there's technically no original version. Rather, he finds it a potential waste of everyone's time. At the start of the semester, he has told students, "If you're gonna just turn in a paper that's ChatGPT-generated, then I will grade all your work by ChatGPT and we can all go to the beach."

Nobody gets into teaching because he loves grading papers. I talked to one professor who rhapsodized about how much more his students were learning now that he'd replaced essays with short exams. I asked if he missed marking up essays. He laughed and said, "No comment." An undergraduate at Northeastern University recently accused a professor of using A.I. to create course materials; she filed a formal complaint with the school, requesting a refund for some of her tuition. The dustup laid bare the tension between why many people go to college and why professors teach. Students are raised to understand achievement as something discrete and measurable, but when they arrive at college there are people like me, imploring them to wrestle with difficulty and abstraction. Worse yet, they are told that grades don't matter as much as they did when they were trying to get into college—only, by this point, students are wired to find the most efficient path possible to good marks.

As the craft of writing is degraded by A.I., original writing has become a valuable resource for training language models. Earlier this year, a company called Catalyst Research Alliance advertised “academic speech data and student papers” from two research studies run in the late nineties and mid-two-thousands at the University of Michigan. The school asked the company to halt its work—the data was available for free to academics anyway—and a university spokesperson said that student data “was not and has never been for sale.” But the situation did lead many people to wonder whether institutions would begin viewing original student work as a potential revenue stream.

According to a recent study from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, human intellect has declined since 2012. An assessment of tens of thousands of adults in nearly thirty countries showed an over-all decade-long drop in test scores for math and for reading comprehension. Andreas Schleicher, the director for education and skills at the O.E.C.D., hypothesized that the way we consume information today—often through short social-media posts—has something to do with the decline in literacy. (One of Europe’s top performers in the assessment was Estonia, which recently announced that it will bring A.I. to some high-school students in the next few years, sidelining written essays and rote homework exercises in favor of self-directed learning and oral exams.)

Lam, the philosophy professor, used to be a colleague of mine, and for a brief time we were also neighbors. I’d occasionally look out the window and see him building a fence, or gardening. He’s an avid amateur cook, guitarist, and carpenter, and he remains convinced that there is value to learning how to do things the annoying, old-fashioned, and—as he puts it—“artisanal” way. He told me that his wife, Shanna Andrawis, who has been a high-school teacher since 2008, frequently disagreed with his cavalier methods for dealing with large learning models. Andrawis argues that dishonesty has always been an issue. “We are trying to mass educate,” she said, meaning there’s less room to be precious about the pedagogical process. “I don’t have conversations with students about ‘artisanal’ writing. But I have conversations with them about our relationship. Respect me enough to give me your authentic voice, even if you don’t think it’s that great. It’s O.K. I want to meet you where you’re at.”

Ultimately, Andrawis was less fearful of ChatGPT than of the broader conditions of being young these days. Her students have grown increasingly introverted, staring at their phones with little desire to “practice getting over that awkwardness” that defines teen life, as she put it. A.I. might contribute to this deterioration, but it isn’t solely to blame. It’s “a little cherry on top of an already really bad ice-cream sundae,” she said.

When the school year began, my feelings about ChatGPT were somewhere between disappointment and disdain, focussed mainly on students. But, as the weeks went by, my sense of what should be done and who was at fault grew hazier. Eliminating core requirements, rethinking G.P.A., teaching A.I. skepticism—none of the potential fixes could turn back the preconditions of American youth. Professors can reconceive of the classroom, but there is only so much we control. I lacked faith that educational institutions would ever regard new technologies as anything but inevitable. Colleges and universities, many of which had tried to curb A.I. use just a few semesters ago, rushed to partner with companies like OpenAI and Anthropic, deeming a product that didn’t exist four years ago essential to the future of school.

Except for a year spent bumming around my home town, I’ve basically been on a campus for the past thirty years. Students these days view college as consumers, in ways that never would have occurred to me when I was their age. They’ve grown up at a time when society values high-speed takes, not the slow deliberation of critical thinking. Although I’ve empathized with my students’ various mini-dramas, I rarely project myself into their lives. I notice them noticing one another, and I let the mysteries of their lives go. Their pressures are so different from the ones I felt as a student. Although I envy their metabolisms, I would not wish for their sense of horizons.

Education, particularly in the humanities, rests on a belief that, alongside the practical things students might retain, some arcane idea mentioned in passing might take root in their mind, blossoming years in the future. A.I. allows any of us to feel like an expert, but it is risk, doubt, and failure that make us human. I often tell my students that this is the last time in their lives that someone will have to read something they write, so they might as well tell me what they actually think.

Despite all the current hysteria around students cheating, they aren't the ones to blame. They did not lobby for the introduction of laptops when they were in elementary school, and it's not their fault that they had to go to school on Zoom during the pandemic. They didn't create the A.I. tools, nor were they at the forefront of hyping technological innovation. They were just early adopters, trying to outwit the system at a time when doing so has never been so easy. And they have no more control than the rest of us. Perhaps they sense this powerlessness even more acutely than I do. One moment, they are being told to learn to code; the next, it turns out employers are looking for the kind of "soft skills" one might learn as an English or a philosophy major. In February, a labor report from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York reported that computer-science majors had a higher unemployment rate than ethnic-studies majors did—the result, some believed, of A.I. automating entry-level coding jobs.

None of the students I spoke with seemed lazy or passive. Alex and Eugene, the N.Y.U. students, worked hard—but part of their effort went to editing out anything in their college experiences that felt extraneous. They were radically resourceful.

When classes were over and students were moving into their summer housing, I e-mailed with Alex, who was settling in in the East Village. He'd just finished his finals, and estimated that he'd spent between thirty minutes and an hour composing two papers for his humanities classes. Without the assistance of Claude, it might have taken him around eight or nine hours. "I didn't retain anything," he wrote. "I couldn't tell you the thesis for either paper hahahaha." He received an A-minus and a B-plus. ♦

## Personal History

# Finding a Family of Boys

Leaving Brooklyn for a new life as a college student in Manhattan was in itself an act of becoming.

By Hilton Als

June 30, 2025



*I-love-you* has no usages. Like a child's word, it into no social constraint; it can be a sublime, trivial word, it can be an erotic, pornographic is a socially irresponsible word.

In 1981, I was a student of art history at Columbia University. I was twenty-one and worked to support myself at a variety of jobs. Columbia was an all-boys school then. Old oak desks and a million cigarettes. (You could smoke in class.) I didn't know much about the university—not even that it was an all-boys university—until I got there. It was a new world for me. I had lived most of my life until then in a family of girls. Now there was a family of boys.

I didn't live on campus. I lived with my aunt, my uncle, and an adored older female cousin in Brooklyn. At around that time, Our Ma, inspired by her sister and eldest daughter, was planning on moving from Brooklyn, where I grew up, to Atlanta. A new start. She was just over fifty then. She made it clear that there were certain rules I had to follow if I was going to stay with

my aunt's family. I had to pay rent, twenty dollars a week. "Nobody lives for free," Our Ma said.

At first, my aunt objected to the mandate: I was just a schoolkid. But Our Ma was adamant; it was either that or I would come and live with her and my little brother in Georgia. There were several reasons that my mother put her foot down. One was Daddy. As long as she'd known him, he'd lived rent-free with his mother, whose economic smarts my mother revered. "Mrs. Williams could throw a handful of peas in a pot and feed a whole army," Our Ma said. Mrs. Williams had a husband and two other children—two girls—but, for her, Daddy always came first.

Our Ma did not want me to be some version of my father, a guy who could love women less and get more from them because of that—not if she had anything to do with it. And she did have something to do with it, with everything. She was raised in a society—a West Indian society—that did not put much of a premium on women's bodies, where any kind of intimacy was a joke. People made fun of you for expressing longing, or, if you were a man, for being involved with just one woman, or for showing affection to your children.

For a long stretch of his life, Daddy had two women to nurture him—Mrs. Williams and my mother—but Our Ma had only one enormous love: others. She believed in community, and wanted us all to belong to it, even Daddy, despite the fact that he was living at his mother's house and had been born into a family that laughed at her goodness.

Our Ma may have had a devalued body, in the world she came from, but she fought for and retained her right to put her foot down. And, when she put it down, the world was different. After she put her foot down, I went to school and went to work. Every week I paid my aunt rent. In my room in her house, I had a desk, piles of books, and a typewriter. I tried to write. I was going to write.

Life at Columbia was strange. All those boys. I could smell them. So many of them in their bodies, careless with their scent. They lifted their arms up and, kingdom come, the air was different. The gay ones were less apt to reek. That would be impolite, and already life had proved to be impolite,

having produced queer bodies in 1981, for instance. We gay boys were only a decade or so removed from Stonewall and two decades removed from being blackmailed or jailed for “solicitation,” so caution and madness were in our bones. Sometimes we committed great acts of love or rage in private, while the only public trespass we allowed ourselves was to throw glittering hard words into the air, hoping they would not rebound and chop us off at the knees.

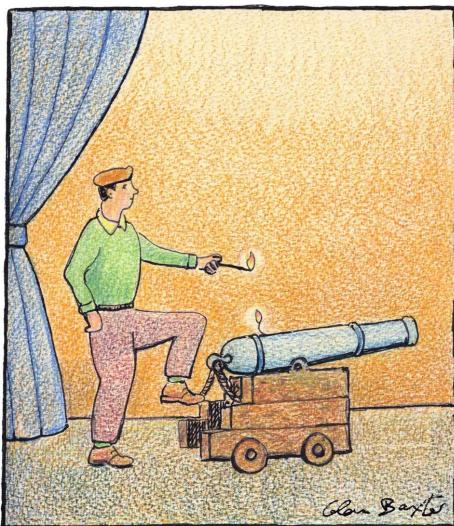
I had never seen so many rich, or rich to me, people in one place before. I was amazed, first, by their hair. For years, Our Ma had made her, and our, living as a hairdresser. Her clients were all Black women. So many words and worries in their hair. The Columbia boys’ hair was so lustrous and well nourished. They had good teeth and healthy bodies and strong nipples that were on display on sunny days when, sitting on the campus steps, they removed their shirts, and not one of them, among the straight ones, at least, looked ashamed. They’d grown up playing tennis or squash in Connecticut, or Rhode Island, or farther north. In the summer, they went to the Cape. Their families knew one another and this was a source of casual pride among them, not of bitter jokes or distancing resentments.

Manhattan had always belonged to my father. He used to take me and my little brother to foreign movies and then to eat foreign food. He was deeply unconcerned about the staring white people wondering what we were doing in a tearoom, say, on the Upper East Side. We ate blintzes in Germantown, and caught Liv Ullmann in “The Emigrants.” Then Daddy took us home to Crown Heights, and, for a while, it felt like Sweden.

At Columbia, I didn’t have to pretend that I was somewhere else; I *was* somewhere else. All of it—the grand buildings, the wave upon wave of stone steps—was like a stage set for becoming. But becoming what? Daddy had given me Manhattan, and now I took to it without him. He had no active role in this New York—in my New York—and perhaps that in itself was an act of becoming for me.

Everything was so queer, or I wanted it to be. I don’t mean queer like camp—a loyal adherence to the artificial—but queer like my mind, which was interested in all that was misshapen. In this new, unfamiliar place, I felt freer to go on about the things that excited me, just as I had with my older sisters

when I was a boy, before they put an end to all that—because what was I turning into, some kind of faggot?



MY TASK WAS TO DEAL WITH ALL  
THOSE TRYING TO BE FRIENDS  
WITH UNCLE DEREK ON HIS  
FACEBOOK PAGE

In my family, I never answered the what-are-you-some-kind-of-faggot question, because I couldn't trust anyone with the answer. There's not a fag who grew up in East New York or Crown Heights in the nineteen-sixties and seventies who would have trusted the inhabitants of those worlds with the knowledge that he was gay.

In the West Indian community, Our Ma knew one sort-of-out guy. He never said that he was gay, but he communicated it through his fastidious love of women and the fact that he lived in Manhattan. He loved my mother—they were distant cousins, I think—and when he came to visit I heard family members, neighbors, and the like refer to him as an “auntie man.” To them, he wasn’t just a queen. He was every queen they had ever known and despised, been disgusted and amused by, secretly had and then spat upon, dismissed and jeered at. Because that’s how prejudice works: you are one thing that represents all bad things to others. Didn’t the elders describe racism that way? But gay was not a skin color. It was a state of being, a consciousness that took your race—or anything else that life had given you—and made it different. My ability, as an auntie man, to love those who

considered me a pariah, or some kind of wicked novelty act, told me that fags were made of different stuff—but what stuff?

It happened the way love happens—while you’re least expecting it though wanting everything. I had been at Columbia for a semester or so when I fell in with a small group of guys, most of whom, like me, were studying art history. The most interesting of them was from Orange County, California, the son of a single mother who worked as a nurse at Disneyland. He had pale skin that flushed easily, curly dark-blond hair, and beautiful hands—thick Daddy hands, but gestural, femme like that. He was a brilliant reader of philosophy, and made me want to read more seriously and widely.

[Roland Barthes](#) had landed with a boom on Columbia’s academic planet years before and he was beloved by that group of guys. My smart friend read him and imitated his aphoristic style—a new way of being an “author.” But, for me, Barthes’s writing was like the finest embroidery stitched in the air: only the author could see it. And what did all this talk about the “other” actually mean?

One reason those queens loved Barthes, I think, without entirely understanding structuralism as a discipline, was that he was so elusive about being queer. They were, too. Despite Stonewall and other political advances, my new friends were barely out of the closet (and some never left it). They had grown up in parts of America that, in 1981, were still ideologically 1956.

We had an intense philological relationship, my blond friend and I. I remember how delicately he handled the paperback copy of [Toni Morrison’s “Sula”](#) I lent him, and how interested he was to hear about my father and how he had been spoiled by his mother, just as Milkman Dead had in Morrison’s [“Song of Solomon.”](#)

We passed books back and forth, back and forth, and the words in them made the ground more solid beneath our feet. I kept trying with Barthes because I loved my friend and found something I recognized in the emotional language in [“Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes”](#) and [“A Lover’s Discourse.”](#) Actually, in the former book, it was really just a photograph and the line introducing it that got me. The picture, black-and-white, showed a

young Barthes being held in his mother's arms. He was too big to be carried, but his mother managed him with no sign of complaint or surprise. The four words—"The demand for love"—expressed a world: this was me, and all of us, with Our Mas. What soul doesn't want to be carried, held, well past the carrying age?

In "A Lover's Discourse," I was taken by Barthes's interpretation of the "cry of love": "I want to understand myself, to make myself understood, make myself known, be embraced; I want someone to take me with him." Indeed, I wanted my bookish friend to take me into his mind, to discover stories with me, to elevate me with his thought, and to join me in my disco of community. In that imagined disco, there was a select crowd, largely queer. The hall was small, and honestly what it looked like was a home. At my disco of community, the d.j. played Chaka Khan, [Prince](#), [Philip Glass](#)'s "Einstein on the Beach," Jane Olivor singing "Some Enchanted Evening," the Voices of East Harlem declaring, "Right On Be Free," [Dionne Warwick](#) asking us to take a "Message to Michael," [Bowie](#), of course, singing "Station to Station," Labelle describing how "Going Down Makes Me Shiver," and Elton, Elton singing so many things. All these songs were, of course, one song—a song of wishing—and they filled the room so mightily it was as if God were stepping tall around our dance hall. God could be your own queer self, too, and you could even do the Latin hustle with Her, surrounded by all the other folks and things you loved that made you feel panic-stricken because wasn't love a panic?

My book buddy had a boyfriend. Let's call him LES. He had grown up in a block of buildings known as "affordable housing" on the Lower East Side, with his white single mother, a social worker. LES did not know his father, who was Black. He was the only other person of color in that group of gay boys at Columbia, and, given the cultural loneliness I presumed he felt and Our Ma's fidelity to spiritual strays, I felt obliged to love him. For a long time I thought I did because I thought I should.

We were not attracted to each other sexually. From the first, our connection and uneasiness were familial, not romantic. LES was interested in class, not as a way of eradicating his race but as a way of catapulting himself out of his background. At Columbia, he wanted not to be his origin story; he was all about the arrival myth. He outdid the white boys at being a white boy.

Brusque in manner, he embraced capitalism's lack of charity: there was room for only one class, and that class was acquisitive and brutal in its grab for the world—more was more. This was in the era of Lacoste shirts, chinos, and L. L. Bean leather bags and boots. Somehow, LES's Lacoste shirt collars stood up straighter and stiffer than any of those other guys'.

Like Daddy, LES had been coddled for most of his life. His mother gave her son what she had and more than she had. He lived in one of the nice dorms on the newly built East Campus, and one of the signs of his wealth, or his performance of wealth, was the beauty of his space. I remember his dark, calming room, his elegant pillowcases. I had grown up getting scolded if I had the temerity to answer anyone with "What?," but LES quarrelled openly with his mother and his female friends. He wanted to break through softness, which he associated with women. We sometimes went together to parties at St. A's, a largely rich-boy frat, whose members had good hair and all sorts of permission. LES, tall, tawny-riny, as Our Ma would describe him, stood out at those parties, not so much to the guys in blue blazers, white shirts, and chinos who were horsing around and drinking too much, but to me. Because of his joy. He was genuinely happy there, in a world he aspired to, and when you aspire does the quality of what you're reaching for matter? The dream is the point.

I valued LES's generosity, his taking me to parties where I could eat, but I couldn't share his aspirations. Still, I understood why people were attracted to him. LES was brilliant at playing the man. He took choice away from you. When I was spending too much time with my inner girl, mooning over a boy who'd left me sitting alone in a bar with melting ice cubes, LES would drag me off to another bar or to a gay party held in one of the great halls at Columbia. At those parties: loads of talk; nothing would happen. Then LES and I would jump in a cab and head to Uncle Charlie's or one of the other white gay bars downtown, where the air was full of patchouli and synth.

LES's attractiveness had everything to do with action. Before you could say, "Shall we do this?" or "Should we consider that?," he was holding your arm and leading you into the Spike. He had an enviable right to himself and what he wanted, like any free white man but in a colored person's body. And the guys who were drawn to him were drawn to both aspects of him, or to what

he projected about both: the presumed authority of one, and the *What is he? Who is he?* of the other.

LES had drifted apart from my book buddy. His new love worked with him at the reserves desk at Butler Library. I met LES after his shift one day—it was spring, early spring—and, as we walked down the path that led from the library toward the Alma Mater statue, he told me about his co-worker.

Columbia was like a small town within a city then. Even if you didn't know someone by name, you knew him by sight. Days after LES told me of his love, I met him. I was on my way to the library when LES and he were leaving. I recognized him at once. Or I recognized the back of his neck. We were both enrolled in a class on Italian Renaissance painting. A lecture course, it started at some ungodly hour, which meant that I got there very late. Although I wanted to do well, I didn't care about doing well in the things I didn't care about much—that would have felt like a lie, and wasn't this moment in life, making Manhattan my home, building a family of my own, about telling the truth for once, and at last? Still, I took the Italian Renaissance painting class because I was my mother's son and what would it mean to the world if I shirked my responsibilities?

To be honest, I had a lot of Daddy in me, too. Remember those times when Daddy took me and my brother to Yorkville to eat cabbage soup or any other place where people were puzzled by our presence and Daddy paid those pale question marks no never mind? I saw that and it went straight into my blood: I wanted to be like that, a man who paid no never mind to other minds. I had no business being in an Italian Renaissance painting class, but fuck that: Italian Renaissance painting was mine, if only I could get there on time.

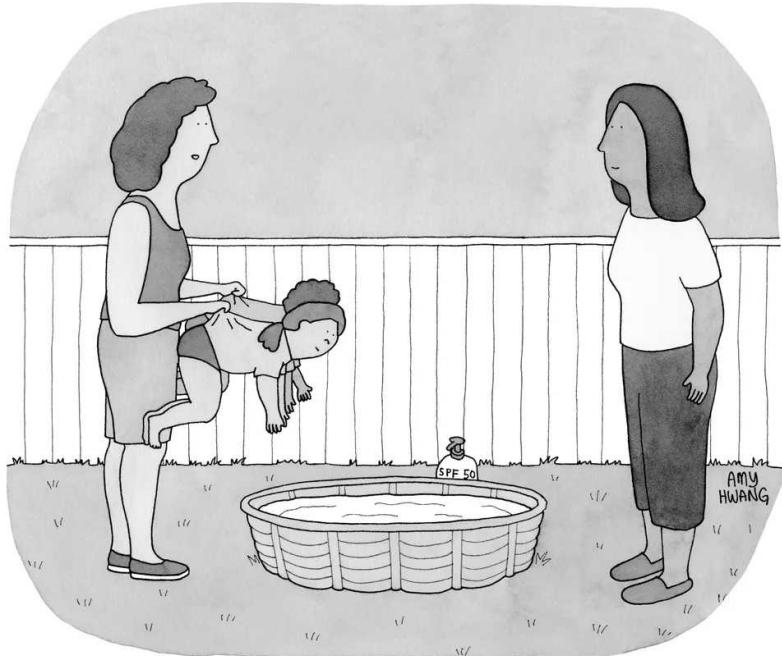
I never did. And, when I search my mind now, first I hear things, especially the *click click click* of the slides in the projector, and then there are images flashing, showing us Mantegna, scrolling through history; I can see, too, how one boy always looked up at me when I made my entrance; maybe he couldn't help it, since I had to pass the screen to get to my seat, casting a shadow on Masaccio's Jesus and all that perspective.

I couldn't tell if I was bothering him; he looked intrigued by the fact that I could be so late and appear not to be worried about it. I sat behind him and

got settled. His neck was long and erect; he sat upright. Looking over his shoulder, I could see that he had three newly sharpened pencils and a pen lined up by his notebook. His notebook was filled with his strong, clear handwriting.

My envy of his orderliness was an old feeling, my irreverence turned on its ear. The truth is, I have always admired people who seem to get it right. In elementary school, I knew a girl named Edna. She was thin and wore glasses. I admired everything about her. I loved looking at the dark hair on her skinny yellow arms and her clean homework pages. When we ate our homemade lunches together, she had such restraint: she'd eat half her sandwich and save the rest for later. At Columbia, sitting in that class on Italian Renaissance painting, I could tell that that boy was a version of Edna. Despite my defiance, I wished that I wasn't always late for class, that I wasn't still the guy who was sloppy with his homework and gobbled up his lunch in two bites.

On the afternoon that LES introduced us, the boy from Italian Renaissance painting was wearing a cotton button-down shirt, jeans, and loafers without socks. (He rarely wore socks, no matter the weather.) He had an angular face, and light-colored eyes that were framed by tortoiseshell glasses. He had dark hair and his eyelids slanted a little. He didn't smile. I was smoking a cigarette. He asked for one. I said, "If you're nice!," and he said, "I'm nice!" His slight body—we all weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds then—shivered a little at my implication.



I suppose other things happened after I gave him a cigarette, but I don't remember what. I doubt we talked about Italian Renaissance painting as we walked down the gravel path away from the library—that would have meant leaving LES out—but surely there was talk, miles of it in an instant, like a fast train that kept picking up speed, passing scene after blurry scene as we raced toward a destination we didn't know, couldn't know, on that first day, a day that contained all our days together and the days after that, because your soul knows everything about a new love before you do.

I do remember how taken I was by his mind, which didn't so much impose order on things as see the order that was already there. Raised in Connecticut in a Catholic household, he had faith—and perhaps that faith would extend to me beyond this moment of possibility? Let me tell you more about this moment, and moments that preceded it, because they all live together: First, you are standing by yourself in the world, and it's fine. Then you blink and find yourself sitting in the palm of someone's hand. That person peers down at you with the look of a connoisseur gazing at a curiosity, until suddenly a shy surprise fills both of you and alters the world as you know it. This might be too much to put on one meeting, but it's all true.

We parted. Spring gave way to the end of the semester and exams and all that. I failed Italian Renaissance painting. By the time the school year ended,

LES and my new friend were romantically and sexually involved, and life was turning, turning.

He contacted me first. In the upper left-hand corner of the envelope his letter came in, he'd written his name above the logo and return address of the yacht club he was working for that summer, in Niantic. The letter was written in his strong hand and I won't quote it verbatim. If I did, I'd have to stop and put my pen down and let hope fly across the page—the hope that this will matter to you, and to others who know nothing of this kind of science fiction, of first a letter filled with anticipation and then, a decade later, no more letters except the one that I am writing here to the living who want to hear about our *AIDS* dead, the better to understand who they were. I'm reluctant to give you his name. To name anything is to limit it, and for now I want him still to be limitless and alive, alive, alive.

In any case, his letter said that he was very happy, that he had waited a long time to have a friend like LES, and that was part of his happiness. At the end, he said how much he looked forward to getting to know me in the future, and how we could or should meet when he came down to the city to see LES sometime that summer. I remember that I was twenty-one when I received his note. I'd be twenty-two that August.

I was still living in Brooklyn with my aunt and uncle when I got his note. I was as thin as any man over six feet tall should be. But the truth is that I don't really remember my body. In "I Remember," [Joe Brainard](#) writes quite a bit about his cock—looking at it, touching it, trying to make it appear bigger in his trousers—but I don't remember looking at my cock in those years. When would I have had a chance to be alone with it? I had always lived with women in small spaces. There is no privacy in poverty.

Which is to say that I don't remember when my body was first looked upon not as a problem, when someone's desire moved him to hold those parts of me that gave him pleasure and presumably gave me pleasure, too. I don't remember because, by the time any of that occurred, too much had already happened.

Still, I remember his letter. The way it took my weekend loneliness away. It weighed whatever a single piece of semi-heavy-stock paper with ink on it

would weigh. That was one weight. The other was the weight, the beautiful gravitas, of his sense of responsibility and his hope: he looked forward to getting to know me in the future. The future.

During my first semester at Columbia, I'd taken Introduction to Religion, taught by the esteemed religious historian [Elaine Pagels](#). It was a big class, and packed. One day, after class, Professor Pagels asked Mr. Als to come and see her in her office. (In those days, professors addressed you by your surname.) In her office, Professor Pagels said that she liked a paper I'd written, and that she wanted to pass on two books she thought might be especially interesting to me: [Simone Weil's "Waiting for God"](#) and James Cone's "[God of the Oppressed](#)." Weil and Cone, Professor Pagels said, were real writers, too.

Real writers. In the weeks that followed, I read everything I could by and about Weil, a Parisian anorexic who was raised as an agnostic Jew and became a practicing Catholic but would not be baptized, in part because she didn't feel worthy of the sacrament, and then I read Cone, who had grown up in a small segregated town in Arkansas. Painful things had happened to both of these writers because of illness or racism. And yet, in their writing, both had a profound interest in connecting, or at least in the idea of connecting, which, of course, lies at the heart of friendship and is the beginning of community.

That boy's letter affected me as much as Weil's and Cone's writing did, because, basically, he was asking the same questions they were asking: How do we make a friendship? How do we make a family? Do you believe in love, and know how to honor it? I read his letter once, and then twenty times. I wrote my own questions alongside every one of his: Was it possible to be gay and be together? Be Israelites together and refuse the sacrament, just because we were so joyful at having found each other? If we were gay and together with LES or whomever else, would that make us a gay community, and what would that mean in the world?

I remember him coming down from Connecticut to see LES. I remember the smell of the August night in New York when we met up at LES's mother's apartment. Trees shaded the paths as I entered a maze of high-rises whose short windows had bars over them. Nearby, there was a pool, and I could

smell the chlorine. Night swimmers glistened in the dim light. Manhattan was so different from Brooklyn. One of my sisters lived in a version of these buildings in Brownsville, but there they were called “the projects,” and at the pool that was near my sister’s place I had found shit in the water.

LES opened the door. I don’t remember if the friend from Connecticut was standing beside LES, but I remember the feeling of parents. The sense that people who were together, as LES and he were now, were parents. I had seen that in the street, in the movies, and so on—couples doing things together!—but I didn’t know what that felt like; the idea cowed me.

We had a good gay conversation piece to start things off with: my hair. Before I arrived, I’d described to LES on the phone how a barber, ignoring what I had asked for, had fucked my head up to such a degree that I’d had him shave everything off. This was in the days when only lunatics or scary white punks had shaved heads. But it’s not so bad, the Connecticut boy said, after I took my cap off. He looked at me again. Honestly, it’s not bad.

He didn’t laugh, or even smile. He just stood by what he said, in his white cotton shirt. Also: he didn’t touch my head. He didn’t even make a gesture toward it. I had seen the seemingly in-a-trance eyes of the white person extending a hand to touch what you would never dream of touching on them, since it was not yours. Later, I would tell him the story of how, on a trip to visit family in Barbados, I had seen a white girl, a preadolescent child with Bo Derek braids, complain to her mother that a Black Bajan girl with cornrows she had spotted on the beach had stolen her hairdo. I don’t remember what he said about that story, and I don’t know if he ever read Joe Brainard’s “I Remember,” in which Brainard says, “I remember feeling sorry for black people, not because I thought they were persecuted, but because I thought they were ugly.”



What got into people? What compelled Brainard to say that? What made that girl in Barbados assume she could claim ownership when she was the appropriator? Those are the kinds of questions, rhetorical and otherwise, that I felt comfortable posing with the boy from Connecticut once we began to spend real time together, because he hadn't started our relationship by touching my head. He was a human who understood that I was one, too.

The funny thing is, he didn't have to be human, given the way he looked; he resembled the young [Montgomery Clift](#), especially in the 1951 movie "A Place in the Sun." You'd think he would have plopped himself down on a stool in a gay bar, held out for the highest bidder, and called it a day. But he didn't. I don't know why he didn't. Don't know why he made good on the promise in his letter to get to know me better when he returned to Columbia in the fall. Don't know many things where he's concerned.

The summer he was away, I spent a fair amount of time on the Lower East Side, some of it with LES, who still wore his Lacoste collars high. Preppy chic wasn't much of a thing in that neighborhood, though. The dominant style in the East Village that summer had a lot to do with disavowing labels, and opting for the black-and-white New Wave or No Wave look that Patti Smith served on the cover of her first album, "Horses," or the sunglasses and rude-boy hats some of the Specials donned on the cover of their 1979 album,

the one with “A Message to You, Rudy,” which I loved because a girl I knew swore it was one of the best songs ever.

The girls I admired as they walked along Third Street, Eighth Street, and sometimes even as far north as Fourteenth Street lived in shitty hot apartments with brick walls, but what did that matter when they slipped on a “nothing” black dress like the ones the beautiful but solitary post-neorealist Monica Vitti wore in the movies? These girls had come to New York to be New Yorkers: thin and angry and creative and loving. They filled the world with potential heartache or fun as they walked up Second Avenue in their spike heels, their black purses containing more money than boys ever had, because boys couldn’t hold on to a dime. Later, after the clubs closed, and they were done with men for the night, they sometimes ended up at Kiev, on the corner of Seventh Street, pulling off their gloves and eating split-pea soup together—*hold the bread*—and ignoring the bums at the next table. I saw them from the other side of the window as I walked south to take the subway home to Brooklyn, where, the next morning, I was greeted by derisive Black-girl laughter and gossip about where I’d been, and how white I was getting to be in the white world.

I’ve heard that laughter my whole life. It’s in my body and has never found a way out. It would like to kill me, and, at times, has made me want to die, if only to escape the feeling of powerlessness, abandonment, and despair it engenders. The best description of that laughter I’ve ever read is in Henri Bergson’s 1900 essay collection, “[Laughter](#)”:

Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. I do not mean that we could not laugh at a person who inspires us with pity, for instance, or even with affection, but in such a case we must, for the moment, put our affection out of court and impose silence upon our pity.

Maybe the Black girls back in Brooklyn wanted to pity me, but that would only have detracted from the disdain for “faggots” that bonded them. Speaking of which, [James Baldwin](#) heard a similar laughter, in a different key, in 1949, which he wrote about in an essay titled “Equal in Paris.” Baldwin had been in Paris for a little over a year when an American acquaintance moved into the grim hotel where he was living. When the

American friend had left his previous residence, another grim hotel, he'd taken with him, in a fit of pique, a bedsheets, which he presented to Baldwin. The young writer, disgusted by the condition of his own sheets, placed the relatively clean linen on his bed. For this "theft," Baldwin was arrested and spent eight days in jail. I've read this essay a number of times, and, while I never remember, precisely, how Baldwin gets out of jail, I always remember the ending of the piece, because I understand it:

On the 27th I went again to trial and, as had been predicted, the case against us was dismissed. The story of the *drap de lit*, finally told, caused great merriment in the courtroom. . . . I was chilled by their merriment. . . . It could only remind me of the laughter I had often heard at home, laughter which I had sometimes deliberately elicited. This laughter is the laughter of those who consider themselves to be at a safe remove from all the wretched, for whom the pain of the living is not real. I had heard it so often in my native land that I had resolved to find a place where I would never hear it any more. In some deep, black, stony, and liberating way, my life, in my own eyes, began during that first year in Paris, when it was borne in on me that this laughter is universal and never can be stilled.

That laughter helped shape Baldwin, just as the laughter I experienced at home and, later, in some gay bars in New York shaped me, but I could barely stand the shape: when a female relative asked, rhetorically, if I was white, or directly or indirectly called me a faggot, or laughed at me, my heart broke a million times over. I could not bear the derision I heard in the world, or at home, when something interested me or made me feel tender or curious. In retrospect, I can see that whenever I talked excitedly, openly, about those things my interlocutor was, more often than not, just waiting to jump on my vulnerability, like a kid jumping in a puddle.

That summer, before the boy from Connecticut came back, I worked as a telemarketer for a company in midtown. A friend from my years at LaGuardia High School had got me the job. I don't remember what we sold, but I do remember that my friend and I—we'd done improv together in school, and were as clever as any Nichols and May—treated the experience as a kind of acting exercise. On different days we assumed different identities. One day, I might be a relentlessly cheerful American with lots of

blond in my voice; the next, a laid-back European ne'er-do-well. On Fridays, when we got paid, we'd go to a hamburger joint near Grand Central and order up a storm: burgers and onion rings and one lemonade after another. Sometimes we'd go downtown together after work and fuck around on Astor Place or go to Azuma, a Japanese emporium filled with delectable junk. It was around that time that I saw the shirt.

It was in the window at Cheap Jack's, an East Village thrift store. The shirt had three-quarter sleeves and a button-down collar. Its main design was a version of [Mondrian's](#) "Broadway Boogie Woogie"—all geometric lines and primary colors. Buying that shirt and tucking it into the black flared high-waters I wore with black lace-ups and white socks made me feel that I was the artist I hadn't yet become. My outfit also made me feel that I was part of something, and I think that "something" was the whole queer world I saw and loved in downtown Manhattan, including the girls in their dresses carrying the kind of old-timey gloves my sisters wore for real. This new world was real to me, too.

When I returned to my neighborhood by train after a late night out, my shirt reeked of cigarette smoke and was sticky with dance sweat. I was foul—at last!—with experience. I always carried a book on the train. Sometimes, on my way from the subway to my aunt's apartment, I'd stop by an all-night diner for breakfast: toast soaked in butter, the fattiest bacon, greasiest eggs—delicious. The lady who waited on me at the diner didn't laugh at me. While I sipped a glass of her delicious sweetened iced tea and struggled with "Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes," she'd ask me what I was reading. When I tried to explain, she'd cut me off sweetly with "Baby, tell me the story part."

Let me tell you the story of the dress. I wore it years before I bought that shirt. I was fourteen, and I had been invited to a Halloween party by a high-school friend who lived in Manhattan. I decided to go as the bearded lady. By then, I already knew I was a lady, but I needed something to hide that. With a beard as camouflage, I could get away with wearing my stage makeup, which I enjoyed—the girlish fact of it.

I remember my mother making a long skirt out of some tulle, and then attaching the skirt to a green bodice with gold straps. She designed the

whole thing. I suppose Our Ma could justify making the dress—which I put on over a thick sweater, to further butch it up—because it was connected to my education. I was going to school to be an actor, which was a kind of artist, a profession she revered.

Our Ma was an artist who wasn't given half a chance to become one. She was a [Linda Ronstadt](#) who didn't sing, a [Paule Marshall](#) who hadn't written a novel, an [Alice Neel](#) who hadn't picked up a brush—she was all of those women to me. She had what [Rilke](#) called an “infinite capacity” to be herself through other people's needs. That was how it seemed to me. *To me*: a selfish claim that doesn't allow for who she was to herself. I want her to own herself, just as I want all the dead to own themselves. My mother, the unrealized artist who loved artists because artists expressed themselves, was making my dress in the name of art, which is to say, also in my name.

But, before we get to the dress specifically, let me just say that for years now I've carried around in my head the enormous weight, I mean the powerful reality—same difference—that the feminist writer [Tillie Olsen](#) discusses in her 1965 essay “Silences in Literature.” Olsen talks about how the grind of having to earn a living, the drag of figuring out home care for young kids, has worn female writers down. Silenced them after one book or two. Just as racism and degradation have silenced a number of writers of color. Olsen describes her own workdays, raising four children while dreaming of writing, and watching that dream die. “What demanded to be written,” Olsen writes, “seethed, bubbled, clamored, peopled me . . . always denied.”

My mother stitching away in the other room—what had been denied her in this life? As a girl, she'd loved to dance; maybe she'd dreamed [Maria Tallchief](#) dreams, and maybe now I was her Maria Tallchief in that tulle, her chance to be a prima ballerina, instead of a member of the withholding cadre of women she'd been born into, women whose job it was to disapprove.

I don't remember when my father arrived at our place that day, but I do remember the air changing when he did. He took off his great peacoat and hat without saying anything, and put his ever-present newspaper on a chair in the hallway. I remember overhearing him say to my mother, angrily, “Well, why can't he go as the bearded man?” I remember Our Ma defending my costume, and I remember putting on the longest coat I had to cover that

dress up before we hit the streets. Then my father put his jacket and hat back on, and walked me to the subway, because my mother said that he should, to protect me from hooligans. I remember walking along with my father, and the world between us was silent.

As I rode the subway, I experienced the loneliness I sometimes felt when going from one part of my life to another. I remember expecting something to happen. I was on the lookout for a potential ambush of violent men. When I got to the party, I missed everything I'd left behind, including my mother. I remember smoking pot for the first time, and waves of paranoia squeezing me in my dress. I remember taking off the dress and wiping off my makeup, and putting on my jeans so that I could get on the subway in the cold, black air. But what I feel now most of all is that I've never taken that dress off, never left behind me the way my mother helped me to create myself and herself. Nor can I forget my father's constant drama of aggrievement, his implication that the world would have been a better place for him if his son, and the boy's mother, and their dress, weren't part of it.

"There is speech and there are verbal symbols." That's from [Tennessee Williams's](#) 1944 story "Oriflamme." In it, the female protagonist, Anna, struggles to express her inner life. At one point, she puts on a red dress, which is a kind of flag—a declaration of being. Society at large is not ready for Anna in her red dress; they don't want to see her, but she's there. I admired the story, because it said so much—indirectly—about being an artist: you put that dress on, and people either laugh at you or ignore you, but you put the dress on anyway, and you live. When I wore my dress or, later, my Mondrian shirt, people told me I wasn't a man, but no one could tell me I wasn't an artist. This was my flag. And I hoisted it in Brooklyn and in the East Village, so that other artists would find me, and love me as much as I loved them. I had so much ambition for togetherness, and so much drive to be an artist and be alone.

It wasn't too long after we returned to Columbia that fall that LES broke up with the boy from Connecticut. I don't recall there being a reason, but the steadfastness of love can be as crushing to some souls as its absence. Steadfast love sits in a corner and enjoys the daily things, a cup of tea in the afternoon, a cigarette it shouldn't indulge in before lunch or dinner. It likes to look at you. And LES didn't always like to be seen. It was too much for

him. Where was all that lovely distance, scented with yearning? The white space, fortified by letters and phone calls and I-can't-waits? Now love was an imposition, irritating and enormous in its demands, because it could not be controlled, lied to, or otherwise manipulated so that LES could win whatever he assumed the rest of the boys were winning.

I remember the anguish on the Connecticut boy's face as he told me that, a month or two after we returned to school that fall, LES had stopped returning his calls, and that when he did manage to reach LES on the phone he was always on his way out, and said he'd call him back, but didn't.

That fall, the Connecticut boy and I talked about LES, of course, but not for long; I could only get so close to his despair. He wouldn't allow me to become a version of my mother, listening and listening and trying to effect change at my own expense. Because, to him, I wasn't my mother (or his); I was a man, and that was what he wanted me to be.

I remember our first excursion in the city, or nearly our first. We met on St. Marks Place; he wanted to buy some records. That afternoon, he had on chinos with a sharp crease, a pressed button-down shirt—he ironed all his clothes carefully; of course he did—and black loafers. There were his pale ankles as he walked up the stairs to the record store. That straight back and neck I knew from Italian Renaissance painting looked different now as he flipped through used or discounted albums. "Let It Bleed." Nico. Donna Summer. Lou Reed. Bob Dylan's first Jesus record. Lots of Elvis Costello. He loved voices. I don't remember what he ended up buying that afternoon, but I remember how proud he was of his brown-paper-bagged purchases as we walked west. My sidelong glance as we walked, talking about nothing, or a great many things, was a physical manifestation of what I felt: sidelong, about new love. If he loved me back, then what? Could I love him more than I loved his letter and the things it did to my imagination?

I said that I wanted him to meet a woman I was becoming friends with. She worked at McGregor's (later it became Boy Bar), between Second and Third Avenues, across the street from the St. Marks Baths, and even though I averted my gaze from the Baths every time I passed it—all those men going in and out, my fear of them and my interest in going in and out with them—I tried to appear cooler and more authoritative than I was, as my friend from

Connecticut and I sat down at an outside table. We were in my gay Manhattan now, and I wanted to show him the ropes. So many ropes in New York then, all trying to hold together a crumbling, economically depressed, drug-filled, violent world.



My woman friend came out of the bar's open doors. She was carrying a tray of drinks, and she looked as she always looked whenever she did anything: flawless and annoyed. (She didn't like to do anything.) I'd called her Mrs. Vreeland from the first because she was always immaculate and she made pronouncements like "Europe stinks. I am depressed. Bye," which was what she wrote to me from abroad once. A Latvian American woman from New Jersey, she heightened things, in the way a born star can, and she could just as easily ruin things—a day, an event—simply by switching her mood from elation to dissatisfaction. A big component of her charm was her essential don't-care-ness, with a lipstick touch.

Drinks and introductions all around. And across the street those men were coming and going, coming and going, just as—it's clear to me now—I was both coming and going with my friend from Connecticut, because look at what I'd engineered on our first date: I'd interrupted the flow of my getting to know him, and his getting to know me, by introducing him to another person. Hadn't he written me a letter, and telephoned me, and met me

downtown, and showed an interest in me? And I had broken our covenant by shifting the scene away from any potential intimacy.

Daddy did the same thing to me. All those weekends in the city, and the bliss of walking down Fifth Avenue with my hand in his, my little brother on the other side of him, the joy of being together, only to be disrupted by his tics, his violence, and left hoping for a better time next time. Once the visit was done and Daddy had let go of my hand and deposited me at my mother's door and walked away, anxious, no doubt, to be in his own room, alone but catered to, reading his newspapers and finding disasters in every one of them —once all that had happened, I burned with want. Burned and burned in the void. We are all the people who came before us, those whom we can never seem to turn away from, even if they have turned us away.

Still, when my friend and I had finished our drinks outside, I followed him onto the dark, empty dance floor inside. I don't remember what songs were played, but I remember that, as we danced, coming together and then apart, he was still holding on to his records.

That semester, at school, we took another course together, over at Barnard—Brian O'Doherty's The Art Film. The course focussed on artists whose work included short films—[Joseph Cornell](#), [Maya Deren](#), and others. We also saw documentaries made by visual poets like the Maysles brothers, their "Grey Gardens." My new friend loved the class; he was a big movie buff. Our first assignment was to write a scenario about an artist; my script was called "The Trouble with Saskia," and it began with a scene in which [Rembrandt](#) is trying to paint his wife, Saskia. Saskia fidgets. Finally, Rembrandt puts his brush down, walks over to Saskia, and slaps her. The day that my script was discussed was one of the rare occasions when my friend wasn't in class; he had a cold. Later, he telephoned to find out what he had missed. When I told him that I'd got an A on my piece, he said, "I knew it!" I have never forgotten the sound of his voice in that instant: excitement tinged with envy and the feeling that I was a writer, and he wasn't, and that was just one of the ways that we were learning that we were different together.

My new friend, my first true and truly beloved. His feeling about life was, basically, Why burn down the house before you've built it? He wanted to live in that house every day. To build a house and put his records in it. From

what he told me during our first days, months, and then a year, his folks were not a couple whose relationship took place on the phone, like Daddy and Our Ma. His mother didn't hold the receiver as if it were a quarrelsome baby squirming to break free of her love. His folks, in fact, lived in the same house, and it was their house, not welfare's, or somebody else's. His father, a quiet Wasp from Indiana, was an engineer, and his mother was an Irish Catholic who, in addition to working in the Connecticut school system, kept house and raised her good-looking children in the faith.

When I was ten or so, I lived in an apartment building in Flatbush. I had a next-door friend, a white girl who read books, like me. One day, she took me on a tour of her home, and when I saw her parents' bedroom I said, "That's nice. Where does your father sleep?" The girl looked at me quizzically. She said, "Here." After that, I wondered about families. That is, how did they make a home that was real? How did parents make a bed together? Sometimes, on special nights, my brother and I slept with our mother, but the closeness, the promise and reality of love in that sleepy warmth, evaporated during the day. Being solely responsible for her children's well-being, Our Ma had to leave the bed and get on with the business of living and listening to our father, on the other end of the line, whining and carping, wondering when she might turn up to make his bed.

And here my friend was, saying, Why burn the house down? And, What's up with your imagination? Love can be real. Real love in a potentially real house. One way he got me to approach the door of that house was by not pointing it out: he just built the house and left the door open. He walked around the house first. As I remember it, he was hard on his shoes—he walked like the Taurean that he was: with a sense of purpose, and inevitability. When he walked through his house of love, the floors shook. He wanted that house to know he was in it. *Come and share, come and share.*

Here's what I found by standing on the threshold of the house he built, window by window, and the chimney flue, too: a man who could be with me in silence. A man who could be and wanted to be by my side and not say a word as I explored this new world of trust. Silence was trust that didn't have to explain itself; it was also knowing someone. I had spent so much time

lying. Lying to everyone I knew in Brooklyn about who I was or wanted to be. I lied to survive all those people.

Then life got fuller and bigger, with rainbows! rainbows! rainbows! everywhere, even as we walked toward his death. Our language, our love of it, the talking and laughter, the shared books and gorgeous and petty observations I offered up about people I didn't like (my bitchery amused him but he never joined in—he was focussed on me) were the whole world that first year and a half or two years while we were at Columbia together.

He had a scar on one of his knees, the result of a car accident in high school. He told me that story when I finally went to Connecticut to visit; one of his lovely, funny sisters was getting married, and I was his date. We were finished with college by then. It must have been 1984, or 1985, who can remember. We had been friends for several years. At that point, he was in love and living with a man in an apartment on the Upper East Side, near where the train tracks emerge from under Park Avenue. I spent some time in that apartment. We'd all go out, and instead of going home without him I'd go to his home and sleep in the living room, sleep fitfully, because of their closed door.

He picked me up at the train. We were delighted to see each other. His sister's wedding would take place in a nearly completely white town. There are many ways to come out. Before he took me to meet his parents in their nice, modest home, he took me on a drive and showed me a number of things: his high school, the shore where he and his friends sometimes hung out, other places. I remember night rolling in and his legs in his bluejeans and his loafered foot on the car's accelerator. I remember being turned on by his confidence behind the wheel.

He had told me a story about how once, when he was little, his mother drove him and his siblings to pick up their brother from his paper route. This was around 1969, when there was much strife and mayhem in the Connecticut branches of the [Black Panther Party](#). His mother told her children to make sure to lock their car doors, because "those Panthers were loose." And he remembered thinking then, *Oh, let them in, let them in.*

The point was his smile. The point was that here was a human, and this human was saying, Press your smile and all else against me, and this human was saying, I'm glad I'm from Connecticut and you're from Brooklyn, and isn't it amazing that we can drink Manhattans in Manhattan? The point was that he was interested in my interest in [Proust](#) and in the accuracy of William Gass's observations. The point was that he wanted to be a living presence in my imagination, was intent on making room for himself in my thoughts. I remember him saying once—God, this is just coming back to me now—I remember him saying once after he got sick, in 1989 or 1990, I was with him in the hospital and I was trying to take his clothes so that I could wash them at my place, and he exclaimed, "You're a young man!" He saw in my posture all the women he would never know, including my mother, who was dead by then, and my sisters, but what he also saw and was calling me out on was a fact: I was a man, and I turned him on just as I was.

Love had teeth. They grabbed me by the modified Afro and wouldn't let me go. I didn't want him to let me go, not then, and not now. I want to say that one of those teeth was chipped in the front, but I can't remember. What I do know is that, Yankee stoic until the end, he had his four wisdom teeth pulled in one go. His former lover presented them to me in a Tiffany watch box at his funeral. (When the West Indian elders dreamed of teeth—"Dem teet fall out dem head"—it meant that somebody would die, or was dead. He's already dead, but he comes back, he comes back.)

For some time after he died, I kept those teeth on a little altar I made for him, in my first real New York apartment. A careless rich Black girl was staying with me the fall after he died; she was between apartments, having just left her female lover. Back then, I thought it was my job to take in every Black girl in the world, especially those who seemed in distress. One night, as this woman talked about her tiresome ex-lover, she lit a cigarette off one of the candles I had burning by the altar. Then, distractedly, since she was interested only in her own story, she put her cigarette out on the box that contained his teeth. I remember saying nothing, because I didn't feel I had a right to, because who was I? Plus, I wanted to believe that she wouldn't do such a thing; I wanted to believe that she was family, and with family you can forgive anything, even having the teeth you love singed by carelessness, all in the hope that your silence will result in togetherness. ♦

## Sketchbook

# An Artist's View of the Riches of New York City

I knew no one when I first came to New York, which meant it belonged only to me. Drawing it, I still feel as if I'm taking inventory of an infinite treasure vault.

By Christoph Niemann

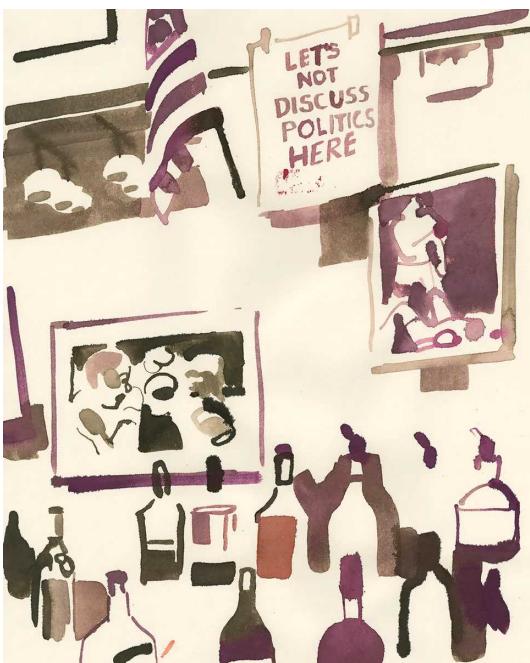
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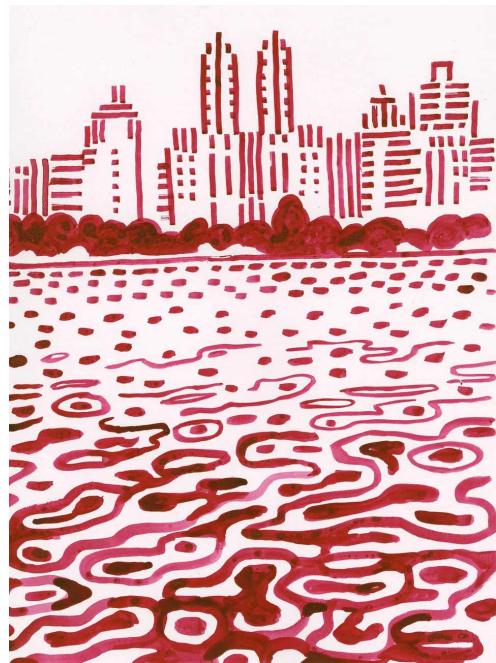
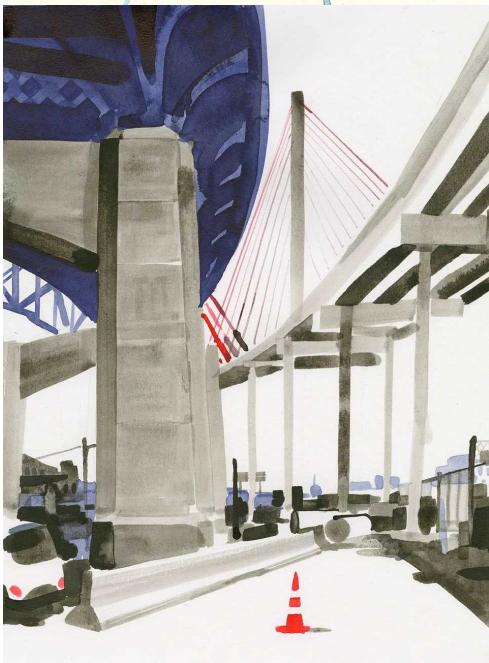
I first came to New York when I was twenty-four. I didn't know anybody, which was scary, but that came with a perk: the city belonged to me alone. I soon discovered that drawing was a useless medium to reproduce its dizzying level of detail. But here's what I found drawing can do: it can convey the rhythm and texture of New York. It can capture the disorienting, intoxicating experience of stepping out of Grand Central Terminal, or of being in downtown Brooklyn on a dark, hard February day, or of walking through the Lower East Side with dozens of layers of the city's history visible simultaneously.











## Takes

- [Zadie Smith on Grace Paley's "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age"](#)
- [Jhumpa Lahiri on Mavis Gallant's "Voices Lost in Snow"](#)
- [Ottessa Moshfegh on Harold Brodkey's "The State of Grace"](#)

## Takes

# Zadie Smith on Grace Paley's "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age"

**By Zadie Smith**

June 30, 2025



It's hard to overstate how startled I was upon first reading Grace Paley. At the time, I'd never really given a lot of thought to stories. I didn't come across them much during my education—aside from a few Sherlock Holmes tales and too much Somerset Maugham. My idea of the form was very distorted. Neat little British packages tied up with a tight bow. Airless. I was unfamiliar with the more formally inventive American tradition, or the fact that there were any magazines or journals that published short fiction. (The first time I saw a copy of *The New Yorker* was when it published me.) Reading "[My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age](#)" in the early years of a new century was genuinely transformative. No twists or moralizing. Not much stately third person. No neat scenes. Not really any scenes at all. Just a loosey-goosey human voice coming at you, going

wherever it wanted, arguing, joking, dramatizing, romanticizing, politicking. A working-class voice. A neighborhood voice. I came from a different neighborhood—a different country entirely—but recognized the Paleyverse immediately. I, too, grew up around working-class socialists, feminists, pacifists, marchers, and first-generation-immigrant mothers—the kinds of women who treated their activism as just another duty to be ticked off the long list of domestic chores. Meanwhile, the neighborhood elders came from another world (not so much the “Old World,” in our case, as the “third world”), and they, like Paley’s “father,” enjoyed giving the sort of advice that we mostly ignored or took with a large grain of salt: “The main thing is this—when you get up in the morning you must take your heart in your two hands. You must do this every morning.” To which Paley’s narrator replies, “That’s a metaphor, right?” Nope. As advice, it’s up there with “You’ve got to work twice as hard to break even”—the mantra of my childhood. (Also not a metaphor.)

Read Zadie Smith’s new story “[The Silence](#). ”

Paley reminded me of my past but also of my present: living in Greenwich Village, with a poet as a partner, trying to write while bringing up two kids. The startling aspect, to me, was that she included it all. She didn’t put a cordon around a short story and use a special literary voice to create it. In her expert hands a short story is like one of those cavernous shoulder bags you’ll need to carry in the city if your plan is to tote around four or five novels, a feminist treatise, a bunch of diapers, somebody’s lunch, a photocopy of a zoning law to brandish at a community-board meeting, and a large banner that reads “*END THE WAR*.” Paley is an everything-and-the-kitchen-sink sort of a writer, with an emphasis on the kitchen sink. The domestic is not banal to her, nor is it bourgeois. It’s perhaps a little perverse to write a story called “[The Silence](#)” in homage to one of the chattiest writers on the block, yet for me Paley has always served as a kind of stimulant to honesty. I can get all up in my head when I’m writing. But if I read a bit of Paley just before I open the document I feel some of that wildness and openheartedness enter me. My character Sharon in “The Silence” is a fictional person from a shadowy region of my mind, but Paley cleared the space and built a little platform so that Sharon could step forward and just . . . be. My Sharon is dealing with “the Change,” which seems also to be on Paley’s mind in “My Father.” (“We should probably begin at the

beginning, he said. Change. First there is change, which nobody likes—even men. You'd be surprised. You can do little things—putting cream on the corners of your mouth, also the heels of your feet.") But Sharon is not a participant in what I want to call “menopause discourse.” She doesn't really have a language for what's happening to her. She's just trying to get through it.

Paley died in 2007, and I never got to meet her, but she is eternally present in my imagination, the kind of writer you might see out in the summer, sitting on her stoop, and when she spots you pacing the block, bitching about writing, she rolls up her sleeves and gives it to you straight: *Please. Is it working down a coal mine? It is not. What to write about? Look around you! Nothing but people every place you turn! So, write!* So, I did. ♦

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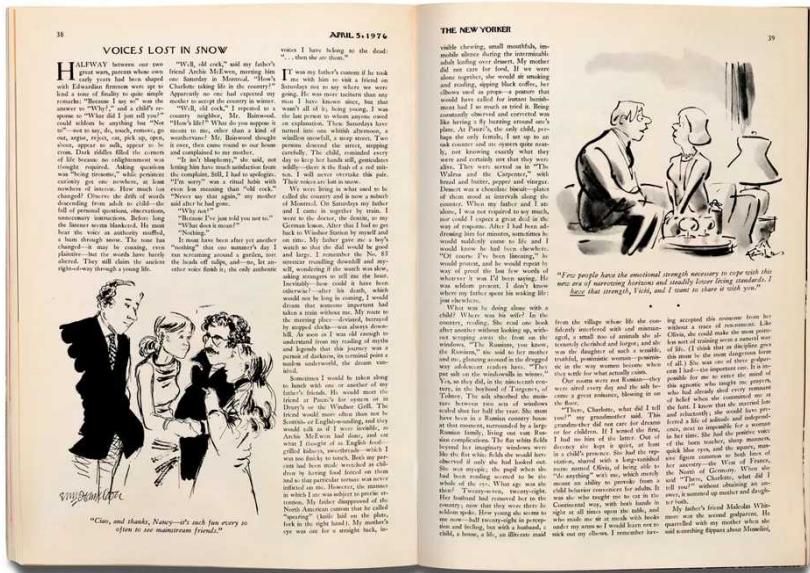
[Read the original story.](#)

## Takes

# Jhumpa Lahiri on Mavis Gallant’s “Voices Lost in Snow”

**By Jhumpa Lahiri**

June 30, 2025



“[Voices Lost in Snow](#)” ran in *The New Yorker* in 1976, though I discovered it almost two decades later, in a discarded library copy of “Home Truths,” a volume now out of print. I was plunged into Mavis Gallant’s vertiginous world, stunned by the way she excavated the past, shuffled narrative time, and privileged shards of perception over conventional plots. The story forms part of a semi-autobiographical sextet, often referred to as the Linnet Muir series, and is an example of how Gallant dispenses with forced (and, I would argue, fallacious) distinctions between life and art, between the novel and the short form. When I fell under the spell of her work many years ago, I was still learning to piece together my first stories; it felt like sounding out scales and arpeggios after listening to the teacher perform Mozart or Bach.

“Voices Lost in Snow” is set “halfway between our two great wars,” as Gallant writes, in Montreal, where she was born in 1922. My story “[Jubilee](#)”

takes place in 1977 in London, my own birthplace. (I moved to America with my parents when I was two.) I am now, as Gallant was, a writer in her fifties looking back at childhood—in particular, at a few months my family spent in England the year I turned ten, during Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee. I had been trying to write about this period for some time. Early drafts of the material were composed in Italian, but the heart of the story eluded me, and so my scattered impressions languished in a notebook. After I reread "Voices Lost in Snow" earlier this year, "Jubilee" came to me quickly. In this new phase, I decided to write the story directly in English: my first one in English in well over a decade. Perhaps it was the bravura and beauty of Gallant's sentences that inspired me to work in that language again.

Read Jhumpa Lahiri's new story "[Jubilee](#)."

At a certain point, Linnet, the narrator of "Voices Lost in Snow," refers to the "long backward reach" of memory. This is the key to Gallant's story, and also suggests the spirit in which I approached "Jubilee"—reaching for something that had hitherto felt at once meaningful and distant, fleeting and fixed. Yes, those months in London were a set piece in my mind, but set pieces are not short stories. In "Voices Lost in Snow," I noted the thin membrane between the narrator's present, mature awareness and a past in which one's parents feel both inscrutable and utterly in charge. Her description of Montreal in winter helped me to evoke my youthful impressions of London, and her way of talking about a displaced mother, and a father who inhabited a kind of elsewhere, led me, yet again, to place my own parents inside a new fictional container. The hovering but absent quality of Linnet's parents reminded me in some ways of my upbringing. Her story, full of phantoms, of voices from the beyond, combines a gathering of scenes with observations on marriage, illness, boredom, loneliness, language, and death. It is at once tight and loose, stripped to its essentials yet free-ranging. This juxtaposition was Gallant's unique signature and skill. Much of childhood, in her stories, is an act of decoding the incomprehensible behavior and speech of adults—one could call it a form of translation.

One thing I understood while writing "Jubilee" was the abyss, alongside the extreme closeness, between me and my mother during those months in London. This realization allowed the story to darken, to swerve, and it also

created space for the character of Joya, who is six months younger than my narrator, to emerge. I suppose a fundamental difference between my story and Gallant's is that mine includes a friendship between two girls, whereas Linnet is utterly alone in a world of adults. The godparent tradition is absent in Bengali culture; all the same, like Linnet, I was raised not only by my mother and father but by other adults, members of their social circle, who exerted their influences on me. The final paragraph of Gallant's story refers to a spiderweb. Mine mentions a lace curtain. Both images are planted earlier in our stories, and are tied to the workings of memory. Spiderwebs and lace curtains have something in common: seemingly insubstantial, even ghostly, they are in fact sturdy, carefully wrought. I did not set out to replicate the gesture, but I am old enough to know that children sometimes mimic parental figures in unconscious, mysterious ways. ♦

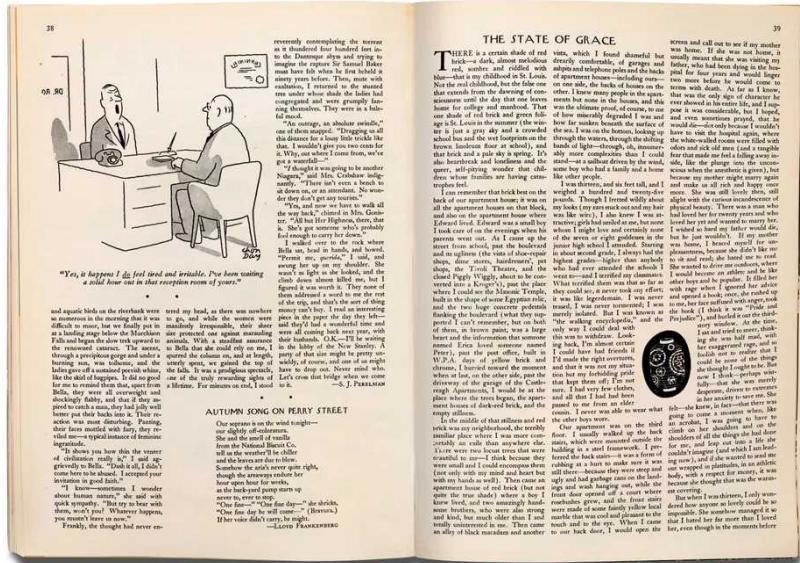
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[Read the original story.](#)

# Ottessa Moshfegh on Harold Brodkey's "The State of Grace"

By Ottessa Moshfegh

June 30, 2025



I first discovered Harold Brodkey's 1954 story "[The State of Grace](#)" in 2013, and I've probably read it a hundred times since. It remains, for me, one of the most charming and strangely affirming depictions of a budding artistic consciousness in fiction. In the simplest terms, it's the story of a man recounting select dramas from his adolescence. The grownup narrator never identifies himself as a writer, but the prose is so calibrated—lyrical, emotional, intentional—that the story is easy to mistake for memoir. Perhaps it's safe to assume that "[The State of Grace](#)" was based on Brodkey's own adolescence, in suburban St. Louis in the nineteen-forties. The terrain of the narrator's childhood seems to have calcified into mythology.

But here's something peculiar. Brodkey wrote "[The State of Grace](#)" in his early twenties, a sweeping act of pure genius that took him only forty-five minutes (or so he said). Not on the first reading but maybe on the second or

the third, I started to pick out evidence of the writer's youth and inexperience: the nostalgia gives way to romantic grandiosity now and then; the poeticism can occasionally veer into grandstanding. The voice is almost musical in its cadence, a little precious in its attention to details. I love the multidimensionality of these moments. And I relate to them. As a younger writer, I experienced a similar tonal crisis when I wrote fiction inspired by, for example, my travels, or some personal disaster. These stories were full of such extreme self-seriousness that when I read them over a few days later I had to laugh at myself. Not because the events hadn't actually been painful but because I had heightened the subjectivity so grotesquely that I could suddenly see myself from the outside. (That's part of youth, I think: the luxury—and perhaps necessity—of self-seriousness, the belief that your misery is so unique and exquisite, you must describe it with perfect accuracy, or else it might kill you.)

Read Ottessa Moshfegh's new story "[The Comedian](#)."

I can believe that Brodkey wrote "The State of Grace" in less than an hour—it feels inspired, rendered from a moment, one sitting, one experience. I imagine that he also worked on it for many days afterward. It has all the turns and guideposts of a short story that resonates with forethought and authority, even though it reads like candid recall. Brodkey is a very cool writer, of course; he has a lot of control. He allows for a little self-exposure, but can also seamlessly transmute from one register to another. A single plainspoken sentence will pierce through the fiction with the ring of holy truth, from the perspective of someone older, someone who's spent years recovering from the family that made him. That interplay—the youthful lyricism punctured by adult disillusionment—is what makes "The State of Grace" seem so alive to me, so true.

There's a passage in the story I've returned to so many times that I've memorized it:

I was to be rich and famous and make all their tribulations worth while.  
But I didn't want that responsibility. Anyway, if I were going to be  
what they wanted me to be, and if I had to be what I was, then it was  
too much to expect me to take them as they were. I had to go beyond

them and despise them, but first I had to be with them—and it wasn't fair.

"It wasn't fair." And yet, by writing the story, Brodkey makes it fair. He imposes form on what was once chaotic. He uses storytelling to both preserve and transform his adolescent suffering.

I wrote my own story "[The Comedian](#)" with an appreciation for the complexity of Brodkey's relationship with his personal mythology. "The Comedian" couldn't pass as memoir—the narrator is very clearly not me—but it does tell a coming-of-age story that ends with the narrator confronting the love he hasn't allowed himself to feel. I never identified my own adolescent loneliness as an unmet need for the love and acceptance of the people around me. I saw the lack of all that as a fated consequence of my position as an artist. Perhaps this loneliness is the essential fuel for any committed artist. That, and the fear that, if we don't put our suffering to use creatively, it will destroy us. ♦

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[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)

# Fiction

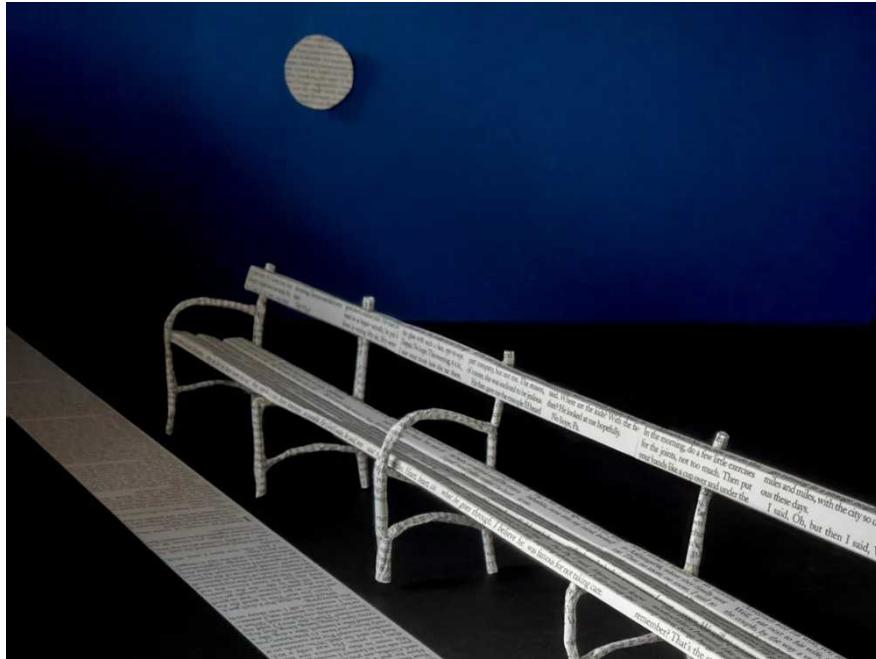
- [The Silence](#)
- [Jubilee](#)
- [The Comedian](#)

Fiction

# The Silence

By Zadie Smith

June 30, 2025



A great silence opened up inside her. But that made it sound more dramatic than it was. It happened by degrees, creeping up slyly. And at times, in certain places and situations, it was expected and welcome—on a long walk, or when a person confessed something pitiful, or at a funeral or a party. In all those places, where once she'd had a lot to say—too much, honestly—now there was this silence and she became a far better listener. Not consciously, that was just one of the consequences. It wasn't a Zen silence or an enlightened silence or anything she'd worked to achieve. It was only a sort of blank. Once, on a mini-break, she'd spotted a sentence graffitied on a bridge in Paris: "The world is everything that is the case." (It was written in English and stuck in her mind.) The silence felt like that: it spoke for itself. But it could also offend and disappoint others, the same way the world itself never seems enough for some people. It was no use on big family occasions, for example, or when one of her adult daughters called her name from another room, or if someone at work asked for her view on the news of the day. It could make other people feel awkward. But when she was alone with

it, whenever it coincided with her own long-standing habit of looking upward into the branches of trees—then it didn't really bother her at all.

When a person looked at a tree, there was no expectation of speech or thought: the light passed silently through the clusters of leaves; there was nothing to say. This combination (leaves, light, silence), which you can find everywhere, which is so easy to come by, this now had the power to make her cry—“happy tears,” as her girls called them. And so she was often in tears. They rolled down her face unimpeded, because her eyelashes were no longer thick enough to halt them. She'd worn too much mascara back in the day. Someone should warn her daughters about that, she thought. It wouldn't be her, though, because of this silence.

#### The author on the *New Yorker* story that inspired her story.

Like everybody, Sharon felt young inside, essentially unchanged since late adolescence, and often had trouble integrating the person in the mirror with the young soul she felt herself to be. But here the silence was useful—clarifying. Because she was definitely not like those talkative teen-agers on the bus. Comparing her silence with their noise, she understood that she was infinitely old, like a tree. And it wasn't only that she spoke so much less than they did but also that her inner voice—the ever-present internal narrative, the self-regarding monologue, which she now realized had always been in some sense preparing itself to perform, so that it could become a character for other people out there in the world, in the hope that these others might love and understand her—that was gone, too. It wasn't like this for the kids on the bus, any fool could see that. They were still talking. To themselves and to anyone who would listen.

Hearing them actually made her retrospectively embarrassed, thinking back thirty years, to how she'd talked up a storm at all those birthdays and barbecues and church fêtes and intimate encounters—she'd gone on and on! Not realizing. Her elders had mostly been kind about it, and these days she aspired to exactly that type of kindness, making a conscious effort to look fondly on the chatter of her own daughters, and promising herself that she would never tell either of them about this silence, which gets planted within you sometime in the middle of your life, without your even noticing, then

grows in darkness like a tuber, night after night, until it suddenly breaks the topsoil of your life and takes over.

Until recently, Sharon had worked on a hospital ward for mothers with postpartum psychosis. She was not a doctor or a therapist—she worked in administration—but still her duties included managing and monitoring these troubled young women, the hospital’s mission being to care for the babies and the mothers in their moment of crisis, so that the babies were not taken away and permanently rehomed. It was interesting and satisfying work. For twenty years, she’d felt herself to be in her exact right place, doing a job that only she could do, in this particular corner of London.

Part of this certainty stemmed back to her childhood, to her own brush with what she now knew not to term madness. She was about ten years old at the time. She had stood in front of a mirror in her mother’s flat and had “intrusive thoughts,” and for a few days after that she’d actually heard voices, many of them, very loud in her head. These voices were accompanied by a sense of “seeing” sentences move around her bedroom, liberated from the page, just floating on the ceiling and in front of her eyes, almost all of them from the Bible. Luckily, whatever this was did not last and, after those few days, never happened again. But it sparked a permanent curiosity. As a teen-ager, she watched a lot of films set in mental institutions, and began to feel that she might be the right kind of person to work in the field. Yet she was never mathematical or scientific, did badly in school, and hated the self-regard and imperiousness of doctors, both onscreen and in real life. Even when she went for childhood checkups, she’d felt patronized, and meeting the psychiatric consultants on the ward years later did not do much to change her opinion.

Still, her work brought her joy. She took special pride in the fact that hers was a job that could not be advertised or passed on to another person in any simple way: the role had developed around her and her particular skills, like a dress cut for her body alone. She was a secretary and an administrator, yes, but she also knew exactly how to speak to the shell-shocked fathers suddenly confronted with the ravings and violence of their partners, knew how to comfort or entertain bewildered children in the family room as their mothers screamed on the other side of the wall. She dealt with government inspectors, private insurers, police, social workers, the cleaners, orderlies,

midwives, nurses, and doulas (to her initial surprise, rich women could also lose their minds). People said things like “Sharon is the beating heart of this operation,” and when they spoke in this way she did not act fake humble or correct them: it was true. She could talk to anyone, and she didn’t judge. These, her two main skills, were valued on the ward. She was able to keep her cool while all about her swirled this mysterious, fascinating miasma of what she’d once called madness, swallowing the women whole, creating a cloud of misunderstanding between them and the world. It was not her job to correct this misunderstanding. Her job was to make the experience of the ward tolerable for both sides, for the “sane” and the “insane.” (These were not terms she used on the ward. She applied them only when talking to herself.) Though she never did fully comprehend the science of the women’s condition, she had made her own amateur observations, through the years, watching as patients confronted the intrusive thoughts and devilish voices, the hallucinations, the paranoia, the signs and symbols, the interconnectedness of everything.

She noticed how often those connections seemed to pass through figures familiar to her—Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, Satan, angels, demons—and she was comforted by the persistence of them, the way they turned up even here, on the other side of sanity. Once, she made the mistake of trying to express this to one of the consultants. She got told off. She had expressed herself awkwardly, clumsily, O.K.—but was it necessary to speak to her like that? And in front of a nurse? In Morocco, they talk of Allah, the consultant explained, speaking to her as if she were a child, and in New York everybody thinks they’re in “The Truman Show.” On your island they’d probably speak of the spirits. The context changes, but the patient’s broken mode of processing reality remains the same. She nodded at this consultant, privately resolving never to speak to him again. This was around the time that the silence began to take root within her. It was irrational, she knew, but she blamed the consultant. He was like the man who spits an apple seed on the ground, not imagining the tree that will grow from it.

As valued as she had always felt on the ward, she was aware that she’d come into her own during *COVID*. The obligatory P.P.E. arrived, she put it on, and in this way she discovered that she had the gift of speaking to people using only her eyes. Turned out not everybody had this gift. The women on the ward were terrified by the sudden invasion of masked people. But, even

when deep in their delusions, not a one of them mistook masked Sharon for a duppy or a djinn or a zombie, as they so often did with the consultant psychiatrists. She truly became an essential worker. Behind her mask, though, the silence bloomed. Not speaking to a consultant was no loss, but she *was* meant to speak to the nurses and the families and the two women who worked in the office with her, and all of that became increasingly difficult. She struggled for a year, telling no one, until the silence took on such a dimension that it became an impediment to her work, even a danger to the patients.

A well-meaning female consultant took her aside, lecturing Sharon about a series of drugs she had taken, which were a “godsend”—they had “saved her,” apparently. She hadn’t got them from the N.H.S., but she believed you probably could, with a bit of effort, although whatever the N.H.S. prescribed would most likely not be “hormone identical.” Sharon listened patiently to all this nonsense, returned to her cubicle, and got on with her day. A few weeks later, one of the cleaners, Iphigenia, spotted Sharon, pearly with sweat and deep in silence, staring into space. Iphigenia explained that in Guinea the women eat yams. That same day, Sharon went to the African food shop on Kilburn High Road and bought many more yams than usual, boiled them, mashed them, and ate them with everything for months. Her daughters thought she was crazy. Her husband had always had a soft spot for yams and was glad for the sudden bounty. The silence grew anyway.

She decided to take early retirement. On her final day, she got a box and went to clear out her cubicle, unpinning the postcards and photographs that had long decorated the space, every one of them, she now realized, the portrait of a silent person, although the silence in each case was different. The Ife head from Nigeria was a proud silence. The pride of a self-sufficient empire. The old photograph of her husband was silent because that young man no longer existed, having been superseded by eight or nine different versions of the same man. She couldn’t remember what on earth this long-ago handsome boy was smiling about or what—his mouth slightly open, as if about to speak—he was on the verge of saying. But there he sat, smiling, in a café, in Bath, with sun-drenched oolitic limestone behind his head, a healthy young man, with no idea that he would ever be otherwise. They had both asked a lot of questions about the architecture that weekend—it was their first time out of London, ever—and that was how they’d learned that

the stone in Bath was called oolitic limestone. Not that it mattered anymore what it was called. Her husband was now a chronically ill man, and the responsibility for the family rested entirely on her shoulders. The world is everything that is the case.

Next to her boy-husband was a little photo of her best friend, smiling and silent, but, in her case, it was the silence of the grave. On the back of the photo, the funeral home had printed her name, the dates of her birth and death, and the sentence “What is written upon thy forehead, thou wilt come to it.” Which sounded Biblical, but her friend had been an Algerian Muslim. When Sharon Googled it, an A.I. overview explained that it came from Hindu and somehow also Islamic tradition and meant basically that you get what’s coming to you. She frowned, reading this. Predestination did not appeal to her, not in those traditions or in her own. It was too much story, somehow, too much knowing. Not enough silence. She didn’t even like it when her daughters said, “Everything happens for a reason,” for if that were true and everyone got what was coming to them, well, then that would have to include the young man pushed in front of the train, the children bombed from above, the women raped during a coup, and, of course, the aggressive cancer that had struck down her dear Algerian friend when she was only thirty-seven. No.

The final postcard was the one with the lovely Harlem Renaissance girl in her pretty pink dress. Her silence was pensive. Dark-skinned, beautiful, with a marcel wave, she looked a little like Sharon’s grandmother. The Harlem girl was anxious, you could tell. It was 1927 and she was wondering what America’s future might hold for her. There were certainly a lot of things that Sharon could have told the girl about that future, revelations concerning what was coming for her people, during the rest of the twentieth century and beyond. But, if you talk to postcards on a ward for psychotic mothers, people will think you’re crazy. Silently, she peeled the Harlem girl off the side of her computer monitor. Scraped away the Blu Tack on her reverse side and put her with the rest of the silent people, back in their box.

Fifty-six was young to retire, and everybody was worried. It was not obvious to anyone how a woman of her age and background and skill set would ever get another job in this economy. Her husband and daughters had a lot to say on the topic. Too much. Who did she think she was, retiring? And how were

they going to live? (Both her daughters were still at home. Neither had a job. Her husband was on benefits.) These were all good questions but they required answers that she could no longer voice. Instead she went online, found a flight for eighty-nine pounds, if you only took hand luggage, and flew to Kraków. She had gone to Kraków once before, when she was young and Kraków was cheaper than Rome or Paris and seemed far less intimidating: there wasn't so much you were supposed to know about it in advance. But the city had not seen many women like her, and as she'd walked down a cobblestone road a man had stared at her and shouted something unintelligible. This made her young husband lose his temper and bump chests with the man—although she'd begged him not to—and after that they'd spent a fair portion of their first-ever European mini-break arguing in the street. These days the city seemed full of new arrivals, from every corner of the globe, and perhaps as a consequence of this no one paid Sharon any mind. It was truly as if she didn't exist. She no longer had to approach a foreign city like a test, one she was destined to fail. And there were no children, young or old, for her to negotiate with or find a toilet for, and no husband to argue with about restaurants or local prices, and no one was shouting at her in Polish. No planned visits to museums or facts to read up on. No itinerary at all. It was August, and the weather was beautiful. She sat in a public square under a beech tree. The light came filtering through the leaves.

At the time of that long-ago mini-break, there had been some debate about whether the Polish man in question had shouted a slur or made some kind of sexual comment, the latter being considered more likely because of the thin yellow summer dress she had been wearing at the time, and her breasts and her legs and her backside, and all the things about her that were the case back then, before children, before her husband sickened, before she had attended the funerals of friends—before everything. Back then, she carried her body like a precious commodity. Beautiful girls were passing by her right now, as she sat on this bench, and she thought that she'd been totally right all those years ago: she *had* been precious, and so were these girls. Everyone talks about the beauty of nature, but people are far more beautiful. So Sharon felt, even if she no longer had the words to express it. Nature is only a backdrop, like scenery at the theatre, and all the man-made objects only props. People are the beauty and the light and the point and the purpose.

This had always been clear to her on the ward, where everything was either white plastic or that industrial British-hospital gray, and by contrast each young woman was like an astonishing flare sent up into a dark sky. Mesmerizing. She herself had been mesmerizing. Still was, but now nobody noticed. She could sit on a bench in Europe completely unmolested, without a single human being saying a word to her, until the sun fell out of the sky. Silence within, silence without. But, even if her own beauty was now lost on the world, gobbled up by it, the same way the stone in Bath eats up a sunbeam, and the leaves eat light and become translucent, revealing their fragile skeletons like the bones in a bat's wing—she still noticed the beauty in others, and she celebrated it, silently. The beautiful girls, yes, of course, but everybody else, too. She certainly appreciated the beech tree above her head, and the light passing through its leaves, and the sudden sweep of bats that flew low through the square, right over her—but never, ever would she mistake all that natural beauty for the true glory that was people. Even if she didn't speak to another person for the rest of her life, she felt she could never be confused on that point.

Suddenly, the sun had gone and the street lamps were lit. They were Victorian-looking, with curlicues of iron, but they were electric. No one seemed at all startled at the way they instantly illuminated the square, revealing lovers and drinkers and darting squirrels and a strange dark woman sitting alone on a bench staring at a beech tree. But to Sharon this warm August day had seemed, until just a moment ago, as long and as broad as the silence. It was a surprise that it could end, that this moment of sitting on a bench in the Polish sunlight wasn't going to last forever. The notifications buzzing in her back pocket were becoming more frantic, arriving every few minutes now. There were far too many to scroll through. Prying the phone out of her pocket, she laid it on her thigh, and glanced at the most recent:

Pls Mum dad's frantic

Who do u even no in Poland???

Do you have a hotel? Somewhere to stay????

The truth was she was waiting for someone to take her to bed. She stared meaningfully at the people who passed her, their waists at her eye level, and knew that they could have no idea how little it would take for her to stand up and follow any one of them home. It would take nothing at all. How could they imagine such a thing? She was silent. Didn't want to ask, didn't want to be rejected or even accepted—no. She wanted to make herself clear using only her eyes, without resorting to any of her daughters' careful, sensible conversations about consent—she didn't even want an introduction. To be taken in silence and delivered in silence and returned to silence. Anyone! Whoever passed or momentarily sat by her on the bench, or could be spied drinking European beers at outdoor tables with those stunning yellow umbrellas the color of daffodils, every one of these strangers was more than welcome to come over and penetrate or otherwise envelop her in some way—sucking fucking spitting rutting kissing stripping tying holding dominating submitting. There were no boundaries anymore. From dust you have come and to dust you shall return, and somewhere in the middle of that process her boundaries had become fluid, and now it appeared that Sharon might literally do anything. What would her pastor say if he saw her? Perhaps that she had been invaded by demons, which was what he thought about the women on the ward. But it turned out pastors knew some things and not others. Daughters, too: they knew some things and not others. Husbands and consultants, also.

If pressed, Sharon thought, she would admit to believing that there is a gigantic mystery at the center of the world, a many-faceted jewel, and that no person glimpses more than a facet of it. She didn't know the science behind it, or, rather, the theology, but she knew that much. One day soon, she would be dead and buried and daffodils would grow out of what once was Sharon. Her husband would mourn her—theirs had been a great love—and some facet of Sharon would continue to be visible, no doubt, through her girls. But to everybody else she would become a mere aspect of the world, to be noticed or ignored. Just another one of those things that are, or were, the case, like everything else. But surely one of these Polish people had a room? Somewhere she could stay as the temperature dropped? If only she could formulate the question! She'd never spoken during sex, come to think of it, and maybe the silence that had originated in that part of her life was now spreading over all her human activities, even mini-breaks. What is a mini-break? She looked up and saw that it was moonlight filtering through

the leaves of the beech, silvery, delicate. Happy tears ran down her face, with nothing to stop them. She worried that she might look, to these Polish people, like someone who had crossed an ocean in a small boat and now lived on the streets of Kraków, specifically on this bench.

Then suddenly she understood why she was there. It appeared as words in front of her, luminous and yellow and crackling, as if written in the night air with a sparkler. *THE KRAKÓW CHAKRA*. A holy, silent place. Years ago, a guidebook had led Sharon-the-newlywed to seek out a place called Wawel Castle and put her hand against the spot where a magical stone had landed, supposedly thrown by a Hindu god, all the way from India to Poland. According to this guidebook, the stone had buried itself in Kraków, in a corner of a courtyard, inside a castle, and tourists came from all over the world just to be in its presence. To feel the vibrations from this mystical stone. Or, in Sharon's case, to take a picture of her husband standing stiffly on the spot, and then to change places with him and submit to a photo herself, and then later to put these photos above the electric fire in their first flat, as evidence that they, too, could be tourists. Could look at things and not only be looked at.

Yes, she had come to Poland to stand in that mystical courtyard again! In that special corner. To feel the cosmic energy. But *really* feel it this time. Because she would be standing there not as a pretty, skeptical, well-defended young woman with a lot to say, in a yellow dress, on top of the world, but as a silent being who had travelled to this place from a point lower down, far lower, fully humbled by the world, an infinitely old person who was half tree and knew only a shardlike facet of the everything that is the case. Who finally—*finally*—knew all the things she didn't know. Silent. Unlike on her first visit, she had nothing to say about the seven chakras of the world, their reality, or otherwise. No view as to whether these world chakras could possibly correspond to the ones in the body, given that neither exists. A middle-aged woman with no opinions on ancient superstition, on what her husband called “urban legends,” or even on the legitimacy of faiths other than her own, practiced in faraway lands, by brown people who, though brown, looked nothing like her.

And, as if on cue, she spotted one such person approaching. An angel messenger. A young brown woman, with wonderful jet-black hair, wearing

the same North Face jacket that everybody in Poland and perhaps on earth now wore, except Sharon, a jacket that had slowed her progress through Kraków, because every time she saw those three white words—*The North Face*—she felt compelled to stop and face north. At least now she knew why. She stood up. She faced north. There it was, on the hill—the castle! She followed the sacred brown girl northward, all the way to the castle, at the entrance of which the girl turned left and disappeared, having fulfilled her role, having delivered Sharon to the very gates. Maybe that was what happened in the middle of a woman's life: she got delivered to the gates.

How lovely, this castle. A Renaissance courtyard surrounded by a classical arcade in white—arc after arc after arc—like the old town in Kingston, Jamaica. Everywhere reminded her of everywhere else these days, as if the beginning of her life and its forthcoming end were meeting. She looked up into the recesses of each alcove, the way the stone ate light and cast shadows. And then there was the ivy on the walls, lifting and falling in the slight breeze, as if the courtyard itself were breathing. Sharon followed the ivy as it stretched itself from wall to wall, a clutch of desperate tendrils, curling from one corner to the next, like a young mother feeling her way down a dark corridor, looking for her child. A bell rang. People seemed in a terrible hurry to get to the famous mystic corner. There was nothing special-looking about the particular patch of wall—it was just a corner. But everybody wanted to stand there, and the castle's gates would soon close, time was running out. It was clear to Sharon that there were all kinds of ways to approach the situation, many of which were unfolding right in front of her, and for a while she stood back and silently observed.

Some people touched the wall with a flat palm, waited a moment, walked away. A few pressed their backs against the wall and half crouched, eyes closed, as if sitting in imaginary chairs. One bold young woman lay on the ground and put her feet up, wide apart. The chakra was her gynecologist. The chakra was a midwife, come to deliver the woman's baby Jesus and keep him safe, until she understood that he was not really Jesus. A young man in a North Face thrust his groin at the corner, as if he wanted to fuck the Kraków Chakra or imagined it would bring him some advantage, down there. He looked back over his shoulder at his friends as he did this, laughing, and they all laughed with him. Young men, in Sharon's narrow experience, seemed to be afforded only the tiniest glimpse of the many-

faceted mystery, to the point that most of them appeared entirely blind to it. (Sharon had no sons, but she'd met the young men who came in and out of her daughters' bedrooms.) The facets of the world, Sharon suspected, revealed themselves to people at different times. There had to be a reason that all the fairy tales speak of wise old women, that it was usually the oldest woman in the village who got the better of sly Anansi.

Sharon approached the wall. To her left, not a foot away, stood an old white woman. Her right hand looked like the hands most people have, but her other hand was very flat, tinged purple and green, mottled like a fish's belly, and hanging like a dead fish. The woman seemed to have no control over it. It didn't move or spasm, it only flopped, lifeless—an appendage. Never had Sharon seen anything like it. For a moment, she forgot all about the Kraków Chakra. Though she had always hated to be stared at, and had fiercely admonished her daughters, as children, never to stare, she now found that she could not help herself. The world is everything that is the case. It is the fish in Jamaica trawled in from Treasure Beach, who lie thunderstruck on the sand, mouths open, amazed to be so dead, so out of their element. It is also the fish that sit in the melting ice in the Irish fish shop, stinking up the Kilburn High Road in the summer, horseflies squatting in their eyeballs. And it is all the hands. Reaching for the Christ child, batting away evil spirits, grasping after floating words. Hands that work and don't work. Minds that work and don't work—or not in the way the consultants wish they would. Fish at home in the sea. Fish out of their element. From the North Face to the South Face, from the sunlight to the moonlight, from a seed to a tree! What a world!

The woman was about twenty years older than Sharon. She wore a padded gilet with little primroses all over it, navy Capri pants, and a pair of Birkenstocks. She was not tall. She had let her very curly hair go white, and the little corkscrews sprang up all over like the crinkly shredded paper in which you might wrap something precious. So precious. The old woman put her feet together and leaned forward at an angle and placed her forehead squarely on the Kraków Chakra, where the mystic energy of the world was thought to be both most intense and most accessible to human beings. As the old woman's wrinkled skin touched the white stone, Sharon saw her smile. Some wisdom had been transmitted. A secret text meant for this old woman alone, as her dead-fish hand hung by her side, unconnected to anything.

Such a woman, Sharon guessed, was far beyond wondering or caring about what she looked like to these Polish people. She was in a different place than Sharon—beyond Sharon. And Sharon could just about see that place. One day, she hoped to reach it. That silent clearing under the trees on the other side of the middle of life. What would it be like to be at home there, as this woman seemed at home? Where the light filters through the leaves and there is no longer anything at all to say. Assuming the same position as this wise old woman, Sharon put her feet together. She leaned forward, letting the tears roll, and placed the only part of her face that was dry—her forehead—silently against the stone. ♦

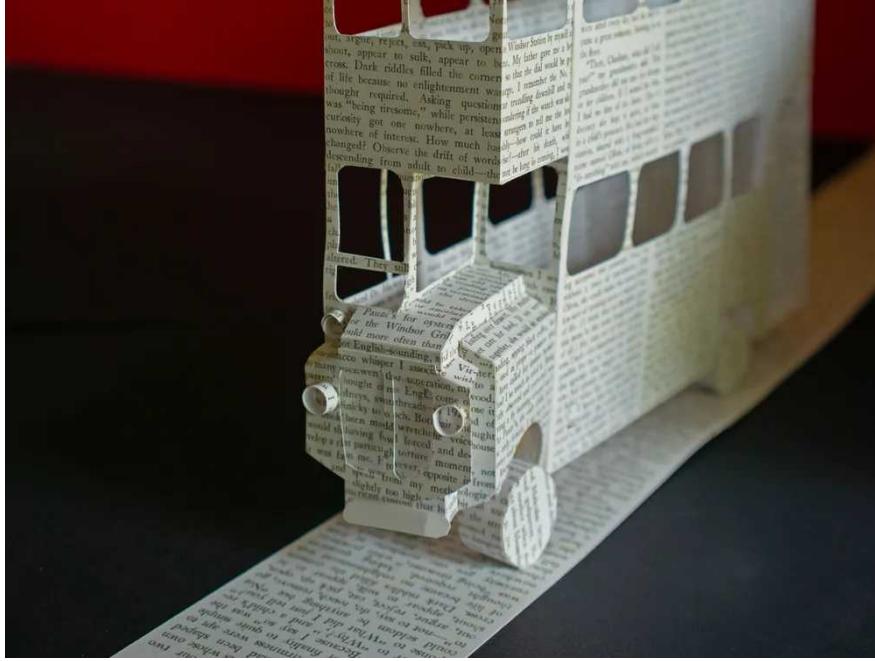
*This story was inspired by Grace Paley's "[My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age](#)," which was published in the magazine in 2002.*

Fiction

# Jubilee

By Jhumpa Lahiri

June 30, 2025



A wooden ruler with the etched faces of Henry VIII's six wives running down the middle; ticket stubs from Hampton Court and the Chamber of Horrors, where we walked ahead of our mothers, hand in hand; a few wrappers of Dairy Milk. I still see clearly the brochure from Madame Tussaud's, a green nameplate on the cover with white lettering. We shuddered at the likeness of one particularly sinister man standing in an olive-colored three-piece suit with old brown pharmaceutical bottles behind him. We'd seen him in the chamber dedicated to those who poisoned and stabbed and slashed. Later, flipping through the brochure, sitting side by side, we braced ourselves for his effigy; how we dreaded turning to that page. A Mavis Gallant story I discovered only recently likens the compulsion to save tickets and programs to a type of narcissism: that's how a mother interprets a daughter's need to hold on to memorabilia. But was that not what Gallant had done in some of her stories, and taught me to do? Intertwining invention with preserved bits and scraps of life? Already that

spring, about to turn ten in the city of my birth, I was attempting to leave some trace, struggling to glimpse myself on a murky surface.

There were objects that Joya and I could not paste into our matching notebooks from WH Smith. One was a miniature silver double-decker bus. Joya wasn't with us that day; my mother had handed me enough heavy coins to purchase it from a trinket stand in Trafalgar Square, where long white poles around Nelson's Column were festooned with regal banners and topped with crowns. The items I subsequently began to covet, which were somewhat more costly, were eventually bought with the understanding that they were to serve as my official birthday gifts: a pair of smallish dolls that came—and thereafter lived most of the time, for safekeeping—in two transparent tubular containers. One was a palace guard wearing a red jacket and a bearskin hat made of black felted material. The other, slightly larger, was a girl who played the bagpipes and had hair that curled up at the ends. Their faces were impassive, but their eyes had lids and lashes that blinked. I was told that the guards, in real life, were famous for their ability to stand perfectly still for impressive lengths of time. Both dolls were made of plastic. I had not owned them for long when the palace guard emerged from his container and the delicate gold sword he clutched in his fingers snapped in two.

#### The author on the *New Yorker* story that inspired her story.

We'd arrived from the other side of the ocean; my mother and father, typically diffident and apprehensive, had, like a Greek god and goddess, snatched me out of the circumstances of my ordinary life, whisking me from our shaded New England street to the London of the Queen's Silver Jubilee. It was springtime. At home, my schoolmates would still be lining up their lunchboxes by the side of the road to mark the order in which we would file onto the bus. My teachers had asked no questions and assigned no homework. It was understood that, come September, I would rise to the fifth grade in spite of my lengthy absence, and part of me was perplexed by their nonchalance. We had flown over clouds and descended one morning over a landscape of grassy green parabolas. We settled into the back of a shiny black taxi as if it were a small sitting room, with enough extra space for six large suitcases, mostly stuffed with gifts for our relatives, and three smaller ones. My father took the seat that flipped down, facing the back window. My

sister, too small for a seat or a suitcase of her own, slept in my mother's lap. The taxi-drivers of London, my parents told me, knew every street and lane, every address of the city by heart. No one ever had to explain where they were going or how to get there. In fact, there were no questions asked, no comments on the obscene amount of luggage loaded into the car, though when we reached our destination and the driver announced our arrival I noticed that he pronounced the name of the street differently than my father had.

It was the neighborhood in North London my parents knew and trusted; the curving street in Finsbury Park where we would stay, full of plain brick and cream-painted row houses, was just a few streets over from the one where my parents had first brought me home from the hospital. They had lived there for the first two years of my life, a time I could not access through memory, only through their stories; they were the translators of my origins. Joya's parents had lived in the room next door. Our parents had shared a toilet and a kitchen under the dormer windows, a space my mother always referred to as an attic. There are photographs from those years, in an album with captions my mother wrote on bits of masking tape: my parents posing with other recent arrivals from Kolkata, looking relaxed on what must have been a Sunday afternoon. They stood in groups in front of or alongside other buildings, with parked cars and trees and lampposts sometimes visible here and there. The men were bundled in woollen pants, jackets, and ties; my father's overcoat was long and tailored, his hair still wavy and middle-parted. My mother, coltish, looking down at me in a stroller, the only woman among the men, a cardigan over her sari to keep warm. She was slim still, had yet to mourn her father's sudden death or wear printed polyester saris that smelled of Rive Gauche.

The photos were all taken by Joya's father; he was the only one who owned a camera back then. Thanks to him, I can still see my mother sitting in a pretty brown-and-white-wallpapered room with a mound visible beneath her slate-blue silk sari. Her face is turned, and earrings I never recall her wearing dangle from her lobes. She used real vermillion powder to mark her forehead in those days, a blurry red spot floating higher up above her eyebrows than where she would later stick those adhesive maroon dots. There are pictures of Joya's mother, too: still a teen-ager, barely eighteen when she married and left Kolkata. Her name was Piyali; I was told to call

her Piya Mashi. She hadn't known how to boil rice—my mother had taught her everything she knew. I'd believed that every baby girl lying in a pram was me until the day my mother told me that one of them was, in fact, Joya. We were born less than six months apart, and my mother passed down to her everything that once belonged to me, relieved, when our move to America was official, to have to pack only the bare essentials. When, at school, we'd had to bring some object tied to our infancy for a day of show-and-tell—a rattle, a Teddy bear, a pair of scuffed shoes—she told me that, other than a Victorian guinea some friends had made into a locket for my rice ceremony, and which lived sequestered in a bank vault, she'd given it all away. I ended up bringing my baby book to school. Though my mother had diligently filled in information about my weight, height, immunizations, and first words, the page for baby's first haircut was left blank. Silently blaming her for this, I cut off a lock of now coarser strands to show my classmates, affixing them to the page with a crisscross of Scotch Tape.

The sojourn in London had nothing to do with my tenth birthday; it had been planned so that my father could carry out research at the British Library. In August, we would proceed to Kolkata, where, the previous August, my maternal grandmother had died, after four years of widowhood. But before that final stop on our journey this parenthesis, this change of pace for me, this inaugural international voyage for my sister, this return for my parents to the first life they'd shared and left behind.

WHAT YOUR GIRLFRIEND IS REALLY UP TO  
WHEN YOU'RE OUT OF TOWN



The steps of the building, painted a different shade from the rest of the house, were peeling, and the steep staircase inside was covered in a thin lichen-green carpet. We'd rented two rooms on the third floor, with a bathroom at the top of the stairs for our use. The square sitting room had a gas fireplace and little brown moths that fluttered in the corners. The landlord, an engineer named Mr. Palit, who occupied the ground floor, was an acquaintance of my parents' from the late sixties, one of the few members of their Bengali circle who still lived in the city. He'd been a bachelor then but now had a wife and a young son with long eyelashes who went off to school every day in shorts and a gray blazer. I remember you when you were younger than your sister, like this, Mr. Palit said, holding an invisible infant in his arms. He wore a gold ring on his pinkie finger. We sat for a moment in their kitchen, where I was served a cup of Ovaltine and a slice of jelly roll; my mother dipped a McVitie's Digestive into her tea and said it had been eight years since she'd bitten into a proper biscuit. We were welcome to come downstairs in the afternoons to watch some television, Mrs. Palit said. The middle floor was rented by an elegant older man who had remained a bachelor, also Bengali but raised in Burma, whose rosy complexion and white hair made him look more English than Indian. The rooms smelled of gas and damp, there was a box of matches to light the stove, an unfamiliar brand of liquid soap for washing dishes—that, too, my mother recalled with fondness. In the bathroom, which filled with morning light, the chain to

flush the toilet was almost out of reach, and the sibylline whisper of the refilling tank seemed an eternal admonishment to the living.

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Jhumpa Lahiri read "Jubilee."](#)

Joya and her parents turned up the first weekend to welcome us back to London. Joya's father set up her old crib for my sister, and Piya Mashi brought small jars she'd filled with all the spices my mother would need to see her through three months of cooking. Anything for old friends, they said. Piya Mashi hugged me tight and stared intently into my eyes, caressing my face, noting the ways I'd changed. This is your birthplace, your *janmasthan*, she said. She sounded giddy; her voice was like a girl's. She's *my* friend, you already have yours, Joya said matter-of-factly, cutting off this display of affection. She grabbed me by the hand and led me down the stairs, figuring out the way to the back garden, where she taught me to play a game called "two balls" against the brick wall. It was a game one could play alone by deftly transferring one of two pink rubber balls from one hand to another. We were like twins separated at birth, she said. She had her mother's dark restless eyes, a husky voice, slightly prominent eyeteeth. I admired her quickness at two balls and her smooth side-parted hair, liking the way it fell over one eye.

After lunch, we went by bus to see Big Ben and Westminster Abbey, and back in Finsbury Park we walked over to the house where our parents had once lived all together, the house—though this was not mentioned—where we'd both been conceived, on either side of the same wall. All day our parents reminisced. I gathered that London was the same and not the same, that the city had its share of troubles and tensions, that the National Front wanted us all gone, and that it was no longer unheard of to spot litter on the street. The price of fish and chips had gone up, of course, and the Beatles weren't bursting into song on a rooftop. Still, one had only to sit in a taxi to keep from feeling lost. Joya and I tried to mimic each other's accents; apparently when I was little I'd sounded like her. Our parents made plans for another weekend, she told me to keep the two balls she'd brought, and when we waved goodbye I already longed to see her again.

The bedroom where the four of us slept in the Palits' house had just one bed. My spot was on the extreme left side, flush up against the wallpaper. It was patterned to make it seem as if pieces of it had been torn away to reveal a layer of netting underneath. But the resulting illusion of narrow peaks emerging here and there made me think, as much as I willed them not to, of the people in white hoods I'd learned about in a history book. They'd begun to populate my nightmares, shouting over the crackle of a burning cross on our front lawn. I kept the observation to myself, thinking we were now far from the crass manners and open fury of America. The bedroom was at the front of the house, lace curtains hung at the windows, and every morning I could hear the delivery of our two milk bottles on the peeling steps: the full-cream one with the gold cap reserved for my sister. I poured some of the silver cap over cornflakes, and my mother put a few drops of the gold cap into her tea.

My father left before we did, alone, knotting his tie and taking the Tube to Holborn. The three of us set out later on errands; it was clear that this was what my mother had been used to doing before. In America, to get anywhere from our shady street, we had to take the car. On Thursday evenings, for example, after my father returned from work and had a quick cup of tea, we all went grocery shopping and I was allowed a fast-food dinner because of the late hour. But in London my mother was in charge and we bought food every day. After she buckled the belt of her yellow checkered mackintosh, we walked to the end of the street and turned onto Seven Sisters Road and again onto Holloway Road, passing all sorts of shops, newsagents, Cypriot bakeries, greengrocers, a butcher shop where a smiling pig's head hung in the window inviting us in. We entered the places she remembered and liked, her mood always lifting when anyone said "Ta, love." It was my job to arrange our purchases under the seat of my sister's stroller, and help carry the bags that didn't fit.

Almost every expedition down Holloway Road promised a small indulgence on my mother's part, an ice lolly or a Dairy Milk; this was a new side of her. In the supermarket we visited, there was a section for books and magazines where I would browse as my mother shopped with my sister strapped in the cart. It was the closest thing I knew to a bookstore, the kind of place my parents didn't generally enter in the United States, not that there seemed to be many in the town where we lived. I found paperback copies of books that

the school librarian had read to me, only with different covers. If my mother was willing, I was allowed to slip one into the shopping cart, and I reread them with the extra satisfaction of knowing that they were mine. Each week I also bought copies of *Look-In*; one had ABBA on the cover, with pinups inside that I wasn't allowed to put up on the troubling walls of the Palits' home. Instead, having somehow obtained glue, scissors, and a notebook, I spent long afternoons cutting and pasting pictures of pop stars and tennis players from the pages of the magazine. Even on days when I received nothing special, I was simply happy to inhabit my birthplace, my *janmasthan*: this almost unbearably meaningful fact that linked me to every red letter box and slightly tilting double-decker bus that rumbled along Holloway Road. I convinced myself that shopkeepers and pedestrians who glanced our way detected, by some form of telepathy, that I had been born in that very neighborhood, thereby taking me out of the protective tube that kept me from belonging anywhere. I knew too little about the world to realize what they might really have thought of an Indian woman in a sari, leather moccasins, and a mackintosh shopping with her two children—if, of course, they stopped to think of us at all.

My mother had her own long list of items to buy for herself: it included complicated bras with thick straps and thin black cardigans, both of which came from Marks & Spencer. America produced flimsy bras, bulky knitwear—these were among the many things made better in England, she said. We went from one branch of Boots to another to find the right shade of the blue Yardley compact she kept in her purse, and, once in a while, we braved the bigger shops on Oxford Street. We picked out stainless-steel eggcups and a toast rack from British Home Stores. Mrs. Palit always served her toast in a toast rack with a plate of butter curls beside it, and my mother set out to do the same. It would have been too risky to carry the teapots she admired on the store's shelves all the way to India and back to America.

That summer marked ten years since my mother had become a mother. I would be conscious of this milestone when my own son turned ten, but I wonder if my mother measured time that way. I imagine she was distracting herself as she marched capably up and down Holloway Road, pushing her second child, whom my grandmother hadn't lived to see, both dreading the return to the city of her own birth and counting the days. In America, my mother had obtained a license but didn't drive, having once hesitated too

long at a changing traffic light and gotten flustered. Here she descended calmly with two children on escalators too narrow for two people to stand side by side, among hordes of humanity, into what seemed to me the Avernian depths of public transportation. The person I was aware of being, in a mix of clothes derived largely from church rummage sales and the Butterick patterns my mother followed in feverish bursts at her sewing machine, stood out less in the bustle of a big city, on crowded platforms waiting for the Tube. We glided toward Uxbridge, toward Cockfosters, away from all that. This was what turning ten meant to me—not a celebration of what had come before but a thankful distance from the familiar elements of my life. Already, I was eager to begin anew.

I tried to play two balls in the garden the way Joya had taught me, but it was less fun alone. I went downstairs with my family now and then to watch “Top of the Pops” on the Palits’ television, or cartoons too young for me and too old for my sister, which only their son enjoyed, crowding on their hard-backed settee. Mrs. Palit remained Mrs. Palit; I never turned her into an honorary maternal aunt. My mother and Mrs. Palit would talk about the cost of living and people they knew in common. Soon enough my mother began to talk about my grandmother, too. We hadn’t been in India when she died, and my mother hadn’t flown there afterward. It was the end of summer, my sister was a baby, my father had no vacation, and my school year was about to start. It would never have occurred to her to make a trip on her own. We always had to travel as a family in case catastrophe struck. When it happened, the phone rang, it was the middle of the night; I heard my mother’s voice through my bedroom wall repeating the words *ki bolchish*, what are you saying, to one of her brothers with such bewilderment that it might have been mistaken for excitement. My father came into my room and told me to get up. For the rest of that night, we all had to lie side by side on a sheet my mother spread on the floor at the foot of their bed. My mother neither cried nor slept. She soothed my sister and gave her a bottle of milk. I don’t know why lying on the floor after hearing the news seemed necessary to her, whether it was connected to some ritual of mourning, and I never asked her to explain it to me.

And so as the Queen was celebrating a quarter century on the throne and I was eager to face a new decade, my mother, at thirty-eight, was bracing to face the rest of her life as an orphan. Until then, death and distance blurred

together, letters had stopped but the anticipation of returning and seeing my grandmother again, even as a ghost—that sweet suspension of disbelief that exile allows—must have sustained her. Those three months in London, my grandmother still hovered between the dead and the living, just as my mother hovered between her current and former selves. Soon the curtain would fall and she would feel the full weight of death sinking down beside her.

And yet the boundary between death and life, between this world and another, was blurring for both of us in the gray light of London, and my mother's underlying fear of returning to Kolkata must have been instilling fears in me. Why else was I seeing Klansmen in the wallpaper, or expecting Charon the ferryman at the bottom of a Tube escalator? Why else, the night Mrs. Palit invited us to dinner, did my eyes fall on suspicious dark objects, not much larger than prominent flecks of salt, in the dal? I convinced myself that they had once been living creatures, that a small colony of moths had fallen into the pot and spread their wings in the act of dying. I began to avoid them, picking them out and putting them to the side of my plate using my finger. What's wrong, what is it? Mrs. Palit had asked, and for a moment the adult conversation stopped, like the scratch of a needle being lifted from a record as the violins were swelling in a symphony. All eyes were on me, I was drawing attention to myself, the palace guard had shifted his stance. She notices the tiniest things—if there's a spider in the corner of the ceiling her eye goes right to it, my mother had said by way of explanation, only making things worse, and I was told later, by both my parents, never to embarrass them that way again.



Despite those memories, perhaps it is my mother's abiding trust and affection for London that continues to cast its dappled light on those spring-summer months full of pavements, pigs' heads, and peeling steps. Once, as we were waiting for the Tube, she told me a story: when she was eight months pregnant with me, she'd decided to go by herself all the way to Balham, where, she'd learned, a distant cousin of hers was living. She'd scribbled a note to my father, who was already at work, and, when she returned after dark, later than he had, they had quarrelled—he had accused her of ignoring her well-being and mine. She expressed no remorse as she told me the story; it was intended to convey how intrepid she'd been, willing to risk her husband's disapproval for her own happiness. Of course there had also been the time, before she got pregnant, that the teddy boy standing outside a pub had made a comment and walked threateningly a few steps behind her just to shake her up a bit, and the time, when I was two or three months old, that she'd stopped into a shop for a loaf of bread and stepped out to find an empty pram. The woman clutching me against her chest was about to turn the corner—*About to turn the corner*, she always went out of her way to stress when telling the story—at the very moment that the nearest bobby on hand spotted us. My mother emphasized this to show that she was narrating the rough draft of tragedy: had that woman been walking slightly faster, or the bobby been slightly slower, I really might have disappeared.

forever from her life. But even on the busy streets of London, all one had to do was call for help, and help came.

She must have been remembering her arrival in the city in the spring of 1966, a girlish twenty-seven, recently married, far from Kolkata for the first time. She was the daughter of a father who doted on her, of four siblings the only girl. Everything would have been new: the silence and chill compared with the twisting lanes of North Kolkata, the delicate birdsong in the mornings, the septic smell of ancient plumbing, trips twice weekly to public baths to keep clean, the English language she both knew and didn't, a husband in her bed, learning to keep quiet as he studied in a corner in the evenings, learning to accept what he needed from her in the dark. But she was still a daughter when she sat down to write a letter to her parents to tell them she was expecting me: in her mind, the twin peaks of Parnassus, however distant, were still prominent when she gazed out the window.

My father had intended to learn how to drive a manual car before returning to England but hadn't followed through in the end. And so we travelled by British Rail, out past Wembley, to visit Joya and her parents for a few days and watch Virginia Wade win Wimbledon on their television. Joya's father met us at the station, and she had come along, too. The house was not so different from ours in America, on two floors. It seemed open and airy compared with our pair of rooms in London, though in reality it was likely modest and drafty, with a pebble-dash front and boxy windows. The streets were flat, there were few trees, all the houses had short driveways and blooming rosebushes outside. This, or something similar, would have been our life had my parents remained in England. We cheered for Virginia in her pink cardigan when she held the gold plate high over her head, and later in the garden Joya and I pretended to play tennis with our two rubber balls and some broomsticks. We sat on the carpet in her bedroom and cut and pasted pictures from *Look-In*, creating blizzards of scraps. I might have lost my accent, but I was still British, her parents assured me—my temperament was cold and reserved. In fact, Joya seemed like the American one, they joked.

When my mother was busy tending to my sister, Piya Mashi drew a bath for both of us; it was as if we were still toddlers six months apart playing in soapy water. Drying me off with a towel, she told me not to be shy, that she'd seen me so small that there could be no shame between us. I had been

the first child of the village, and this made me the child of many people. Our parents continued to talk about the years they'd lived in close quarters, and Joya's father opened albums with pictures of me that I'd never seen before. They vividly remembered a ghost story they'd once watched on the landlord's television—it had been an adaptation of "The Turn of the Screw"—and how they'd been too terrified when it was finished to fully shut the door to the toilet when they each had to use it, the other three standing guard. They were laughing now as they told the story, recalling the absurdity of clutching one another as they'd climbed the stairs.

To those who asked for details, my mother said that my grandmother had gone into kidney failure. One of my uncles had stepped out to smoke a cigarette on the balcony of the hospital at the medical college where she'd been admitted, and that was when it had happened, my mother explained. He had written it to her in a letter. Had he not decided to have that cigarette there and then, he might have seen his mother draw her last breath. This was the tragedy inside the tragedy, in my mother's telling. That spring and summer, she told the story to Mrs. Palit, to Piya Mashi, and to whoever else might lend a sympathetic ear. She was keeping her mother alive that way, postponing her grief.

Of my grandmother I remembered little. She had looked after me when my mother went out in Kolkata to see friends and family, to the theatre and the cinema, to the tailor to get measured for new blouses and petticoats. She had taught me to read the Bengali alphabet, and she'd read to me, speaking slowly, long stories about talking animals who tricked one another. She would put grains of puffed rice between her lips to make me laugh. She was so afraid of electricity that she would cover the tip of her finger with the border of her sari before touching the switch. There was a time, when I was sitting between my mother and my grandmother in a hand-pulled rickshaw, that a funeral procession passed by on the bustling avenue. My grandmother, agitated, had shielded my eyes with a cloth bag to prevent me from seeing the dead body. Turn away, she'd said. I'd seen it anyway wrapped in white, the lightly bobbing face, chanting pallbearers running alongside the rickshaw, marigolds piled on the bier.

My mother spoke of my grandmother's sober beauty, plain and simple but nevertheless an inspiration to my grandfather. He had painted her in profile

holding a terra-cotta water vessel, and also bent over her sewing machine. She took in work as a seamstress to help pay their bills. In the first painting, she posed without a blouse under her sari, the old-fashioned way, always dignified. But what my mother spoke about most to me was the time my grandmother contracted tuberculosis in her spine and had to lie flat for a year, immobilized in some sort of plaster cast. Every two weeks, a doctor came and gave her an injection that made tears run down her face. I imagined my grandmother as a mummy, her long dark hair streaming toward the floor. From that corpselike position she'd knitted innumerable sweaters and taught my mother to take her place: to cook for the family, to chop and to season, to tidy the rooms, to receive guests and offer them refreshments, to rinse away the menstrual blood that darkened her bedpan. She allowed only my mother to do this. My mother was eleven or twelve and had yet to get her own period. I don't think this was a story she shared with Mrs. Palit or Piya Mashi; at some point she'd handed it down to me. I can't remember when.

For years and years, usually on weekend nights when we weren't entertaining, my mother would announce that it was time for a slide show. We would choose a specific year and turn off the lights. The spring and summer of 1977, full of photos of me and Joya, was one of my favorites, though already I didn't like myself in pictures. Somewhere between the ages of three and ten, I had lost the ability to look delightful and carefree in front of a camera. I was wary of attention, and I suffered from a skin condition that lined my lower lip like the stain from the rim of a coffee cup. One of the carousels contained evidence of all the tourist attractions we visited during those three months in England, most of them with Joya and her family, all seven of us somehow stuffed into the car, me in the black tasselled poncho I'd asked my mother to knit me; of course, I still recall moments of actually being there, too. One Sunday, for example, we had driven out past sheep fields to Cambridge, and after Joya's father found a place to park, feeling peckish, he'd produced a round red tomato and bitten into it as if it were an apple. This was not caught on a slide but remains lodged in my mind as if it were yesterday. We entered a college and saw an ancient tortoise who, we somehow gathered, had been crawling on a rectangle of grass for close to a hundred years.

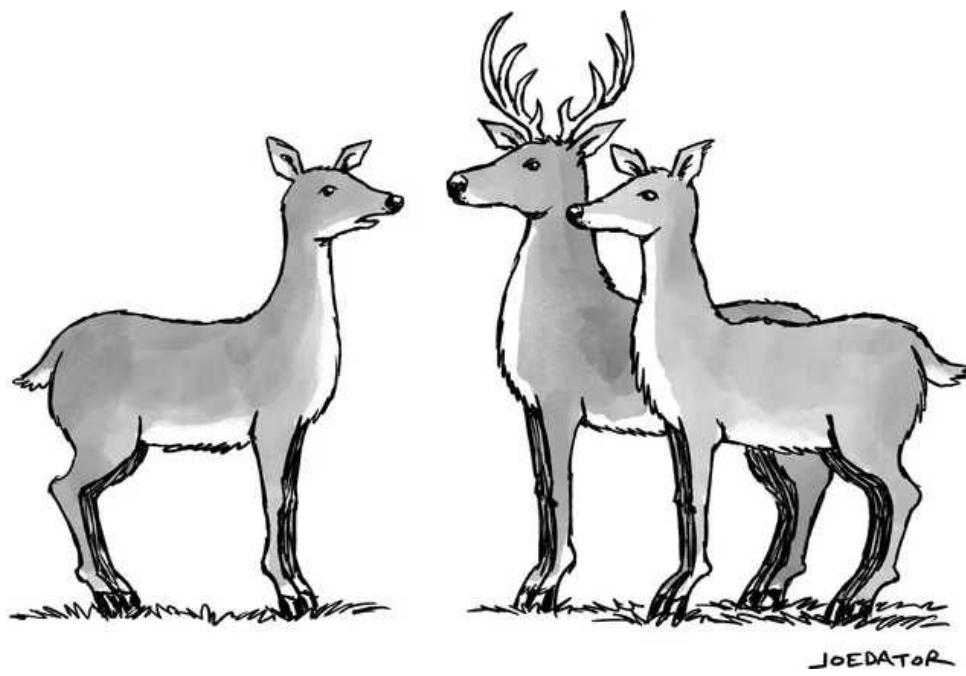
*Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived.* We'd chanted this wandering through the labyrinth at Hampton Court; Joya told me it was the easiest way to remember the succession of Henry's wives. On the way back from that visit, or perhaps it was the time we went to Windsor Castle, we stopped at a shopping center where there was a big bookshop I wanted to go into, but we spent most of the time in a department store while my mother looked for discounted socks to take to her brothers and uncles in Kolkata and Piya Mashi bought my mother a pair of salt and pepper shakers that were meant to look like old-fashioned silver, light as a feather but elaborately carved. Piya Mashi also picked out matching green tops made of some synthetic material with a flouncy panel at the neckline. Joya and I wore them out of the store, excited to be matching. Her father took a picture of us side by side. My arms are thicker than hers, my smile stiff. Joya had been allowed to pull the flouncy bit off her shoulders, like the singers in ABBA, but since my mother told me to keep covered, the top surrounded me sadly like a funereal wreath.

Why, when I stick my hand into the past, does it come away coated with cobwebs, as it did a few summers ago when I leaned down to reach for something—a cheap serrated knife, perhaps, that could be used to slice bread in a rented vacation house—on the bottom shelf of a dusty five-and-dime store? Within my first decade of life, a version of that cobweb had settled over me, too. Was that what gave me a British disposition according to Joya's parents? Was it my tendency to listen to my mother's stories and sit still? Joya was restless, not just her eyes but all of her. She fidgeted—she was no palace guard. She flashed her teeth when she smiled; she grabbed me by the arm to lead me to the garden. She didn't braid her hair before going to bed. Her room was messy, even if she spoke proper English in my mother's opinion, with "can't's" that didn't offend. When Joya and I played two balls, she didn't seem to want to break through to the other side of the wall. She was happy in her pebbly house; she didn't fear that death might flutter onto her plate or feel that terror lurked in wallpaper.

Piya Mashi smiled when she held my face in her hands; she looked to the future and not the past. I doubted that she told Joya stories about nearly being snatched away forever by a deranged stranger or what it might be like to spend a year of your life lying flat on your back getting painful injections in the spine and knitting sweaters. After the bath with Joya, I was studying

my reflection in the mirror as Piya Mashi untangled my wet hair, when she predicted that I would be extremely devoted to the man who would one day become my partner. Apparently, at ten, I was already transmitting the traits of a good wife. I have always loved her for saying that to me. There are things one is told as a child that one never forgets.

For my birthday, my parents invited Joya and her parents, the Palits, the bachelor on the second floor, anyone else they could think of. The man who had driven me and my parents back from the hospital came all the way from Sheffield for the occasion, with his wife and son, as did the couple who had given me the guinea. Too bad it was in a bank vault, my mother said, otherwise she'd have let me wear it on a chain. In addition to these guests, there were also assorted people they'd met in recent weeks, friends of friends, all of them Bengali. And so I both was and was not the center of attention. There was the usual chaos of overlapping conversations and food, sauce-filled plates, men who smoked cigarettes and pipes. My mother had fried shrimp cutlets, my favorite thing. It was July, the windows were open, the rooms crowded and warm, and so Joya and I escaped to the garden and played two balls. We took the bagpipe player and the palace guard out of their plastic tubes. It was in Joya's hasty fingers that the guard's sword snapped in two. So sorry, she said, and I pretended not to be upset with her.



We were called inside for rice pudding and jelly roll. No cake or candles. Yes, ten years old already! I had been two days late, a high-forceps delivery —how time flew. The hospital where I was born had been bombed during the war. My mother recounted it all cheerfully, this time adding a new detail I hadn't heard before: the day I was scheduled to be sent home from the hospital, my father had brought a light-blue sweater, one of several that my mother had knitted in advance, not knowing if I was to be a boy or a girl. But blue was unacceptable, and so he was sent back home to fetch a pink one. The British were a strict people; they maintained standards of speech and dress. No baby girl leaves this hospital clothed in blue, the nurse had firmly said. As I didn't yet understand the complications of my mother's labor, it was the impact of that detail that marked my turning ten. I was partly upset with the nurse for sending my father back home again, partly angry at my father for being careless, for not knowing better. He had gone all the way to the house to search through a pile of knitted items. His wife wore blue, he must have thought, so why couldn't his daughter? I imagined him walking back, or taking the bus—how far had it been?—doing as he'd been told, and, as my mother recounted the story, she turned the city unkind. Its strict people had inconvenienced my father, perhaps humiliated him. Would the nurse have been so insistent had my father been English? My father shrugged and played the hapless husband. His sideburns were noticeable—in his own way, he followed the styles of the day. What did I know back then, he said, always quick to take the blame, and the guests laughed at the memory as my eyes burned with tears.

The following week, we would fly to Kolkata, where, for the entirety of my childhood, all death lurked. In America, even in London, it couldn't catch up with us, but there it stared down at us from the walls of every home and pranced beside us on a busy street. Even today, driving by Calcutta Medical College, I picture my uncle looking down from a balcony and smoking a cigarette as his mother breathed her last. On the British Airways plane, my mourning mother would nevertheless delight in the safety demonstration, loving the way the oxygen mask would drop *automatically*, allowing us to breathe *normally*. (Years later, when answering machines became popular, she would aspire to end her recording with the clipped "Thank you" that concluded the safety announcement.) Before landing, she would freshen up in the rest room and dab some 4711 eau de cologne behind her ears. On the ground, we would unlock our suitcases for customs officers to sort through

to make sure we weren't smuggling in contraband goods, and then the airport doors would open to the pungent air of the city and the prick of truth.

My father would have held my sister, some of our relatives must have crowded around to welcome the baby, to fasten a gold chain around her neck, but all I remember is my mother sinking into her brothers' arms; she was an asphodel among them, the stem snapped. Grief, when it hit her, would be out of synch, as my uncles were shaving and rushing off to work the next day, their wives frying fish at the stove. Once she became an orphan, my mother was never the same. Her blood pressure rose, pill bottles lived by the kitchen sink, and I was always afraid that something would snatch her away. All this happened nearly but not quite fifty years ago. "Jubilee" is a form of synecdoche: from the Hebrew *yōbēl*, meaning ram, it came to signify a horn that sounded every fifty years to mark emancipation. The sense of rejoicing that derives from the wild shouts of *iubilare* in Latin didn't emerge in English until the sixteenth century.

I knew nothing about forceps, high or low, when the term entered my vocabulary. My mother never went into specifics or explained what the procedure entailed. Years later, looking it up after I'd given birth without incident to two children, I learned that high forceps are no longer used, that this type of delivery is no longer performed. Before that, ignorant of obstetrics, I felt no guilt for the suffering I'd caused her, no fear that we might both have died. That, too, was the rough draft of tragedy. Had she seen the instrument used to coax me out of her, the crisscross of metal, the glinting blades? Forceps were an English invention. At what point had the doctor deemed them necessary?

When I learned more about them, a part of me even blamed her for not being more capable, for lacking the strength in that crucial moment. But how much of this had to do with her body's unwillingness, how much with my own reluctance? One day I would learn that she had waited as long as she could to get pregnant again because she was terrified after the ordeal of the first time, agreeing to it only because my grandmother told her that she owed me a companion, having sensed, the few times she met me, that I was a lonely child.

Joya and I were both mothers when she fell on the sidewalk one afternoon in a suburb of London not far from where she grew up. She was walking quickly to pick up her younger child from school. Our vow to write to each other after 1977 was short-lived, and many years had passed since our families were in touch, though the ersatz-silver salt and pepper shakers still sat in my mother's china cabinet—her most prized piece of furniture—and were pulled out for special occasions. Wedding invitations were sent, but none of us had the time or energy to attend our respective ceremonies and receptions overseas. Even the cursory holiday cards had tapered off. I had married a man I was devoted to, I had an infant daughter, the silver double-decker bus I'd handed down with quiet ceremony to my son lived in a plastic tub in the jumble of his other toys. Joya had given birth to two girls. Her parents called mine when it was all over. An inoperable mass in her brain—she'd survived six months. Her daughters were already teen-agers. She'd married at eighteen, like her mother, less than ten years after we'd played two balls and sat in a bathtub together. I pictured her on the same sidewalk where we'd posed in matching green tops, thinking she'd merely tripped, before getting up and continuing on her way, putting it out of her mind until the day the headaches became too much to bear and she'd called the doctor.

My parents made a trip to tell me in person, saying they missed the children and had decided on the spur of the moment to take the train to the city. They sat me down on the couch. We dialled the number, two low chirps in succession. Piya Mashi cried when she heard my voice; hers remained a girl's. She said in the end she had prayed for God to take Joya away. I could still hear her voice when I passed the phone to my mother. Piya Mashi said my mother had once taught her everything she knew. Then she asked, Tell me, now what should I do?

After the call ended, I told my mother to get on a plane. She needed to stand beside her old friend, grieve with her, help out for a week or two. It was the decent thing to do. That's what I would do, I added. But my mother turned to the excuse of her own poor health. Already she requested a wheelchair when she flew to Kolkata, and I had to coax her to walk ten blocks to the movie theatre close to my apartment. She felt more secure pushing a shopping cart or my daughter's stroller; otherwise, she'd reach for my hand. Sometimes, as I encouraged her to go one more block, I would remember her, so intrepid in her yellow checkered mackintosh, Holloway Road stretching before us, the

city festooned to honor the Queen. Those months are a lace curtain, parts of the fabric visible, other bits cut away. You should have gone to see Piya Mashi, I would say years after the fact, weaving in the incrimination when tensions flared. I was a grown woman, old enough to wear my guinea on a chain around my neck. I wouldn't have known what to do there, my mother replied feebly in her defense, I'd have only been in the way. She had always been afraid to look death in the face. It was among the many things I held against her, and have let go of now that she's gone. ♦

*This story was inspired by Mavis Gallant's "[Voices Lost in Snow](#)," which was published in the magazine in 1976.*

Fiction

# The Comedian

By Ottessa Moshfegh

June 30, 2025



My father worked nights as the desk attendant at a cheap hotel downtown. It was a thankless job behind bulletproof glass, which was all he had to shield him from demented drunks and screeching prostitutes, from seven in the evening until four in the morning, the poor man. But he had to do it. The next month's rent was always due. Life cost money. I was in high school and growing so quickly that I needed new shoes all the time. And he had to pay my clarinet teacher and the girl who came to clean once a week. My mother hadn't been able to work for years already. By the time I turned sixteen, she was completely blind, and so, while my father was downtown with the scum of the earth, it was my job to keep my mother company, to feed her and put her to bed, etcetera.

Our ground-floor apartment had no views but was crowded with city noises all the same. My mother insisted that we keep the windows shut at all times because, I think, it pained her to hear life happening outside. From our kitchen windows, all you could see was the gray courtyard, pale walls with

marks like blood splatter from rain that had fallen before the cement had fully cured. Outside the bedroom windows, there was a two-foot gap of tinny air, like a laundry chute. Sunlight barely made it all the way down, and pigeons used the cool darkness for their mating rituals. My mother called them garbage birds.

The author on the *New Yorker* story that inspired her story.

Weekday mornings, my father and I walked together to St. Thomas, where he was a math teacher and I was a junior. Every so often, he'd buy me a pack of Twizzlers and himself a pack of NoDoz from the pharmacy. The NoDoz made it hard for him to keep still, so he was always doing something with his fingers, worrying a paper cut or picking at his cuticles. Anything to keep him occupied and busy, to distract him from his exhaustion.

He spoke constantly for the same reason.

“The people downtown, they are not like us, son.” He called me “son.” It was that dignified between us, or he pretended it was. “It’s a different world down there. You don’t see a single normal person. They’re all heathens and whores.”

“Jesus Christ,” I said and crossed myself, and so he did, too.

“And, you know what else, some of the whores look exactly like men,” he said.

“Dad!” came out of my mouth sometimes like a hiccup, not a word but a sound. And sometimes it felt like a common foreign word whose meaning I didn’t really understand. Like “gesundheit.”

“No, no, listen, son,” he insisted, as if it mattered at all what we thought. “A life like that is hard on a woman. They can’t be delicate creatures, I’m saying. I don’t know. It’s very confusing. It’s the wilds of Hell down there.”

**Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

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I crossed myself again and whispered some fake prayer in Latin and snapped my fingers by one ear and then the other, as if to ward off the evil my father was attracting just by talking about it.

“I’m glad you don’t understand,” he said. But of course I understood. We lived not far from downtown, and every summer I’d bike around all the heathens and whores and sneak into the dirty cinemas and steal Twizzlers and cans of Coke from the deli and cans of beer from the liquor store, so of course I knew that downtown was where the interesting people stayed. They were not afraid of evil, and nor was I. My piety, my superstition was an act, a joke, and my father never got it. I had no faith at all as a young person. I thought the whole idea of God was made up.

“You know why nuns smoke?” he asked me. Whenever he felt he’d hit some kind of sharp corner, he’d pivot and turn back into a hapless, happy child with bloodshot eyes behind his thick glasses. He was an innocent. He was a simple, good man. All he wanted was to make me laugh.

“No, I don’t know, Dad. Why *do* nuns smoke?”

He shrugged. “Habit.”

His delivery was very flat and monotonous, like that of an announcer in the subway or one of the nuns taking attendance. I felt sorry for my father, and I could never laugh at him, even if his jokes were funny, which they rarely were. I suspected that he stole a lot of his material from his students or some old joke book in the library, but I could never corroborate this.

“You know why nuns wear pantyhose?” I asked him.

“I don’t know, son. Why?”

“So nobody recognizes them when they rob banks.”

He pretended not to get my jokes, knitting his eyebrows for a moment before putting on a patronizing smile and saying, “Oh, I get it, good one.” But I was naturally funny and glib. I was no fool. My father pretended this wasn’t true. And so he had to pretend not to notice that every time I bested him I snatched a little of his dignity to add to my own pile. That felt correct. I was

the one who'd have to carry it out into the world. He was already out there, and we could both see how poorly he'd tended to his pile.

At school, nothing was more shameful to me than seeing my father drinking from the water fountain, sucking and gulping. The cuffs of his trousers rose up when he bent over, and everyone could see his stringy, naked Achilles tendons. Paper-white skin crawling with wiry black hairs. He rarely wore socks. I was glad that I didn't look anything like him. He had rows of hard, tiny pimples on his forehead along his hairline. He'd scratch at them during our calculus exams, writhing as if his own fate were on the line. I'm sure it was the NoDoz that made him do this. He'd sit behind his desk, stare off into nothingness, gouge out his pimples, and then clean out his fingernails with one of his sharp canine teeth and spit the results into a handkerchief he always kept balled up in his pants pocket.

The other boys at school did laugh at my father. They thought it was hilarious that he could be so good at math yet so bad at normal behavior. He wore shoes that were a half size too big, and his gait was comical. He walked like a duck or a clown, often with a scab of toilet paper stuck to the sole of one shoe. I think he did this on purpose, for the attention. And still I had to pretend to admire him; I had to smile at him proudly in the hallways. He thought that was what it meant to be respected—to be admired when other people were watching, like a woman.

And, much like a woman, he was always grasping for some perfect version of himself, always seemingly exasperated that this perfection was just out of reach. As if somebody had moved it. Who had moved it? This silliness, the silliness of his arrogance, was actually funny to me. He was nothing and nobody, and nobody cared, and he thought that everyone was watching him, that even I was watching him.

My mother certainly wasn't watching. She had no future, so she played the old-fashioned, agreeable wife. She knew that he liked it when she spoke to him in a small, sweet voice, so she did that. "Sweetie," she called him. And sometimes "Honey." "Daddy." "Darling." "Dear." My father seemed to accept these words as proof of her affection.

The voice she used on me was very different. Efficient. Almost professional. “Where’s Peter?” she’d ask me. Not “Where’s your father?”

She called me “son” like he did, but, when she said it, it felt as though she could mean anyone, anyone’s son. A neighbor kid or the newspaper boy. It seemed not to matter to her who I was. It was a real gift, her great detachment. No matter how helpless she became or how much I did for her, she gave me nothing. As if I were merely a houseplant and I would bend stupidly toward whatever light I could find. She did not have to shine, nor would she shine for me.

School was aggravating, but home was worse. I had a perfect attendance record because, when I got sick, I preferred to stay in the nurse’s office at St. Thomas, in the still and quiet comfort of the narrow bed covered with white tissue paper. The smell of iodine and the nurse’s hair spray. I could cough and blow my nose freely around her. I could breathe. One time, I stole a penlight, and when I went home to my mother that afternoon I tried shining it in her eyes, back and forth, left to right, again and again, curious if it might inspire something, any reaction. She barely blinked. Her eyes were murky green and always cast upward and to the left. I’d stare at them shamelessly, sometimes taunting myself to feel something like pity, or compassion, or sadness for her. It was a game I played with myself. She barely noticed me. The penlight went dead after just a few days.

The only thing that I could do to punish her was practice my clarinet. Although I was not untalented, I hated the clarinet, and so I knew how to play it very badly. I practiced the same Weber Concerto in F Minor for a year and a half, and only the second movement. I was able to produce a self-pitying, pleading noise like an animal lying on the side of the road, begging to be put out of its misery. Twenty minutes was all her nerves could tolerate, my mother said, so I chose to torture her during her bath time in the evenings, when she was supposed to relax. It was all I could do, squeak and squawk while dinner cooked on the stove, while the rice and chicken boiled —my mother didn’t trust me to use the oven or to fry anything in oil. The taste of my clarinet reed was the bitter taste of my own hunger, and I loved it, my own dried-up hunger from the evening before, while the rice boiled, and so forth.

Her vision had been slowly waning for a decade, and yet she'd refused to learn how to accommodate her disability. She was the one prone to accidents, but somehow she protected herself by controlling me. No television. No going out onto the fire escape. No leaving my book bag or shoes or anything at all in the hallway. Still, I'd seen her trip and fall and had held my breath while she got up. She turned bright red. Her fury scared me because, when I was little, she'd slapped me across the face a few times, and it had been horrible for both of us. There'd been nothing to do afterward but pretend that it hadn't happened.

It was my job to avert my eyes and hold up the towel to protect her from me as I helped her out of the bath. Her legs had purpled from the hot water, the veins on her shins bulging like bludgeoned earthworms. I waited outside in the hallway so she could dry herself in private.

"Slippers," she'd say, and I'd open the door and guide her feet.

She was hasty and didn't like being naked, I assumed, so the polyester nightgown—she had seven in rotation—would cling to her hot skin as she shuffled down the hall toward the kitchen, one hand dragging along the waxy wallpaper even as I took her other arm.

I helped her sit down at the table, put the fork and knife in her hands, poured her a single glass of Chianti, then left her to eat alone while I went back into the bathroom to drain the tub and pick up her soggy, wet towel off the floor.

If I was very quiet, though, I could stand in the hallway and watch her eat. She never actually used the fork and knife. She would feel for the wine first. I made sure to pour it full to the brim each time, so, no matter how light her touch, the wine sloshed onto the tablecloth, then dribbled down the stem as she drank and dripped onto the pillowy nylon lace across her chest. Her nightgowns were all permanently stained.

When she was done with the wine, she put her hand on the plate, lowered her head, and ate with her fingers. This was always messy, because everything I cooked got doused in jarred turkey gravy or barbecue sauce, which I heated up in the microwave. Pieces of her wet hair fell and stuck to her face, and she'd smear sauce on her cheeks trying to get a strand out of

her mouth. She required very many napkins. Also, she rarely brushed her teeth. Perhaps this was another reason that the food she demanded was mushy. Like a little baby's.

It was immensely boring to be with my mother. After dinner, she went to bed to listen to the radio. She liked only very solemn, funereal church music. If something was too quick tempo'ed, too unrestrained, or if there was any singing in it, she'd snap at me to change the station: "Quick, quick. Before I go deaf, too."

I made terrible faces when she snapped at me. I gave her the middle finger. I mouthed "bitch" and "cunt" and "fuck you." She could have changed the station herself. The radio was right beside her on the nightstand, the nob to turn the dial easily within her reach. I did my schoolwork sitting next to her, on my dad's side of the bed. This was her preference; if she needed something, I was right there. She never had to raise her voice.

When she fell asleep, I stared at her close up, counted the wrinkles in her lips, the hairs on her chin. She wept in her sleep sometimes, and the tears would pool in the hollows of her eyes. I often fell asleep there beside her, with the lights on. She was a very heavy sleeper, actually, so only I woke up when my father got home. I'd hear him kick off his shoes, then I'd see him as I headed to my own room, in the eerie yellow light that filled the kitchen when he cracked open the fridge. The palest yellow light, sunshine pouring in from another world.

The nuns hated us. Sister Brigida, who taught history, flung chalkboard erasers at the ground by our feet, and the yellow dust clung to our dark polyester trousers. She did this randomly, just to make sure we were paying attention. Her teeth were tiny and gray, like an elderly cat's. Her ass was very big and square, and she must have liked the way it looked. She was the only nun at St. Thomas who elected to wear a rope belt. Her waist was very narrow. When she reached up to pull down the world map, she grunted a little. I liked her.

But I preferred Sister Veronika, the English teacher, because she was young and easily overwhelmed. All it took was one teasing question, one interruption, and she'd lose her concentration completely.

“Excuse me, Sister, did you say ‘ship’ or ‘shit?’” I might ask.

“What?”

“We can’t hear you.”

“What can’t you hear?”

“We can’t hear you clearly. Did you say ‘ship’ or ‘shit?’”

“ ‘Ship.’ I said ‘ship,’ didn’t I? I said, ‘When they boarded the ship.’ ”

“I heard ‘shit.’ ”

“No, I would never—”

“I heard ‘shit,’ too,” someone else might say.

And then for the rest of the class she’d cough and bang on her chest and say, “Turn to page . . . Turn to page . . . ” And then she couldn’t find the page.

So we went on. “ ‘Shit.’ ‘Ship.’ ”

“Does ‘but’ have one ‘T’ or two ‘T’s?”

“ ‘Cunt’ has one ‘T.’ ”

“ ‘Cunt butt,’ yes.”

And so on and so forth.

She tried so hard to contain her frustration sometimes that it seemed to reverse course deep inside her and come out as laughter and mucus sputtering from her nose.

I was always well liked by the other boys in my grade, but I reached the zenith of my popularity after I wowed everybody at lunch with my impression of the principal, Sister Margaretta. I’d practiced among small circles of friends until I was sure I could command a real audience, and then, in the cafeteria, when I was confident, I stole a dish towel from the lunch

lady and draped it over my head. I could perfectly mimic how Sister Margaretta cleared her throat. Everyone turned to look. I started shuffling around like a robot, my mouth opening and shutting like a sock puppet's, my head moving up and down as I read names off an imaginary attendance sheet, the way Sister Margaretta did every morning, when we all assembled in the chapel.

“Ivanov, Kalashnick, Krachenko.”

The boys cried out, “Here! Here!”

“Kovalenko.”

“Here!”

“Kowalski.”

“Here!”

“In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost, *beep beep*,” I said, finally moonwalking backward across the greasy linoleum.



Later, my father said, “I don’t get it.” He hadn’t been there to witness my great performance, but my classmates in calculus told him the story, each trying and failing to re-create my imitation. “Yes, I understand the robot part, but Sister Margaretta doesn’t wear a dish towel on her head. She’d never do that.” My father’s mind was not built for irony of any kind.

The girl who came to clean once a week had freckles and blue eyes and wore heavy black eyeliner. I loved her. Her name was Priscilla. She was a few years older than me. She smoked a lot and had a habit of spitting onto the rug and then rubbing at it with the sole of her tennis shoe. My mother acted brain-damaged whenever Priscilla was around, I don’t know why. Sometimes it looked like she was drooling a little, her head shaking ever so slightly. It was hostile, I felt, like my mother wanted to horrify the poor girl. Maybe she sensed Priscilla’s undeniable beauty, and that made her crazy. I never understood it.

As a result of the pretend brain damage, Priscilla thought my mother was dumb as well as blind. She used to flash her breasts at her as she dusted the coffee table. Then she’d cluck her tongue in pity at my mother and look at me like I was some kind of monster. Of course, she knew I was right there. Priscilla wasn’t blind. And I wasn’t blind. I was always watching her.

Her breasts were very small, like dumplings. Is it terrible to describe a girl’s breasts as dumplings? My mother’s breasts reminded me of bowling balls.

When Priscilla went down to the basement to do the laundry, I’d look through her purse and kiss and lick the things I knew she would hold in her hand later. Her Pac-Man key chain. Her cinnamon Binaca. Her ChapStick. A dwindling bottle of Charlie perfume. Sometimes I stole a Life Saver or some cigarettes, but I never smoked them.

When Priscilla found a few dozen stale Marlboro Lights rolling around in the back of my desk drawer, she asked, “Is it you that’s been stealing my smokes?”

I nodded.

She looked up at me in disgust. I was taller than her, thank God.

“Sit,” she said, and pushed me down on the bed. She shut the door, sat beside me, lit two cigarettes, and put one between my lips. “Go ahead,” she said, “if you’re that cool.” This silent mortification was more like erotic asphyxiation, and it frightened me, because now I had her alone to myself and I didn’t know what to do. So I tried to smoke. I choked and cried. She just watched me.

“What’s your name again?” she asked me finally, then ashed into her cupped palm. I could feel my face turning red, but I told her my name and kept smoking. She said my name three times, like a witch practicing a spell.

“Where’s your dad?” she asked.

“He goes to whores,” I told her. I meant it as a joke, but, as I sounded the words out, they weren’t funny.

“Which whores?”

“The ones downtown.”

“You ever go with him?”

“I don’t like whores, no,” I said. “Only my dad likes them. And sometimes he likes the ones who look like men.”

She took a long drag. I wasn’t sure she understood me, and so I was full of self-doubt. Had they been men dressed like whores or whores who looked like men? I had no idea. She lifted her shirt.

“What are those, potato dumplings?” I asked.

“You wanna touch them?”

Of course I did. But I thought she was taunting me, and I had to fight her. So I rolled my eyes and said, “I don’t like whores, I told you.”

She laughed. Then she got up and stood before me so that, if I’d wanted to, I could’ve reached up her shirt, but I didn’t.

“Close your eyes,” she said. I figured she was going to kiss me.

She didn’t kiss me. I cracked open one eye and watched as she licked the tip of her index finger, dipped it in the cigarette ashes in her hand, then drew an “X” on my forehead.

“Much better,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said.

She laughed at me, retrieved her stolen cigarettes from the drawer, and went out, saying, “You don’t know where your father goes. You have no idea what men do.”

The next morning, it was raining. On our walk to school, my father talked about how he got plantar warts on the soles of his feet because he didn’t wear sandals in the shower when he was a student at Brooklyn Polytechnic. “Two years in Da Nang setting up radio lines, and not a single injury. But these warts were so deep, and they hurt a lot, and they didn’t go away until long after I graduated and married your mother and you came along. I think you were three years old and walking and talking when they finally disappeared.”

“What did I say that scared them off?”

“What?”

During calculus class that day, he went off topic and gave a long, impromptu speech.

“Faith and reason are not opposed,” he said, and then he said it again, as if he were trying it out on us. “Let’s consider pi. It is infinite, the measurement of the purest shape, the infinite circle, the shape of God, I think. Don’t you think?” He yawned. Then I yawned.

Nobody was paying any attention. The other boys were already filling out their worksheets that were due the next day. “What is irrational about an irrational number? The way I see it, the irrational numbers are the lucky people, like us, who look out at the world and all of human history and

think, See, it all makes sense, because we are here now, and we're alive, and we are not suffering like other people whom God doesn't love as much. And the rational numbers are all the sad orphans and all the slaves and innocent prisoners and the people out there starving to death while we try not to get fat."

I could see the skin under his left eye quaking. I'd never paid such close attention to him before. I'd always been so focussed on guessing what the other boys were thinking.

"But what makes us so special?" my father asked, his voice dragging a bit. It was clear to me that this was a rhetorical question.

A boy in the front row put up his hand.

"Yes, what?"

"It's because we're Americans," the boy said.

My father coughed and turned his back. The NoDoz gave him terrible acid reflux, and now and then he'd choke, gag, and pound his chest until he caught his breath.

"We're Polish Americans," another boy said.

"I've never even been to Poland," the first boy said.

My father seemed to crumple a little, shuddering, grabbing the edge of his desk to steady himself. Was he dying? I almost called out to him. I thought maybe he was having a heart attack. Then I saw that he was only laughing. He was right to laugh, of course. It took me a moment, but eventually I saw the humor in it all as well.

That day, after the bell rang, I did not go home to my mother. I waited outside St. Thomas for my father to finish grading papers, then, when he finally lurched out the door and onto the sidewalk, I followed him.

The Happy Clam was a Chinese restaurant near the Manhattan Bridge, in the basement of a narrow, soot-streaked four-story tenement. A bubbling tank of

lobsters greeted you as soon as you made it down the stairs. Even though the restaurant was very dimly lit, I could see that the red carpeting, once plush, was worn and blackened with grease. The tables were sparkly red Formica, the chairs grimy and mismatched. The crowd was also mismatched. I watched my father casually take a seat at the bar. I hung back near the swinging doors to the kitchen, close enough to see him but not close enough to be seen. The busboys and waitresses ignored me.

The Chinese lady behind the bar served my father a bottle of Budweiser and a bowl of peanuts. He didn't have to ask. He sipped the beer and pulled a stack of index cards from his inside jacket pocket. He looked at a card, mouthing words to himself, then mouthed them again, looking up at the television bolted to the wall above him. An old boxing match played on mute. I imagined, at this point, that my father had stopped in for a beer on his way to his desk-attendant job at the cheap hotel. But then he checked his watch, wiped his mouth with his cocktail napkin, snapped his fingers at the bartender, who flicked a switch, illuminating the shiny sky-blue brocade curtain across a small stage at the front of the dining room, which I hadn't noticed. Customers angled their seats toward it as my father casually strode up and disappeared behind the curtain. When he came back out, he luggered a microphone stand with him.

He spoke into the mike very flatly. "Welcome to the Happy Clam. If you're here for the food, I'm sorry. If you're here for the comedy, I'm more sorry, because tonight, like most nights, I'll be your m.c., which stands for 'miserable cunt.'

"Now, before I bring out the guys who still think being funny gets you laid, I thought I'd loosen things up with a few thoughts. You good with that? No? Doesn't matter. What matters is the two-drink minimum."

He wrestled the microphone from its stand and took a step toward a table for two.

"You, ma'am, are very fat, so let's call it a six-drink minimum."

A few people laughed.

“Is that your wife, sir?” he asked the man sitting with the woman. “No? But you’re paying for the six drinks, right?

“My wife couldn’t be here tonight, either. She doesn’t work, but, with all the ball-breaking she does, she’s a busy lady. To be clear, she doesn’t actually break my balls. She hasn’t even seen my balls in so long, she wouldn’t recognize them in a lineup. Because she’s blind.

“Sometimes I envy her, you know? She doesn’t have to look down at her saggy tits. But I can see them, right there, resting in her lap like a pile of mashed potatoes. And then I think, No, God, no, I don’t want to be blind. I like pornography too much.

“And I love reading the news. It makes me feel like I’m a good guy. By comparison, I mean, I’m a pretty decent person to be around. Imagine having to live with Ted Bundy. Or the Night Stalker. You ever notice serial killers, they’re so fucking principled? They have all these rules and routines. ‘I only kill on Wednesdays. During the full moon. Brunettes named Diane with crooked teeth.’ I can’t even finish a jar of peanut butter without losing my sense of purpose, and these guys are out there building shrines and naming bones. That’s dedication.

“My wife and I are raising a son. He takes after his real father. Obedient. Good in school. Loves his mother. That’s how I know the kid’s not mine. I can’t stand his mother.”

Someone in the back laughed loudly at that.

“The kid is pretty principled, come to think of it. I could see him getting sucked into the serial-killing life style. He plays the clarinet, so he won’t get laid until his late forties, and even then it’ll be supervised by the state. No, that’s a joke. He’ll die a virgin. You’ve never seen anyone so prudish. He crosses himself whenever I say the word ‘whore.’ So I say it a lot. Kid needs his exercise.”

I never told my mother what I’d seen that night. Why would I?

I found her banging at the bedroom window. She had her robe on inside out, the bottle of Chianti in her hand.

“What happened?” was all I could think to ask. I stayed far enough away that if she swung at me she’d miss.

“They won’t shut up,” she said. She was drunk and she was crying. She continued pounding at the glass. The pigeons were out there, a dozen or so, cooing and flapping around in the soft yellow light, loving one another. “Get a cat and throw it in there or something,” she said. “Do something. Where’ve you been, anyway?”

“Go sit down on the bed,” I told her. “I’ll get them to stop, but you’ve got to sit down first.”

She nodded. She had no choice. First, she finished the bottle of Chianti and laid it on its side on the floor. Then she got down on her hands and knees and crawled, the wrong way, toward me. I said nothing when her fingers hit the scuffed toe of my right derby. She took hold of my shoe and felt it. With both hands, she felt each fret of the tied laces, up to my ankle. It was only when she got up past my sock and felt my skin that she recognized that the thing she was touching was me.

It was obvious why my mother hated the sound of those pigeons. The very idea of courtship, seduction—it embarrassed her. I don’t think she believed in love, nor do I think she ever felt it, even accidentally. There are such people on earth, and we should study them, I think, and glean from them what we can. If it hadn’t been for the movies, I might’ve thought that this was a typical feature in mothers, to exude no love.

Perhaps you think I’m being cruel. I am not. She refused to know and love me. That’s the truth, and I know nobody likes to hear it. My mother wasn’t stupid, so how was it that she learned nothing from her miseries? She must have. Yet she shared none of her wisdom with me. What a waste, don’t you see? Did she think I wouldn’t understand? I would have understood her, better than my father ever could have, yes. Like the driest bit of dirt, I would have absorbed her completely. I would have worshipped her, had she been remotely willing to share. ♦

*This story was inspired by Harold Brodkey's "[The State of Grace](#)," which was published in the magazine in 1954.*

# The Critics

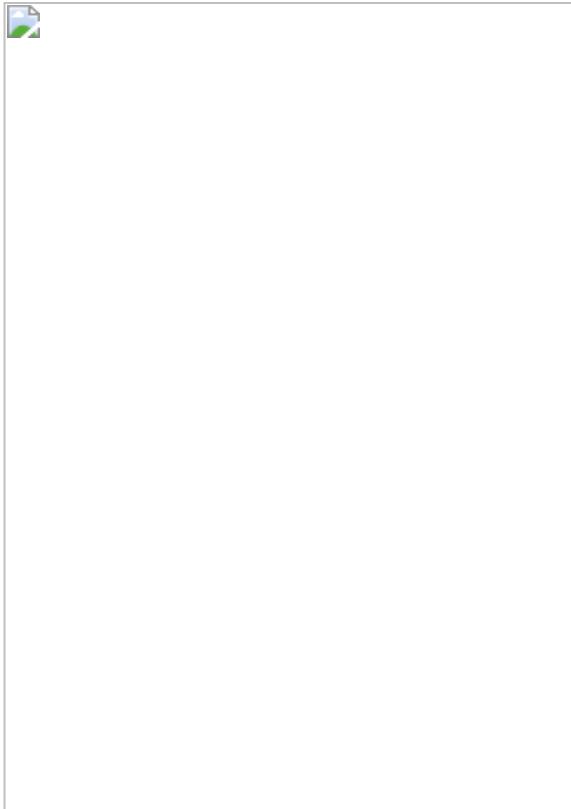
- [What \*The New Yorker\* Was Reading in 1925](#)
- [Elmore Leonard's Perfect Pitch](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Is Technology Really Ruining Teens' Lives?](#)
- [The Met's Luminous New Rockefeller Wing Still Casts Some Shadows](#)
- [The Argentinean Comic Strip That Galvanized a Generation](#)

Books

# What *The New Yorker* Was Reading in 1925

Touted in our first issue: A love-crazed soldier, scheming septuagenarians, an Anglo-French chastity plot, and a suspected nymphomaniac with a taste for fast cars.

By Thomas Mallon June 30, 2025



Several months before the first issue of *The New Yorker* appeared, [Harold Ross](#)'s fund-raising prospectus promised, along with much else, that "Judgment will be passed upon new books of consequence." The publication's literary coverage would take a while to settle down into the distinct critical sensibilities of [Dorothy Parker](#) and Clifton Fadiman, and at the start "books of consequence" were something noticed haphazardly. "[The Great Gatsby](#)," for example, received more attention for its theatrical adaptation in 1926—"a play of shrewd, hard humor, of self-respecting sentiment"—than for its appearance as a novel, a year earlier.

Much of the magazine's earliest book reviewing was written under the byline Touchstone, who was actually a man named Harry Este Dounce. It's hard now for a reader to perceive Touchstone's own touchstones, to discern a critical standard beyond his own struggle to figure out who this new publication's readers might or ought to be. In the first issue, of February 21, 1925, he sort of recommends "[Those Barren Leaves](#)," by Aldous Huxley—if, that is, "you like your novels professionally clever and intellectual." Late in November, reviewing John Dos Passos's "[Manhattan Transfer](#)," Dounce felt compelled to note that the author's Manhattan "is not the hypothetical typical New Yorker reader's," though he did find it to be "very much like the real, complete thing—which is to say, like a hell of chaotic futility."

*The New Yorker*'s inaugural number has Touchstone critiquing eight books in two columns of type. On the opposite page, the magazine offered a list called "Tell Me a Book to Read." As if determined to prove brevity the soul of crit, the column outdoes Touchstone's terseness by recommending eight novels, two collections of short stories, and several "Biographies and Things" all in a single column, with little more than a noun phrase to characterize each.

The magazine's fact-checking department got going only in 1927, and in the first "Tell Me" column at least three mistakes eluded Ross's error-hunting eyes. One of the recommended titles and two of the authors' names are misspelled. Even so, the list provides an interesting glimpse of the world of fiction as seen from 25 West Forty-fifth Street—whose windows seem to have looked out onto Charing Cross Road. There might be room for [Mark Twain](#), Will Rogers, and Theodore Roosevelt in the "Biographies and

Things” portion of “Tell Me,” but eight of the ten recommended works of fiction are by authors born in or writing from Great Britain.

“[The Little French Girl](#),” a novel by Anne (not “Anna”) Douglas Sedgwick, had already been through multiple printings by February, 1925, so this first list presented it, in eight words, as a known quantity: “The pleasant love story, Anglo-French, that is Best-Selling.” It was the sixteenth book of fiction by the American-born but thoroughly Anglicized Sedgwick, who by this point had lived in Britain for more than forty years and had done war-relief work in France with her English husband.

Alix, the book’s eponymous French girl, sets things in motion with an across-the-Channel visit to the family of Owen Bradley, an English soldier killed in the recent Great War. Everyone would like to believe that Owen’s Parisian leave time with Alix’s divorced “Maman” was as innocent as a quick dance at a soldiers’ canteen, but the scales eventually fall from most eyes. The sixteen-year-old Alix, meanwhile, remains preposterously articulate as the eggshells are danced upon. (She finds London to be “like an old great-grand-mother over a tea-pot; and Paris is like a goddess with a wreath.”) In some ways, the novel is the opposite of Colette’s “[Gigi](#).” Instead of being schooled as a courtesan, Alix has been shipped off to England in order to learn the skills required of a proper English wife. (“Racial difference,” when it arises as a subject, refers to Gallic-Anglo distinctions.) Had Owen survived the war, his return to his English village might have sparked an edgy comedy, a vicarage version of the era’s problem of how to keep ’em down on the farm. But Sedgwick’s tale is mostly told with a smothering earnestness, and at a length that makes one long for a short story instead—one that focusses on Owen and Maman.

Sedgwick’s mannered syntax and dissective dialogue mark her as a committed Jamesian. Her book reaches here and there toward modernity, with references to Bloomsbury and Joyce and Proust, but *The New Yorker’s* first literary list, while wanting to appear respectful and non-fogy-like toward innovation, gives modernism little real support. Recommendations are earned not by pioneers of form but by the comfortable John Galsworthy and Hugh Walpole.

Readers are assured that “[The White Monkey](#),” the fourth volume of Galsworthy’s “Forsyte Chronicles,” can be read as a freestanding production, “fine by itself” and demanding no commitment to the whole family saga. Set in 1922, the year both “[Ulysses](#)” and “[The Waste Land](#)” appeared, Galsworthy’s novel is, in some widely separated patches, not entirely untouched by the vogue for stream-of-consciousness writing, but over all “The White Monkey” is a sturdy pillar of bygone, or bygoing, conventionality, its inhabitants closer to the Pallisers than to the Blooms.

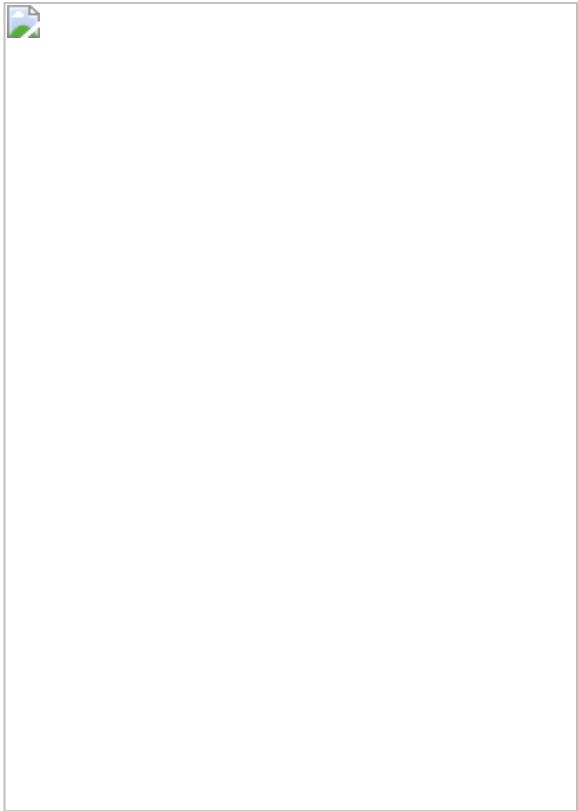
The book’s heroine, Fleur, is the rich daughter of Soames Forsyte and the young wife of Michael Mont, an amiable young publisher with lightly “socialist principles” that he’ll be giving up before the novel’s end. Michael’s most heartfelt enthusiasms look backward more than forward: “If only life were like ‘The Idiot’ or ‘The Brothers Karamazov,’ and everybody went about turning out their inmost hearts at the top of their voices!” His spouse is perilously close to beginning an affair with the best man at their wedding, now one of his authors, a war poet disillusioned by violence and fanaticism. Fleur is a trend-susceptible will-o’-the-wisp whose slang is as perishable as her penchants. Not show up at someone’s party? “Impos!” she tells Michael. The hostess has “got all sorts of people coming.” [Evelyn Waugh](#) would have treated her more cruelly than Galsworthy does.

It is Fleur’s father, Soames, for whom the author reserves his greatest regard. Soames is a lively piece of taxidermy, an avatar of Victorian virtues whose conscience still ticks inside all the stuffing. One of the book’s plotlines involves his decision to expose fraud at a firm whose board he sits on. He knows how to sound a meaningful “No!” between comical tut-tuttings, some directed at his dissolute cousin George: “The idea that George should have had taste almost appalled him.”

There is a good deal of this kind of humor, along with plenty of rectitude. A lifelong progressive and a good literary citizen—he was the first president of *PEN* International—Galsworthy also put plenty of postwar dread and prophecy into “The White Monkey.” There’s even talk of a future war “when millions can be killed by the pressing of a few buttons.” The author’s own disinclination toward literary experiment likely stemmed from a belief that the social demanded more moral attention than the psychological.

In a diary entry from April 13, 1929, [Virginia Woolf](#) recounts a conversation with her aesthetic bête noire—the sleek Hugh Walpole, with his “morbid egotism & desire to scratch the same place over & over again—his own defects as a writer & how to remedy them . . . all mixed up with his normal, & usual sense of being prosperous & admired.” Thanks largely to Woolf, all that today’s readers know about Walpole is not to read him. So they have no context for deciding whether the eleven-word “Tell Me” judgment of “[The Old Ladies](#)”—that it is “As quiet and unpretentious as its title, and Walpole’s best novel”—might be true. Well, in a present-day reprint, a hundred and thirty-four pages long, the book proves to be a rattling good read, the best surprise on the magazine’s inaugural list.

The novel concerns itself with some “really old ladies” (they’re in their early seventies) living close to poverty in a seaside rooming house in 1896. That makes it more or less a work of historical fiction, though there is nothing in the way of public events except for some brief fretting over what appears to be global cooling. The book is vibrant with infirmity—all the characters’ aches and ailments are finely described—but the ladies are less frightened by decrepitude than they are by one among them, Agatha Payne, who has become rejuvenated by hatred and avarice after finding a target in a new arrival. The book’s snares and cruelties make “[Memento Mori](#),” Muriel Spark’s geriatric masterpiece from 1959, seem positively cozy.



The narrator has an unusual kind of first-person omniscience. “As I have intimated in other chronicles,” one sentence starts, referencing Walpole’s own books. “Then followed a very touching little scene,” he will inform you, by way of a setup. This is not the voice of either a character or a narrative persona. It’s the voice of the author himself, allowing you to read the book over his shoulder as he types it. And yet, when he gets his ladies alone, and shows how in recalling the past they “do not think connectedly” but, rather, “in a series of pictures . . . here intensely vivid, there dim and blurred,” he is performing exactly the work of interiority—of rendering consciousness instead of just circumstance—that Woolf considered beyond the abilities of the pre-modernist Edwardians.

This magazine would come to publish its own distinctive brand of short fiction, but the first “Tell Me” list seems a bit tentative and confused when it comes to the genre, as if wishing that someone else would explain it. A strange axe-grinding anthology called “[The Short Story’s Mutations](#)” is recommended; its offerings range from Petronius all the way to Chekhov, Lawrence, and Joyce, but the collection is continually interrupted by the critical commentary of its assembler, Frances Newman, who, in the overawed words of the magazine, uses the stories to “illustrate her brilliant theory” of the form.

Whatever Newman’s theory might be, it remains indiscernible to a reader being hustled through her incantatory anthology’s vacuum of critical pronouncement. If the short story began, as Newman posits, with men’s “fondness for recounting their amorous conquests,” that “would account for its beginning in the egotistical first person; and fraternal exultation, rather than physiognomical improbability, would explain its passage to the altruistic third person.” It might even explain why the sixteen selections include not a single one by a woman, though Newman, a librarian from Georgia, would soon publish two novels herself.

Newman exceeds Anne Douglas Sedgwick in her admiration of James—“the charm of his style came only from his beautiful deference toward his characters and his ideas and his very words”—going so far as to say that Sedgwick damaged her own writing by daring to imitate James at all. Moving on to Joyce, this overbearing anthologist reserves judgment as to whether his “method” will prove to be “art or science,” but feels certain that the Great War’s effects on fiction have been overstated; most of the latest changes in technique and sensibility would have occurred without it. She writes that the twentieth century has so far shown “no beliefs and no disbeliefs . . . only tastes and distastes and a certain interest in its own unconscious.”

The stories here have not been anthologized so much as incarcerated in a slapdash jailhouse of abstract fancy. Her book seems to have made the “Tell Me” list out of a kind of eat-your-peas obligation, the fulfillment of which then freed the magazine to indulge its more natural taste for yarns. Four undemanding short stories by Joseph Conrad, published as “[Tales of Hearsay](#),” are commended for being “admirable and easy to read”—so long

as one is willing, presumably, to put up with the laboriousness that can overtake that author's prose whenever it isn't reproducing speech. ("He made a shadowy movement of assent in his chair, the irony of which not even the gathered darkness could render mysterious.") The most thought-provoking of the four tales is "The Warrior's Soul," in which Napoleon's campaign against Russia is seen to have been fought over nothing, much like the Great War, which hangs over so much of the fiction on the list.

For another light read, "Tell Me" offers "[Sard Harker](#)," by John Masefield, a "wild tropical adventure" from the future Poet Laureate. It may be, the magazine says, "'unworthy of Masefield,' but—try to put it down!" I did try, and I succeeded, picking it up again only to see if I had been missing something. I hadn't. A love-crazed soldier's mad dash through some rum-running, gold-mining South American land throws him up against sand sharks, storms, brawls, kidnapping, a time bomb, and a "priest of evil" bent on human sacrifice. The novel also imparts lessons: "Truly a man digs his grave with his teeth, but assuredly he cuts his throat with his tongue." This piece of claustrophobic escapism, a yarn of the most tangled synthetic fibre, would seem to be a contender for the worst book of the year. If you must go down to the seas again, take along something else.

Detective fiction was in full swing by the mid-twenties. The literary sociologist Q. D. Leavis, in "[Fiction and the Reading Public](#)" (1932), would soon associate this respectable entertainment with the enthusiasm for crossword puzzles, each "a not unpleasurable way of relaxing" via the application of "ratiocinative faculties on a minor non-personal problem." In this spirit, "Tell Me" has two works to recommend: "[The Cask](#)," by Freeman Wills Crofts, and "[The House of the Arrow](#)," by A. E. W. Mason.

Both books involve extended investigative trips made from Britain to France. (*The New Yorker*'s literary Anglophilia had, here and in Sedgwick's book, a kind of built-in Franco-fondness, too.) The novels also both include an upright, fresh-faced young man—one a solicitor, the other a shipping clerk, each eager to see justice done. A current reader wonders if boyishness was so prized in 1925 because so much of it had been pointlessly wasted in the Great War's trenches.

“The Cask” provides fewer pleasures than “The House of the Arrow,” and it will not surprise a reader to learn that its author was also a railway engineer. These days, Crofts’s book has been reprinted with the label “A Police Procedural Mystery,” though in the twenties this particular genre was still aborning. The novel may have its gaudy and gory elements—from strangulation to arson, not to mention the titular cask, stuffed with gold coins and a woman’s dead body—but the book is almost all procedure and no propulsion, pedantically replete with the evidentiary value of footprints, handwriting, typewriter peculiarities, and train schedules. Its victims, malefactors, and investigators are largely without personality, their function being merely to leave or follow trails, and to wear out a reader with anticlimax after anticlimax. As soon as anything probative appears, something exculpatory must arise to cast doubt. So many sentences begin with “But” that the novel seems to develop a stutter.

There’s more fizz and, perhaps, preposterousness in “The House of the Arrow,” which centers on whether or not a young Englishwoman murdered her French aunt and guardian. The book has charm (a law firm that dislikes litigation), plus a lot of staginess (masquerades, secret passages) and stage dialogue (“Blackmail’s an ugly word, Mr. Frobisher”). Frobisher is a good-hearted boy, and Hanaud, the detective cautioning him, is Mason’s franchised gumshoe, used in a good many of the author’s books. He is “theatrical,” volatile, and vain; a kitchen sink of quirks and foibles, Hanaud is an infinitely more florid French sleuth than Georges Simenon’s Jules Maigret would prove on his *début*, six years later. If Crofts is all business—the mystery novel as a locked room unto itself—Mason invites in a bit more of the outside world, flashes of the “boyish slenderness and carriage which marks the girls of this generation,” along with a sense of that generation’s loosening conventions. “Nowadays, my dear Jim!” Frobisher’s older colleague exclaims.

Two serious novels that have lasted the century in front of them made the list. E. M. Forster’s [A Passage to India](#), which the column describes as “a foaming-up of India’s race hate, pictured with searching skill,” still takes readers to the Marabar Caves, and even now Dr. Aziz oscillates with wonderful believability between tenderness and resentment. His friend Fielding may think that Aziz’s “emotions never seem in proportion to their objects,” but Aziz, to use a term coined by the novelist who created him,

remains a fully “round character.” In a book that considers what different forms God may take, the narrative voice can itself seem an audible manifestation of the divine. “Other people had woken up elsewhere, people whose emotions they could not share, and whose existence they ignored,” Forster writes. Some of the book’s diction has been cancelled, but its observations still enlarge: “Like most Orientals, Aziz overrated hospitality, mistaking it for intimacy, and not seeing that it is tainted with the sense of possession.” Fielding offers a theological suspension of disbelief as a way of managing to live; he does not believe in Heaven, he says, but he does “believe that honesty gets us there.”

Still read, if not so well known as “A Passage to India,” is Michael Arlen’s [The Green Hat](#). Written by a not quite thirty-year-old son of the Armenian diaspora, the book earns a strange capsule endorsement on the “Tell Me” list: “Champagne stuff, sweet but worth drinking, about a light-o’-love and her playmates.” In fact, the novel, redolent of sexual neuroses and venereal disease, and ending with the heroine’s suicide by automobile, is a lot darker than that. Its young male narrator feels “dingy”; another character is obsessed with “purity”; a third wants to “live clean.” After two marriages—her first husband killed himself on their wedding night—the story’s heroine, Iris Storm, is scorned for abandoning “caste and chastity” and suspected of nymphomania. She calls herself “the slave of freedom.” In the book’s big reveal, we learn that the wedding-night suicide was prompted by the husband’s guilt over having syphilis, but this leaves unsolved the mystery of what later lands a “terrified” Iris in a Parisian convent clinic. Is her “septic poisoning” the result of an abortion or disease?

The narrative is deliberately overwrought and overwritten. The book’s up-to-the-minute feeling is enhanced by a novelistic envy of moviemaking (“If only one had a cinema for a moment!”), as well as the snappy syntactical inversions that were becoming associated with *Time* magazine: “Smoothly ran the Renault with the scarlet wheels.” Descriptions are sometimes circumscribed by compulsive literary references—to [Wilde](#), [H. G. Wells](#), and even Galsworthy—but “The Green Hat” caught on. Tallulah Bankhead starred in a London stage version, and Greta Garbo silently played the heroine in a Hollywood adaptation called “A Woman of Affairs.” On the page, the “original material” ends up less cynical, and more tragic and perplexing, than one expects or remembers.

Most of the “Tell Me” recommendations are now easily available via print-on-demand or small-press editions that make an easy buck off of copyright expiration. Their physical features can be shabby to the point of scandal: mad spacing, pagination mixups, microscopic type. A.I.-generated cover copy is sometimes robotically off-kilter in tone, or entirely misplaced; the plot description on the back of a new Zinc Read edition of “The House of the Arrow” belongs to another novel altogether. On tech’s magical flip side, the “Tell Me” list, which ran for the next twenty-one months, remains electronically available to *The New Yorker*’s present-day subscribers.

The list-makers didn’t do too badly. Michael Mont, the publisher character in the Galsworthy novel, declares, “Only one book in twenty is a necessity really.” The first “Tell Me” list bats rather higher, at about .250, and the magazine’s book coverage would quickly and steadily improve. By the end of 1925, it was ranking [Sinclair Lewis](#)’s “[Arrowsmith](#)” and [Willa Cather](#)’s “[The Professor’s House](#)” among the best novels of the year. Only fifteen months after that, a reported piece about the training of a new physician would be titled “Young Arrowsmith,” the name of Lewis’s character having already become a byword. Novels once really were the talk of the town. ♦

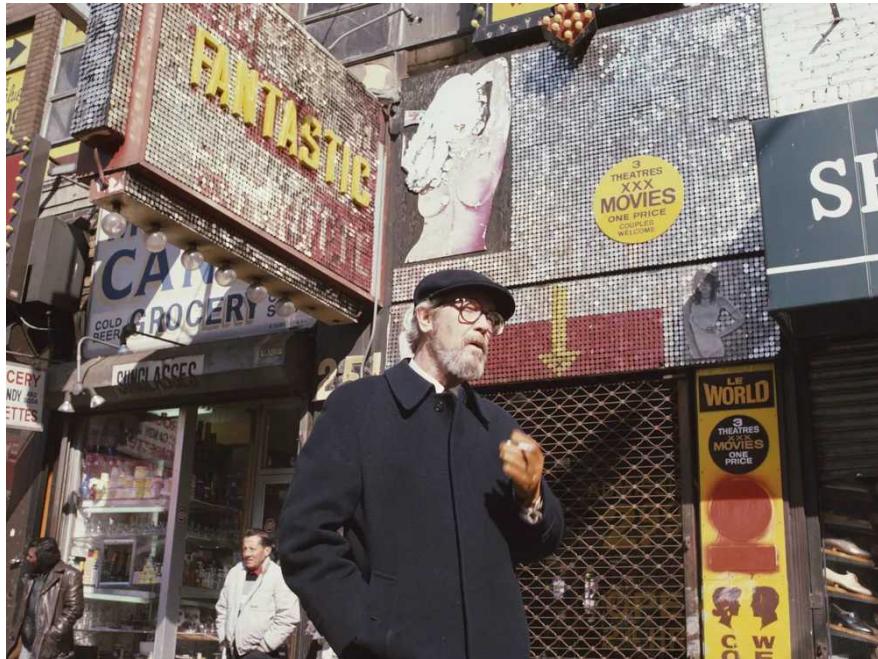
## Books

# Elmore Leonard's Perfect Pitch

How the author of “Rum Punch” and “Out of Sight” came into his style.

By Anthony Lane

June 30, 2025



Out of interest, could this be the best beginning to the sixth chapter of any book, by anyone, ever?

The girl with the stringy blond hair over her shoulders and the trading beads and the black turtleneck and Levi's and the half-filled water glass of domestic wine in front of her on the bar said, “Do you like sex?”

Ryan hesitated. He said, “Sure.”

The girl said, “You like to travel?”

Ryan said, “Yeah, I guess so.”

The girl said, “Then why don't you fuck off?”

In case you can't pin the passage down, it is *not* from "Mrs. Dalloway," or even "To the Lighthouse." In fact, it comes from "Unknown Man No. 89," a 1977 novel by Elmore Leonard. The man is Jack Ryan, not to be confused with the Jack Ryan dreamed up by Tom Clancy. The woman at the bar is Denise Leary, and she's not just drinking; she's a drunk, as we intuit from a single word. A glass of wine is one thing. A *water* glass, half full, is quite another. It smacks of quaffing. That's Leonard for you. Like patches of reflected light in a portrait, flecked into life with dabs of pale paint, the smallest details kindle the larger picture.

Thanks to a new book by C. M. Kushins, "Cooler Than Cool: The Life and Work of Elmore Leonard" (Mariner), we know a little more about "Unknown Man No. 89." We learn from Kushins that "Universal Pictures entered into a purchase agreement with Leonard, with the intention that the book was to be adapted by Hitchcock"—a promise that was never fulfilled, though the idea of it is worth savoring. Kushins has also burrowed in the Leonard archives at the University of South Carolina's Special Collections Library, truffling up a note that Leonard made in an early draft of the novel. He wanted Ryan, who was once an alcoholic like Denise, to lurch off the wagon and, in every sense, to lose the plot. "To describe why Ryan starts drinking again—to make it natural and believable—will take a little doing," Leonard wrote, "but it's important to the story that he does."

Leonard, who died in 2013, was the author of more than forty novels. A dozen of the best are available in a three-volume boxed set from the Library of America. Far be it from me to propose that you steal such a treasure at gunpoint, a transaction much favored by some of Leonard's heroes, but you really should get your mitts on the box without delay. The first volume contains "Fifty-Two Pickup" (1974), "Swag" (1976), "The Switch" (1978), and, yes, "Unknown Man No. 89," which is goaded by a sense of private purpose. Here is Ryan, for instance, recalling old habits. Talk about dying hard:

"I used to drink mostly bourbon, over crushed ice, fill up a lowball glass. I also drank beer, wine, gin, vodka, Cuba Libres, Diet-Rite and scotch, and rye with red pop, but I preferred bourbon. Early Times. I knew a guy who drank only Fresca and chartreuse. I took a sip one time, I said to him, 'Jesus, this is the worst drink I ever tasted in my

life.' He said, 'I know it is. It's so bad you can't drink very many of them.' ”

Leonard knew whereof he wrote. When Denise describes her plight, in a speech that slurs toward the brink of tragedy ("I don't want to be inside me, but I can't get out"), her bafflement springs in part from Leonard's own acquaintance with the bottle. The first of his three marriages was badly disfigured by drink, and not until the age of fifty-one did he take his final swig: Scotch and ginger ale, on January 24, 1977, at half past nine in the morning.

"Cooler Than Cool" is an anatomy lesson. It demonstrates that Leonard, as often as not, was writing close to the bone—much closer than many of us suspected. In the case of most novelists, that would hardly be headline news ("You telling me that Melville went to *sea*?"), yet the reticence of Leonard's approach has tended to deflect investigation. On the whole, he prefers to hold back from the arena and let his characters do the yakking. "I don't want the reader to be aware of me as the writer," he told *The Paris Review* in 2002. Such a desire, needless to say, is itself an authorial ruse. Leonard is there, in permanent residence, behind the scenes and between the cracks. You just have to know where to look.

When readers think of Leonard, they think of Detroit. His fiction is set all over the place—genteel backwaters like Miami, Hollywood, and Atlantic City, with excursions as far afield as the Dominican Republic, Italy, and Israel. When you buy "The Complete Western Stories," a meaty compendium of his work, mostly from the nineteen-fifties, you get a bonus at the front: a map of the Arizona Territories in the eighteen-eighties. Nevertheless, it is Detroit that Leonard made his own, so much so that it could be mistaken for native soil. He was in fact born in New Orleans, in 1925, and his childhood was a restless one. In Memphis, he was photographed with one foot on the running board of a car, jabbing a gun at the camera and aping a pose made famous by Bonnie Parker. He was not yet ten years old.

In 1934, the Leonard family relocated to Detroit. Leonard's father, Elmore, Sr., worked for General Motors and stayed in the business until he died at his desk in a Chevrolet-Buick-Oldsmobile dealership in Las Cruces, New

Mexico, aged forty-six. He had thought about enrolling Elmore, Jr., in the General Motors Dealers' Son School; the very title, with its pledge of a franchise to be handed down to the next generation, conjures up a vanished era of the U.S. automobile industry. The trouble was that, as Leonard later admitted, "I don't like cars." According to Kushins, he drove around Detroit in a Fiat convertible, a VW Bug, and a Saab Turbo. That was like stepping up to the plate with a cricket bat. Yet there's no denying the chorus of vehicles that rumbles through his prose. In "Glitz" (1985), a creep named Teddy Magyk takes his mother's Chevrolet for a spin:

Big yellow turd of a car, '77 Chevy Monte Carlo that had lost its gleam to the salt air while traveling less than 20,000 miles, 19,681 on the odometer—she'd never wear the son of a bitch out, but she wouldn't trade it in either.

The sense of nothing going to waste—of experiences, lowly or intense, being stashed away for creative recycling—resounds through Kushins's biography. Leonard was educated at Blessed Sacrament School, Catholic Central High School, and the University of Detroit High School, which was run by Jesuits. Deep background, you might say, for two of his novels that appeared in 1987. In "Bandits," a young woman who used to belong to the Sisters of Saint Francis teams up with a former thief. ("Boy, you come out of the nuns you come flying," he says to her.) More startling still is "Touch," about a man who receives the stigmata. Blood truly flows from his hands, his feet, and his side, and he wreaks miracles, though that doesn't stop the unholy from taking advantage of him. The wounds of Christ are not a scam, in Leonard's cosmos, but everything else is up for grabs.

In the Second World War, Leonard served in the Seabees but saw no action, or, at any rate, no combat. To the eager eye, the action never stops. He shipped out to New Guinea ("a preview of paradise") and, as hostilities ceased, found himself in the torn landscapes of the Philippines—"the only place in the world where you can walk into a bomb crater and walk out drunk with half your money gone," as he wrote to a friend. Imagine receiving a letter that swings as smoothly as that; Leonard, not quite twenty, is already practicing his strokes. When he describes his homecoming, the facts are simply set forth, yet amid the simplicity you catch a keen delight in the telling of tales: "We got back from the Pacific in January 1946, tied up at

Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay, and I headed straight for Oakland, where Stan Kenton was playing that night.” You want to ask, “And then?”

Leonard returned as a decorated veteran. The decoration took the form of a tattoo on his shoulder, bearing his nickname, Dutch. Bestowed at school, the name was a nod to Emil (Dutch) Leonard, a noted pitcher of the period. (The moniker stuck. An earlier biography of Leonard, by Paul Challen, bore the title “Get Dutch!,” and was presumably purchased in error by Americans planning a trip to Amsterdam.) Thus adorned, Leonard stepped over the threshold into adult existence. By 1950, he had graduated from the University of Detroit, married a woman named Beverly Cline, and found a job at the Campbell-Ewald advertising agency. By 1955, he had three children and a daily routine to match, as Kushins reveals:

Up at five o’clock sharp for two hours of uninterrupted writing (still two pages completed before putting the water on for his morning coffee), then showered and suited for the office—ready to wolf down breakfast and help Beverly feed Jane, Peter, and infant Christopher—then receive the Eucharist during eight o’clock Mass. Finally, he arrived at Campbell-Ewald by nine.

The sheer discipline—“the perseverance to just sit there alone and grind it out,” Leonard calls it—is striking. (Forbidding yourself a first cup of coffee or tea until you’ve written a certain amount, despite not being technically awake, is a brutal habit that I’ve stuck to for decades. Turns out I’ve been taking orders from Leonard all along.) Much of what arose, from those difficult dawns, was Western fiction. Pulp publications such as *Argosy*, *Rodeo Romances*, *Zane Grey’s Western Magazine*, and the excitingly named *Exciting Western* were hungry for cowboy yarns, and Leonard dished them up. He was also turning his hand to full-length novels, including “The Bounty Hunters,” and his daytime employers hitched a ride on his growing reputation. Readers of *The New Yorker*, opening the issue of October 6, 1956, were met with a large advertisement for Campbell-Ewald. There was a photograph of Leonard: white shirt, dark tie, cigarette in one hand, pencil in the other, and, on the wall behind him, a steer’s horned skull and an array of guns. The accompanying text sang his praises:

As a rising young writer of Western novels (three books published) this gives his prose a spare and muscular quality; his gunsights never become entangled in fancy verbal foliage.

With all writers of substance, as with all ministers of religion, it's useful to reach back to their novitiate. Here is Leonard, kicking off a 1955 tale titled "No Man's Guns":

As he drew near the mass of tree shadows that edged out to the road he heard the voice, the clear but hesitant sound of it coming unexpectedly in the almost-dark stillness.

To his fans, this doesn't quite sound like him. It's not yet Dutch enough. The adjectival caution, the suspense-flattening adverb, the archness of that hyphen before "dark": the sentence is not so much loaded as overloaded. No wonder it jams. So, when does Leonard become himself? Is it possible to specify the moment, or the season, when he crosses the border? I would nominate "The Big Bounce," from 1969—which, by no coincidence, is the first novel of his to be set in the modern age. As the prose calms down, something quickens in the air, and the plainest words and deeds make easy music: "They discussed whether beer was better in bottles or cans, and then which was better, bottled or draft, and both agreed, finally, that it didn't make a hell of a lot of difference. Long as it was cold."

What matters here is what isn't there. Grammatically, by rights, we ought to have an "As" or a "So" before "long." If the beer drinkers were talking among themselves, however, or *to* themselves, they wouldn't bother with such nicety, and Leonard heeds their example; he does them the honor of flavoring his registration of their chatter with that perfect hint of them. The technical term for this trick, as weary students of literature will recall, is *style indirect libre*, or free indirect discourse. It has a noble track record, with Jane Austen and Flaubert as front-runners, but seldom has it proved so democratically wide-ranging—not just *libre* but liberating, too, as Leonard tunes in to regular citizens. He gets into their heads, their palates, and their plans for the evening. Listen to a guy named Moran, in "Cat Chaser" (1982), watching Monday-night football and trying to decide "whether he should have another beer and fry a steak or go to Vesuvio's on Federal Highway for spaghetti marinara and eat the crisp breadsticks with hard butter, Jesus, and

have a bottle of red with it, the house salad . . . or get the chicken cacciatore and slock the bread around in the gravy . . . ”



The ellipses are Leonard’s, or, rather, they are Moran’s musings, reproduced by Leonard as a kind of Morse code. We join in with the dots. But it’s the “Jesus” that does the work, yielding up a microsecond of salivation, and inviting us to slock around in the juice of the character’s brain. You could argue that Leonard is taking his cue from Hemingway—in particular, from “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” which was, Leonard said, “the novel that would eventually get me started as a writer.” The interior scheming of Hemingway’s hero, in that book, does have a dash of Leonard:

I’d like to kill him and have it over with, Robert Jordan was thinking. I don’t know what he is going to do, but it is nothing good. Day after tomorrow is the bridge and this man is bad and he constitutes a danger to the success of the whole enterprise. Come on. Let us get it over with.

What Leonard does, though, is give these ruminations a good shake—brushing off the formalities as if they were bits of dried mud, and getting rid of “constitutes,” which is not a word that many aspiring killers would voice inside their own skulls. Make those changes and you wind up with someone

like Nicky, a man with a gun, in Leonard's "Pronto" (1993), who, like Robert Jordan, has a target in mind:

He'll see the gun pointing at him and try to duck. Guess when the piece was about to go off and then duck, try to, keep from getting shot and the car from going off the road. So the guy would duck—okay, wait for him to come up and *bam*.

Set beside Hemingway's proud and steady pace, the progress of Nicky's mind sounds herky-jerky, self-interrupting as he struggles to contemplate anything beyond the here and now. As with many of Leonard's *dramatis personae*, Nicky is none too bright, just like his immediate future, and we warm to him in his bewilderment. The same goes for a couple of hotheads in "Rum Punch" who are slightly impeded in their loading of a rocket launcher by an inability to read the instructions:

Zulu said, "'Re- . . .' The fuck is that word there?"

Snow said, "'Re- . . . *lease*.' Yeah, it say to release the . . . something. 'Release the safe-ty.' Yeah, that thing right there."

Has anyone listened more intently than Leonard to the infinite bandwidths of spoken English? So sharp are his ears, when pricked up, that somebody, way back in the Leonard genealogy, must have made out with a lynx. That is why he earns his slot in the Library of America: he turns the page and starts a fresh chapter in the chronicle of American prose. His genius is twofold; he is unrivalled not only as a listener but as a nerveless transcriber of what he hears. No stenographer in a court of law could be more accurate. His people open their mouths, and we know at once, within a paragraph, or even a clause, who dreamed them up. Many folks, in many novels, might remark, "You certainly have a long winter." But only someone in a Leonard novel would reply, "Or you could look at it as kind of an asshole spring."

After a hundred pages, with Leonard having quit advertising, in 1961, "Cooler Than Cool" settles down, and so does its subject. He begins to earn higher advances, and a larger readership. In 1977, he divorces Beverly. In 1979, he marries Joan Shepard. (The Leonards and the Shepards both belonged to the same country club.) The marriage is a contented one,

immortalized in the dedication to the cheerful “Freaky Deaky” (1988): “To my wife Joan for giving me the title and a certain look when I write too many words.” Joan dies of cancer in January, 1993. In August of the same year, Leonard marries a landscape gardener named Christine Kent. The best man is his son Peter, who says of his father, “He worked by himself all day and then would want somebody to talk to and have dinner with. He *liked* being married.”

The operative phrase is “by himself.” What is a biographer to do with a solitary soul, especially one who, like Leonard, produces a half-dozen novels in the final decade of his life? Rising from “Cooler Than Cool” is a nagging sense of intrusion—not from Kushins, who is doing his scrupulous duty, but from all those who breached Leonard’s peace, requesting interviews and bestowing prizes and wanting a piece of the guy. Being a pro, and a courteous fellow, he was minded to consent, but still. Relief arrived in 1981, when he hired a Detroit-born writer, Gregg Sutter, as a researcher. For the next thirty years or so, Sutter would bring back the goods, which Leonard would then fence, as it were, into fiction. For “Glitz,” Kushins reports, “Sutter was dispatched to Atlantic City for five days, armed with a list of questions for local law enforcement,” not least in regard to “morgue protocols.” This shift in method was a practical one: it left Leonard alone to write.

And what does he write about? Where, exactly, is he *at*? If you race through a heap of Leonards, from the springtime of “Swag” and “Stick” (1983)—two books about the same man, Ernest Stickley, Jr., a canny but not infallible maestro of the armed holdup—to the late bloom of “Raylan” (2012), his last completed novel, what hits you is the generosity with which the entire corpus bursts with the stuff of life. Stick himself is given to brooding along those lines: “Look at it in bright sunlight. Here it was, the world. What did it have to offer? All he had ever seen was one shady part of it.”

Leonard’s patch, from book to book, was the frontier, where the light hits the shade. For an alleged crime writer, he committed an awful lot to the page that had nothing to do with misdemeanors. He relished demeanors, of all varieties, and the poses that we strike in a doomed attempt to make ourselves look swell, plus the gift of tongues that encourages us to expose our positions. Nothing dramatizes the human comedy with more precision than

the sound of a happily narrow mind retorting to the wider environment. Here is Walter Kouza, a corruptible cop in “Split Images” (1981), discussing a relative of John Paul II:

“Yeah, the cousin use to work over to Chrysler Lynch Road. He was a sandblaster. Only the pope spells it different. Wojtyla. With a *a* on the end ’stead of a *o*. He’s a Polack too. Hey, and how about that other Polack, Lech Walesa? He something? Doesn’t take any shit from the communists.”

Alternatively, try Dennis, a high-diver by profession, in “Tishomingo Blues” (2002), which was Leonard’s own favorite among his works: “Dennis had a couple of microwaved Lean Cuisines for supper, both chicken but different, and came out on the porch to look through a few *Enquirers*.” Ah, the utopia of choice in a free society! *Both chicken but different*. Then, we have the multitalented Dawn Navarro, in “Road Dogs” (2009), who tells fortunes: “You can call me Reverend Dawn, if you’d like. I’m an ordained minister of the Spiritualist Assembly of Waco, Texas, though I started out doing nails.” Dawn had shown up fourteen years previously in “Riding the Rap,” and “Road Dogs” is a three-way junction, where she bumps into characters from two other Leonard books, “LaBrava” (1983) and “Out of Sight” (1996). Such interconnections are enough to make you believe in a place called Leonardland. Its geography is as varied as its ethnic composition. Its educational facilities are called streets. As for its ambient temperature, do you need to ask?

There is one activity in which many inhabitants of that land freely indulge. Let Dennis, again, be our guide, as he shows somebody how to use a Colt: “Thumb the hammer back. Or you can squeeze the trigger and fan the hammer, the way Alan Ladd did in *Shane*.” Chris Mankowski, in “Freaky Deaky,” opts for Mel Gibson—“He thought of Mel blazing away with his Beretta. Shit, the Glock held more rounds.” But the best advice, in this regard, is not about firearms at all. It’s about sex, and what it means to Tommy Donovan, in “Glitz,” who owns a casino and knows all he needs to know, thank you very much:

He didn’t want to try any new ways to do it that had been discovered since Rae Dawn Chong showed that cave guy in the movie how to

make fire and do it face to face. Being an important man Tommy was always in a hurry.

The subject of Leonard and the cinema is highly charged, one reason being that you keep having to reverse the current. His work flows into the movies, and vice versa. For a start, there are the films that have sprung from Leonard's fiction. One of the best was one of the first: "3:10 to Yuma," from 1957, adapted from a story of the same name. (The remake, fifty years later, with Russell Crowe and Christian Bale, is not to be mentioned in the same breath.) Shot in black-and-white, as crisp as a funeral suit, it's as beautiful a Western as you could hope for. The beauty, indeed, pulls it into the gulches of noir. So does the presence of Glenn Ford, as a villain so beguiling that it's all too easy to think of him as the hero. That temptation, rich in moral confusion, runs through Leonardland, onscreen as on the page. Consider the newly escaped convict and the U.S. marshal—George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, respectively—in "Out of Sight" (1998), cozying up in the trunk of a car. For whom, in that tight space, are we supposed to root?

"Out of Sight" is one of a trio of films, the others being "Get Shorty" (1995) and "Jackie Brown" (1997), that are widely believed to have done cinematic justice, at long last, to Elmore Leonard. And it's true that, if you cast your eye over the decades, what you discover, mostly, is a junk yard of travesties and rusty letdowns. Even the sturdiest directors have faltered. How did the man who made "The Manchurian Candidate," John Frankenheimer, manage to scupper Leonard's "Fifty-Two Pickup," in 1986? How come the touch of John Madden, which saw him through "Shakespeare in Love," deserted him in "Killshot" (2008)? The flinty aplomb of Charles Bronson was Leonardish enough, in Richard Fleischer's "Mr. Majestyk" (1974)—Leonard begat the novel *after* writing the screenplay—but the result lacked the poise of its star. When Leonard claimed that the first adaptation of "The Big Bounce," in 1969, was the second-worst movie of all time, it was because, in Kushins's words, "the sheer laws of statistics dictated that *something* had to be worse. Following the release of the 2004 remake, Leonard announced he'd finally found it."

In covering these tussles with Hollywood, "Cooler Than Cool" is at its most entertaining, but also its most agonizing. The curious fact is that, though Leonard's fame did not explode until "LaBrava" and "Glitz," his virtues

were recognized, and his services sought, many years earlier, by stars and producers alike. I love the domestic scene that is summoned up by Peter Leonard and quoted by Kushins: “The phone would ring and it might be Clint Eastwood or Steve McQueen calling to discuss script revisions. Elmore would take the call, and my sister Jane would run upstairs, unscrew the mouthpiece on another phone and listen to the conversation.” Just another day in the Leonard household.

Leonard was no naïf. He knew the probable fate of the wordsmith who heads west. “People have been getting fucked since before *Birth of a Nation*,” he wrote. “It’s sometimes part of the deal. In taking money, you assume the position.” Even so, to study the farce that enveloped a potential film of “LaBrava” is to be reminded anew of why many writers elect to remain at their workstations, poor but inviolate. In 1984, in Kushins’s telling, a producer “sent a copy of Leonard’s screenplay adaptation to Dustin Hoffman, who claimed to have loved the book but immediately asked for revisions.” At the actor’s request, Leonard then wrote no fewer than four more versions. In January, 1986, the Los Angeles *Times* reported that Hoffman was asking for \$6.3 million, plus 22.5 per cent of the gross. (Hoffman denies that he was involved in financial negotiations. Perish the thought.) Later, according to Kushins, the star not only hired his own screenwriter but also declared that he wished to co-direct—allegations that Hoffman, likewise, now repudiates. Is anything beyond dispute? Well, we know that the film of “LaBrava” was never made, and that Hoffman plumped instead for “Ishtar.” Slock on *that*.

As so often, what might have vexed or depressed many authors was, for Leonard, an extra helping of grist. His sweet revenge on Hollywood arrived in 1990, in the shape of “Get Shorty,” about a loan shark named Chili Palmer, who swims into the movie business and snaps at the other fish. He winds up sketching out plot points with a vainglorious star. Five years later, that novel *did* become a film, and a hit to boot. And who, in Leonard’s recollection, was the studio’s first choice to play Chili? Dustin Hoffman. “It didn’t make sense, and yet, in a way, it does,” Leonard said, with typical tranquillity. In the event, the role went to John Travolta.

All in all, it’s tempting to agree with Leonard’s fellow-novelist Donald E. Westlake. “Dutch, why do you keep hoping to make a good movie?” he

asked, after Burt Reynolds, both acting and directing, had made a hash of “Stick.” Westlake added, “The books are ours; everything else is virgins thrown in the volcano.” Yet Leonard’s experience had not been merely sacrificial, and his influence on cinema has been most dynamic, I’d say, when it’s indirect. Quentin Tarantino turned Leonard’s “Rum Punch” (1992) into “Jackie Brown,” in 1997, with a fidelity verging on the devout, but had he not already proved his devotion in “Pulp Fiction,” three years earlier? From where did the tasty back-and-forth between Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson—Quarter Pounders with cheese, and so on—emerge, if not from the repartee of Ordell Robbie and Louis Gara, whom Leonard had paired together in “Rum Punch” *and* in “The Switch,” back in 1978? Unofficially, since the nineteen-fifties, Leonard had been a national coolness adviser. Hollywood took a long time to catch up.

There is an unwritten rule that any book about Leonard must, if possible, sport the word “cool” in the title. Hence “Being Cool: The Work of Elmore Leonard” (2013), a critical assessment by Charles J. Rzepka. “Being cool resembles what the former University of Chicago psychologist Mihali Csikszentmihalyi describes as the mental state of ‘flow’ that characterizes highly focused creative activity,” Rzepka writes. “Leonard is particularly interested in a subset of Csikszentmihalyi’s full range of autotelic pursuits, something closer to what Aristotle calls *techne*, or skill.” All perfectly true, and it’s pleasant to think of Ordell and Louis, say, watching that shrink, Chickie something, getting his piece of shit Chevy fixed at Autotelic. But Rzepka is right to concentrate on skills. Leonard was drawn to dexterity from the days of “The Big Bounce,” in which a burglar breaks into somebody’s house and then breaks *off* to answer the door to a dry-cleaning delivery:

He took two suits and a topcoat from the guy, thanked him, and put the clothes in a suit-case. Thanking the guy was the touch. It was a hard one to beat.

At the same time, Leonard pays unceasing tribute to our mortal genius for screwing up. His comedy—like that of a very different Catholic writer, Evelyn Waugh—logs all the ways in which, as fallen creatures, we can’t help going astray, betrayed by the very skills that led us to trespass. Not that Leonard casts judgment; that is neither his prerogative nor his shtick.

“They’re not *trying* to be funny, they don’t *know* they’re funny,” Leonard said of his characters. “They just are.” That is why his prose, rather than straining to be laugh-out-loud, wears a wise and well-informed smile.

“Cooler Than Cool” is testament to that wisdom. The fun of it resides in the minutiae of Leonard’s mores, or in those interludes when he rises, with reluctance, from his typewriter. (“Writer’s block just means you got up from your desk,” he said.) Thus we learn that he liked to wear Italian boots with zippers up the side, and a Nine Inch Nails T-shirt. We learn that Aerosmith, whose music Leonard admired, came round to his place in Detroit, and that nothing but water was offered—absolutely fine by the band, *all* of whom were, like their host, recovering alcoholics. Most enlightening of all, we learn that, to the alarm of his son Peter, Leonard once flew to the Tucson Book Festival with seven joints concealed in a pack of cigarettes. As luck would have it, airport security failed to check. “I was incredibly relieved,” Peter said. “I thought I was going to have to call the festival organizer to tell him that eighty-four-year-old Elmore Leonard got busted for possession.” Eighty-four!

We are blessed to have as much Leonard as we do. Would it be greedy to plead for more? On the evidence of what Kushins quotes, we surely deserve a book of Leonard’s correspondence—letters *to* him, preferably, as well as from him. One woman confided, “My husband is getting tired of me spending more time in the sack with a Leonard book than with him. So I told him, ‘Get my attention.’ ” From a prison in Connecticut, a librarian wrote to inform Leonard that, “while you ain’t caught on with the crack and cocaine heads, you have got a following amongst the heroin crowd.” It could be that Henry James used to get fan mail like that, but I doubt it.

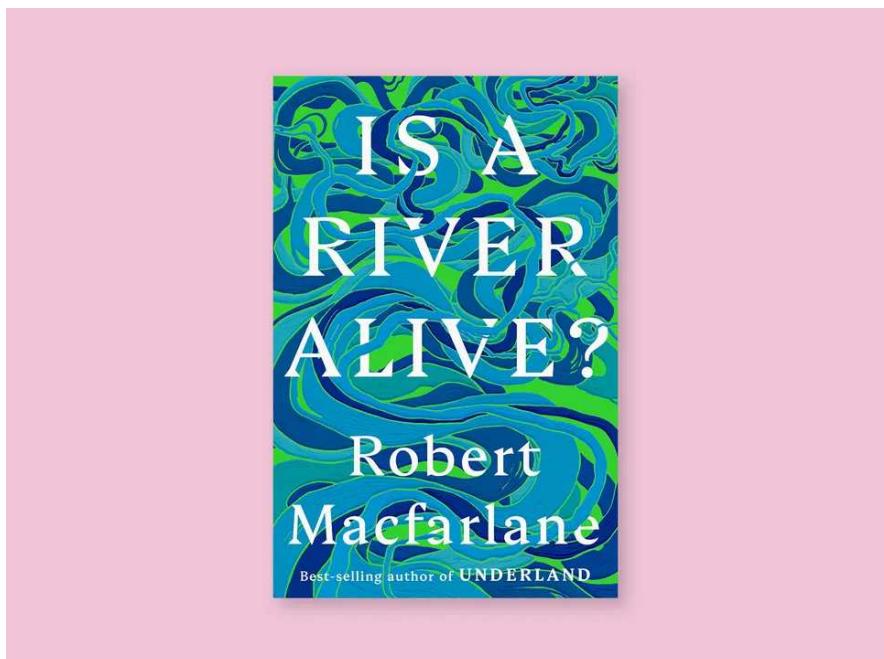
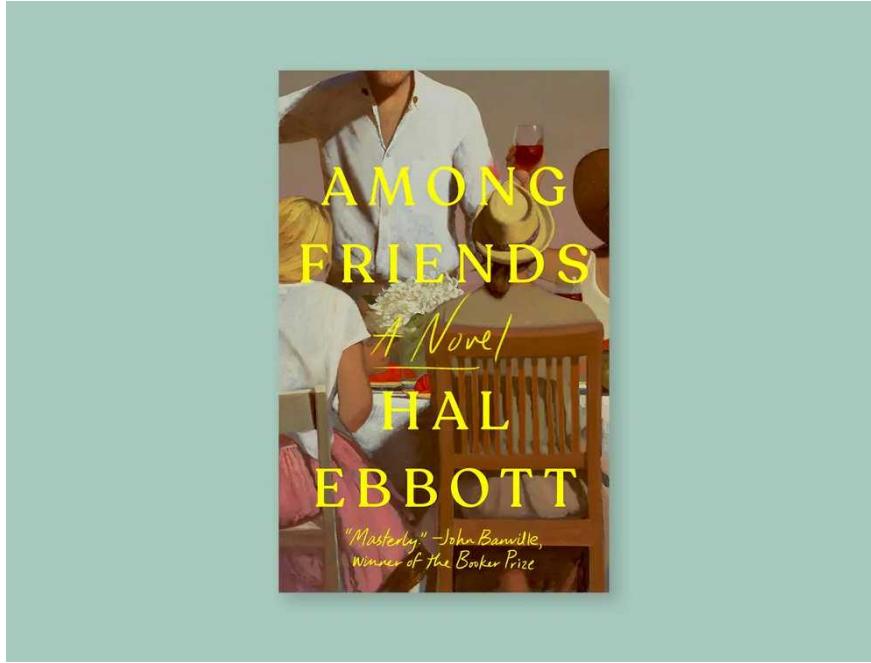
The crowning surprise of “Cooler Than Cool” is that it stirs the heart. In forty years of reading Elmore Leonard, and of surfing along on his stories—tense as they are, and yet so wickedly relaxed—I found myself moved by a letter that he wrote to one of his grandchildren, who was departing for Los Angeles in 1998. This is how it ends: “One thing I’ve noticed, especially in the movie business, the girls are smarter than the guys. But the guys have the power. Really all you have to do is be yourself. Be cool. Go with God, Grandfather Elmore.” Makes you weep. I mean, Jesus, a great writer who was also a good *person*? Whatever next? ♦

Books

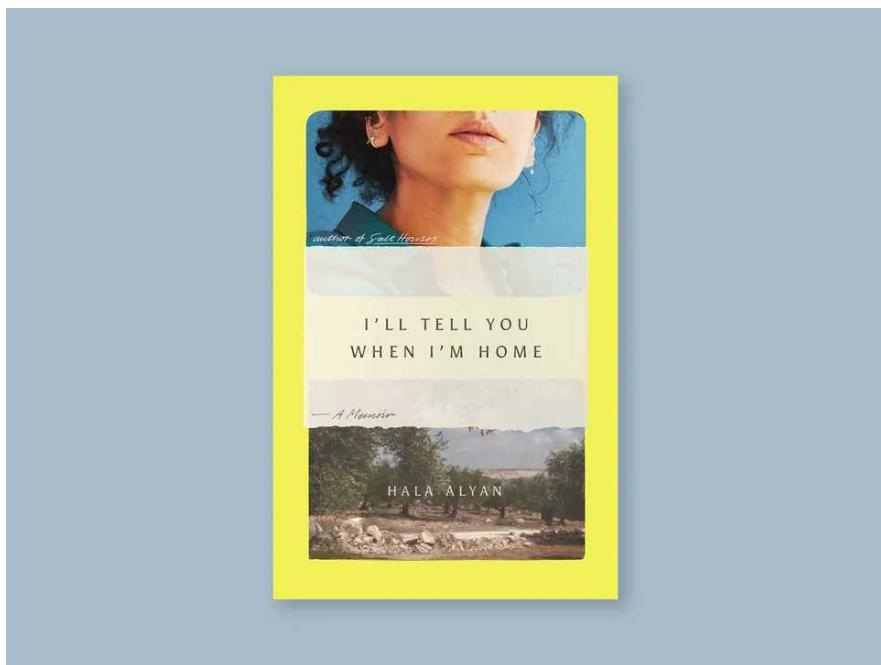
## Briefly Noted

“Is a River Alive?,” “I’ll Tell You When I’m Home,” “The Doorman,” and “Among Friends.”

June 30, 2025

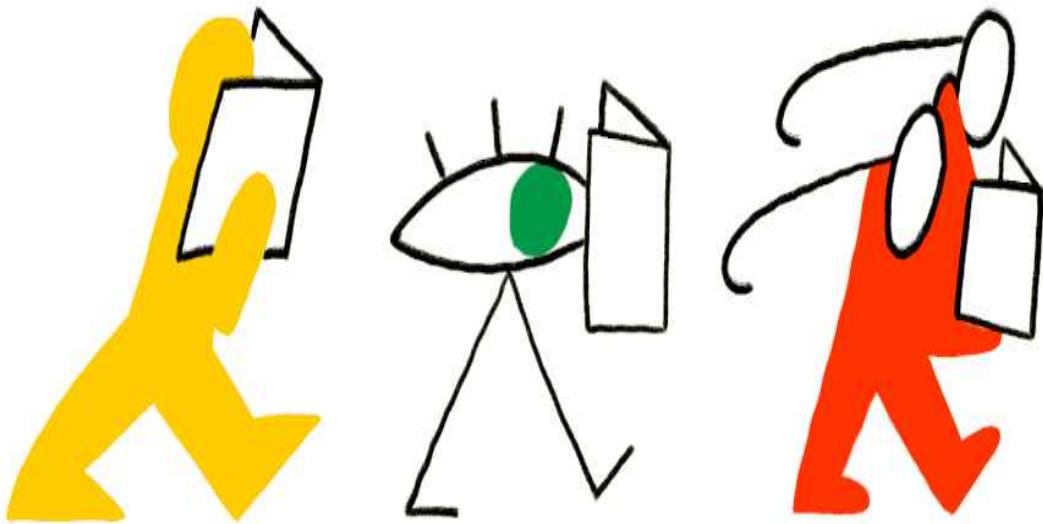


**Is a River Alive?**, by Robert Macfarlane (Norton). Rivers in Ecuador, India, and Canada provide the settings for this elegant travelogue, which asks whether a natural entity, such as a river, can be regarded as a living thing. Macfarlane approaches the question by contrasting rivers' legal rights with those enjoyed by corporations—often quite close to those afforded to persons—which dam, drill, and divert rivers in damaging ways. He also considers the “rights of nature” movement. In 2008, some of its precepts were enshrined in Ecuador’s constitution, a development that has helped to protect the country’s waterways—an example of policy that Macfarlane sees as a cause for optimism. “Rivers are easily wounded,” he writes. “But given a chance, they heal themselves with remarkable speed.”

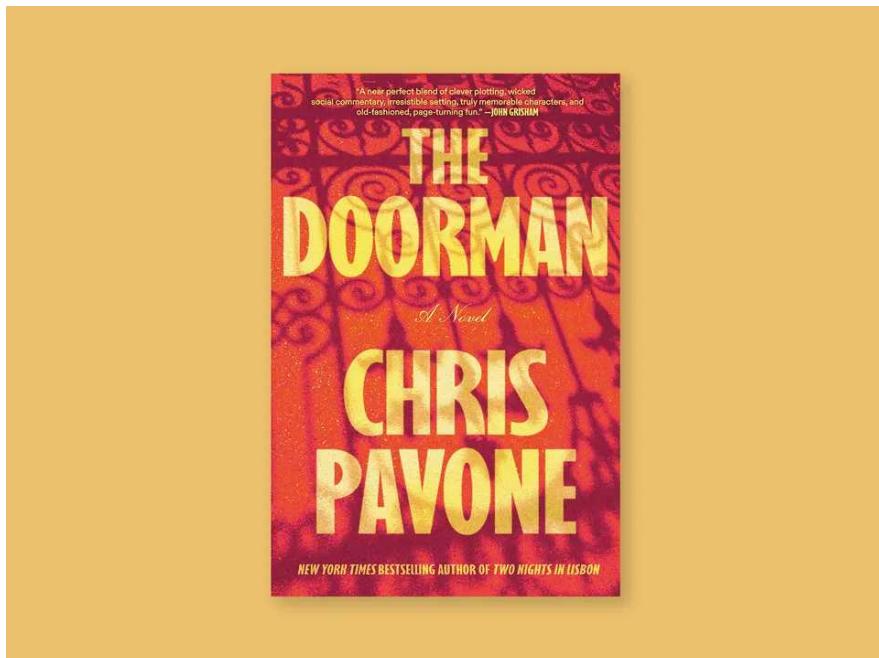


**I'll Tell You When I'm Home**, by Hala Alyan (Avid Reader). This affecting memoir, by a Palestinian American poet, is structured around the arc of a surrogate pregnancy, but it bears the emotional weight of the events that preceded it: infertility, miscarriages, a strained marriage, and exile. Told in fragments, the book spans Alyan’s itinerant upbringing, in Kuwait, Beirut, and elsewhere, and her life as an adult in the United States. Storytelling, especially among women, is shown as a means of establishing continuity, despite ruptures both geographic and political. Meditating on the contradictions that define her bicultural background, Alyan writes, “You exist in both identities like a ghost, belonging to neither.”

## What We're Reading

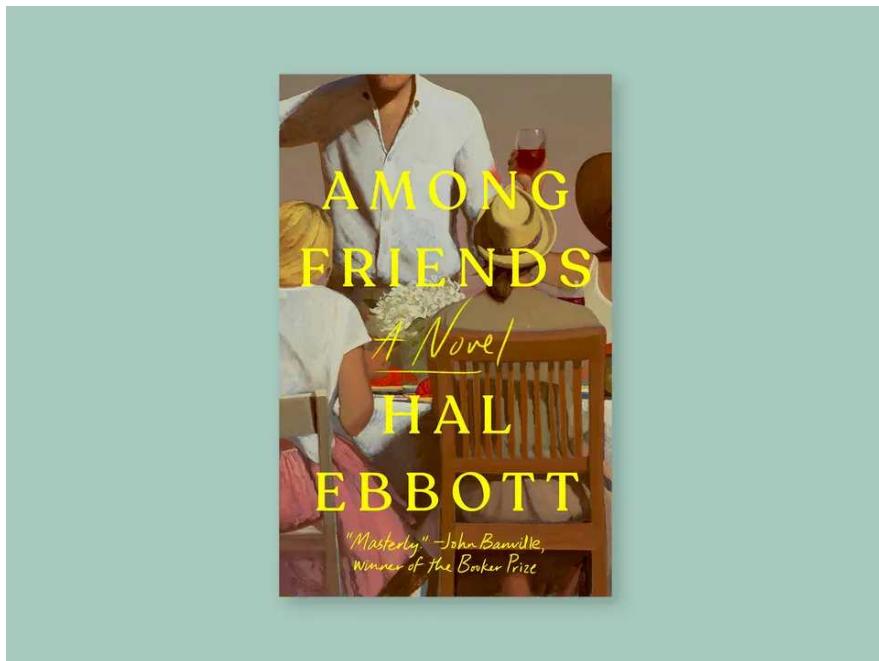


*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



**The Doorman**, by *Chris Pavone* (*MCD*). The events of this politically attuned thriller unspool over one fatal day at the Bohemia, a luxury

apartment building in Manhattan, where a doorman finds himself ensnared in the high-stakes dramas of the ostentatiously wealthy residents. Pavone deploys signifiers of the contemporary culture wars to conjure a relentlessly polarized New York City, where race, class, and politics suffuse every interaction. Embracing a diverse cast of characters—including society ladies, defense contractors, and a Ukrainian super who spends his evenings on Grindr—the novel ultimately turns on a festering marriage, an ill-fated affair, and a business relationship gone sour, all of which combine to trap the “unerringly patient and unfailingly nice” doorman in a cataclysm.



**Among Friends**, by *Hal Ebbott* (*Riverhead*). This finely calibrated début novel hinges on a decades-long friendship between two men, a therapist of humble origins and a lawyer born to money. While the men are at the lawyer’s upstate home celebrating his birthday with their wives and each couple’s teen-age daughter, distinct events—among them an unsparing comment made in private and an ankle injury sustained on the tennis court—seem to set up a monstrous act, the aftereffects of which lay bare the unacknowledged self-interest the relationships are built upon. The book is as discerning as it is pitiless about the transactional nature of human connection. As the therapist reflects, when a friendship is working, “each of you knows that you’ve gone somewhere you can’t get on your own.”

Books

# Is Technology Really Ruining Teens' Lives?

In recent years, an irresistibly intuitive hypothesis has both salved and fuelled parental anxieties: *it's the phones.*

By Molly Fischer

June 30, 2025



In early 2021, the journalist Matt Richtel spoke to a father who was a few weeks into a nightmare. Tatnai Burnett was a doctor, his wife was a therapist, and, until middle school, their daughter Elaniv had seemed to be the happy beneficiary of loving parents and a stable home. Then, without apparent external cause, she became depressed and began cutting herself. Her parents sought treatment, including medication and therapy, but on March 1, 2021, Elaniv took an overdose of pills. She arrived at the hospital conscious, then started hallucinating and having seizures, before going into cardiac arrest and being placed on life support. She died on March 5th, shortly before her sixteenth birthday. Later that month, her father tried to make sense of what had happened while talking to a reporter.

Richtel was at work on what would become “The Inner Pandemic,” a 2022 [series](#) for the New York *Times* about American teens’ mental health—which, by many measures, had been deteriorating for some time. “I could barely hold it together,” he writes in his new book, “[How We Grow Up](#)” (Mariner), recalling his harrowing conversation with Burnett. “I was a journalist, yes, but more than that a father of two children who themselves were on the verge of adolescence.” Richtel’s response was visceral. “I desperately wanted to understand,” he writes.

In recent years, a seductively intuitive hypothesis to explain stories like Elaniv’s has taken shape: [it’s the phones](#). A smartphone, equipped with TikTok and Instagram, contains in one sleek package an assortment of forces that might make a teen unhappy—toxic social dynamics, [unrealistic body image](#), incitement to paralyzing [self-consciousness](#), even a reason to avoid such fundamentals of well-being as a good night’s sleep. And—parents and professional commentators generally acknowledge—phones don’t make adults feel so great, either. The explanatory power of technology is tantalizing. (In Elaniv’s case, there was no obvious tech factor, but her parents still grasped after the dominant narrative: “We controlled electronics, monitored friendships,” Burnett tells Richtel, helplessly.) The phone consensus is bipartisan, appealing to right-wing moralism and left-wing anti-corporate sentiment alike. States including Florida, Utah, California, and New York have all moved to variously restrict teens’ access to social media, or, if you like, to restrict social-media companies’ access to teens; Texas recently came close to passing a bill that would have banned minors from social media altogether.

A flock of whistle-blowers, journalists, and documentarians have sought both to illuminate the situation and to service parental anxieties. Alarming statistics circulate, along with lists of milestones missed and failures of intellectual and social engagement. Talk to any high-school teacher and anecdotal evidence of a phone-beholden generation abounds. But nailing down the particulars of the problem proves more slippery. Which digital media are bad, under what circumstances, and for whom? According to one oft-cited figure from a 2022 Pew Research Center [report](#), forty-six per cent of teens say that they are online “almost constantly,” a statement that somehow has the ring of both truth and hyperbole. It’s easy to imagine a lot of teens saying that, and harder to know what they mean. (The survey’s

other possible responses were “several times a week or less often,” “about once a day,” and “several times a day,” all of which suggest a formal and polite level of acquaintance with one’s smartphone.) In 2023, the Surgeon General released an advisory titled “Social Media and Youth Mental Health,” which called for more research. “Nearly 70% of parents say parenting is now more difficult than it was 20 years ago, with technology and social media as the top two cited reasons,” the advisory notes. Yet, though it takes the form of a statistic, this statement bears only a tenuous relationship to anything quantifiable. For one thing, “parents” here refers to people with children under the age of eighteen—a pool with limited firsthand expertise about what it was like to be a parent twenty years ago.

In “How We Grow Up,” Richtel expands his reporting to take in the experience of contemporary adolescence more generally. His hope, he explains, is to answer a pair of broad questions. First: “What is the core, universal purpose of adolescence?” And second: “Why is adolescence undergoing unprecedeted change? What is happening right now?” Nowhere in his title does the term “online” or “social media” appear, but the image on the book’s cover seems to supply a predictable answer to the latter line of inquiry: a big, blurry phone, clutched in two hands and held aloft, obscuring the face of a teen.

The conversation that Richtel’s book joins began in earnest nearly a decade ago, with [Jean Twenge](#), a professor of psychology at San Diego State. Twenge was already a generational diagnostician when she set out to analyze young people born between 1995 and 2012. Previously, she’d written a book on millennials (born in the eighties and early nineties): “[Generation Me](#),” published in 2006, promises in its subtitle to assess “Why Today’s Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled—and More Miserable Than Ever Before.” With “[iGen](#),” her 2017 best-seller, she offers an account of “Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What That Means for the Rest of Us.” The book supplies a term that achieved no widespread purchase (“iGen”) and a premise that did: that today’s teens have been, in a fundamental and unprecedented way, deformed by technology. Using survey databases and interviews, Twenge documents a decline in well-being that coincides with the growth of smartphone use. The

group she calls iGen had entered adolescence just as these technologies took hold.

Several years later, the New York University social psychologist [Jonathan Haidt](#) proposed another name for this cohort: “the Anxious Generation.” Haidt’s book of the same title was published early last year and has not left the *Times* best-seller list since. Its author, meanwhile, emerged as a leading voice of alarm by picking up where Twenge left off. In “[The Anxious Generation](#),” Haidt calls her work “groundbreaking,” but notes that, at the time she was writing, “nearly all evidence was correlational.” Armed now with ever larger data sets and some experimental findings, he argues that, between 2010 and 2015, a generational “rewiring” took place, thanks to two forces. The first was a parental overemphasis on children’s safety. The second was the phones. This combination of “overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world” brought about a shift from “play-based” to “phone-based” childhood, he writes, with young people’s mental health as a casualty.

Part of Haidt’s appeal to terrified parents is his willingness to provide a stern and confident prescription: no smartphones before high school, no social media before sixteen, no phones in schools, and more independent childhood play. His guidance draws on the work of a former journalist named Lenore Skenazy. After winning media notoriety with a 2008 *New York Sun* [column](#) about letting her nine-year-old ride the subway alone, Skenazy reinvented herself as an activist against helicopter parenting, and published a book called “[Free-Range Kids](#).” Haidt read it when he was a parent of young children, and subsequently partnered with Skenazy to help found Let Grow, a nonprofit that advocates for increased childhood independence. He credits her with shaping his thinking, but he’s also repackaged her ideas in a way that’s enabled them to be taken seriously: where Skenazy offers advice with an air of rambunctious provocation (for a time, she hosted a reality show called “World’s Worst Mom”), Haidt projects sober objectivity. His previous book, “[The Coddling of the American Mind](#),” co-authored with Greg Lukianoff, also addresses generational change and mental health—in that case, as manifested in campus conflicts and cancel culture. The authors explain in “Coddling” that they based their argument on a combination of “wisdom literatures” and cognitive-behavioral therapy. Haidt adopts a similar formula—classics plus social science—in “The Anxious

Generation,” a book in which quotations from Epictetus and Buddha nestle alongside charts from the C.D.C.



Even as “The Anxious Generation” has set the terms for teens-and-phones discourse, it has attracted critics, some of whom seem primed to react against Haidt as a cancel-culture warrior. Others, though, have questioned his facts—in particular, the data underpinning his argument that phones offer the only reasonable explanation for a stark decline in teen mental health. Haidt points to a selection of statistics across Anglophone and Nordic countries to suggest that rising rates of teen unhappiness are an international trend requiring an international explanation. But it’s possible to choose other data points that complicate Haidt’s picture—among South Korean teens, for example, rates of depression fell between 2006 and 2018. Meanwhile, in the U.S., suicide rates have increased for virtually all age groups in the past two decades, not just for teens. Even in the areas in which Haidt’s case appears the strongest—for instance, concerning rising rates of depression among American teen-age girls—definite connections are elusive. The science journalist David Wallace-Wells has pointed out that the sudden increase in depression among teen girls coincides not just with the [rise of smartphones](#) but with a shift in screening practices that followed the Affordable Care Act: new guidelines recommended annual depression screenings for teen-age

girls (and mandated that insurers cover them). More girls were saying that they were depressed, yes, but more doctors had started asking.

Richtel, entering this debate, stakes out a position between Haidt's and those of his skeptics. Rather than questioning the existence of a teen mental-health crisis, Richtel seeks to contextualize it. Phones, in his view, aren't a singular explanation, even if they are a legitimate concern. "I don't think you need to be an evolutionary biologist or anthropologist to see the basic logic in this," he writes. "*SPENDING TEN HOURS A DAY WITH YOUR FACE BURIED IN A SCREEN IS NOT GOOD FOR THE DEVELOPING BRAIN.*" In a chapter called "Social Media: This Is the Actual Science Behind the Boogeyman," he explains his reluctance to make clear-cut statements on causality. "I'm guessing this can feel very unsatisfying," he writes. "Like, *really frustrating*. Parents and policymakers want answers. I want to provide them. It would be really nice, were it true, to be able to say that the rise in mental health distress is a direct result of heavy use of social media. It's just not that straightforward, though. The only thing worse than no answer is a false one."

Like Twenge and Haidt before him, Richtel proposes a name for today's teens: "Generation Rumination." But he situates their turmoil in a consideration of adolescence as a cultural, sociological, and psychological stage that has emerged in recent centuries. The distress teens feel is, he believes, a reasonable response to a world whose challenges are increasingly abstract and intellectual rather than physical. "Generation Rumination is growing up in the realm of the mind and psyche," he writes. "Asking why some are struggling is like asking why some adolescents of yesteryear skinned their knees and broke their bones while trekking over a mountain to explore new terrain." At the same time, adolescence itself has changed as the age of puberty has fallen. Since the eighties, a growing body of research has found that [girls in particular](#) are starting puberty much younger than was once considered typical—as early as six or seven. Richtel argues that this means young people are now stranded for longer than ever in a state of heightened vulnerability; he describes studies indicating that adolescent brains are particularly drawn to novelty and social information (in addition to the risk-taking and poor judgment for which they've traditionally been known), laying them especially open to the temptations of the phone. "Changing environment + changing puberty = neurological mismatch," he

writes. Richtel intersperses his research with the stories of several teens, who help illustrate the broad strokes of his theory. “I don’t want to blame the internet, but I do want to blame the internet,” one kid, who’s struggled with anxiety and depression, tells Richtel. “I feel like if I was born in 2000 BC in the Alps, I’d still be depressive, but I think it’s wildly exacerbated by the climate we live in.”

In addition to reporting on technology and health, Richtel writes thrillers—in 2007, the year the first iPhone appeared, he published one called “[Hooked](#),” about Silicon Valley villains racing to develop ever more addictive technologies. His sideline comes through in the prose of “How We Grow Up,” which is full of cliffhanger paragraph breaks and staccato fragments. It’s a book that seems acutely conscious of holding the reader’s attention, resorting at times to bullet points and chatty interjections. (While explaining “[The Sorrows of Young Werther](#)”: “Way to go, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe! You helped establish the idea of adolescence as one of terrible tumult.”) This is never truer than in a chapter addressing teens directly, titled “Hey, Adolescents, Own Your Own #\*^& (or These People Will): An Open Letter to Adolescents Explains How You Can Take Back Power from Heartless Money-Grubbers.” Richtel has reported extensively on the dangers of distracted driving, and perhaps it’s a credit to his prior work that he’s inclined to treat teens and their phones as part of the broader phenomenon of our tech-mediated lives—a phenomenon in which the teens themselves are active participants rather than pliant victims. “Adolescents do not just form their own identities,” he writes. “They help form ours. They are the future-makers, and they’ve been doing that for a long time.”

It would be too dismissive to call the concern over teens and technology a moral panic, as some skeptics have done. But, if it isn’t a moral panic, it has at least become an irresistibly gripping cultural drama—a story operating on the level of emotion rather than data. Parents are daunted, exhausted, and afraid. A fear underlying the discourse of teens and phones is that technology might sever the parent-child bond, leaving the child a stranger. “The boy had changed, and was lost,” Haidt writes, summarizing one kid’s transformation from cheerful at age nine to screen-fixated at age fifteen.

The terror of losing a child to online darkness is enough to power the recent Netflix series “[Adolescence](#),” which, despite its title, is less about young

people than about the distance their elders feel from them. It centers on a thirteen-year-old British boy named Jamie, who is accused of murdering a female classmate. Both kids are born around 2011, making them late members of Twenge’s iGen, or, as it has become better known, Gen Z. Jamie’s guilt is quickly established; the mystery is how and why he did what he did. To the police detectives who visit his school, teen behavior is a cipher to be decoded, almost literally: their breakthrough arrives when the lead detective’s young son takes pity on his dad and tells him what all the emojis in Jamie’s Instagram replies mean. (They’re manosphere arcana.) At one point, another detective laments that they haven’t spent more time learning about the victim. “We’ve followed Jamie’s brain around this entire case,” she says. Maybe so, but his inner life remains inaccessibly remote. Jamie has a big head, like a baby, and skinny limbs; his flashes of menace have the horror-movie quality of an evil doll. The audience’s most sustained encounter with the boy takes the shape of an hour-long meeting between him and a court psychologist. He is a patient, a specimen to be examined, and viewers, like the psychologist, are tugged between fear for him and fear of him.

Fear is a note rarely absent from generational analysis of teens. “Always emphasize that you want to help them, that you’re on their side, and that the feedback you’re offering is to help them succeed,” Twenge counsels the managers of iGen employees, sounding a bit like she’s giving advice to novice zookeepers on entering a big-cat enclosure. Haidt’s book, meanwhile, begins with an extended analogy in which kids are pestering their parents to let them move to Mars, possibly never to return. The dominant strain of anxiety at present focusses less on the outright monstrous (as with nineties fantasies of teen-age “superpredators”) than on the brainwashed or body-snatched. “I’m a Liberal Professor, and My Liberal Students Terrify Me” read the headline of a widely circulated *Vox* [article](#) from 2015, amid the period of campus culture wars that Haidt took on in “Coddling.” Technology is a vector; it transmits whatever ills and ideologies a parent imagines might lure a child beyond reach. Like the ongoing debate over kids and gender, the teens-and-phones discourse taps into a dread that your kid might stumble onto new ideas, very likely online, and be irreversibly transformed.

One of the teen subjects of “How We Grow Up” is a trans boy in Utah, and Richtel approaches his experience as well as that of his parents with

sensitivity. Rather than casting kids as zombies or aliens, “How We Grow Up” insists on the continuity between young people and the adults around them, while acknowledging that the relationships involved aren’t always easy. The book’s warmth and sympathy distinguish it on the crowded shelf it occupies. Richtel compares adolescence to the moment in “life’s eternal relay race” when a baton changes hands. “Sometimes the prior generation doesn’t want to give up the baton, and the new generation often starts running in a slightly new direction,” he writes. “It makes the older generation very uncomfortable, even angry, and aware on some level that the handoff represents the end of their lives.” He doesn’t dwell on that older generation, but I found myself thinking about the hazards that technology presents—from online fraud to long, lonely hours spent scrolling—for aging baby boomers. People too young to have teen-age children may already be familiar with the sight of older family members locked unnervingly to their screens—the elderly, though, tend not to inspire the same fascination as adolescents.

What do the teens themselves make of this literature: the books of social-science findings and parenting prescriptions, the headlines and journalistic concern? I was twelve when *Newsweek* published the cover story “Tweens: Are They Growing Up Too Fast? What Parents Can Do,” and I remember regarding its basic premise—that there was a meaningfully cohesive group of people between the ages of eight and fourteen—with scorn. Eight-year-olds were children. Fourteen-year-olds were so old. Neither group had anything to do with me. But I also remember eying a copy of “[Reviving Ophelia](#)” on a family bookshelf with real curiosity. Mary Pipher’s 1994 best-seller instructed worried parents on “Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls” from a media-saturated, modern coming of age. On the jacket, a very young woman gazed out of shadows and into the light of a future I could not yet perceive.

“Don’t let the knuckleheads own you,” Richtel tells the teens. “Use social media and all the rest on your terms. Make that phone your tool, instead of being its tool.” It’s the voice of an overcaffeinated social-studies teacher straddling the back of a chair—that is to say, earnest enough to be unembarrassable and trying very hard to connect. I’m not sure it will work, but it’s nice to see the effort. ♦

The Art World

# The Met's Luminous New Rockefeller Wing Still Casts Some Shadows

A seventy-million-dollar renovation beautifully presents the museum's non-Western art—even if doubts remain about whether all of it belongs in New York.

By Julian Lucas

June 30, 2025



The recent reopening of the Metropolitan Museum's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing—a spectacular treasury of art from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas—was fortuitously timed. The renovation, which cost seventy million dollars, began in 2021, as a global campaign to decolonize Western museums was prompting some institutions to repatriate looted objects, and others to engage in tortured self-critique. Four years later, an America-first cultural crackdown has freed the Met to cast off the hair shirt of reckoning and celebrate its diverse holdings in a spirit of defiance. Tahitian dancers and Senegalese drummers performed at a festival to mark the reopening, spilling out onto the plaza on Fifth Avenue.

“Light” is the watchword of the renovation, directed by the architect Kulapat Yantrasast, who has transformed a dim, low-ceilinged annex into a cathedral-like hub. Graceful Bamana headdresses and Senufo carved birds have swapped their cramped niches for open platforms and vitrines, arranged in an enfilade of galleries under a ribbed vault inspired by Mali’s Great Mosque of Djenné. Mayan stelae and Melanesian slit gongs share the sunlight from a sloped glass wall abutting Central Park which has been specially reengineered to protect photosensitive works. Nearly two thousand objects are on display, from the towering *bis*, or ancestor poles, of the Asmat—collected by Michael C. Rockefeller on an anthropological expedition to Dutch New Guinea, where he disappeared in 1961—to a gilt “linguist’s staff” of the Asante, its finial shaped like a spiderweb. The wing’s design stresses each region’s singularity while fostering an atmosphere of cosmopolitan exchange. We’re meant to feel that the Met is no longer what the writer Ishmael Reed described a half century ago: “the Center for Art Detention.”



It may be the most impressive of the recently modernized colonial collections, far surpassing Berlin’s much criticized Humboldt Forum. One laudable shift is the variety of media exhibited—not just sculpture, which was the first so-called primitive art to coax open the doors of Western museums, but jewelry, featherwork, and textiles. A particularly beautiful

gallery is devoted to works from the Andes, including a camelid-fleece tunic emblazoned with two crimson cats that still looks ready to wear after five hundred years. Another expanded category is African photography, thanks to a donation by the German collector Artur Walther. Among those represented are Seydou Keïta, Zanele Muholi, and Samuel Fosso, whose playful self-portraits in the guise of twentieth-century Black icons wink out from among the bronzes and masks.

The wing's handful of living artists has always been a bit awkward: Why are the works of some non-Westerners exhibited in the department of Modern and Contemporary Art, while others are mixed in with ritual and decorative objects? But the juxtapositions have become more insightful. Previously, the Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui's "Between Earth and Heaven" (2006)—a rippling sheet of intricately linked liquor-bottle caps, which reflects on, among other themes, the trade between continents—was displayed as a response to traditional artistry from the region, particularly kente cloth. Now it sits opposite an ivory spoon and saltcellar carved, in a European style, by Temne or Bullom artisans around the sixteenth century, for sale to the Portuguese. The implication is that African creativity has always been global; just before the wing's entrance, a Baule mask used in theatrical performances shares a vitrine with an ancient Roman sculpture of Pan.



Once upon a time, the Met had very little art that wasn't from Europe, Asia, or North America. In 1942, Nelson A. Rockefeller, Michael's father, offered the museum his own collection of African and pre-Columbian works, but the Met leadership refused, suggesting that he take it across Central Park to the Museum of Natural History. Non-Western cultural heritage was seen as fodder for anthropology—specifically, the study of prehistory—until European thinkers raised its stature by linking “primitive” aesthetics with modernist movements. Rockefeller exhibited works from his spurned collection at *MOMA*, and founded the Museum of Primitive Art for them in the nineteen-fifties. Eventually, the Met yielded, absorbing the M.P.A. into a new wing named for Nelson's vanished son, which opened in 1982.

Then as now, rapturous coverage spoke of visionary donors, ingenious architects, and a museum finally ready to give non-Western artistry its due. Yet, if the fine-arts treatment seemed more respectful than ethnography, it also distanced the works on display from the cultures where they'd originated, exhibiting socially and ritually significant objects with the same austerity as color-field paintings or Danish chairs. The renovation attempts to correct the correction, presenting the objects neither as evidence of timeless “customs” nor as art for art's sake, but as the vital expression of communities.



Take, for instance, the Kwoma ceremonial-house ceiling, dazzlingly hung above the sunlit gallery adjacent to the park. Comprising more than a hundred surfboard-size palm petioles, each painted with designs evocative of flora and fauna, it's a replica of a ritual men's lodge in northeastern New Guinea, whose creators were commissioned, in the nineteen-seventies, by the Met. But they were left ignorant of how it would be exhibited. For the renovation, the museum invited their descendants to consult on a reinstallation in line with their beliefs, and interviewed them for an in-gallery film about their forebears.

What's conveyed is that many traditional arts are—contra the Western fetish for pre-contact “purity”—still being refined. The theme is echoed in videos exploring contemporary Australian bark-cloth painting, and the persistence of masquerade traditions across Africa. A series by the filmmaker Sosena Solomon includes footage of contemporary brass-casters in Benin City, Nigeria. Members of an ancient guild once employed by Benin's royal court, they're still going strong after half a millennium—albeit reduced to melting down scrap metal in a dirt yard.

Today's brass-casters work from online images, because the masterpieces of their tradition are abroad. The Rockefeller Wing features several dozen—a rooster with filigreed plumage, the famous mask depicting a queen mother, and plaques that once adorned the kingdom's royal palace, which British troops ransacked and burned in 1897. The wall text dutifully mentions the seizure of these works, which made their way to collectors such as Nelson Rockefeller through the international marketplace. But nothing is said about the half-century-long campaign for their return, or the growing consensus around its justice.

Germany and the Netherlands, as well as the Smithsonian, have either relinquished or agreed to relinquish ownership of their Benin art works, as have numerous smaller institutions. A wave of books, op-eds, and films have advocated for restitution more generally, doing so much to popularize a once niche cause that it's been taken up by John Oliver. The Met, though, signals sympathy with restitution efforts even as it mounts an implicit case against them. Mentions of provenance research are everywhere, and a snippet of wall text proudly cites the museum's return of two Benin works to Nigeria in 2021. But, if you read closely, you'll see that they were stolen from the

country's national museum in the *nineteen-nineties*. Elsewhere, a video installation by the artist Theo Eshetu documents the reërection of an ancient Aksumite obelisk stolen from Ethiopia during Mussolini's failed invasion and returned by Italy in the early two-thousands. Orthodox priests burn incense, and enraptured crowds dance as the monument is raised. Yet, absent discussion of the Met's own stolen works, the video's placement comes across as a deflection.



Just as the parents of a fraudulently adopted child might boast of the expanded opportunities they can offer, the Met implies that its globe-spanning, comparative collection makes a better home for such works than their parochial places of origin. Detailed information about Benin's warring and slaving reminds visitors that the looted were also looters, though I searched in vain for similar labels about European palace décor. More idealistically, a label titled "Benin Court Art at the Met" informs us that Alain Locke, godfather of the Harlem Renaissance, wanted "the genius of African art to be widely accessible in a public New York institution." It's a recasting worthy of Benin's metalworkers. A white billionaire's bequest of colonial plunder is, really, the fulfillment of a Black philosopher's dream.

Some might protest that it's too late to rectify century-old thefts, and that disputes have already arisen over the inheritance of repatriated works. But

the problem can't be contained to the colonial era. The Met periodically hosts visitors from the Manhattan District Attorney's office. In the past five years, the museum has surrendered tens of millions of dollars' worth of looted art to Egypt, Greece, Nepal, and Iraq. In the Rockefeller Wing, an Igbo sculpture depicting a woman with powerfully squared shoulders and a necklace of leopard claws is described, in the accompanying label, as having been in Abiriba, Nigeria, "until the Biafran War," when it was likely taken from an *obu*, or traditional "house of images," after an attack by Nigerian federal troops. Several years ago, Ike Anya, a doctor who grew up in Abiriba, found the *obu* figure on the Met's website. Not only was the sculpture in storage, its provenance record omitted all mention of the war. Outraged, Anya tweeted at the museum that this was akin to saying, without additional context, that an Impressionist painting had been acquired in Vienna in 1942. There was no response, but an art-historian friend put him in touch with a curator at the Met, who promised to address his concerns. Ultimately, Anya contributed a discussion of the sculpture to the audio guide, and also attended the reopening of the galleries, where he was inspired to see "an Abiriba matriarch standing elegant and proud." Anya still feels that decisions should be made by the sculpture's "rightful owners," he told me, but the gesture could herald more consequential steps. After all, Rockefeller waited forty years to get his collection into the museum. The world can wait a few more years to get what doesn't belong there out. ♦

A Critic at Large

# The Argentinean Comic Strip That Galvanized a Generation

How the politically aware six-year-old heroine of “Mafalda” became an international phenomenon.

By Daniel Alarcón

June 30, 2025



A uniformed police officer stands sideways, his head turned to face us. His eyes are unnaturally close together, rendered by the artist as two black dots floating in the very center of his face. He has a drooping nose, a thin mustache, and a glum look, staring as if he is aware of being watched. Behind him stands a little girl, less than half his size, wearing a red dress, a red bow poking from the thicket of her heavy black hair. Her eyes are big and sad, and her index finger touches the tip of the nightstick hanging from the policeman's belt. “You see?” she says, with a worried expression. “This is the little stick for squashing ideologies.”

I probably first saw this image in the nineteen-eighties—taped to the wall of a cousin’s bedroom in Lima, perhaps, or hanging on the side of a newspaper kiosk—but I already knew who the little girl was. In fact, I can’t recall a time in my life when I *didn’t* know her. “Mafalda,” the comic strip in which she appeared, was published in Argentina from 1964 to 1973, and remained a cultural touchstone for Latin Americans of every generation thereafter. At one point, Mafalda and [Eva Perón](#) were the two most recognizable Argentinean women worldwide. “Mafalda” has been translated into more than twenty-five languages, and tens of millions of books have been sold in Spanish alone, making it the best-selling Latin American comic of all time.

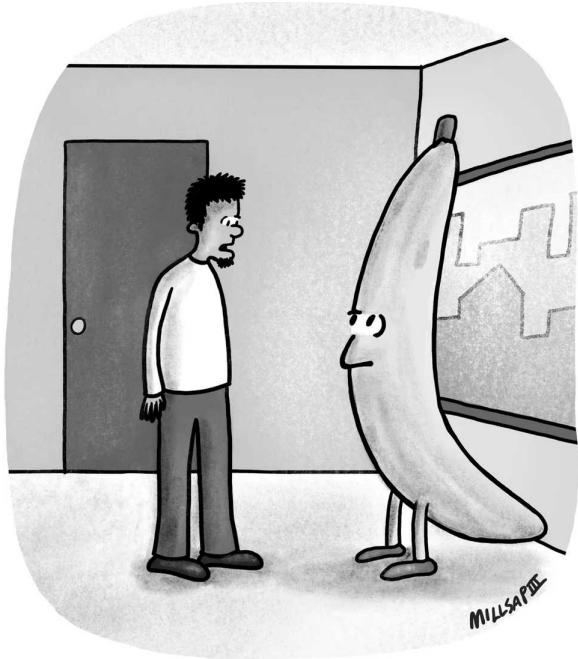
The strip—and, even more so, the eponymous character—stood for something. Though her family was solidly middle class, Mafalda didn’t let that fool her into thinking that everything was fine in her unequal society. She was too sharp for that, too observant. She was a little girl who read the newspaper and had opinions on current events. She cornered her parents with uncomfortable, often bewildering questions, and approached life with bemusement, pondering the mediocrity of the adults crafting the world she would inherit, people who, for the most part, disappointed her but whom she was still generous enough to love. Ricardo Liniers, an Argentinean cartoonist who has drawn several covers for this magazine, described “Mafalda” to me as “‘[Peanuts](#)’ plus socialism and ideology.” The Italian philosopher and novelist [Umberto Eco](#) put it another way, theorizing that if Charlie Brown reads [Freud](#), Mafalda reads [Che Guevara](#). In any given week, the comic strip might raise the subjects of nuclear annihilation, government inefficiency, the “brain drain,” military coups, labor strikes, or the pressures of inflation. And it did so without being didactic or abandoning the perspective of a precocious and unrelentingly curious six-year-old girl. “Mafalda” “doesn’t teach you to behave,” Liniers told me. “It doesn’t teach you to respect your elders or not to fight with your brother. ‘Mafalda’ teaches you to question the world.”

And though fifty-two years have passed since the last “Mafalda” comic strip was published, the ensuing decades have done little to dim its popularity. In 2009, I witnessed a near-riot at the Lima International Book Fair, as more than a thousand fans waited hours for Quino, “Mafalda” ’s beloved creator, to sign their memorabilia. Last year, [Netflix](#) announced that it was developing a new series based on the strip, co-written and directed by the

Oscar winner Juan José Campanella. There are statues of Mafalda around the world; the sixteenth, on Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, was unveiled at the end of June. Also in June, the first of five volumes that will reproduce the complete “[Mafalda](#)” run in an English translation, by Frank Wynne, was released by Elsewhere Editions—the strip’s first publication in the United States.

Joaquín Salvador Lavado Tejón, better known as Quino, was born in 1932 into a family of politically engaged Spanish immigrants living in Mendoza, Argentina. His parents were Republicans, his grandmother a Communist. Quino was a timid, quiet boy, traits that would follow him into adulthood. (For years, he hung a sign in his studio warning journalists to stay away: “Due to Shyness, No Reporting of Any Kind Will Be Accepted.”) He never really wanted to grow up. “Every time I put on my shoes and noticed they were too tight, I felt an enormous despair,” he once said. He first became enamored of drawing on a night when his parents went out, leaving him and his two brothers in the care of his uncle Joaquín, who entertained the children by sketching. “It was a revelation that, so long as you had the skill, whatever you wanted—human forms, landscapes, animals, plants—could emerge from a pencil,” Quino said, at the Lima International Book Fair in 2009. He was twelve when his mother died. He enrolled in an art school soon after that, but dropped out before completing the program, a decision he would later regret.

In 1950, when Quino was in his late teens, a local silk shop commissioned him to draw an advertisement. After that, he never stopped working, and eventually he outgrew Mendoza. By the end of the decade, he’d settled in Buenos Aires, one of the cultural capitals of the Spanish-speaking world at the time, where bookstores stayed open late into the night, audiences lined up at movie theatres to see the new [Ingmar Bergman](#) film, and magazines and newspapers competed for the attention and money of the growing Argentinean middle class. It was here that Quino came of age professionally, part of a generation of writers and artists who would help shape the country in an era of immense political and cultural change. Illustration and comics played an important role, and every outlet, it seemed, was looking for graphic humor. In this context, Quino was able to cobble together a living by placing his work in many different publications, covering everything from fashion to sports.



His big break came in 1963, when an advertising agency asked him to create a comic strip for a local manufacturer that was planning to launch a new brand of domestic appliances called Mansfield. Quino's assignment was to portray a typical middle-class family—a married couple with kids—in which each character's name began with the letter "M." (This was supposed to be subliminal marketing, though it seems unlikely that such a subtle ploy would really have been effective.) In the end, it came to nothing—the campaign and the line of appliances were cancelled—but no matter, because Quino had found his protagonist. The following year, "Mafalda," now liberated from the task of selling washing machines and ovens, was published for the first time, in a Buenos Aires weekly called *Primera Plana*.

Isabella Cosse, a history professor at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín, in Buenos Aires, who wrote a book about "Mafalda" and its legacy, told me that although the strip was originally written for grownups, it wasn't long before kids were reading it, too. "Those kids were sneaking into the adult world, guided by a little girl who made fun of the adults," she said. "Mafalda"'s combination of humor and social critique made it an immediate hit, and soon it was running daily in the newspaper *El Mundo*. Within four years of its début, the strip was syndicated in newspapers around Argentina, read by an estimated two million people each day. The first book-length

collection of “Mafalda” was published in 1966, and sold more than forty thousand copies in its first three months—in Buenos Aires alone.

“Mafalda” wasn’t the only political cartoon of its day, but it was arguably the most specifically Argentinean, which was central to its appeal. The dialects, the concerns, the neighborhoods the characters lived in—it was all utterly recognizable to the middle-class Argentineans who made up “Mafalda” ’s most loyal audience. Mafalda’s father is quiet and unassuming, trudging to his job as a clerk at an insurance company and returning home to wage war on the ants that threaten his houseplants. Her mother is a homemaker, often overwhelmed by chores, whom Mafalda scolds for not having studied to become something more. But the adults are secondary characters. Mafalda’s universe is inhabited, primarily, by her friends: Manolito—the son of a Spanish immigrant who runs the neighborhood grocery store—who’s always scheming to make a buck; Felipe, an absent-minded romantic who hates school and loves cowboy movies; Susanita, a traditionalist who, to Mafalda’s horror, dreams, even at her young age, of one day becoming a wife and mother. Other characters later filled out Mafalda’s circle, including a little brother, Guille, and a short but mighty friend called Libertad, each new voice deepening Quino’s lucid portrait of the community.

But Mafalda, of course, was the star, and what set her apart was her engagement with the world. More than any of the others, she worries about the kinds of things that many parents want to protect their children from even noticing—poverty and war and repression—concerns that confuse her friends, often to comic effect. Quino’s political stance was general, a non-prescriptive discontent that his middle-class readership could get behind—or, at least, whose absurdity they could appreciate. In Mafalda’s universe, being forced to eat soup was a cruel imposition, a form of domestic authoritarianism. “Argentineans of my generation and younger tend to hate soup,” Liniers told me. “ ‘Mafalda’ put that little virus in our heads.” In one strip, Mafalda explains to Felipe that the war in Vietnam must be about sex—why else would her father get so tongue-tied when she asks him to explain it? Another sequence is drawn upside down, after Mafalda finds a globe and discovers that Argentina is in the Southern Hemisphere. Our ideas are falling out of our heads, she reasons, which must explain why Argentina is underdeveloped. In another set of panels, the kids announce that they’re

playing a game called Government. “But don’t worry,” they reassure Mafalda’s mother. “We don’t actually do anything!” Later, when Mafalda is named President, the boys lead a coup against her—which she repels by throwing a chair and a book at them. The would-be usurpers are caught off guard. “Madame President!” Felipe complains. “That’s not how we do things in Argentina!”

Felipe—or, rather, Quino—was right. In the Argentina of “Mafalda” ’s time, coups were hardly uncommon, and were virtually always successful. There were five heads of state during the strip’s nine-year run and three military coups. The country’s most popular politician, Juan Domingo Perón, was exiled in Spain, his party banned. In 1966, when armed officers arrived to depose the democratically elected President Arturo Umberto Illia, he simply caught a ride outside the Presidential palace and rode across the city to his brother’s house. It was all so banal, Argentina’s democracy so fragile. The new general in charge, Juan Carlos Onganía, was different from previous military dictators in that he paid no lip service to an eventual return to democracy. Onganía promised nothing less than a new social order: a project of economic modernization marked by austerity, and a cultural policy that included censoring artists, attacking the autonomy of universities, banning miniskirts, and prohibiting long hair for men. Quino responded to the coup with a strip that eschewed the convention of a story broken into panels, drawing instead a single horizontal image: a closeup of Mafalda, her eyes downcast and fearful. “So,” she says, “those things they taught me in school . . .” The sentence trails off, but everyone who read “Mafalda” knew precisely what Quino was getting at.

Onganía’s rule lasted only a few years before he was deposed and replaced by another general, and soon the political chaos was matched by economic disruption. In 1971, a Buenos Aires magazine named Mafalda’s father “person of the year,” a symbol of a struggling middle class worn down by inflation, which that year surpassed thirty per cent. The economic malaise and the political and cultural repression made for a combustible mix; urban guerrilla movements, such as the Montoneros, were formed, further destabilizing the country through kidnappings, executions, bombings, and industrial vandalism. By 1972, Argentina was besieged by unprecedented political violence.

Quino was no radical, and Mafalda's politics are simple enough—she's a child, after all, and wants the sorts of things most children demand as a matter of course. Peace. Justice. Equality. But, as the country unravelled, her cutesy jokes came to feel almost antiquated, out of touch. Isabella Cosse writes that Quino was attacked both by the left (for being too bourgeois to offer a real critique of the political repression) and by the right (for being too friendly to subversive groups). The idyllic universe that Mafalda had lived in was falling apart; the fissures in Argentinean society had become too severe, too dangerous, and the time for making sarcastic cracks at those in power had passed. The last "Mafalda" strip was published on June 25, 1973, just days after Perón's final return from eighteen years of exile. An estimated two million supporters gathered to welcome him near the Buenos Aires airport. A confrontation between warring factions left at least thirteen people dead and more than three hundred injured.



Perón died the following year, from complications of heart disease, at the age of seventy-eight, and his widow, Isabel Perón, was left in charge. When one of her ministers asked to use "Mafalda" in a publicity campaign, Quino refused. A few days later, armed men tried to enter his home. Quino wasn't there, but the incident served as a warning. In 1976, a new military junta ousted the government, and soon the nightmare so many had dreaded was a

reality. Quino left the country, living in a self-imposed exile for the better part of the next decade.

For much of the world, the deranged ferocity of Argentina's state-sponsored terror in those years would be understood only when it was all over. In the mid-eighties, a detailed report of the horrors of the military rule estimated that about nine thousand people had been "disappeared" by the junta between 1976 and 1983, though it noted that the number was likely greater. (Current estimates are as high as thirty thousand.) Hundreds of clandestine detention centers were operating across the country. The human-rights organization Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo calculate that some five hundred children who were either born in detention or taken from their parents at the time of their arrest were then illegally adopted.

Numbers this stark leave little room for the kind of humor in "Mafalda." It was one thing for Mafalda to comment on the Vietnam War, a conflict happening on the other side of the planet. Just imagine what would have happened to that mouthy, fearless girl coming of age in an Argentina dominated by the brutal military juntas of the late seventies and eighties.

Quino did. When asked, on the occasion of "Mafalda" 's twenty-fifth anniversary, what his most famous character would have become as a grownup, Quino answered in a way that left no room for whimsical speculation: "Mafalda never would have reached adulthood. She would be among Argentina's thirty thousand disappeared."

In Argentina, Quino has ascended to the sort of cultural sainthood reserved for national icons like the tango composer Astor Piazzolla or the soccer legend [Diego Maradona](#). When Quino passed away, in 2020, at the age of eighty-eight, his longtime publisher, Daniel Divinsky, announced it on Twitter: "Quino has died. All good people in the country and the world will mourn him."

A lot has happened since. Argentina won its third World Cup, a cathartic national accomplishment that might have moved even Quino, though he was the rare Argentinean who never much cared for soccer. The [first Latin American Pope](#), an Argentinean, died in Rome; Quino was not religious, but he might have appreciated Pope Francis's progressive leanings. More

important, the political order in Argentina has been transformed once again: the Libertarian ideologue [Javier Milei](#) won the Presidency, in 2023. (American observers may remember him as the wild-eyed man with bushy sideburns who handed [Elon Musk](#) an actual chainsaw at the Conservative Political Action Conference, in February.) At home, Milei confronted crippling inflation rates—more than two hundred per cent when he took office, among the highest in the world—with draconian cuts that plunged half the country into poverty within his first six months in office, while pushing cryptocurrency opportunities that certainly look, to the casual observer, like scams. He’s a master of theatrical provocations designed to troll his political opponents, a tactic surely recognizable to anyone paying even scant attention to the machinations of the [Trump](#) Administration. Both Presidents have attempted—and, in some cases, succeeded, through policy and rhetoric—to rebrand ordinary cruelty as a potent new variety of patriotism. It’s not difficult to imagine what Mafalda might have thought of all this. The expansive, bighearted politics of Quino’s strip feel out of step with this terrifying moment, but, then again, that may be precisely why now is the right time to return to its heroine. ♦

# Poems

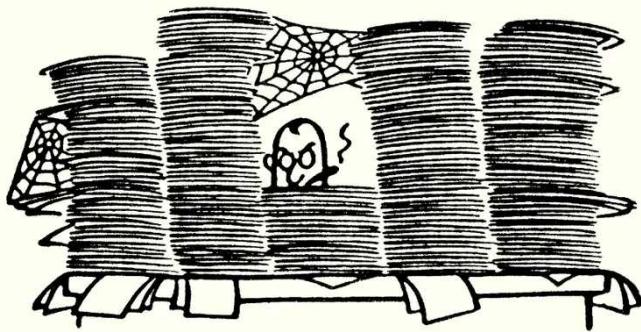
- [Deep Winter Stars](#)
- [The Eulogy I Didn't Give \(XXXVII\)](#)

Poems

# Deep Winter Stars

By Jorie Graham

June 30, 2025



What if I were given eyes only  
to feel  
I am  
a disappearance

of mind into  
thought, into a  
tossing foam of  
thought

straining  
to watch you, so exact  
up there,  
endlessly undertaking your

casting of  
seeds into that which will never  
grow into  
more . . . Bright star,

you come closer

than I thought,  
you don't hang as I was  
told, you are in a  
mid-place

neither here nor  
far—infinite spaces hum  
beyond you  
but you seem still here

on our side  
even if you are not  
for us or faced  
towards us, here, so alone in

this storm of

history . . .  
And there is no one star among you  
to stand out—each of u  
points to an

other—  
strong or weak all do  
whatever they do all  
together—

& the fire that tossed

your white-hot embers  
up is

banked in a  
beyond we don't even try

to imagine. You  
are not apart  
though scattered.  
Once I see yr

netting I seek  
a protection  
you know  
nothing of—

you know nothing  
of this apartness,  
you do not  
jump forward to

be yourselves.  
I am afraid, I say  
as I look up.  
The wind

fingers the tips  
of the empty  
limbs. They whisper & clack  
with appearance—

jittery. There is  
no appearance  
u hiss in yr acid yr pitched  
brilliance. That wld be

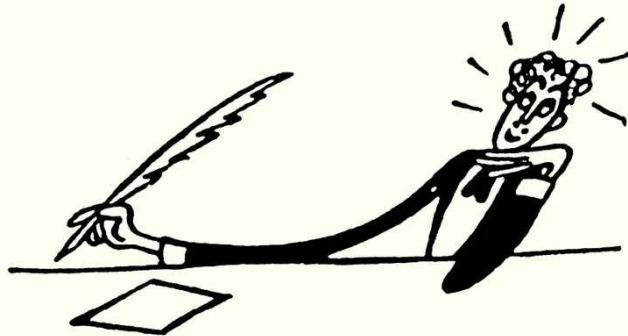
singleness. Nothing  
is a part  
of the whole  
we are a part of.

Poems

# The Eulogy I Didn't Give (XXXVII)

By Bob Hicok

June 30, 2025



I've been writing down the whispers  
of a stopped clock. Waiting for the wind  
to cast a shadow. Paying a detective  
to find the imaginary friend  
from my childhood. Filling the holes  
in the gaps in the cracks  
of my forgetting. Thinking the world  
is a cup the sun fills every day,  
even when it's cloudy, then goes away.  
The chair my father sat in to read the Bible  
is full of the absence  
of him doing that. Death is a hat  
we look in for the head that wore it,  
a picture we take in the future  
of the past. If you come by for breakfast,  
I'll pour you a bowl of thorns,

so don't. I need some time alone,  
like the rest of my life.  
It's weird to me now  
that we urge kids to blow  
birthday candles out  
when they should burn, given that our bones  
are I.O.U.s. Cake sounds good,  
and after cake, being older  
and missing cake. If the dead  
could speak, they'd tell us to start  
with the dessert menu. The best thing  
about my mother's apple pie:  
she was here to make it.

# Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, June 25, 2025](#)

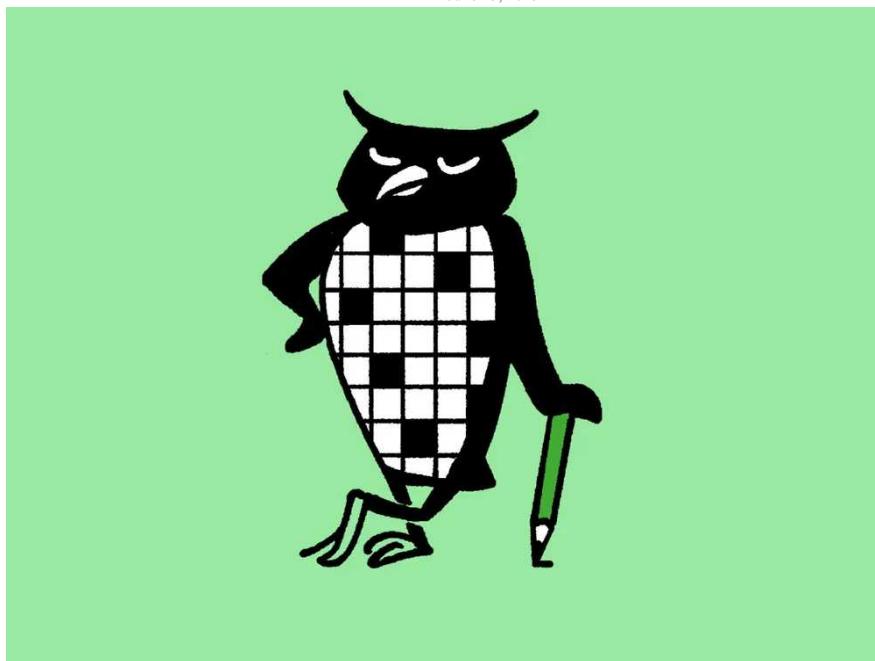
Crossword

# The Crossword: Wednesday, June 25, 2025

Today's theme: Closing the books.

**By Adam Aaronson**

June 25, 2025





# Table of Contents

## Goings On

[\*\*The Mesmerizing, Hard-Edge Paintings of Fanny Sanín\*\*](#)

[Anne Enright's Literary Journeys to Australia and New Zealand](#)

## The Talk of the Town

[Trump, Congress, and the War Powers Resolution](#)

[Jeff Bezos's Big Fat Geek Wedding](#)

[Ready, Set, Libretto! Jesse Eisenberg Speed-Writes a Musical](#)

[The TV Dinner Goes <em class="small">MAHA</em>](#)

[Curtain Up at the New Delacorte](#)

## Reporting & Essays

[What Happens After A.I. Destroys College Writing?](#)

[Finding a Family of Boys](#)

[An Artist's View of the Riches of New York City](#)

## Takes

[Zadie Smith on Grace Paley's "My Father Addresses Me on the Facts of Old Age"](#)

[Jhumpa Lahiri on Mavis Gallant's "Voices Lost in Snow"](#)

[Ottessa Moshfegh on Harold Brodkey's "The State of Grace"](#)

## Fiction

[The Silence](#)

[Jubilee](#)

[The Comedian](#)

## The Critics

[What <em>The New Yorker</em> Was Reading in 1925](#)

[Elmore Leonard's Perfect Pitch](#)

[Briefly Noted](#)

[Is Technology Really Ruining Teens' Lives?](#)

[The Met's Luminous New Rockefeller Wing Still Casts Some Shadows](#)

[The Argentinean Comic Strip That Galvanized a Generation](#)

## Poems

[Deep Winter Stars](#)

[The Eulogy I Didn't Give \(XXXVII\)](#)

## Puzzles & Games

The Crossword: Wednesday, June 25, 2025