
EQUAL JUSTICE UNDER LAW

August 12th 2024

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Goings On

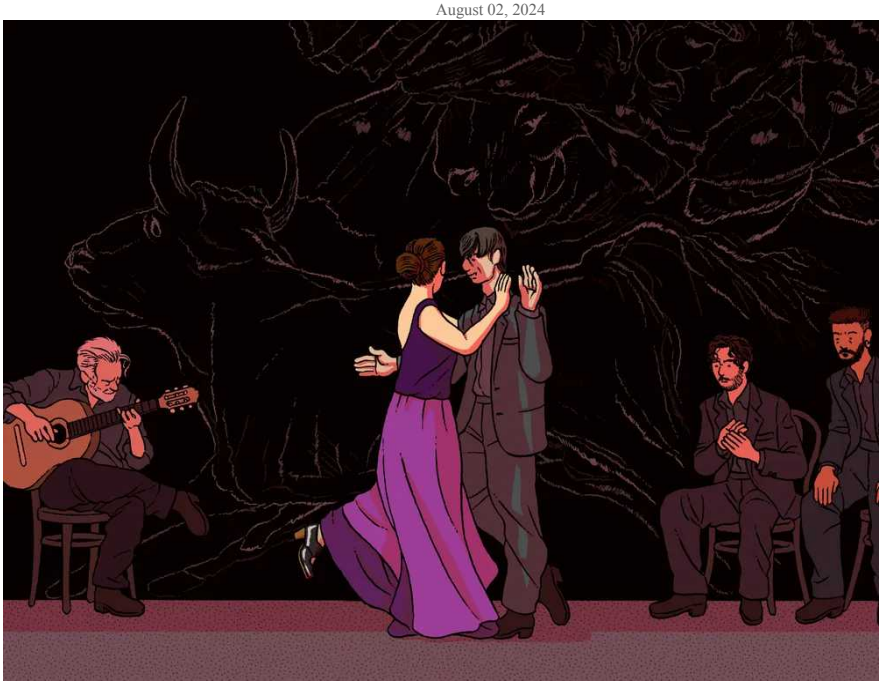
- Noche Flamenca, in Its Natural Habitat
- Stracciatella Dreams, at Caffè Panna

Goings On

Noche Flamenca, in Its Natural Habitat

Also: the hard-won rock of DIIV, “Job” on Broadway, Justin Chang’s disaster-movie picks, and more.

August 02, 2024

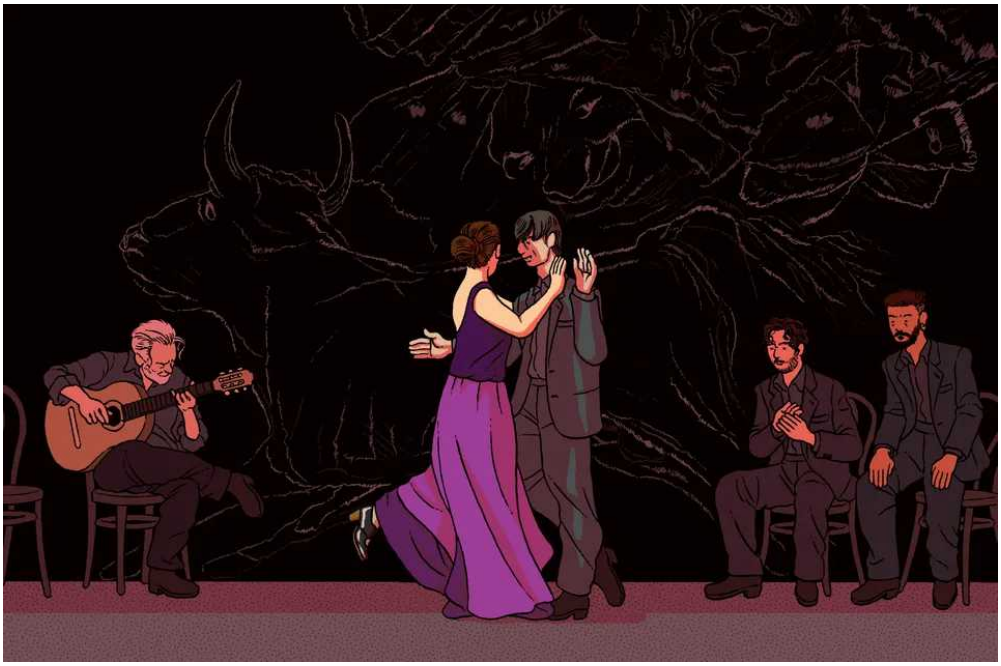


Brian Seibert
Seibert has covered dance for Goings On since 2002.

Somewhere on the list of things that go together well: flamenco and taverns. Part of the music-and-dance form’s historical development took place in compact *cafés cantantes*—literally, singing cafés—where wine flowed freely; though flamenco now can be seen in glitzy theatrical spectacles, much of its special flavor is best experienced up close, in tight quarters, with drinks. That’s especially true of troupes like **Noche Flamenca,** which returns to Joe’s Pub, Aug. 7-10. The company’s stripped-down aesthetic is well suited to the space, and the tremendous, unfaked

intensity of its star, Soledad Barrio, isn't at all diminished by being near enough to hear her breathe.

Flamenco and the art of Goya are a bit more surprising of a match. Sure, they're both from Spain, but the paintings and drawings, even from the hand of an Old Master, would not seem to offer much help to artists of motion in the present. Noche Flamenca's recent show, "Searching for Goya"—performed at the Joyce Theatre in April and coming, in excerpt, to the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, in the Berkshires, Aug. 14-18—proves otherwise.



Noche uses images from Goya as jumping-off points, taking the artist's themes, moods, and compositional ideas as material for flamenco elaboration. Sometimes the inspiration is primarily formal, as when the dancers translate an etching of four colliding bulls into a four-way dance-off. But most of the show shares Goya's grim realism, with unflinching evocations of war, death, and pain.

At Joe's Pub, the company presents a new iteration of "Searching for Goya," titled "Bulls and Butterflies," featuring the same terrific cast of dancers and musicians, with some sections swapped for new ones. It isn't unusual for

this group to tinker with a show after it has débuted. It's a pleasure to join them as they keep searching.

About Town

Broadway

There's a bait and switch at the core of Max Wolf Friedlich's new Broadway transfer **"Job,"** directed by Michael Herwitz, which dresses itself as a taut, two-handed thriller but is actually a sequence of glib retorts and generational sniping. A wild-eyed millennial patient (Sydney Lemmon) pulls a gun on a boomer therapist (the great Peter Friedman, operating far above the material), demanding that he authorize her return to work as a content moderator, after a breakdown. Will her descriptions of vile Internet videos reveal that tech is driving her nuts? Or is the therapist's smug Luddite attitude somehow a threat? Eventually, Friedlich changes strategy, but the narrative, by then more hole than plot, is too corroded to sustain the twist.—*Helen Shaw (Hayes; through Sept. 29.)*

Opera

Luciano Pavarotti once said, no doubt in a speaking voice as sonorous as his stately tenor, that opera "should be listened to and appreciated by everyone." The **Glimmerglass Festival** seems to have followed this directive through the years, and this summer is no exception. You can catch "Pagliacci," your classic homicidal-clown story and a Pavarotti staple; "The Pirates of Penzance," a seafaring tale about a leap-year mixup; and "Elizabeth Cree," a nineteenth-century narrative about why you should always hide your diary. The final stretch also offers an exclusive look at an upcoming "House on Mango Street" adaptation, and introduces "Rumpelstiltskin and the Unlovable Children," a fresh take on an old imp.—*Jane Bua (Cooperstown, N.Y.; through Aug. 20.)*

Off Broadway

The creators of the vast immersive production "**Life and Trust**"—including the director, Teddy Bergman, and the experience designer, Gabriel Hainer Evansohn—have borrowed a lot from Punchdrunk's "Sleep No More": audiences again wear commedia-derived masks as they scramble through a

dim labyrinth (several floors of a stunning, repurposed 1931 skyscraper), following performers acting out wordless dance-dramas. In a nightmare version of the Gilded Age, bankers and stevedores alike attend vaudevilles, swig opium, and sign contracts with Mephistopheles. As you wander, you could stumble across, say, a mysterious lake, or you may never find it. Imagination, therefore, furnishes much of "Life and Trust" 's beauty, which can otherwise skew a little silly: you can always dream up what *might* be happening, just out of sight.—*H.S. (Conwell Tower; through Sept. 30.)*

Dance

As the city enters its quietest period, **Battery Dance Festival** fills the void—the artists arrive downtown from as far as Romania, the Dominican Republic, and Taiwan. Tsai Hsi Hung, of Taipei's Focus Dance Company, illuminates ideas of beauty through the lens of Chinese folk dance, calligraphy, and abstract painting. Julie Crothers, from Berkeley, performs a solo that explores her relationship to her prosthetic arm. And on Aug. 15, India's Independence Day, the festival offers performances by two Indian dancers, one of whom, Rajesh Sai Babu, is a specialist in the ancient martial-arts-based dance form mayurbhanj chhau, full of backbends, splits, and barrel jumps.—*Marina Harss (Rockefeller Park; Aug. 11-17.)*

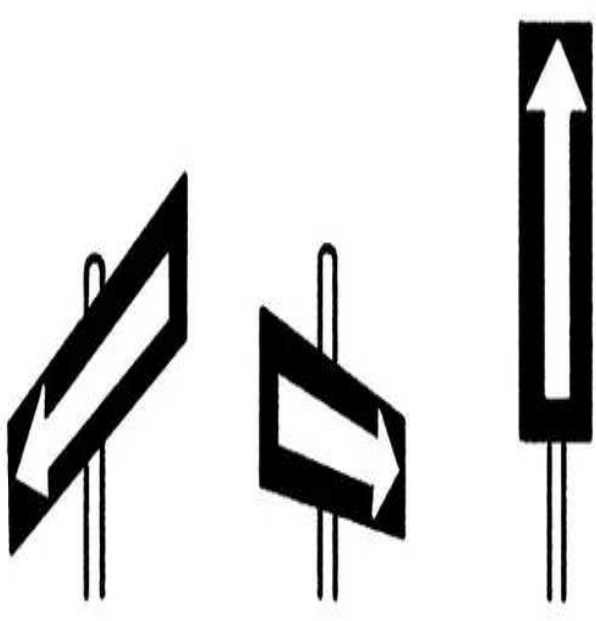
Rock

The Brooklyn band **DIIV** began as an outlet for the songwriting of the guitarist Zachary Cole Smith, who brought in his childhood friend Andrew Bailey and other players to help build his live outfit. The group quickly refined a gorgeous take on modern dream pop, starting with the 2012 album "Oshin" and digging in with the follow-up "Is the Is Are" (2016). After Smith checked into rehab, the band embraced a much heavier shoegaze sound, making the 2019 album "Deceiver," as its leader reckoned with what he owed others, including his bandmates. DIIV nearly imploded while producing its new LP, "Frog in Boiling Water," released in May, which sought to turn the band into a democracy for the first time. The resulting music is immense: weighted songs, dense and cataclysmic, consider the discovery of beauty in collective action amid the suffocating grip of plutocracy.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Paramount; Aug. 8.)*

Movies

The Egyptian director Youssef Chahine's boldly imaginative and politically confrontational body of work gets a prime showcase on the Criterion Channel, which is now offering twenty of his films, from streetwise crime stories and romantic melodramas to autobiographical fantasies and historical epics, made between 1950 and 1999. One of the highlights is **"Adieu**

Bonaparte,” from 1985, which depicts the Napoleonic conquest of Egypt from the perspective of one Egyptian family. The teeming action involves large-scale battles, domestic conflicts, and philosophical wrangling. At first, the French Army, promising respect for Islam, represents liberation from Mamluk warlords. But, when the invasion proves cruel and ruthless, two brothers engage in daring acts of resistance—even as they befriend a French general whose Enlightenment ideals, though self-deluding, they admire nonetheless.—*Richard Brody*



Pick Three

The film critic Justin Chang on exceptional disaster movies.

1. Of all the starry Hollywood disaster epics that proliferated in the seventies, it's **"The Towering Inferno"** (1974) that I'm powerless to resist. The movie, about a San Francisco skyscraper that goes up in flames, is a harrowing hoot; the pyrotechnics hold up, as do the performances of Paul Newman, Steve McQueen, Faye Dunaway, Fred Astaire, and others. But what survives most of all is the film's utter ruthlessness—its lack of compunction about immolating an elevator full of partygoers or bumping off its most sympathetic character in a fiery final stretch.

2. At the beginning of Lars von Trier's **"Melancholia"** (2011), a rogue planet crashes into Earth in transfixing slow motion, with mighty blasts of Wagner. It's essentially foreshadowing, a prelude to the end of the world; what follows is an intense psychological drama, starring a never-better Kirsten Dunst, about a woman battling an all-consuming depression. Her despair is so acute that the looming apocalypse, far from being cause for alarm, becomes something paradoxically and ecstatically beautiful—an annihilating work of art.

3. In the early days of *COVID*-19, it was no surprise that Steven Soderbergh's eerily prescient **"Contagion"** (2011) shot up the rental charts. We watched it for masochistic thrills, for worst-case-scenario pointers, and for a welcome dose of competence porn. To see Kate Winslet initiate a round

of contact tracing, or Jennifer Ehle devise a vaccine, is to witness the rarest of disaster-movie spectacles: human workers committing themselves to the belief that intelligence and empathy can go hand in hand.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- What is the city but the people?
- Scammed women scam back
- The former President's meme stock

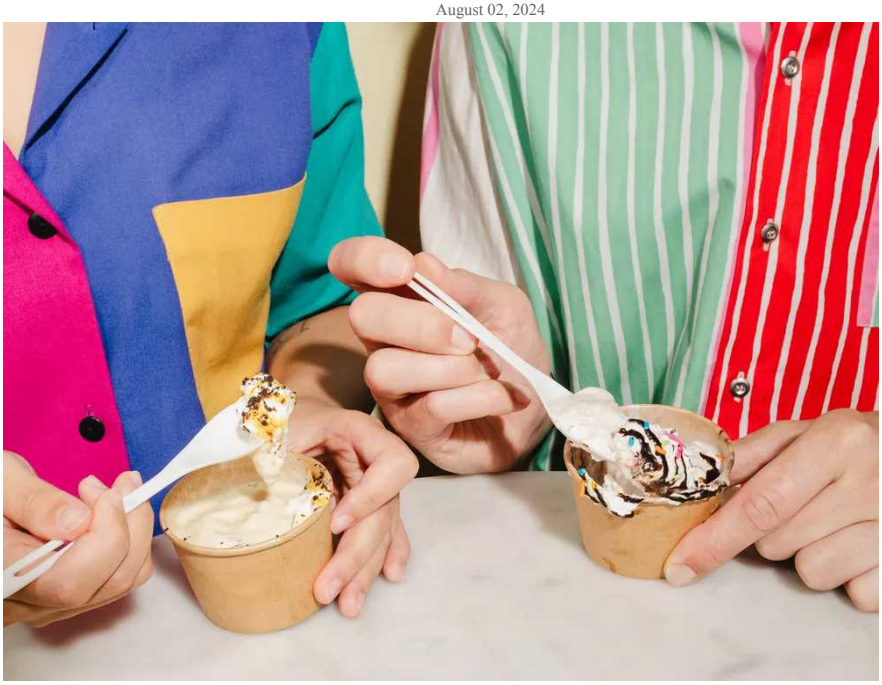
Tables for Two

Stracciatella Dreams, at Caffè Panna

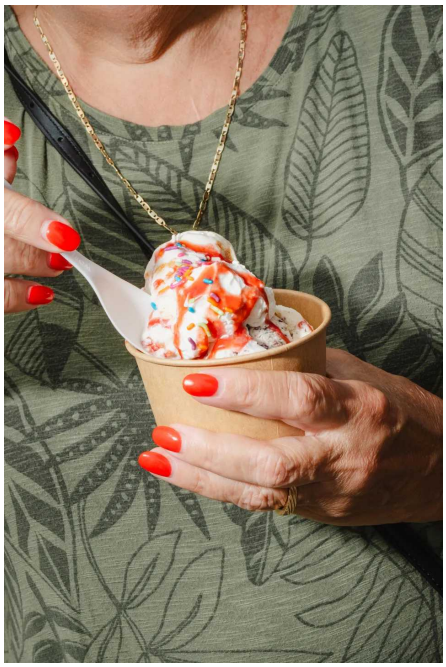
Hallie Meyer's gelato project expands from Union Square to Greenpoint, offering bounteous daily flavors topped with luscious imported Italian cream.

By Shauna Lyon

August 02, 2024



If you like ice cream—according to one poll, ninety-seven per cent of Americans do—chances are high that you'll find something at Caffè Panna to later dream about. The original location, on Irving Place, in Gramercy Park, was opened in 2019 by Hallie Meyer—the daughter of the restaurateur Danny Meyer—as an homage to Italian coffee and gelato and also to the Union Square Greenmarket. It may sound chaotic, but Meyer has a way with all three, seamlessly presenting, from a chic walkup to-go counter, an array of gelatos, including seven "classic" flavors; coffee drinks, plus a granita featuring the Rome staple Sant'Eustachio; and five new flavors *every day*, utilizing Greenmarket ingredients—raspberries, Sungold tomatoes, basil—whenever possible.



After a pandemic blip, which spurred the addition of hand-packed pints to the roster, Caffè Panna's popularity continued to grow—social media loves a towering sundae, and a buzzy collab (Levain Bakery, "Somebody Feed Phil," the list goes on). Energized by the food scene in Greenpoint, Meyer has opened a new outpost there, big enough, at nearly five thousand square feet, to house an actual ice-cream factory and a seating area. At either location, scoops come in a brown-paper cup, with the option of added "panna" (whipped cream), "drizzle" (chocolate, salty caramel, strawberry, or olive oil), and "crunch" (Oreo, a graham-cracker crunch, flaky salt, or rainbow sprinkles), all gratis.

The ice cream is rich, almost chewy, the flavors specific and fun: classics include an optimal stracciatella, coffee-infused and striated with crackling slivers of Amano chocolate, and a somehow subtle cookies and cream with “housemade Oreo brittle”; recent one-offs were a cherry-and-pie-crust number, Sicilian pistachio with lemon-bar chunks, and a mild fresh-mint gelato swirled with dark fudge. Affogatos, scoops topped with espresso, offer the best of both worlds, and recently, in Greenpoint, a searingly sour lemon granita, layered with panna, lemon rind, mint, and scant sugar, was one of the most deliciously bracing citrus dishes I’ve had.

The congenial young staff seems to be in on the collective secret of what makes this place so good—and simultaneously in awe of it: genuinely impressed, for instance, as they recite the fact that the cream is imported from Piedmont, and whipped fresh every day—as well they should be! The cream is thick yet light as air, with barely a hint of sweetness (a pleasing theme). Owing to high demand and space limitations—the factory can churn only so much—flavors sell out at a rapid clip. One night around eight-forty-five, as I stood on a line with at least seventy other people, vanilla and chocolate were the only choices left; by the time I got to order, vanilla was gone, too. A scoop of chocolate ice cream, panna, olive-oil drizzle, a bit of sea salt—turns out, it's definitely what I wanted. *(Scoops from $5.50; pints $13.)* ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified some menu items in the photo captions.

The Talk of the Town

- The Supreme Court Needs Fixing, but How?
- Kamala Harris and the Understudy Effect
- Elizabeth Banks Likes Makeup That Smells Like Her Grandma
- Philippe Petit Thinks You Should Look Up
- The Podcast Shorter than Your Subway Ride, Recorded on Your Subway Ride

Comment

The Supreme Court Needs Fixing, but How?

President Biden has proposed radical changes to the Court. Reviewing them is a reminder of why reform is so hard, despite dissatisfaction and a wealth of ideas.

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

August 04, 2024

Politics, more than many fields, can be unjust. Last week, at the L.B.J. Presidential Library, in Austin, President Joe Biden boasted about his judicial expertise: “I’ve been told that I’ve overseen more Supreme Court nominations as senator, Vice-President, and President than anyone in history—anyone alive today, I should say.” As chairman or ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Biden did help manage the confirmation hearings of eight nominees to the Court (one of whom, Robert Bork, was voted down) and a Chief Justice. That’s almost a full bench. But as President he has named only one Justice: Ketanji Brown Jackson. Donald Trump, on the other hand, whose most intense court experiences before going to the

White House were with bankruptcy judges, put three Justices on the Court—Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh, and Amy Coney Barrett.

Now, two years after those three helped to overrule Roe v. Wade, there is a sense that something is off balance about the Court—about its composition, its ethics, and its general connection to democracy. Its approval ratings hover around thirty-five per cent. And it was clear, in Austin, that Biden himself felt cheated. Trump didn't benefit just from fate; Mitch McConnell, then the Senate Majority Leader, had held one seat open for him in 2016 and kept another in his hands by rushing the process in 2020. The result, Biden said, was a Court marked by "extremism," with its legitimacy at risk. He had long resisted pressure from the left flank of his party to pursue Court reform, but with only months left in the White House, he had come to offer a set of radical changes.

To review Biden's proposals, though, is to be reminded of why reforming the Court is so hard, despite the dissatisfaction and a wealth of ideas. He proposed three measures, the first of which is not so much a reform as a rebuke: the "No One Is Above the Law Amendment" to the Constitution. It would effectively overrule the Court's decision, in Trump v. United States, dangerously asserting that former Presidents have broad immunity from criminal prosecution for their actions in office. But any amendment requires first a two-thirds majority in each house of Congress, and then ratification by three-quarters of the states—thirty-eight in all, a big number. Alternatively, two-thirds of the state legislatures could demand a constitutional convention, which might put the entire document up for grabs. This has never happened, and could be calamitous in a time of Trumpism.

Biden's second proposal was for staggered term limits, with each Justice serving eighteen years, instead of the current lifetime appointment. In theory, this would give every President two picks per term. There is much to recommend term limits; the United States is an outlier in not having them. Until the late nineteen-sixties, Justices spent an average of about fifteen years on the Court; for those who have departed since 1970, the average has been about twenty-six years. A fixed term might make the confirmation process less ugly and less expensive (tens of millions are now spent on lobbying and ads), addressing problems that aren't confined to one party. There might be more room for deliberation and less for resentment.

However, a Presidential commission on the Supreme Court, convened in 2021, was divided over whether term limits would require a constitutional amendment. Under the Constitution's Article III, federal judges "hold their Offices during good Behaviour," which has meant for life, as long as they aren't impeached and convicted. (No Justice has ever been removed that way.) There are a number of proposals for getting around the lifetime rule legislatively—assigning a less powerful "senior" role to longer-serving Justices, or creating "temporary" seats on the Court—but each has risks. And the Court would probably consider itself the arbiter of constitutionality.

Biden's third proposal should be the most achievable: an enforceable code of ethics for the Justices, which Congress could pass. Right now, for offenses that aren't impeachable, the only code the Justices have is voluntary. An effective code of ethics might, for example, allow the Chief Justice to mandate the recusal of a Justice owing to a conflict of interest (if, say, a spouse did work for an advocacy group) or strengthen the rules on gifts (an issue for Clarence Thomas, among others). It might, in short, make the Court seem a little less shady and a bit more legitimate. But it wouldn't change its structure or, necessarily, alter its ideological dynamics.

Yet, even an ethics code seems hard to achieve. Speaker of the House Mike Johnson called Biden's proposals "dead on arrival." Vice-President Kamala Harris endorsed them, and she has expressed openness to ambitious reforms in the past, but it remains to be seen if she will run on any of these ideas, or make them priorities if she wins the election. Chuck Schumer, the Senate Majority Leader, was noncommittal about Biden's plan, even as he called the Court a "morass." Reform may be a generational project.

One idea that Biden stayed away from is increasing the number of Justices—or, as critics call it, packing the Court. Such a move is seen as disreputable by many, in part because of the threat of escalation. (Would Presidents add Justices each time they controlled Congress? Trump might.) Ironically, expansion could be achieved by getting a law through Congress, and so would be simpler than a lot of other measures—it's easier to get people on the Court than off it. In 1937, when Franklin D. Roosevelt called for expanding the Court, after the Justices repeatedly blocked key New Deal legislation, the threat was not idle. A crisis was avoided after a Justice

changed his position. A lesson there may be that even unrealistic proposals can encourage a reckoning.

What's less well remembered about F.D.R.'s plan is that it was tied to age: one seat would be added for every Justice who was seventy or older, to a maximum of fifteen. In 1937, no fewer than six Justices were at least that old; now, three of them are. Justice Thomas is seventy-six, Samuel Alito is seventy-four, and Sonia Sotomayor is seventy. The age question adds a certain poignancy to Biden's quest for reform, in more ways than one. Not long before he dropped out of the race, he said that the next President would get to choose "a couple of Justices." He was referring, presumably, to possible resignations from the bench and to the role of time and chance—and of elections. If Trump wins, he could have, between his two terms, five appointees, or more. If he doesn't, a woman, for the first time, stands to do the picking. And the Court will change. ♦

Switcheroo Dept.

Kamala Harris and the Understudy Effect

Julie Benko, who hit it big after going on in place of Beanie Feldstein in "Funny Girl," has a lot of advice for the Vice-President, now that she's done with waiting in the wings.

By Zach Helfand

August 05, 2024

One important shift in the Presidential race is that a large chunk of the population recently decided that everything they used to dislike about Kamala Harris they now love. Favorable ratings are up. Negative views are down. Traits that were seen as wacky or amateurish now read as cool and inspiring. Los Angeles *Times*, 2021: "More than a laugh: Kamala Harris' is a sound check for a divided country." Washington *Post*, last week: "Vice President Harris laughs at 128 beats per minute—the same tempo as some truly excellent dance songs, such as 'We Found Love' by Rihanna or Kylie Minogue's 'Padam Padam.' " What happened? Could it be the understudy effect?

Everybody loves a backup turned star—your Jeremy Lins, or Tom Bradys, or Shirley MacLaines. Just last week, at the Olympics, we got the Pommel Horse Guy, Stephen Nedoroscik, a subdued, spectacled American gymnast who rode the bench until the very last team event. Was he the best competitor? No. But he was the hero. This is bad news for Donald Trump. He has appeared rattled and whiny after the Harris switcheroo, probably because he recognizes a good narrative arc when he sees one. As one Broadway site posted on X while Joe Biden was refusing to exit the race: "Nation Shaking Their Playbills, Hoping a Little Slip Falls Out."

An American Vice-President is actually more like a standby, who waits in the wings, than an understudy, who at least gets to perform in the chorus. The Vice-President, like a standby, is basically there just for emergencies. She must study and prepare, likely in vain. There's a part of her that wishes calamity upon the star. (One understudy wrote in *Playbill*, "I secretly wanted to poison the lead.") Standbys and V.P.s are both taken for granted and abused. Thomas Marshall, Woodrow Wilson's Vice-President, felt so worthless that he invited tourists who visited his office to pelt him with peanuts. Someone once interrupted a speech he was giving with an urgent phone call saying that the President had died. He rushed off the stage, ready for his big break. It turned out to be a prank.

The Vice-Presidency is a weird concept. Most countries don't have one. In the United Kingdom, if the Prime Minister dies, the government just chooses someone else. But there's something very American in enduring ongoing humiliation for a small chance at a big payoff. Who doesn't think they can do better than their celebrated co-worker or boss? Maybe this is why we identify so strongly with the ones who make it. Bradley Cooper decided to start "Maestro" with the young Leonard Bernstein being told that the conductor of the New York Philharmonic is sick, and that he needs to step in. Many listeners prefer Sammy Hagar's Van Halen to David Lee Roth's, and Phil Collins's Genesis to Peter Gabriel's. There's Sutton Foster, Bebe Neuwirth, Tim Cook, Lou Gehrig. Nick Foles, the backup quarterback who led the Eagles to a Super Bowl victory, is so beloved in Philadelphia that its citizens gave him an honorary nickname. For a while, even Amazon's Alexa referred to him as Nicholas (Big Dick) Edward Foles.

Two years ago, the big Broadway drama was the revival of “Funny Girl,” whose lead role is Fanny Brice, a character made famous by Barbra Streisand. Beanie Feldstein was tapped for the part, but she turned out to have the same problem as Biden: a flagging voice. The standby was Julie Benko, a veteran; she’d understudied five roles in “Spring Awakening” and eight in “Fiddler on the Roof.” (Later, she created a one-woman cabaret show called “Standby, Me.”) Feldstein was pushed out. Benko stepped in. She was a sensation. When Lea Michele got the full-time gig, the production maintained regularly scheduled Benko performances.

“As soon as Kamala got it, I was, like, I feel you girl,” Benko said last week, when reached by phone. In considering Harris’s campaign, she identified several characteristics of a successful understudy transition. First, make it bigger than yourself. “The Fanny dressing room overlooked the street, and I could hear people on line screaming at the security staff, ‘What do you mean it’s the understudy? I want my money back!’ ” she said. “By the end, it was like they had all come on this journey with me, and it was as if they had discovered me themselves. It’s very grassroots.”

Benko added that timing matters. A last-minute substitution has benefits that a planned one doesn’t. “You are running on instinct, so you just end up being you,” she said. “When Kamala was trying to win a primary, she had to be very calculated, and I think she came across as calculated. Now she can relax and be herself.”

What advice would Benko give Harris about turning her big break into lasting success? “The full-time job is a lot more physically demanding, so make sure you have a good acupuncturist,” she said. “And don’t worry about comparisons. Nobody can be Barbra.” ♦

The Pictures

Elizabeth Banks Likes Makeup That Smells Like Her Grandma

The actress (“The Hunger Games,” “Pitch Perfect”), director (“Cocaine Bear”), and producer (“Bottoms”) talks facials and lipstick in honor of her role in the new thriller “Skincare.”

By Jennifer Wilson

August 05, 2024

The actress Elizabeth Banks was sitting at the counter of Lip Lab, a SoHo shop that, for sixty-five dollars, lets customers create their own tubes of lipstick. First, you choose a shade, then a scent, and, finally, a name. “What’s the best name someone came up with for a lipstick?” Banks asked one of the “color experts” behind the counter.

“We get a lot of bachelorette parties, so the names can get X-rated,” the expert answered. “One bride picked Brad’s Penis after her fiancé, because that’s what she wanted on her lips, she said.”

Banks laughed. She had on a white tank top and a daisy-print silk skirt. She thinks that the future of skin care is just these kinds of solutions, tailored to the individual. “In the future, there’s going to be some biomechanical thing that looks at your skin and goes, ‘Here is what you need.’ I hope it’s, like, ‘This is the cure for your skin cancer,’ but it’s probably going to be some wrinkle cream. The patriarchy doesn’t want us to have wrinkles.”

Banks had been thinking a lot about lotions and potions, because she just starred in a thriller called “Skincare.” The plot was inspired by the real-life story of a Los Angeles facialist who, in 2014, was accused of putting a hit out on the owner of a new, rival spa. The character Banks plays is old school, still relying on face steamers and “luxury ingredients” from Italy, while, all around her, a new age of high-tech pore-refining gizmos, including one designed by *NASA*, takes hold. (To this point: Kim Kardashian is reportedly obsessed with a salmon-sperm facial that’s all the rage in Hollywood.) When she first read the script, she said, her character “reminded me of this facialist named Matty on Third Street in Los Angeles. She was recommended to me by Johnny Depp’s agent.” The movie is set in 2013, Banks explained, because that’s when Instagram and e-commerce were on the rise. “There’s a generational divide,” she said. “My mom, for instance, is on Facebook all the time. It’s a way to share your life. Now young people are, like, That’s my business.” Of her character in the movie, she said, “The sand was shifting under her.”

Banks, who is fifty, has one of the most eclectic résumés in the industry. She directed last year’s action film “Cocaine Bear” (based on the true story of a Georgia bear who eats a brick of cocaine that a drug smuggler dropped from a plane) and produced the lesbian fight-club comedy “Bottoms” (2023), and she is slated to star as Ms. Frizzle in a “Magic School Bus” reboot. She was in town from L.A., where she lives with Max Handelman, her husband of twenty-one years, and her two sons, to shoot a new TV series called “The Better Sister,” with Jessica Biel and Corey Stoll, set in New York City and the Hamptons. “It’s a whodunnit, one of those things where there’s a dead body in Episode 1,” she said. “It’s sexy, and everyone’s a suspect.”

Banks feels that she has paid a price for being versatile. “I think I could be a lot more famous and a lot richer if I’d done two things differently. One, if I hadn’t stuck it out with my husband and partied with a bunch of famous

boys instead, and, two, if I had really been able to create a brand," she said. "People thought I wasn't good-looking enough to be a leading lady. I've always been a character actress." But she likes the way different audiences know her from different roles. "I know people who've only ever seen me in 'The Hunger Games,' " in which she played a histrionic chaperon. In that regard, she's similar to the old-style practitioner she plays in "Skincare," who can't imagine offering the same kind of facial to everyone. "It's about the client and what they need, not doing the same facial over and over again for everybody," she said.

At Lip Lab, Banks settled on a vampy Merlot shade that smelled like roses. "I like my makeup to smell like my grandma," she said. The color complemented her mustard-yellow bucket hat, which she put on before heading back out into the sun—a bit of old-school skin-care technology, and arguably the best there is. ♦

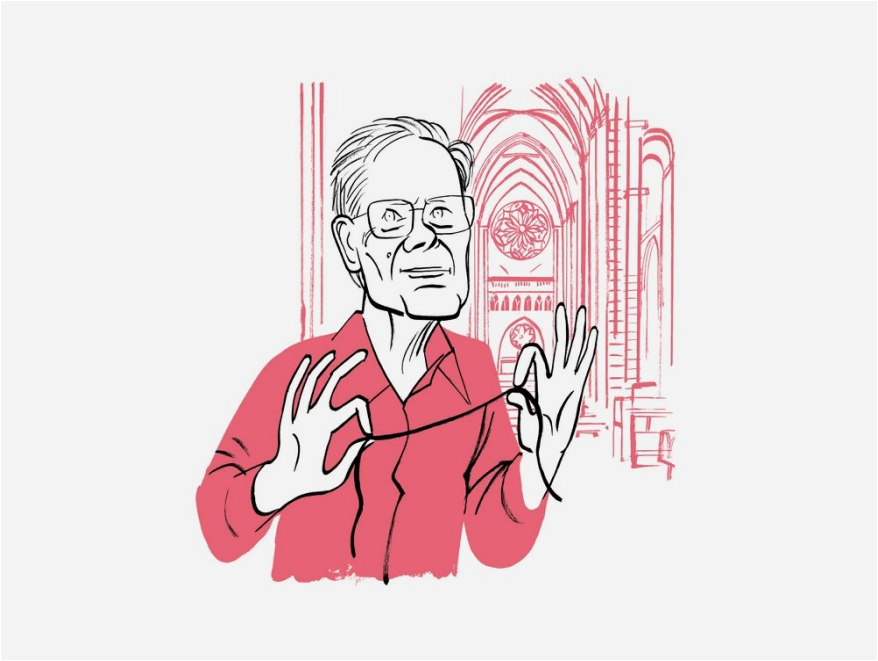
Up in the Air

Philippe Petit Thinks You Should Look Up

The high-wire artist, famous for his Twin Towers walk, joins the tourists at Edge before an upcoming tightrope walk inside the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

By Bob Morris

August 05, 2024



Philippe Petit, the high-wire artist, had wanted to visit Edge, the hundredth-floor observation deck at Hudson Yards, for a long time. But when he arrived the other evening to go up to the platform, which resembles a spaceship-size triangle wedged into a skyscraper, it looked as if high winds might shut it down. “It’s a tourist trap, of course,” Petit said. “But people are here to see the world from a different perspective.”

Fifty years ago this month, Petit walked (illegally—he was arrested) on a steel cable strung between the towers of the World Trade Center. To mark the anniversary, he is planning to walk a tightrope this week inside the

Cathedral of St. John the Divine. “Retirement is for others,” said Petit, who, at seventy-four, is taut and compact. Waiting for an elevator at Hudson Yards, he wore white trousers and a pressed sherbet-orange shirt that matched his full head of hair. “I have a life of passion and exploration of an endless universe, so why would I want to stop when the ground is totally uninteresting to me?”

Moments later, he was rocketing upward in the elevator, along with a gaggle of tourists and one wailing baby. A guard checking bags recognized him from the 2008 documentary “Man on Wire” and told him in French to have a good time. For a while, it didn’t seem that he would—nobody was allowed onto the observation deck. But then the doors opened, and Petit scooted out into the fresh air.

“Here we go!” he said. “This is fabulous, and I am not ashamed to be here—I am happy.”

With impressive agility, he threaded through clumps of people (“I cut lines by making myself invisible”) to get to a V-shaped wall of glass. Beyond it, the Hudson River and New Jersey sprawled in the twilight. He looked south, to where the Twin Towers once stood, and where, earlier in the day, he had given a press conference on the eightieth floor of 3 World Trade Center. (He ended it by balancing a rose on his chin.) He pointed out Madison Square Garden, where he once performed, and the Empire State Building, then took some pretend practice steps in the hot wind, commenting that he felt like a bird navigating turbulence. Then he jostled his way to the main attraction, the deck’s transparent floor, through which Tenth Avenue was visible like a canyon below.

“My feeling is not the same as these people,” he said, looking at tourists snapping selfies. “I take being high up personally.”

After his Twin Towers crossing and arrest, Petit was world famous. He declined offers to shill for Burger King and Sweet’N Low. When bookers for Johnny Carson’s “Tonight Show” called, he asked, “Johnny who?” He turned down a film offer from Werner Herzog and another from Miloš Forman, who wanted to cast him in “Hair.” He regrets that one. “I told him if he wanted a circus performer to look for a juggler in the Yellow Pages,”

Petit said. He ended up taking a relatively modest job with Ringling Bros. for a year, during which he fell, in a rehearsal, for the first and only time in his career and broke a few ribs. Since then, he has performed in countless high-wire events and has built a barn for himself using eighteenth-century techniques on property he owns near Woodstock.

He was aware of the recent election in France and the upcoming one in the United States, but wasn't focussed on them. "I don't pay attention to politics," he said. "Politics is like rain, and you can't fight the rain." As he left the observation deck, which was being evacuated because of lightning, he went on to say that life was short. "If you drag your feet, you miss the beauty, so you have to look up at the sky and marvel at things."

On the way home, Petit stopped outside the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, where he has been an artist-in-residence for more than four decades. To accompany his upcoming walk, Sting, who used to play chess with him, will perform live. In 1992, when Petit walked on a wire across Amsterdam Avenue to the cathedral, he landed on the front page of the *Times*, and the attention helped raise funds to complete the cathedral's tower. In dim light at the arched entrance, he gestured up to a relief of Moses. "To the left and above him there's a little man with outstretched arms and a balancing pole," he said. "Not many people can say their face is on a cathedral." Nor can they say that they changed the light bulbs in one of its chandeliers. "It was so high that the staff didn't like to do it," he said. "For me, it was no problem." ♦

Here To There Dept.

The Podcast Shorter than Your Subway Ride, Recorded on Your Subway Ride

Kareem Rahma and Andrew Kuo devised “Subway Takes” to solicit controversial opinions on the train, like why men should sit to pee.

By Dan Greene

August 05, 2024

It’s been said that New York is a city of eight million stories. This is a godsend for Kareem Rahma, the comedian and co-producer behind “Subway Takes,” a quickie podcast series (most are ninety seconds) in which New Yorkers share—and defend—their most distinctive beliefs while riding the M.T.A. “There are so many idiosyncrasies that people have that only their friends know about,” Rahma said the other day, en route to a shoot. (Recent guests have argued that incels aren’t real, that gatekeeping is good, and that men should sit to pee.) He and his production partner, Andrew Kuo, dreamed up the show last year, after they noticed that their comedian friends

were pitching podcasts so they'd have clips to post on Instagram. "I was, like, what if the clips *were* the podcast?" Rahma said. He also has a TikTok series, "Keep the Meter Running," in which he asks cabbies to show him their favorite haunts. (Destinations have included a Muslim-owned Jewish deli and the casino near J.F.K.) "I just need a ferry show," he said.

Rahma, who had on Army-green basketball shorts and a navy button-down, was driving from his apartment, in Bed-Stuy, to Williamsburg, where a handful of opiners—some friends, some friends of friends—would join him and his film crew on the L train. Since the podcast caught on, well-known personalities have begun appearing on it—Olivia Wilde, Charli XCX, a few Brooklyn Nets. But Rahma turns down the majority of publicists' requests. "This show isn't about 'talent,' " he said. "It's about the take."

Rahma parked his Volvo outside the Lorimer Street station. He put on his hosting garb—a greenish suit jacket, from eBay—then headed into a café to corral his subjects and staff. Down on the platform, a call sheet was hastily sketched out. When a Canarsie-bound train arrived, Rahma and his first interviewee, the filmmaker Lance Oppenheim, boarded and squeezed onto a bench. Two cameramen sat opposite. Lapel mikes were fastened to MetroCards, which the talkers held in front of their faces. A trio of buskers passed by. "Perfect," Rahma said. "Pure chaos." Nearby, a man in a hoodie snoozed.

At Montrose Avenue, cameras rolled, and Oppenheim called for the abolition of texting. A few minutes later, Rahma's next subject, an inked-up photographer in a sailor hat named Justin Belmondo, argued that people should stop patronizing bars and restaurants. Rahma objected, until Belmondo clarified: unless the restaurant's staff gets health insurance.

"Oh, we're fighting capitalism," Rahma said, nodding behind wraparound shades.

"I wasn't going to say the C-word," Belmondo said.

Next, the comic Alec Flynn, in a Cranberries T-shirt, argued that men should be permitted to claim to be bisexual as casually as women do.

Rahma was unsure of his own stance here. “I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about,” he said.

Up next: Zohran Mamdani, a thirty-two-year-old state assemblyman from Queens. “Eric Adams is a terrible mayor,” he said. Rahma agreed, with élan, as Mamdani expounded on problems with the city’s rent commission, vender licensing, and utilities. “This is so much more legit than mine,” Pooja Tripathi, a comedian awaiting her turn in the subway car, said. Rahma was enlightened. “I know he’s a bad mayor because I can see the state of the city—it’s a piece of shit,” he said. “But these specific things?”

At Atlantic Avenue, the crew switched trains to ride Manhattan-bound for the rest of the shoot. Back in the car, Tripathi explained why designer fashion is a scam. A rider in a “Simpsons” T-shirt saw the cameras and scampered away. A woman wearing a yellow construction vest snapped photos on her phone.

Next, John McDonagh, a taxi-driver in a “Veterans for Peace” T-shirt, took the hot seat. He applauded the rise in subway crime, thanking Mayor Adams for the boon to a hack’s bottom line. “This is New York,” he said. “Somebody’s gotta win, somebody’s gotta lose.” Farther down the bench, a

long-haired man in a Yankees shirt removed an AirPod to hear the conversation, then shook his head.

The last opiner was Mario Bosco, a four-foot-ten comedian and native Brooklynite, who had on a white blazer accessorized with a blue pocket square. Straphangers leaned in to listen as Bosco called for saloons to be installed in subway cars and on platforms and pleaded for more in-car entertainers.

Rahma concurred. “We’re doing a freakin’ talk show!” he said. The onlookers laughed. ♦

Reporting & Essays

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American Chronicles

How Tribal Nations Are Reclaiming Oklahoma

After the Supreme Court ruled in favor of tribal interests, suddenly nearly half of the state was Native territory. What exactly does that mean?

By Rachel Monroe

August 05, 2024

One day in the summer of 2020, Chuck Hoskin, Jr., the principal chief of the Cherokee Nation, and his daughter were driving through Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the location of the Cherokee Nation headquarters. Hoskin, who is forty-nine, had grown up understanding that he was a citizen of one of the country's largest tribal nations in terms of population—there are nearly half a million enrolled Cherokee citizens—yet one of its smallest in terms of territory. But that had just changed. In McGirt v. Oklahoma, the United States Supreme Court ruled that a nineteenth-century treaty between the Muscogee Creek Nation and the U.S. was still in effect. The 5–4 decision ultimately resulted in the restoration of land to eight tribes and the conclusion that nearly half of Oklahoma, including most of the city of Tulsa,

seventy miles northwest of Tahlequah, was tribal territory. As Hoskin drove through Tahlequah's quiet streets—past its antique stores and strip-mall plazas, its billboards advertising well drilling and Narcan and Jesus—the familiar town was made new with the realization that his daughter would grow up in a world where all of this was part of the Cherokee reservation.

The McGirt case represented an enormous and long-awaited restoration of sovereignty, "the ability of a group of people to manage their own affairs," as Hoskin put it. In Indian Country, which is the legal term for land reserved for tribes, tribal nations have authority over their citizens—they can adjudicate legal cases, levy taxes, and impose municipal regulations. But, in Oklahoma, which apart from Alaska has the nation's highest proportion of Native residents, the state had long maintained that reservations—and, thus, much tribal authority—had ceased to exist in 1907, with statehood. Now two million Oklahomans—some of them tribal citizens, most of them not—were living on a reservation.

The decision was a surprise in part because the U.S. has typically taken a paternalistic approach to tribal nations. Until 1970, the so-called Five Civilized Tribes—the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, Muscogee Creek, and Choctaw Nations—weren't allowed to elect their own chiefs. McGirt specifically applied to criminal jurisdiction, meaning that, in towns like Tahlequah and in cities like Tulsa, the tribes, and their federal partners, now had policing and prosecutorial authority over tribal citizens. The recognition of the tribe's expanded rights offered the Cherokee Nation an opportunity to approach criminal justice differently—by integrating tribal conceptions of restorative justice into proceedings, say, or by treating crimes that stem from addiction differently. (Overdose fatalities among American Indians are higher than Oklahoma's average.) The Court's ruling also made it conceivable that tribal authority could eventually extend to other spheres: taxation, zoning, regulation.

But McGirt came at a fraught time for Oklahoma's tribal nations. The state's governor, Kevin Stitt, is an enrolled member of the Cherokee Nation; he is also emphatically opposed to tribal interests, which he sees as divisive. Stitt, a Republican, has called the idea that eastern Oklahoma is a reservation under tribal jurisdiction "preposterous" and "un-American" and "super weird." In the months leading up to the Court's decision, he predicted chaos

and breakdowns in law and order if the Justices ruled in favor of the tribes. He later called McGirt "the biggest issue that's ever hit any state since the Civil War." The tension between the Governor and the tribes has continued to ratchet up. "This particular governor is looking at it like, McGirt is an attack on my state, we're almost at war," Hoskin said. "Not a shooting war, but almost like enemy camps."

Hoskin, who has a Plains twang and good country manners, is from a well-connected political family; his father served in both tribal and state governments. "My goodness, I don't know what the universe had in mind when it decided that McGirt would happen with someone as governor who really fundamentally does not believe there's a role for tribes," he told me, when I visited him in his office at the Cherokee headquarters this summer.

The office had bright-blue walls and shelves lined with ceramic bowls and tightly woven baskets—Hoskin's collection of work by contemporary Cherokee artists. Hanging on the wall was a prize possession, which he bought at auction a few years ago: a map of tribal territory from 1906, the year before Oklahoma became a state, showing the Cherokee Nation extending from the Arkansas River, in the south, up to the Kansas border. When European settlers began to arrive in North America, the Cherokee Nation stretched throughout southern Appalachia. By the nineteenth century, the growing white population was "sick with the expectation of Indian land," one Cherokee leader wrote. White people encroached on tribal territory, and eventually the tribe was forcibly displaced a thousand miles west, to present-day Oklahoma, along what came to be known as the Trail of Tears. As much as a fifth of the population died along the way.

In the days after the Court's ruling, people kept texting Hoskin the opening line from Justice Neil Gorsuch's majority opinion: "On the far end of the Trail of Tears was a promise"—outlined in nineteenth-century treaties—that if tribal nations ceded their land east of the Mississippi they would be provided reservations in present-day Oklahoma. After removal, the Cherokee Nation established itself in what was then known as Indian Territory, and began setting up schools, courts, and governments. (There are two smaller Cherokee groups: the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, who resisted removal and remained in western North Carolina, and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, who settled in Indian Territory prior

to removal.) But tribal autonomy was short-lived. Oklahoma celebrated statehood with a symbolic wedding ceremony between "Miss Indian Territory" and "Mr. Oklahoma Territory" and, in the name of unity, began systematically dismantling tribal power, dissolving tribal courts and dividing up communally held land. Hoskin grew up learning that Cherokee sovereign rights existed only on what is known as "restricted" land—the small fraction of property that had never passed out of tribal ownership.

The Muscogee Creek Nation, Oklahoma's third most populous tribe, was among the plaintiffs in the McGirt case, and it was understood that the decision would likely apply to the four other major tribes and to a handful of smaller ones. Hoskin's feeling of triumph at McGirt was tinged with trepidation. "There's plenty of people waiting on us to fall short, so they can say, 'See? They can't handle it.' So there's a lot of pressure to meet the moment," he said. "Anyone who's studied Cherokee history, or the history of any part of Indian Country, knows that there's a tendency for there to be a backlash." In the eighteen-thirties, the Supreme Court, under Chief Justice John Marshall, acknowledged tribal sovereignty in a set of rulings generally known as the Cherokee cases. President Andrew Jackson ignored the Court and kept encouraging settlers to take Cherokee land. "John Marshall has made his decision; now let him enforce it," Jackson is reported to have said. "Congress passed the Indian Removal Act—if you want to talk about an *enormous* backlash," Hoskin told me. "So that's in my mind, and in the mind of most Cherokees, when something good happens. I didn't think there would be a second Indian Removal Act—I don't think Congress has it in them. But my concern was that this dramatic expansion in the recognition of our sovereignty would be met with a really firm pushback. And that there could be a great deal of injury inflicted."

Visitors to the capitol in Oklahoma City are directed to leave their cars in the south parking lot, behind an oil derrick. The pink granite building sits atop one of the country's largest reservoirs of petroleum; until the mid-eighties, its grassy grounds were home to both a governmental complex and a working oil field. Inside, next to the door to the governor's office, is a larger-than-life-size oil painting of the Oklahoma humorist and cowboy icon Will Rogers, himself a Cherokee citizen. ("I'm not one of these Americans whose ancestors come over on the Mayflower, but we met 'em at the boat when

they landed," Rogers once said. "And it's always been to the everlasting discredit of the Indian race that we ever let 'em land.")

Governor Stitt is steel-haired and genial, the son of a pastor and the grandson of a dairy farmer. He ran a mortgage company in Tulsa and voted only intermittently until 2017, when he attended the National Prayer Breakfast, where faith leaders mingle with elected officials, and was inspired to go into politics. Less than two years later, after running a campaign that touted his business experience and his status as a political outsider, he was elected governor. His tenure has been marked by friction with Oklahoma's tribal nations. When the state legislature passed a bill allowing students to wear tribal regalia during graduation ceremonies, Stitt vetoed it. (The legislature overrode his veto.) For the position of Native American liaison, he selected Wes Nofire, a former member of the Cherokee council who has suggested that the Cherokee Nation is controlled by Satan. In the past several decades, the state and the tribes have entered into compacts governing everything from tobacco sales to hunting licenses. Stitt has repeatedly attempted to veto or renegotiate the compacts, and that has resulted in protracted legislative and legal battles.

His stalwart opposition to tribal interests has baffled people who are otherwise his political allies. Three top Republican officials in the state have

signed on to a federal lawsuit against the Governor centering on his handling of tribal gaming compacts; the state's attorney general accused Stitt of "betrayal of his duty." "Even President Trump has mentioned he doesn't know why the governor has such animosity toward the tribes," Greg Treat, the Republican president pro tempore of the Oklahoma Senate, told the Associated Press last year. "It's nonsensical."

Stitt's Cherokee heritage comes from his mother's side of the family; he grew up alongside cousins who competed in the All Indian Rodeo Association. "I always thought it was really cool that I was part Indian. It's such an important part of Oklahoma's history," he told me. "But I think of myself as an American and an Oklahoman, and I'm proud of my heritage." In school, he learned about the symbolic wedding ceremony that marked statehood. "We chose to become one state. We decided we didn't want to have reservations," he said. "There was a marriage ceremony that was performed, and that *meant* something." It struck him as unfair that tribal nations had a separate, parallel system of justice for their citizens: "Here I am, and my six children, with blond hair and blue eyes—they're Indians as well. And you're going to have a situation where they get a special set of rules? This is just ridiculous. It's unbelievable."

McGirt came as a surprise to Stitt, and a blow. "I mean, whose land is it?" he asked, his voice rising in bewilderment. "Is this Oklahoma? If it's not, just tell me!" Stitt has framed his opposition to McGirt in the language of racial equality. "We can't be a state that operates with two different sets of rules, especially based on race," he has said. In a 2022 speech celebrating Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, he claimed that the civil-rights leader would be "astounded, maybe even disgusted" by the ruling. The tribes, however, have long maintained that tribal membership is not a racial category but a political one. (Ancestry is only one criterion that tribes may consider when determining citizenship.) Last year, the Court appeared to agree, upholding the legality of the Indian Child Welfare Act, which gives preference to Native families in adoption cases involving Native children.

People seemed more persuaded by another argument that Stitt has made: that McGirt created public-safety problems. "Hundreds of criminal cases are going unprosecuted," he has claimed. The *Wall Street Journal's* editorial board called McGirt a "mistake" and warned of "mayhem" and "criminal

anarchy in tribal areas." The months after the decision were "tremendously chaotic, tremendously disruptive," Matt Ballard, a state district attorney who covers territory that is now entirely on reservations, said. Cases involving tribal members were no longer his responsibility; instead, they were ceded to tribal or federal courts. (Under U.S. law, the longest sentence that a tribal court can impose is three years, for a maximum of three consecutive terms, so major crimes tend to be prosecuted in the federal system.)

Ballard also worried that tribal members who had been convicted by the state would request new trials. "We were looking at retrying cases, these horrendous crimes from the seventies and eighties," he said. "The sheriff's office has moved multiple times since then. We were literally trying to find where's the evidence for these cases." In court filings, Oklahoma described McGirt as a potential "get-out-of-jail-free card" for thousands of criminals. "There's people being released from prison," Stitt told Fox News, claiming that as many as seventy-six thousand cases might be overturned—almost three times the state's prison population.

In 2021, a year after the decision, Ballard spoke on a panel convened by the Governor about the community impact of McGirt. His fellow-speakers included sheriffs and district attorneys, but no representatives from tribal leadership. The restive, raucous crowd carried signs that said things like "Illegal Jurisdiction Since 1907" and "You Are on Indian Land." "We walked up on the stage, and it looked to me like a European soccer game," a participant told me. "Everyone was angry." When panelists said that McGirt was harming victims of crimes, the crowd jeered them. One speaker raised the spectre of criminals who, he suggested, might go free because of McGirt: murderers, rapists, robbers. "Like your forefathers!" someone yelled. The Governor gripped the sides of the podium with both hands.

When it was Ballard's turn, he raised his voice to be heard over the crowd. "I will tell you what's happening in every courthouse: Native victims are being victimized, and nobody is prosecuting their cases," he said. "It's a hard truth, it's a hard truth to take. This situation is not workable." The crowd began to chant, "Treaties are the law of the land."

Later that year, the courts ruled that McGirt was not applicable retroactively, relieving the fear that old cases would have to be retried. Just sixty-eight

people had been released from prison on McGirt-related appeals. A few months later, another Supreme Court case, Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta, further limited McGirt, giving the state jurisdiction over crimes in which the victim was Native but the defendant was not. (The Violence Against Women Act still allows tribes to prosecute non-Natives for certain crimes committed against tribal citizens, including child abuse and domestic violence.)

Meanwhile, tribes were scrambling to scale up their criminal-justice infrastructure, hiring prosecutors, police officers, court clerks, judges, and 911 dispatchers; setting up victim-services offices; and expanding juvenile-justice programs. Instead of handling several dozen criminal cases a year, the Cherokee system was now responsible for several thousand. The head prosecutor for the Choctaw Nation said that the tribe's caseload increased by more than two thousand per cent. In the pre-McGirt era, the Muscogee Creek Lighthorse Tribal Police averaged one call for service a day; that number grew tenfold. "You know, I knew people were bad, and I knew crime was bad, but, when McGirt happened, and we started getting the calls for domestics, child abuse, things like that . . . ," Dennis Northcross, the deputy chief of the Lighthorse police, told me, too overwhelmed to finish the thought. Investigating major crimes largely fell to the F.B.I., which enlisted dozens of agents from around the country to assist. "The challenge for us is that we must provide this basic level of policing in the eastern half of Oklahoma, but we also have to insure we are still doing all the things the American public expects the F.B.I. to do," Melissa Godbold, the special agent in charge of the Bureau's Oklahoma City field office, said in 2021.

The district attorneys I spoke with agreed that things had stabilized since the initial post-McGirt months, but they still noted concerns about sentencing disparities and cases being dropped. Ballard told me about a drug case involving three suspects—one Native, two non-Native. "It's very frustrating to be told you only have jurisdiction over two-thirds of a conspiracy," he said. Under state law, the non-Native defendants could face thirty years in prison; if the Native defendant were convicted in tribal court, he would receive a much lower sentence. "What I've seen from the Cherokee Nation is an earnest desire to do this as well as they possibly can," Jack Thorp, a district attorney whose territory overlaps with the Cherokee reservation, told me. "But they're hamstrung by this three-year cap." Cases can be picked up by the federal government, but the U.S. Attorney's office tends to be

choosier about what it pursues. Elsewhere in Indian Country, the federal government has faced significant criticism for inadequate prosecutions, particularly when it comes to sexual assaults. “I appreciate our federal partners, but they’re not set up to handle cases like this—property crimes, drug crimes,” Ballard said. “They’re just not.”

Rebecca Nagle, a journalist who has covered McGirt in the podcast “This Land” and in her forthcoming book, “By the Fire We Carry: The Generations-Long Fight for Justice on Native Land,” told me that anxieties about crime have often been used as an excuse to chip away at tribal sovereignty. The more pressing public-safety issue, she said, was state officials who refused to coöperate with their tribal counterparts, sometimes for fear of displeasing the Governor’s office.

When I spoke to Geri Wisner, the attorney general of the Muscogee Creek Nation, she told me that she had initially been hopeful that tribal and local authorities could work collaboratively, but that some local authorities were resisting acknowledging tribes’ expanded authority. The Muscogee Nation’s communication with certain district attorneys was functionally nonexistent, and cases were falling through the cracks. “I’ve been trying to tell everyone, ‘The barn’s on fire! The barn’s on fire!’ ” Wisner told me.

Last year, state authorities arrested a woman for strangling her daughter with a rope. When they determined that the woman, Tracy Ann Mannon, was a Muscogee Creek citizen, they dismissed the case and alerted federal prosecutors, who also declined the case. The U.S. Attorney’s office said that it had e-mailed the Muscogee Creek Nation twice, but the messages bounced back. “I didn’t get a word of it,” Wisner said. “This is a strangulation—a strangulation of a minor!” Earlier this year, Mannon was arrested again. Allegedly, she had stabbed her mother to death and was planning to dismember the body. In an interview with a local news station, District Attorney Larry Edwards implied that McGirt was the reason Mannon had been free: “Oftentimes, we see that justice is not served, because cases are dismissed, and, as far as we can tell, sometimes nothing happens to them, and then sometimes we see terrible things in the aftereffect.” (Edwards told me that he now forwards all dismissed cases to both tribal and federal prosecutors.)

In some parts of the state, there has been outright hostility between tribal and local officials. This has been particularly true with the Muscogee Creek Nation, which has a reputation for being more assertive of tribal sovereignty than the other major tribes. Last winter, Stitt was campaigning in Iowa with Ron DeSantis, whom he supported for President, when he received an urgent phone call. "They go, 'Governor! The Indians and the sheriff are pointing guns at each other! They're surrounding our jailhouse, they're trying to take our jailer!' " Stitt told me, widening his eyes at the recollection. "I'm, like, 'Oh, my goodness, what is going on?' "

Both sides deny that any guns were drawn, but they agree that events that week in Okmulgee County, a largely rural area west of Tulsa that's now part of the Muscogee Creek reservation, marked a flash point in tensions between tribal and non-tribal officials.

Historically, many tribal law-enforcement departments have had cross-deputization agreements with their state and local counterparts, which allowed officers to detain and arrest suspects regardless of their tribal status. (Once a suspect had been booked, the relevant agency—tribal, state, or federal—would take over.) A decade ago, the Okmulgee sheriff, Eddy Rice, rescinded cross-deputization with the Muscogee Creek Lighthorse Tribal Police, citing liability concerns. Northcross, of the Lighthorse police, had a different theory. "I think it's a power thing with the sheriff," he said. After McGirt, the state recommended that law-enforcement departments should sign cross-deputization agreements, if they hadn't already; Rice opted not to. Northcross said, "The area that he covers is totally encompassed by, and included in, our area. He went from being a big fish in a little pond to being a little fish in a big pond. Don't think he appreciates that." After a long pause, he continued, "And I think it's some old prejudices—I do. There are some old prejudices there." Rice told me that prejudice was not a factor, and that he was motivated by a desire to protect citizens against what he saw as illegitimate policing by tribal law enforcement. "Everybody thought we were being buttheads, but that is not what any of it is about," he said. "It's not just a simple power struggle. The sheriff is the last stance against the federal government to protect the rights of the people. So I have chosen to try to protect rights."

The Okmulgee County incident began last December, when a Lighthorse police officer named Keith Bell searched a suspect and found a small bag of fentanyl. Because the suspect was non-Native, Bell called the city police, who didn't respond. He didn't want to let the man loose, but, because he wasn't cross-deputized with the sheriff's department, he couldn't make an arrest. There was a potential work-around, however: the Lighthorse police were cross-deputized with an obscure state organization called the Grand River Dam Authority. In the past, this had been interpreted to mean that the Lighthorse police could make arrests in any county where the G.R.D.A. had property—including Okmulgee County. Northcross, expecting trouble, elected to come along to the county jail. When the tribal police brought the man into a holding cell, the jailers refused to accept the suspect, and the tribal officers refused to release him. The dispute became a shouting match; one jailer reportedly accused the tribal officers of not being "real police." The jailers retreated to the secure booking area, and Northcross followed them. The door slammed shut behind him, leaving Bell and another tribal officer locked in a holding cell with the suspect. In a video of the incident, a jailer appears to shove Northcross as one of the tribal officers shouts, "Hey! Get your hands off of him!" In the background, the suspect wails, "What is going on? Oh, my God, this is all because of me? I'm so sorry!" Northcross, who is preternaturally understated, described the scene as "not pleasant" and "pretty heated." Eventually, after consulting with the district attorney, the jailers reluctantly accepted the prisoner. Tribal prosecutors charged the jailer who pushed Northcross with felony battery of a law-enforcement officer, but they later dropped the charges. As a result of the conflict, Stitt suspended the G.R.D.A. cross-deputization, which means that tribal law enforcement can no longer detain non-Natives in Okmulgee County.

The sheriff's office and the tribal police are effectively engaged in a cold war. "It's ugly here," Rice said. When Lighthorse police call the sheriff's department in order to hand over a non-Native suspect, "they refuse to come," Northcross said. "They usually say they're busy. They're always busy." For their part, the Lighthorse police have largely given up on patrolling Okmulgee County. "I understand they don't want to come here, because we don't have a great working relationship," Rice conceded. But, according to him, the lapse in tribal law enforcement has made his county less safe. "If you're a Native, you get away with anything!" he said. "We got people, you know, criminals, that are riding motorcycles, hot-rodding, and

speeding through the city of Okmulgee every single day, and nobody does nothing about that."

Stitt blamed the incident on "the broken system created by the McGirt decision," and used the occasion "to call on Congress and the courts to address this problem." Oklahoma has considered several paths to curbing the power of tribes and returning the state to the pre-McGirt status quo. One would involve Congress officially disestablishing the reservations recognized by McGirt. "The Supreme Court started this bullcrap," Rice told me. "But say that we have a different President in the future. Then you may have a Congress that steps in and says, 'Hey, these people are struggling in Oklahoma. Maybe we ought to help.' "

A more likely pathway involves the courts. McGirt was one of the final decisions made while Ruth Bader Ginsburg was still a Justice; since the Court's composition has changed, Oklahoma has pursued numerous attempts to overturn or significantly limit tribal sovereignty. The decision in Castro-Huerta, which was favorable to Oklahoma, indicates that the Court may be receptive.

In February, 2021, Keith Stitt, the Governor's older brother, was driving his Range Rover to Tulsa, where he lives and works as a real-estate attorney.

The speed limit was fifty miles per hour; according to a Tulsa police officer, who pulled him over, Keith was going seventy-eight. When the officer asked for his identification in order to write him a ticket, Keith presented his Oklahoma driver's license. He also showed the officer his Cherokee Nation citizenship card. "Isn't this my get-out-of-jail-free card?" he asked.

Many of the most bitter post-McGirt fights between the state and tribes have centered not on murders but on traffic tickets. "Tickets are money," Wisner, the Muscogee Creek attorney general, explained; after McGirt, those summonses were now supposed to be sent to tribal governments. (The Cherokee Nation set up a revenue-sharing agreement that allows towns to keep most of the money.) Last year, the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals said that Tulsa cannot ticket tribal members for infractions on reservations. But the Tulsa police continued to do so. The Muscogee Creek Nation sued the city, and the case is still pending. According to Wisner, other jurisdictions have begun to ticket tribal members as well, rather than transferring those cases to the tribe. "It started with Tulsa, and it's been like an infection," she said. "Now I've got it all over the place."

As Governor Stitt explored avenues to chip away at tribal sovereignty, his brother hired a lawyer and contested his ticket, claiming that, as he was a tribal citizen, the city of Tulsa had no jurisdiction over him. The case is currently in front of the state's highest court. Everyone I spoke with in Oklahoma seemed mystified by the situation: one brother trying to overturn McGirt, the other using it as the basis for a protracted legal crusade to challenge a speeding ticket. Some people in tribal leadership speculated that Keith's legal battle was part of his brother's attempt to undermine McGirt, either through bad press or by provoking a court decision unfavorable to the tribes. It's not inconceivable that Keith's case could eventually be taken up by the Supreme Court. When I asked the Governor about his brother's speeding ticket, he burst into laughter. "I love it!" he said. "It's so funny—the tribes are having to do amicus briefs in support of Keith." He told me that the ticket was in no way a setup, but implied that his brother's lawsuit might not be in good faith. "You'll have to talk to Keith," he said. "But maybe Keith wants to show how absurd all this is as well."

Hoskin was twelve in 1987, when another Supreme Court decision changed the trajectory of Native history. The Court ruled that tribes could conduct

gaming operations independent of state regulations. The Cherokee soon built casinos, and his father was later on the tribal council as it determined how to allocate the revenue. “The new money coming in was measured in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and it was a game changer,” Hoskin recalled; the tribe used it to expand housing for elders. Court cases have been crucial for the acknowledgment of tribal sovereignty, but actually putting sovereignty into practice—building the institutions that enact it—requires something else: funding.

These days, Cherokee businesses—primarily but not only the casinos—bring in billions of dollars, and the tribe’s projects have become much more ambitious. In Tahlequah, I toured the gleaming Cherokee Nation hospital, which offers health-care services at no cost to members of any federally recognized tribe.“Providing health care to our own citizens is a way we exercise sovereignty,” Brian Hail, the deputy executive director of Cherokee Nation Health Services, told me. Farther down the highway, in the airy Cherokee Nation Durbin Feeling Language Center, which offers full-immersion programs, posters listed colors and animals in the Cherokee syllabary, which faces what Hoskin describes as an “existential threat” of disappearing.

But the current levels of funding may not be enough. In 2022, members of Oklahoma’s House delegation told the Appropriations Committee that investing in the criminal-justice system so as to comply with McGirt was “effectively bankrupting the affected tribes.” In the first year after the decision, the Cherokee Nation allocated thirty million dollars to fund the expansion of its courts and law enforcement. What’s more, the emphasis on criminal justice, even if it’s meted out by tribal authorities, was met with some ambivalence by the community. (One evening, at a rodeo in Okmulgee County, just before the bull-riding competition, the announcer called the Lighthorse police into the arena, where they stood awkwardly, shoulder to shoulder. “They are not the enemy,” the announcer told the audience sternly. “And the best way to get along with them is to *comply*.” The family sitting in front of me declined to applaud.)

“I didn’t want to go into public service and politics because I wanted to oversee this massive growth of our criminal-justice system,” Hoskin told me. “I see what a lot of people see, which is a system that chews people up

and spits them out. We don't want to re-create that system. That's a big fear of mine." He had been weighing whether the Cherokee Nation should build its own jail, rather than renting space in state facilities. (Oklahoma has the second-highest jail-mortality rate in the country.) "There's also an opportunity to do incarceration differently," he said. "Frankly, though, right out of the gate, we did things substantially the same as the state."

Along with Keith Stitt's speeding ticket, a number of McGirt-related cases are making their way through the courts. Every decision begets more questions: Do tribal citizens living and working on reservation land have to pay state income tax? How far does sovereignty extend, and how far will the state go to fight it? "I'm not going to be the governor that sells my state down the river," Kevin Stitt said. "Maybe some future governor will. But I'm not going down in history as a person that gave an inch." ♦

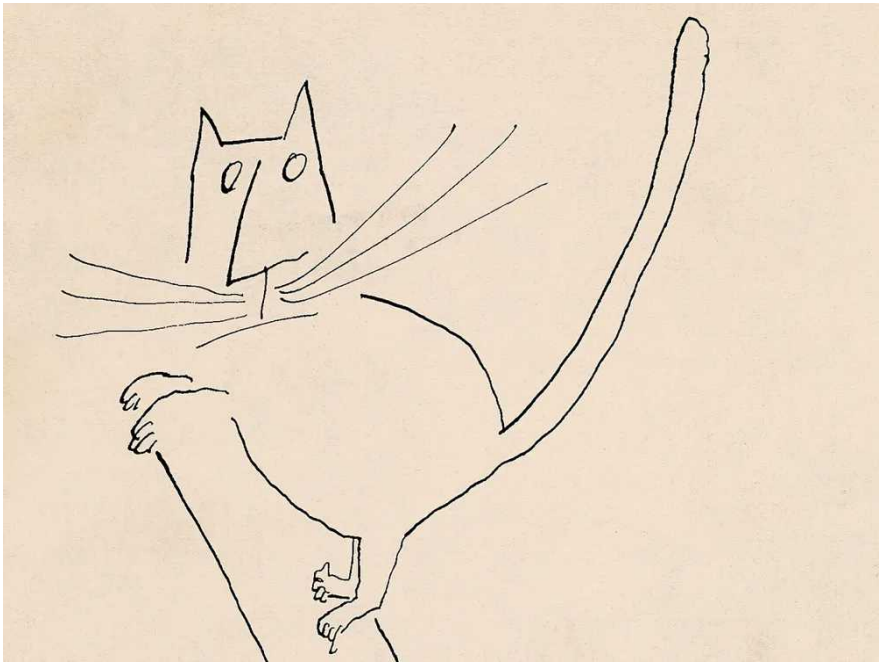
Personal History

The Tail End

What we lose when we lose a pet.

By Sloane Crosley

August 05, 2024



Here is a good story: It's 2003 and a childhood friend is stationed at Fort Bragg, in North Carolina—which will be renamed Fort Liberty in 2023—where she's in the 82nd Airborne Division. She is done jumping out of planes for the day, heading off the base, when she hears meowing coming from a warehouse. Inside, she finds a stray cat, proud but mangy, and decides to take her home. The cat is pregnant. My friend e-mails me a photograph of the kittens, arranged on her lap, one surfing on her kneecap. She writes, "Don't these remind you of your cats growing up?" She knows a target when she sees one.

A few weeks later, the kittens are loaded onto the back seat of a Jeep and driven north. Two are dropped off at my parents' house, in White Plains, and one is dropped off with me at my studio apartment, on the Upper West Side. The family joke is that these are military-grade cats. Your tax dollars at

work. No laser eyes, but they do fetch and come when you call them, and, if they puke, they do so on nonporous surfaces. Twenty-one years later, mine is the last one standing. Personally, I think there's a lesson here about nurture, but I keep this thought to myself.

Since this story will continue, perhaps I should build up an immunity within a certain type of reader: Cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat cat. Cat. There. Now we can get on with it.

The cat is very sick, so a veterinarian whom I have never met is coming over to kill her. She arrives at 10 *A.M.*, which feels wrong. Murders and breakups, these are not interactions for God's hours. On the phone the afternoon before, she tells me of her pastoral childhood in New Zealand. Her mother once put a cat down by feeding it Valium.

"Like, a local cat?"

"No, our cat. So, very local."

This conversation happens in my living room because it feels disrespectful to conduct it in the bedroom, where the cat is resting on her spot, near the pillows. When we hang up, I walk over to the doorframe and lean on it. The cat lifts her head. She's a gray tabby, but her shock-white belly has been my first sight in the morning for much of my adult life. After she's gone, I will place wide objects on my nightstand to obstruct the view of the room when I open my eyes. Her emerald eyes, rimmed in black, are narrowed. Gummy. Surely, she is thinking nothing, except for: I feel like shit. She stretches her paws, which are commonly referred to as "snowcapped," but our private joke is that I hold a paw between my fingers and say, "Ice-cream sandwich." They're all private jokes. It's a cat.

"That was your executioner," I tell her, although she does not understand English.

Though she did once type a perfect word while strolling across my keyboard: "poop."

The vet has arrived at a highly controlled household. The apartment is ready for guests, or perhaps a proposal. There are roses in vases, cellophane still mashed in the trash. There are candles. There is a bundle of sage just in case some things are valid. There is my boyfriend, pressed against a wall in anticipatory horror. He has known the cat for three years, which is not nothing, but it's also not as if I introduced them and now they hang out without me. On the floor is a hatbox from a hat shop in London. The hat, an expensive wool cloche that wound up costing me forty dollars per wear, has been removed. The box will serve as the cat's final transport. Her blanket, her closest colleague, the one with all the institutional knowledge, is nested inside, along with a handwritten letter.

This part will be familiar to anyone who has had to put an animal down: It's been six days since my initial correspondence with her regular vet, during which I fell on the sword of my own hysteria. A skipped meal—it's probably nothing! Still, blood was taken. The results have not come back yet. I am now seventy-two hours into my career as a personal chef: warming, mixing, shaking, diluting, pinching, drizzling, sprinkling. I treat the bodega like a farmer's market, making jaunts to buy cans of processed junk. The cat did this at eighteen (cancer) and thirteen (arbitrary rejection of dry food). So this worry, this belligerent kind of love, knows its way around. She will hear no explanations, be asked no questions. With babies, there's a good chance of their speaking by twenty-one. *Poop*.

Cats are notoriously secretive when something is wrong. The something at hand is often a puzzle. Dogs are more apt to tell it straight: a failure of the heart, a tumor in the brain. Dogs gossip; cats know where the bodies are buried. Dogs are standup comedians. Cats are essayists. Should we decide this animal has been fatally ill for three weeks, not six days, we're still talking about a mere fraction of her life. I once had lunch with a mohel, and when I suggested that circumcision was mutilation, to my surprise he agreed. He also told me that the day of the bris was meant to be a microcosm of a man's life. A few moments of pain in twenty-four hours? May we all have such a life! I have been digging into his words: *May we all have such a life!*

The other conversation to which I cling is more recent. A college friend, now a vet, predicted what would happen. "You will make the decision to

euthanize her and then, in between, there will be something positive," he said. "The cat will purr or eat a bite of food and you will think you're making a mistake. It will be bad. You are not making a mistake."

It wasn't food, it was a lick of cream, and it wasn't bad, it was wretched. Even now, I can feel the pressure in my throat, the difficulty swallowing as I paced during those ethically fraught hours, holding my phone because where was the goddam blood work I could have stabbed the cat in the leg and bought a centrifuge by now. Watching this creature fumble in and out of a litter box, I could not come to a conclusion about what it meant. I don't mean to suggest that I was stymied by emotion; I mean that I had lost the ability to apply opinion to evidence. I thought, Is this not my job as a writer? To see something and say something? Or am I only good for diatribes about airplane etiquette and cheese?

The phone vibrates: *It's her kidneys.*

Hearing is thought to be the last sense to go in death. This is likely true of animals as well as humans. I keep it together for her, expressing my gratitude for all those years of witnessing. In the previous days, she leaned on my forearm while a breeze blew through the window, and I told her the story of us. I described the apartments we'd lived in, the men I'd dated, the time I came home drunk and turned the dead bolt to lock the door, but it wasn't aligned and the door sprang open without my noticing. I woke the next morning to what sounded like my neighbor, calling my name from my kitchen. Because he was in my kitchen. That's when I heard a distant howling and flew down five flights to find the cat huddled by the mailboxes. On the way back up to safety, another neighbor, a grouchy one, popped her head into the hall.

"Is that a cat?!"

No, it's a bag of waffles I taught to meow.

So many dramas! Let us not speak of all the questionable modes of rousing —the flops on the head, the whacks to the face, the pointed release of noxious fumes. The supercut of missed jumps. The time I smacked her on the nose. (If this was some new trend in petting, she wasn't a fan.) The time

we saw a mouse and she looked at me like, “You gonna do something about that?” Or the time, during the cancer, when I boasted to a vet that my cousin’s cat had lived to be twenty-four. To which the vet replied, “You do realize there’s no genetic correlation between *that* cat and *this* cat.”

It’s all in the past, this life with her as the common denominator. Contrary to the popular idea that she is something I keep, she is the keeper, the database. Pet owners are shamed by the implication that we lack perspective, by the manufactured dichotomy whereby adults of legal age must choose which being they’d drop-kick off a cliff, a child or a pet. First of all, do you know how many people I know who’d answer “Both”? Six. Second of all, this weapon has no effect on pet owners. We need only glance at our creatures to feel sorry for those who don’t understand. When we put a leash on the videos, when we prevent ourselves from extolling the virtues of our pets in public, it’s not out of dignity. It’s out of fear that we’ll sell them too hard and someone will kidnap them.

But there is shame. It comes at the end and springs from the suspicion that, in being so greedy for unconditional love, we have made an awful mistake. We have recorded our lives on devices that will run out of power instead of paying proper attention ourselves. We outsourced too many of our quiet days. We also trusted that our pets knew who we were even when we weren’t so sure. And, if what they knew was “asshole,” they never let on.

I tell the cat that she can go. As if she needs my permission. Once the vet confirms it’s my breath that’s moving her on my lap, new orifices sprout on my face. How else to explain the sheer volume of wetness? This is the last chapter of the book. I signed up for this. Well, sort of. I did not adopt a cat. She fell into my lap. And now she has fallen back out. Gingerly, I move her into the hatbox, sweeping her tail around her. I stroke her legs. Sometimes, when I held her, I’d lightly bounce and rotate my body, a process known within the confines of the apartment as “machine-gun legs.”

The vet speaks in low tones. Her accent is soothing, maybe because I don’t hear it much. My sister, who’s had Crohn’s disease since high school, recently sent me off to my first colonoscopy with this sage advice: Whatever you drink with the medication, make sure it’s not your favorite, because

you'll never be able to swallow it again. I haven't had to speak with another person from New Zealand yet.

The vet holds up a carrot-shaped catnip toy, softened by beatings. I can't compute how it got into her hand or what she's going to do with it. Knowing a separation was imminent, I threw out the cat's accessories before the vet arrived. I must have missed the carrot.

"Do you want to put this in?"

"What?" I ask, sniffling.

"It looks well loved," the vet says, admiring this piece of crap. "Do you want to put it in?"

The snobbery is clarifying. It comes from deep inside and pushes my personality out from the cave where it's been hiding.

"It's a toy," I say.

"I know."

The snobbery is also maladjusted.

"I mean, I wouldn't put a boxed set of 'The Wire' in your coffin."

Comedy is tragedy plus time. That's the rule. But you don't have to add time if you don't have any. I start telling the carrot story as soon as that evening. I am not sleeping. (I make attempts with my head at the foot of the bed.) I speak to maybe two people a day, and even those people are subjected to the bit: *Like, what kind of show do you think I'm running here, lady*? *This is a classy affair!* Is it? Or am I making it classless by calcifying it before its time? Stories can be bad habits. I use this one to deflect condolences. I am not great with them regarding human beings, so these ones are extra indigestible, tinged with pity. It's ludicrous to expect anyone to miss a cat independent of the affection they feel for its owner, to recognize that this was not a cat but a person in a cat suit, to agree that the gap between what *any* cat would do and what *your* cat does is actually quite vast. If more than five people outside your household miss your cat, it wasn't a household, it

was a brothel. So I don't want to talk about it. The problem is, I don't want to talk about anything else.

Sometimes I add a bonus layer to the story, tossing in the coincidence that I put the cat down one day before her annual insurance policy renewed and the same week the company announced that, after forty-two years, it would cease offering many of its pet-insurance plans. What a gal. For all I know, the cat's euthanasia claim is the last one the company paid out, especially since I had to submit the paperwork twice. The first time, "the invoice did not specify the name of the pet for which services were rendered." I checked. I hadn't left the box blank. I had put my name down instead.

In reality, the vet and I get along well. We move quickly past the coffin zinger. She offers to take a plaster paw-print mold but suspects I might not want that.

"What do people do with them?"

"I don't know," she says, as if she's never given it any thought, which she probably hasn't. "Keep it in their desk drawer? Maybe ornaments."

To each her own. During the call with my college friend, he told me about the time an owner dropped off her cat for surgery and explained that the cat slept between her legs. So could he please put a pair of her underwear in the cage? The owner then produced a thong in a plastic bag, slapping it on the counter before she left. My reaction upon hearing this story was not that it was unreasonable. My reaction was that it was unreasonable that she didn't stay. But a plaster paw print? I don't think so.

I ask the vet to clip the cat's two longest whiskers. Cats use their whiskers for balance and to know where they fit. I want a piece of her, but not in the fashion of one of our jokes, in which I hold her leg and say, "Rabbit's foot." The vet's arms are full, so I open the door for her. I walk back into the torturously empty space of my apartment while my boyfriend waits in the hall. I put the whiskers in a box and touch the furniture that I have kept for too long. The walls look different. I curl up with my head on her spot until I feel only my own warmth.

I keep adding jokes to my repertoire: The only thing keeping me from burning down my apartment is I'm not a hundred per cent sure where to buy a can of gasoline. One night, I stay with a fancy friend who has a guest bedroom. Her espresso machine looks complicated. The four-dollar charge on my credit-card bill, from a coffee shop near her place, is one of many traces of a bad week. I hire a housecleaner who shows up in a baseball cap that reads "Wifey" in pink script. She surveys the situation and sighs.

"So dirty," Wifey says, shaking her head at the floorboards.

It's like a doctor telling you you're overweight.

"When was the last time you had it cleaned?"

I raise an eyebrow. She doesn't want to know, I don't want to say.

"Years," Wifey mumbles. "Ground in."

Indeed, the years are ground in. Now whom will I ask, as I frantically lift piles of paper, "What did you do with my keys?" My "boss," as my boyfriend calls her, never permitted me to close my bedroom door, and so it remains open. Getting into bed at night, I pat the mattress, though I know she won't come. Yes, it's all very sad. But how many stories does one get where one can say one did everything right?

A gift in life can be a problem in storytelling, especially when the story is about a pet. This is why I keep adding jokes. For texture. I'm trying to take my own advice. When I teach, I encourage students to find the second story. Tear up the floorboards of the first story and see what treasure lies beneath. This part they already know. They were not born yesterday, an administrative impossibility. But another tactic is to imagine the first story searching for its mate, for a wall off which to bounce. Fear not the unlikely clash. I've read solid essays that weave together, say, diabetes and tree bark. This second story will bring forth the larger story. It's why people tell cat owners, "You want the first cat to be happy? Get a second cat."

But I did not get a second cat. I got one cat.

There's a way to view these additional stories as a premature apology. As if to say: A single strain of your life has no inherent value, but perhaps you could persuade people with two. Part of this is because the more we analyze a topic like pets, the more we fawn or protest, the less trustworthy we seem as thinkers. A cat essay? In this economy?

Just this once, I want to tell the story as a dog would. To tell it straight, for her. To make her the only story. Maybe I can leave the jokes in the grass, swim naked in the pool of a hard sell. Your pet dies; it feels like a secret you've been keeping might die with her. It feels serious. Who will know everything now? Who has the keys?

Lately, I have been trying to claw some of her back, piecing together a sensory collage. This can't be healthy. Most people in my position avoid it. I have a half-dozen recordings of her purr. They are labelled "purr" for my own edification or "I live with a large hairy dove" for someone else's. Whether I knew it or not, I have been preparing, taking note of the faint snapping sound of her blinking, the weight of her head in my palm, the fur that lifted and collapsed with each stroke as she plastered herself to my lap, the height of her back so I could remember where my hand used to rest after she vanished. I have no idea what her story was about me in return. But she knew she was safe. She knew her name. ♦

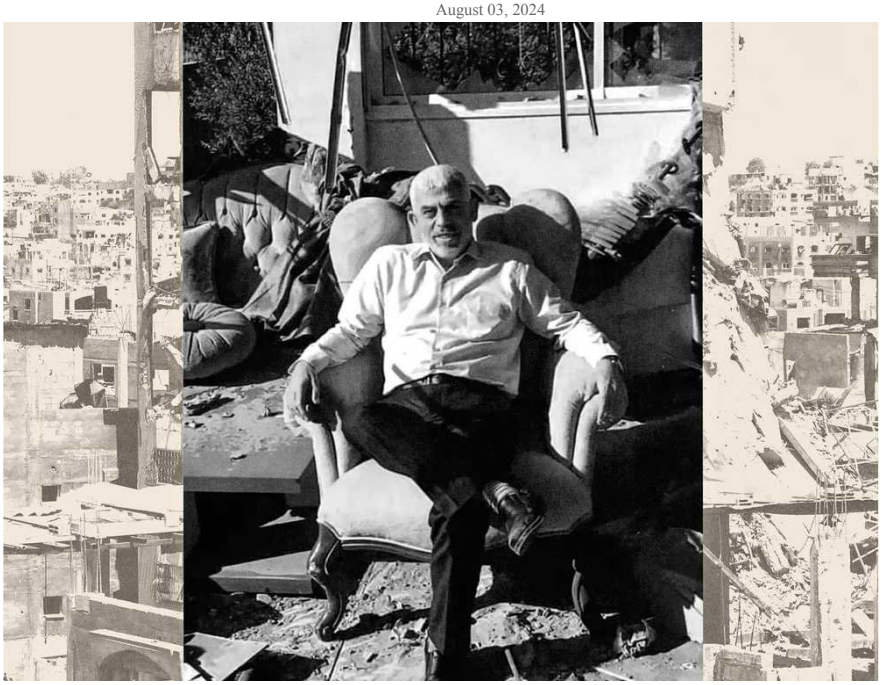
A Reporter at Large

Notes from Underground

The life of Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza.

By David Remnick

August 03, 2024



In the archives of Israel's military courts, there is a six-page document, handwritten in Hebrew, that records an interrogation of Yahya Ibrahim Hassan Sinwar, the Hamas leader in the Gaza Strip. The document, dated February 8, 1999, gives him identification number 955266978.

Sinwar was thirty-six at the time, and had been imprisoned for eleven years. Before being jailed, he had led a Hamas unit called Munazamat al-Jihad wa al-Da'wa, or the Majd—an enforcement squad that punished those who collaborated with Israel or who committed offenses against orthodox Islamic morality, including homosexuality, marital infidelity, and the possession of pornography. Sinwar was serving four life sentences in a facility in the Negev Desert for executing Palestinians accused of working with the enemy. As his interrogator, a sergeant named David Cohen, recorded, he also

admitted to another crime: the year before, he had conspired from prison to engineer the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier.

Sinwar's co-conspirator was a fellow-inmate, the Hamas commander Mohammed Sharatha. The two had become cellmates in 1997, when Sharatha was in the middle of a long sentence; as part of a Hamas security force called Unit 101, he had participated in the kidnapping and killing of two Israeli soldiers. He wasn't especially remorseful about the operation ("I did what I did, and I don't regret it," he said later), but he was troubled about something. As Sinwar wrote in a confession included in the interrogation file, "I felt that he was sad most of the time." Sharatha eventually explained the source of his despair: his sister, back in Gaza, was dishonoring the family by having an extramarital affair. Could Sinwar help find a way to have her appropriately punished? Sinwar promised to get word to his brother, Mohammed, a leading member of the Hamas military wing in Gaza. (Hamas prisoners routinely smuggled out messages through visitors.) The interrogation record notes that the deed was soon accomplished by one of Sharatha's brothers: their sister was found dead in the Strip.

Podcast: The New Yorker Radio Hour
David Remnick talks with Raja Shehadeh.

From the start, Sinwar regarded Israeli prison as an "academy," a place to learn the language, psychology, and history of the enemy. Like many other Palestinians designated as "security prisoners," he became fluent in Hebrew and consumed Israeli newspapers and radio broadcasts, along with books about Zionist theorists, politicians, and intelligence chiefs. Despite the length of his sentence, he was preparing for his release and the resumption of armed resistance.

Indeed, even in jail he continued his battle. In 1998, he and Sharatha agreed that there was little hope of winning the release of Palestinian prisoners by political means, so they devised a plan: they'd pay kidnappers on the outside to capture an Israeli soldier. In exchange for the soldier's release, they would demand the freedom of no fewer than four hundred prisoners.

But, as Sinwar told his interrogator, "soldiers had been kidnapped and killed before, and nothing was gained in return." Instead, they planned to hustle the

soldier across the border to Egypt, “so that the Israelis would not be able to free him” from his captors. Sharatha mentioned that one of his brothers, Abd al-Karim, was connected to a band of thieves who stole cars in Israel and drove them to Egypt. Maybe they could pull off the job.

Sinwar smuggled a written message to a critical figure in Gaza: the founder and spiritual leader of Hamas, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin. He asked for his blessing and for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to finance the kidnapping. Yassin agreed.

The plot, however, came undone when Israeli police picked up another of Sharatha’s brothers, Abd al-Aziz, as he was trying to cross into Egypt to lay the groundwork for the kidnapping. In the years that followed, the conspiracy was more or less forgotten. And yet to read the records of the interrogation is to shudder with a sense of what was to come. The foiled plan can easily be seen as a foreshadowing of the events that led to the current war, the bloodiest chapter in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 2006, Hamas soldiers led a cross-border raid through a tunnel from Gaza. At an Israeli military outpost near the village of Kerem Shalom, they killed two soldiers and kidnapped a third, a nineteen-year-old corporal from the Galilee named Gilad Shalit. Hamas kept Shalit captive in Gaza year after year, demanding hundreds of prisoners in return. In Israel, there were candlelight vigils and bitter debates over whether the life of just one soldier was worth freeing so many Palestinian prisoners. Shalit was finally released in 2011, in exchange for more than a thousand Palestinians—including Yahya Sinwar and Mohammed Sharatha.

Sinwar soon ascended to the leadership of Hamas in Gaza, and on October 7, 2023, together with the Hamas military leader, Mohammed Deif, he unleashed Al-Aqsa Flood, the most devastating attack on Israel in half a century. The war that followed, which has killed forty thousand Palestinians, continues to inflame the politics of the globe.

Yahya Sinwar is believed to have spent the days since October 7th in the vast network of tunnels that runs deep beneath the cities, towns, and refugee camps of the Gaza Strip. Security officials in Israel and the United States, along with independent Palestinian sources, told me they are confident that

Sinwar is alive and still a critical player in negotiations over a potential ceasefire and the release of the remaining hostages.

At first, Sinwar's underground headquarters were believed to be in the southern city of Khan Younis, where he was born; then, as the Israel Defense Forces closed in, he likely fled south to a subterranean complex in Rafah. He no longer trusts electronic communications, lest the I.D.F. detect his location and kill him. Instead, he gives notes and oral messages to trusted runners, who get them to Hamas leaders. When the I.D.F. seized Hamas's complex in Khan Younis, they eagerly distributed footage of his quarters: bathrooms with showers, an office safe overflowing with cellophane-wrapped bricks of dollars and shekels. They also released a video that they believe shows Sinwar, his wife, and their children hustling through a tunnel.

Yocheved Lifshitz, an eighty-five-year-old peace activist from Kibbutz Nir Oz, was taken hostage on October 7th. After her release, she told the Israeli newspaper *Davar* that she and other hostages had encountered Sinwar in the tunnels, a few days after they arrived. "I asked him how he wasn't ashamed to do something like this to people who have supported peace all these years," she said. "He didn't answer us. He was silent." Oded Lifshitz, Yocheved's eighty-four-year-old husband, remains in captivity. It is not known whether he is still alive. Adina Moshe, another hostage who was

released, also recalled her encounters with Sinwar in the tunnels. “He’s short, you know? All his guards were taller than him,” she told Channel 12. “It was ridiculous to see him like that. . . . He stood there. No one responded. ‘Shalom! How are you? Everything O.K.?’ We all looked down. He came twice, about three weeks apart. Each time, it was ‘Shalom! How are you?’ No one responds, and he leaves.”

From the start of the bombardment of Gaza, the Israeli war cabinet has referred to Sinwar and his chief lieutenants as “dead men walking.” Many of the military commanders and political leaders of Hamas have been killed. The Israeli military effort is unrelenting. On July 13th, the Air Force struck a Hamas compound in Al-Mawasi, west of Khan Younis, where Israel intelligence had determined that Deif was meeting with another Hamas leader. Deif, who is said to be responsible for hundreds of Israeli deaths over the years, had previously proved so elusive that the journalist Anshel Pfeffer dubbed him the “Scarlet Pimpernel” of Hamas, “a phantom hero of the resistance.” After the strike, the I.D.F. announced that Deif was dead. Hamas has not confirmed this. What is beyond dispute is that the attack—near a site where thousands of displaced Palestinians were living in tents—killed ninety other people, half of whom were women and children, according to the Gaza Ministry of Health. On July 31st, Iranian authorities announced that Israel had assassinated Ismail Haniyeh, the leader of the Hamas politburo. The *Times* reported that a bomb had been smuggled into the guesthouse in Tehran where Haniyeh was staying—an act that threatens an even wider conflagration in the Middle East.

Sinwar’s image—close-cut gray hair and beard, protruding ears, a penetrating gaze—is known to nearly every Israeli and Palestinian. One image in particular: in 2021, after eleven days of fighting against the Israelis, Sinwar had his photograph taken sitting in an armchair, legs crossed, flashing a rare, defiant smile. He is surrounded by rubble that was once his house. Soon, on social media, many other Gazans appeared sitting on chairs outside their own pulverized homes.

Until 1948, Sinwar’s parents and grandparents lived in Al-Majdal, a town north of Gaza now known as Ashkelon. During the war against the newborn state of Israel—a period of suffering and displacement known in Arabic as the Nakba, or “catastrophe”—the family fled south and into the Gaza Strip.

Born in 1962, Sinwar grew up in a large family in the Khan Younis refugee camp.

A depiction of the political and emotional landscape of Sinwar's youth can be found in an autobiographical novel that he wrote in 2004, while still in prison, called "Al-Shawk wa'l Qurunful" (translated as "The Thorn and the Carnation"). Fellow-prisoners "worked like ants" to smuggle out his manuscript and "bring it into the light," according to the preface. Last December, Amazon began offering an English translation. The promotional copy promised that the novel would provide readers a rare opportunity to "traverse the corridors of [Sinwar's] mind, possibly where the seeds for the 'Flood of Al-Aqsa' operation . . . were sown." Amazon removed the book after several pro-Israel groups took offense and warned Jeff Bezos that selling it could be a violation of British and U.S. antiterrorism laws, but it's still possible to find a digital copy online.

Sinwar's fictive depiction of his life in Gaza makes the novels of Soviet socialist realism seem as fluid and fanciful as "Don Quixote." The book is a stolid, schematic bildungsroman, but it is revealing in the way Sinwar intends: as a portrait of Palestinian life and the armed resistance.

The story begins in June, 1967, during what became known as the Six-Day War. Ahmad, the young narrator and Sinwar's alter ego, has taken shelter with his family from the fighting between Egypt and Israel, which they believe will end with the liberation of Palestine. But it's soon clear to Ahmad that the Israelis will prevail. Commentators on the Voice of the Arabs radio station had been gleefully issuing statements about "throwing the Jews into the sea"; now their tone is mournful. The Israelis have seized Gaza and Sinai from Egypt; the Golan Heights from Syria; and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, from Jordan. In Israel, there is euphoria. In Ahmad's world, there is grief, shame, humiliation: "Our dreams of returning to our homelands from which we were exiled began to crumble like the sandcastles we used to build as children." Ahmad's father is believed dead in the fighting. His mother, a stoic figure of pious nobility, is left to hold the family together.

Against a backdrop of increasing repression, Ahmad and his school friends play Arabs and Jews, instead of cowboys and Indians. The Israeli Army

dominates the Strip. There are curfews, interrogations, arrests, soldiers storming into houses and harassing people at will. In retaliation, Palestinians hurl stones and Molotov cocktails. Just as Ahmad is clearly meant to represent the author, his family members are cutouts for the various resistance factions: one is a Marxist, one a nationalist, one an ardent Islamist. His nationalist brother argues that a compromise with the Israelis is possible: two states for two peoples. An Islamist cousin cannot countenance a Jewish presence on the *waqf*, the God-given Muslim lands stretching from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. Eventually, Ahmad, too, will become an Islamist.

On October 6, 1973, a radio blares the news that another war has broken out. The Egyptians and Syrians, intent on avenging the humiliating loss of 1967, have taken the Israelis by surprise on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur, fuelling more "dreams of victory and return." But after several days these hopes are dashed. Four years later, when the Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat makes his historic visit to Jerusalem and announces to the members of the Knesset, Israel's parliament, that he is ready for peace, Ahmad describes the moment as a "catastrophe," a betrayal of the Palestinian cause.

Every interaction with Israelis, Ahmad concludes, is either violent or morally reprehensible. The Gazan men who find work inside the Green Line, in Israeli cities, invariably indulge in the libertine pleasures of Tel Aviv. Some take up with Jewish women. But when those affairs end and the men return to their old lives in Gaza, they are fallen souls. One of Ahmad's cousins, Hassan, comes home after such a misadventure, and Ahmad sees that "he had become more like the Jews than his own people." Ahmad's pious cousin Ibrahim insists that Hassan must be killed. Ahmad suggests instead "that we ambush Hassan and break his legs so he would remain bedridden in that house and stop harming others."

Ahmad feels a deepening connection to the Islamic youth groups flourishing in Gaza. One day, he and some fellow-students go on a field trip into Israel. They pass the ruins of mosques and villages that were once Palestinian and finally reach the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in Jerusalem, one of the holiest sites in Islam. "A shiver ran through my body," Ahmad recounts. On the way back home, he thinks about yet another site, the pulpit of Salah al-Din—the twelfth-century Muslim hero who defeated the Crusaders—which was

destroyed by a Christian arsonist, in 1969. Ahmad thinks about the "sinful Jewish hands" that rule Jerusalem and asks, "Is there a Salah al-Din for this era?"

In the novel, Ahmad is transformed by an encounter with a sheikh whom he describes as a spiritual and political mentor. When Sinwar was a young man, he met Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, who at the time was one of the most influential Islamist leaders in Gaza. Yassin, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was a figure of unlikely charisma. He was confined to a wheelchair, the result of a spinal injury that he suffered in a sporting accident as a boy, and he spoke in a high-pitched voice. Yet he built a fervent following. In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, as the founder of Mujama al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Center, he established mosques, youth groups, schools, and clinics. In 1984, he was arrested for amassing weapons. "Sheikh Yassin was a genius," David Hacham, a retired I.D.F. colonel who spent eight years in Gaza and advised seven Israeli defense ministers on Arab affairs, told me. "I met him dozens of times. When you saw him, you saw a tiny, paralyzed guy. He hardly moved, but his mind was always working."

In the eighties, while the leadership of the Palestine Liberation Organization was operating out of Tunisia, Yassin was able to appeal directly to people, particularly young Gazans disenchanted with their lot and hungry for guidance. Sinwar, who studied Arabic at the Islamic University of Gaza, grew increasingly close to Yassin, eventually becoming an aide-de-camp.

In December, 1987, a spontaneous uprising began in Gaza—and then throughout the West Bank—that came to be known as the first intifada, or "shaking off." It was sparked after an Israeli vehicle struck and killed four Gazan men as they returned home from their daily work in Israel. Many young Palestinians were convinced that the accident had been a deliberate act of aggression, and went into the streets, hurling stones and setting tires ablaze.

The day after the incident, Yassin assembled a group of associates in a modest house in the Al-Shati refugee camp, in Gaza City, and, after long and feverish discussions, they founded Hamas as an Islamist alternative to the P.L.O. By that summer, Hamas had issued a charter, complete with a stated

determination to eradicate Israel and "the Nazism of the Jews." The charter's description of Jewish history was filled with familiar antisemitic conspiracy theories about a plot for global domination lifted from the tsarist-era text "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion."

Hamas, from the start, was dedicated to jihad—a struggle that was both spiritual and military. According to Tareq Baconi, the author of "Hamas Contained," "Waging jihad was understood as a way of being, as existing in a state of war or espousing a belligerent relationship with the enemy." To establish internal discipline and moral rectitude, Yassin set up the Majd and selected Yahya Sinwar to help lead it. Sinwar, who handled southern Gaza for the Majd, reportedly carried out his duties with icy efficiency and without a trace of regret. "He saw murder victims as people who needed to die," a Shin Bet interrogator who had questioned Sinwar told *Haaretz*. "He brutally murdered a barber. Why? Because there was a rumor that the man had obscene material in the barbershop that he sometimes showed his clients quietly, behind a curtain."

But Sinwar's main responsibility was enforcing loyalty and punishing disloyalty. Zaki Chehab, a journalist who grew up in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, writes in his book "Inside Hamas" that Yassin's instructions were specific: "Any Palestinian informer who confesses to cooperating with the Israeli authorities—kill him straight away." Hacham told me that Sinwar's mission was to torture collaborators and intimidate anyone in the community thinking about working with the Israelis. "He used to do it in the cruellest manner," he said. "He would drip boiling oil on people's heads to get them to confess to collaboration. People were terrified of him." Michael Koubi, a former officer in the Israeli security services who interrogated Sinwar in prison, told me that he was the coldest man he had ever encountered. "He described to me very precisely how he killed people," Koubi said. "He took out a machete and cut off their heads. He put one suspected collaborator in a grave and buried him alive."

Decapitations, boiling oil—it is hard to confirm such lurid stories about Sinwar, and certainly Hamas refuses to credit them. But, as a 2009 Amnesty International report published after one of the I.D.F.'s operations in Gaza noted, men and women suspected of working as informants for the Israelis were routinely abducted, tortured, executed, and "dumped . . . in isolated

areas, or found in the morgue of one of Gaza's hospitals." And Israel has indeed recruited thousands of Palestinian collaborators to provide intelligence, including the whereabouts of Hamas leaders. Yassin was killed in an Israeli air strike in March, 2004. Just a month later, his successor, Abdel-Aziz al-Rantisi, met the same fate.

After Sinwar was arrested and sent to prison, in 1988, he betrayed no fear of his jailers. The Shin Bet interrogator recalled Sinwar telling him, "You know that one day you will be the one under interrogation, and I will stand here as the government, as the interrogator." After October 7th, the official said, "If I lived in a community near the Gaza Strip, I might have found myself in a tunnel, opposite that man. I absolutely remember how he said it to me, as a promise, his eyes red. How did he put it? 'Our roles will be reversed. The world will turn upside down for you.' "

Hamas leaders and supporters insist that the Israelis require an outsized villain, and so they've made one of Sinwar. Resistance groups, like the Irish Republican Army, have always punished collaborators as a necessity of war, they argue. When I asked Basem Naim, a member of Hamas's leadership, about Sinwar's nickname among Israeli authorities—the Butcher of Khan Younis—he told me, "I think this is nonsense. That is the first time I have ever heard this."

Khaled Hroub, a Palestinian who has written two books about Hamas, told me that, although Sinwar is widely respected as a "great organizer," the talk of ruthlessness hasn't been proved. "Before October 7th, I hadn't heard all these terrible stories," Hroub said. "I had heard some. I think some of these stories came about to complete this image of Sinwar the villain. He is decisive, that is true, and maybe people started to extrapolate from that and spice it up."

Gershon Baskin, a columnist and a peace activist who has sometimes acted as a civilian liaison with Hamas leaders, particularly in prisoner-exchange negotiations, cautioned me, "All these Israeli experts and Shin Bet people and interrogators will tell you that they know exactly what Sinwar knows and believes. But they can't know. The dynamic of a meeting with someone who is your prisoner is obviously fraught." And yet, he allowed, we do know a fair amount about Sinwar: "During *COVID*, he talked about how it

would be a terrible thing if he died of *COVID* and didn't get a chance to be a martyr and kill a lot of the enemy at the same time."

Yuval Bitton, a retired dentist in his late fifties, is a tall, slouchy man with a mournful aspect. His English is good, but not as fluent as his Arabic (his parents were immigrants from Morocco) or his Romanian (he studied in Bucharest). He lives in a bungalow in Kibbutz Shoval, a short drive from Gaza. His refrigerator and shelves are covered with snapshots of his three children. On a broiling morning, he flicked on the air-conditioner and set out coffee and cookies.

Bitton grew up in Beersheba, in southern Israel. In 1996, after a brief career in private practice, he accepted an offer to work at the dental clinics of two prisons in the Negev. He found himself treating members of Hamas, Fatah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, who had been imprisoned for various terror-related crimes. Sinwar was among them.

At first, the number of security prisoners was relatively modest; hundreds had been released as part of the Oslo peace accords between Israel and the P.L.O. Those who remained were considered some of the most hard-core—prisoners, as the authorities put it, "with Jewish blood on their hands." But the second intifada, which began in 2000, brought a brutal wave of suicide

bombings and Israeli incursions into Palestinian cities and towns, and there was a sharp increase in arrests. “The prisoners retained the structure of the organizations they came from,” Bitton said. “If it was Hamas, they lived together as a group, Fatah with Fatah. They retained a semi-military life. And they were very tough.” Prisoners held periodic leadership ballots, and, in 2004, Sinwar became the “emir” of the Hamas prisoners.

The security prisoners, Bitton recalled, were in their cells for more than twenty hours a day. The Hamas prisoners were particularly ascetic, assembling for the “count”—roll call—at 5 *a.m.* and then doing their morning prayers. During brief exercise periods, Sinwar jogged and jumped rope. Bitton took note of Sinwar’s steeliness and remove, his refusal to speak personally with his jailers, his pitiless way of enforcing discipline among the other Hamas prisoners. In the years to come, Bitton spent hundreds of hours talking with Sinwar, who seemed to have little interest in concealing his past or his intentions for the future. When Bitton asked him whether achieving his goals was worth the lives of many innocent people, Israelis and Palestinians, Sinwar replied, “We are ready to sacrifice twenty thousand, thirty thousand, a hundred thousand.”

Bitton’s account, which he has provided to many visitors, did not much differ from those of the Palestinians I spoke with. Mkhaimar Abusada, a political scientist at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, told me, “To be from a refugee camp is not unique in Gaza. That’s where most of us are from. What made Sinwar who he is was two things. First, once you kill someone, it’s easier the second and third times. Sinwar was acquainted with killing, with executions. He killed Palestinian collaborators during the first intifada. Second, his life in Israeli jails made a lasting imprint on his personality. He became a leader there.” For Palestinian prisoners, he added, jail is “not about serving time—it’s about learning about Israeli society, becoming fit, holding small discussion groups.”

Basem Naim, the Hamas leader, put it this way: “Anyone who is arrested and imprisoned, from the first day will face two choices—either to continue complaining about why he is here and about those who brought him to this station in his life, to jail, or to accept it as a fact in his life and to try to make the best out of this new situation. Sinwar was one of those who chose the second option. He set out to convert this challenge into an opportunity.”

In a meticulous hand, Sinwar took notes on his reading, filling thousands of pages in journals. “Prison builds you,” he told an interviewer years later. “Especially if you are Palestinian, because you live amid checkpoints, walls, restrictions of all kinds. Only in prison do you finally meet other Palestinians, and you have time for talking. [You’re] thinking about yourself, too. About what you believe in, the price you are willing to pay.”

Ehud Yaari, a journalist known for decades in Israel as an expert in Middle Eastern politics, visited a number of Palestinian security prisoners, including Sinwar. In their first encounter, Yaari began speaking in Arabic.

“No, speak Hebrew,” Sinwar told him. “You speak better Hebrew than the wardens.” Sinwar had seen Yaari on Israeli television and presumably wanted to learn from him.

“He is a straightforward man, no nonsense, no rhetoric, to the point, very calculated, clearly cunning,” Yaari told me. The prisoners had permission to buy food in the canteen and cook in their cells. Sinwar invited Yaari to eat with him. “In the best Arab tradition, he would feed you,” Yaari recalled. But the warmth stopped there.

In the early two-thousands, Sinwar was transferred to Wing No. 4, a high-security area of Beersheba prison, along with other leaders of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and Fatah, the largest component of the P.L.O. Bitton, an observant professional, quickly figured out how to tell Hamas men from Fatah members: their teeth were better. Hamas is a very religious outfit; its members don’t smoke, and they are careful about what they eat. Even in prison, they were fastidious about their habits, retiring at 9 or 10 *p.m.*; many of the Fatah men stayed up late, smoking, gossiping, watching television.

In addition to being a dentist, Bitton had trained in Romania in general medicine, and he sometimes assisted the prison physicians. One afternoon in 2004, at the clinic, he saw Sinwar, who was experiencing severe pain in the back of his neck. At first, Sinwar did not recognize him, and then he said that he had lost his balance when getting up from prayer. Bitton thought that he might be suffering from a stroke, and expressed alarm to his doctors. Sinwar was sent to the Soroka Medical Center, where he underwent emergency brain surgery to remove a potentially fatal growth. A few days

later, Bitton stopped by the hospital to see Sinwar. “He said that he owed his life to me,” Bitton recalled.

Bitton said that he helped broker an interview between Sinwar and Yoram Binur, a correspondent for Israeli television, in which Sinwar acknowledged Israeli’s military strength and held out the possibility of a *hudna*, a truce that could last a generation. After the interview, Sinwar told Bitton he was confident that Israel could not count on its strength forever; it was innately fragile. Fissures between the country’s religious and secular populations would deepen. “After twenty years, you will become weak,” Sinwar said, “and I will attack you.”

While filling cavities, Bitton could engage inmates on everything from prison conditions to matters of politics. In 2007, he accepted an offer to become a full-time prison intelligence officer. In this new position, he spent his days at Ketziot, a large and notoriously harsh prison in the Negev.

Around 2009, Bitton recalled, Sinwar got heavily involved in the negotiations surrounding Gilad Shalit, the Israeli soldier who had been kidnapped three years earlier and was being held hostage in Gaza. The Israelis were prepared to give up hundreds of Hamas and Fatah prisoners in exchange, but they were reluctant to free anyone convicted of killing Israelis after the start of the second intifada. Sinwar was almost certain to be among those released. “After all,” Bitton said, “he did not have Jewish blood on his hands”—only Palestinian blood.

It soon became clear that Sinwar was a maximalist voice in the talks, insisting that even those who perpetrated the most serious crimes be released. Bitton, who was also involved in the negotiations, heard from a West Bank Hamas leader named Saleh al-Arouri that Sinwar was holding up the talks. Eventually, Sinwar was stashed in solitary confinement so that the deal could be completed without him.

On October 18, 2011, Sinwar was one of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners loaded onto buses headed to Gaza and the West Bank. Nearly everyone in the Hamas leadership knew that Israel was paying an immense price for Shalit. Ahmed al-Jabari, a leader of the group’s military wing, told the

newspaper *Al-Hayat* that the prisoners were collectively responsible for the deaths of five hundred and sixty-nine Israelis.

Bitton thought that releasing Sinwar was a terrible idea, one that would come back to haunt Israel. Before the buses left, Israeli security officials demanded that prisoners sign statements promising never to engage in terrorist acts again. The lower-ranking members of Hamas signed. Sinwar refused.

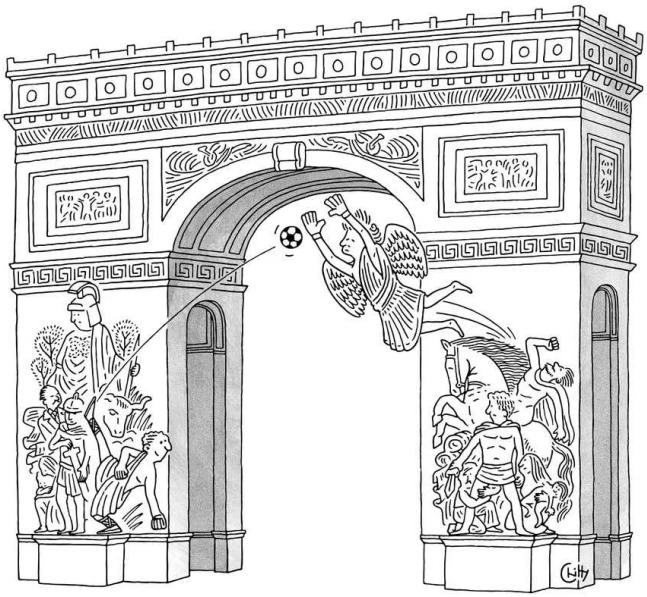
As a young man, Sinwar used to say that he had no need of a wife; he was married to the Palestinian cause. But within a month of his release, according to *Yedioth Ahronoth*, he married a woman eighteen years his junior named Samar. Raised in a relatively affluent and pious family from Gaza City that was known for its support of the Palestinian resistance, she had earned a master's degree in religion at the Islamic University of Gaza. Sinwar did not find his bride on his own. His sisters selected her while he was on a pilgrimage to the holy sites of Saudi Arabia. Samar wears a traditional niqab to cover her face. She and Sinwar have three children.

By 2007, Hamas had displaced the Palestinian Authority as the dominant political presence in Gaza—first through legislative elections, then by prevailing in a deadly civil war. Sinwar's reputation as a prison leader catapulted him to the highest ranks of Hamas almost as soon as he returned. He became a critical decision-maker in the Strip and was in frequent contact with Ismail Haniyeh, who at the time was Hamas's chief political leader in Gaza; Mohammed Deif, the military commander; and important foreign allies, including the leaders of Hezbollah, in Lebanon. In 2012, he travelled to Tehran to consult with General Qassem Suleimani, the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force.

Sinwar also remained involved in the sanctioning of collaborators. In 2015, he led an effort to punish a Hamas commander named Mahmoud Ishtiwi, who was suspected of embezzlement and homosexuality and was thus susceptible to being compromised. Khaled Meshal, who was then Hamas's primary political leader, reportedly tried to de-escalate the situation, but Sinwar was unrelenting. Ishtiwi's relatives say that he was suspended from a ceiling and whipped for days. "I went through torture that no one has gone through in Palestine, not by the Palestinian Authority, not even at the hands

of the Jews, but by Hamas internal security," Ishtiwi wrote, according to documents that the I.D.F. claims it found in Gaza during the current war and that were excerpted in *Haaretz*. Ishtiwi was convicted by a religious court and sentenced to death. He wrote a final letter to his wife: "I ask to die at your feet as I kiss them." These words were a reference to a quotation from the Prophet Muhammad: "Paradise is at the feet of mothers."

Hamas has four centers of authority—Gaza, the West Bank, the diaspora, and the prisons—and a ruling politburo that makes policy. In 2017, Haniyeh was elevated to the head of the politburo, and Sinwar was elected as the over-all chief of Hamas in Gaza. In the early years of his reign, Sinwar sometimes presented a more nuanced view of Hamas ideology. He persisted in the language of resistance and the claim that Israel was an alien Jewish entity on land bequeathed to Islam. And yet, at moments, he hinted at compromise.



In 2018, an Italian journalist named Francesca Borri visited Gaza and arranged to interview Sinwar. Borri told me that Sinwar wanted to send a message that he favored "quiet for quiet," a pause in the armed hostilities with Israel. "The truth is that a new war is in no one's interest," he told Borri. "For sure, it's not in ours. Who would like to face a nuclear power with slingshots?"

Sinwar praised the "brilliant" young people of Gaza, who managed to be inventive despite Israel's draconian control. "With old fax machines and old computers, a group of twentysomethings assembled a 3-D printer to produce the medical equipment that is barred from entry," he told Borri. "That's Gaza. We are not only destitution and barefoot children. We can be like Singapore, like Dubai. And let's make time work for us. Heal our wounds." He also said that the Jews had once been "people like Freud, Einstein, Kafka. Experts in mathematics and philosophy. Now they are experts in drones and extrajudicial executions."

When Borri asked Sinwar to compare his life in jail with his life as a leader in Gaza, he said, "I have only changed prisons. And, despite it all, the old one was much better than this one. I had water, electricity. I had so many books. Gaza is much tougher."

In the years that followed, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, put in place what is now widely known as the "conception," a set of tactics intended to contain Hamas while weakening the Palestinian Authority, in the West Bank, and stifling any talk of peace negotiations. He allowed Qatar to funnel billions of dollars into Gaza, supposedly for civic projects and governance, even though he knew that Sinwar was siphoning much of the money to buy arms and expand the "Gaza metro," the system of tunnels and bunkers.

Over time, Sinwar and the rest of the Hamas leadership lost faith that there would be any progress with Israel. After the second intifada, the Israeli political establishment, especially under Netanyahu, became increasingly brazen in its contempt for Palestinian interests, talking about annexing the West Bank. The Trump Administration, led by Jared Kushner, helped draft the Abraham Accords, which aimed to normalize relations between Israel and the Sunni-ruled states, particularly Saudi Arabia, sidelining the Palestinians yet again.

Sinwar's rhetoric began to darken. In 2019, he talked about the "traps" that Hamas had set in its tunnels. If the Israelis made any "stupid mistakes," he said, "we will crush Tel Aviv." He even declared, "The script is there, and the rehearsal has been completed. Gaza will burst with the full force of its resistance, and the West Bank will explode with all its power. Our people

will attack all the settlements at once." Eventually, he spoke of dispatching "ten thousand martyrdom-seekers" to Israel if Al-Aqsa was harmed, of igniting fires in Israeli forests, of "the eradication of Israel through armed jihad and struggle."

I had not read much of any depth about Sinwar's evolution until June, 2021, when I came across a long piece in *Haaretz* by Yaniv Kubovich, reporting that the Israeli security establishment had revised its understanding of Sinwar. Kubovich's sources noted that Sinwar had dispensed with his "former pragmatism" and "relative humility" in favor of more aggressive military tactics and a messianic style of leadership. The shift seemed to come about not just because the Israelis were ignoring the Palestinian issue but also because Sinwar had endured a startlingly close reëlection race that year. The analysts concluded that Sinwar felt he was "paying a price" for his tacit arrangements with the Israelis.

Kubovich's sources told him that Sinwar was now a more vivid presence on the streets, meeting frequently with ordinary residents. The sources were struck by how people reached out to touch him, how they hung photographs of him. "Sinwar is turning himself into a spiritual figure," one told Kubovich. "He is trying to create myths around himself and to talk about himself as someone chosen by God to fight for Jerusalem on behalf of the Muslims."

In May, 2021, fighting broke out between Hamas and Israel after Israeli police raided the Al-Aqsa Mosque, amid protests against the looming eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah. In eleven days, Gazan forces killed roughly a dozen Israelis, whereas the I.D.F. killed two hundred and sixty Palestinians. The Israeli security establishment concluded that Sinwar, at least in his own mind, was no longer merely a Palestinian leader. He was now a leader of the Arabs, "instructed by God to protect Jerusalem and Al-Aqsa." He began saying that the biggest gift Israel could give him would be to make him a martyr on a grand scale. "I'm leaving now by car, heading home," he said. "They know where I live—I'm waiting for them."

There were many Hamas speeches and public meetings prior to October 7th that should have instilled a heightened sense of alarm in the Netanyahu

government. One took place on September 30, 2021, at the Commodore Hotel in Gaza City, at a conference called "Promise of the Hereafter: Post-Liberation Palestine." The purpose of the discussions, according to accounts by *Haaretz* and the Middle East Media Research Institute, was to prepare for a future after "liberation"—that is, after the State of Israel "disappears."

The conference attendees called for a declaration of independence that would be a "direct continuation" of two earlier proclamations: one drawn up after Caliph Umar took control of Jerusalem from the Byzantines, in the seventh century, and one from after Salah al-Din defeated the Crusaders and liberated the Al-Aqsa Mosque, in the twelfth century. Sinwar did not attend the proceeding, but sent a representative to assure his allies that "victory is nigh."

The plans discussed at the Commodore Hotel were precise. Hamas had compiled a "registry" of Israeli apartments, educational institutions, power stations, sewage systems, and gas stations, all of which it intended to seize. Shekels would be changed into "gold, dollars, or dinars." The plans sorted out Hamas's intentions toward the existing Jewish population, deciding who would be prosecuted or killed, who would be permitted to leave or to integrate into the new state. The delegates were particularly concerned with "preventing a brain drain" of "educated Jews and experts in the areas of medicine, engineering, technology, and civilian and military industry." Such people "should not be allowed to leave and take with them the knowledge and experience that they acquired while living in our land and enjoying its bounty, while we paid the price for all this in humiliation, poverty, sickness, deprivation, killing, and arrests."

Shlomi Eldar, an Israeli journalist with myriad sources in Gaza and the West Bank, told me, "The conference was serious, because the Hamas leadership stopped thinking logically and began thinking religiously. When you think that you have been chosen by God to carry out his mission, you believe everything is possible."

Sinwar not only blessed the conference but also praised the way armed struggle had been celebrated in Gazan pop culture. In May, 2022, he gave a speech lauding "Fist of the Free," a television series that aired on Al-Aqsa, a Hamas-sponsored station. The show was advertised as a kind of answer to

“Fauda,” an Israeli series that features brave but tenderhearted commandos who carry out daring operations in the West Bank and Gaza. In “Fist of the Free,” Hamas soldiers repel an Israeli invasion of Gaza and win glorious victories of counterattack, storming military outposts across the fence and taking hostages. The series, Sinwar said, “has a great impact on the struggle of our martyrs and their jihad and their preparation for the path of liberation and return.”

Of course, history played backward can take on a devotional clarity. In December, 2022, at the annual commemoration of the founding of Hamas, the organization invoked the phrase “We are coming with a roaring flood.” Mkhaimar Abusada, the scholar from Al-Azhar University, dismissed such talk as a “big joke” in those days. “They’ve talked about this for a long time, the destruction of Israel and liberation from the river to the sea,” he said. “But as a political scientist I thought this was just to keep the Palestinian people busy with fantasies.” Yet there were other signs, too. Around that time, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a smaller but no less violent resistance group, launched rockets at Israel. Hamas chose not to join the fight, putting out the word that it was holding fire for a more consequential battle.

Samer Sinijlawi, a Fatah politician in East Jerusalem, told me, “Sinwar did everything possible to prepare, and he talked about it openly, but nobody believed it.” He added, “Israel went to sleep on October 6th and thought there is a cat sleeping in Gaza. They woke up the next morning only to discover a dinosaur there.”

At 6:43 *a.m.* on October 7th, Avi Rosenfeld, a brigadier general who led the I.D.F.’s 143rd Division—the Gaza Division—sent out an urgent military communication: “The Philistines have invaded.”

The reference was well understood. In the Iron Age, the Philistines, the sworn enemies of the Israelites, settled near what is now the Gaza Strip. As recounted in the Book of Samuel, the conflict reached a state of emergency when a messenger came to Saul, the first king of Israel, and alerted him, “Hurry and come, for the Philistines have invaded the land!” Saul’s army fell to the Philistines. Rosenfeld’s coded call to arms proved futile. Netanyahu and his security leaders had dismissed repeated warnings of an attack, and, when it came, the region near Gaza was nearly defenseless.

Hamas's overarching determination to carry out a major military operation was made collectively, by its leaders in Gaza, the West Bank, Israeli prisons, and the diaspora. Yet the raid's planning and execution were largely in the hands of Yahya Sinwar, along with Mohammed Deif. Haniyeh, the politburo chairman, who was living in Qatar, had little influence on the specifics. As Basem Naim, the Hamas leader, told me, "The operational decisions were all made by the military wing in Gaza. We don't interfere in the timing and the tactics."

Sinwar's planning reflected his acute awareness of Israel and its history. The day of the assault was both Shabbat and Simchat Torah, the last of a series of important holidays in the fall. It was also the fiftieth anniversary of the surprise Yom Kippur attack, and Israel was immersed in a prolonged and melancholic period of self-reflection. Young Israelis read accounts of how Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, and other leaders had minimized intelligence reports that an attack was imminent. The assault on Sinai and Golan came on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, when the nation is entirely shut down. In the first days of fighting, Israel suffered such heavy losses that there were fears that the state itself would be destroyed.

Yet no event in the seventy-five-year history of Israel had undermined the nation's sense of security and military superiority like Sinwar's attack did. After launching an unprecedented barrage of missiles toward Israel and using a variety of weapons—drones, R.P.G.s—to "blind" its communications and surveillance systems, Sinwar's men broke through the border fence at sixty different places. Thousands of Hamas-led soldiers poured into southern Israel, with orders to kill and kidnap as many soldiers and civilians as possible. After them came ordinary Gazans—some armed, some not—killing, kidnapping, looting, and, always, filming. It would later be revealed that Israeli intelligence had long been in possession of a Hamas war plan known as Jericho Wall, a near-exact map of the events of October 7th. Sinwar had even sent a clandestine message to the Israelis a few weeks beforehand, warning them to expect a flareup in the prisons. The message, according to Channel 12, circulated in the highest ranks of the Mossad, Shin Bet, and the I.D.F.; both Netanyahu and the defense minister, Yoav Gallant, were "updated." Yet when Israeli military leaders got word, shortly after 3 *a.m.* on the day of the attack, that Hamas soldiers were

undertaking maneuvers, the commanders concluded that they were likely just exercises.

In fact, most Gazans could never have envisioned such an assault. “This was beyond imagination,” Abusada, the political scientist, told me. “Maybe Hezbollah could imagine something like this. But Hamas has been under siege for seventeen years. We never thought that any kind of group was capable of killing and kidnapping this many Israelis.”

Although Netanyahu has resisted any apology or accountability for his role in the collapse, there have been some resignations in the security establishment. Rosenfeld, the general who sent out the call about the Philistines, stepped down in June, saying that he had “failed in my life’s mission” of keeping the region around Gaza secure. Aharon Haliva, the head of military intelligence, resigned in April. In a letter admitting his failure and the failure of the “directorate under my command,” he said, “I have carried that black day with me ever since, day after day, night after night.” It is assumed that there will be many more resignations when the war is finally over and there is a full government investigation, as there was after the Yom Kippur War.

One afternoon, north of Tel Aviv, I met with Michael Milshtein, a highly regarded analyst who worked for twenty years in military intelligence; his last position, before he retired, five years ago, was as head of the department of Palestinian affairs. In hindsight, Milshtein said, there were many reasons that the Israeli security establishment failed to anticipate the attack. For one thing, Israel was concentrating on threats from Iran and its proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. But neglecting to listen carefully to what Sinwar was saying publicly was particularly unforgivable. "He said, in the next war, we will initiate the fighting—and the war will be on Israeli territory, not Palestinian," Milshtein told me. "This was in open sources! Sinwar and others said it in public!" In recent years, he pointed out, Hamas had carried out extensive training, built around scenarios in which invaders swarmed kibbutzim and military bases. "The main problem was not technical," he said. "The main problem was the deep misunderstanding of the Other. It's like you look at that coffee cup and see an elephant."

Rashid Khalidi, the author of "The Hundred Years' War on Palestine," told me, "They will teach this in war colleges for a long time—how this operation was achieved, how this intelligence failure happened—much like they study Pearl Harbor or the 1973 war."

A senior Israeli security official told me that the parallel with 1973 was uncanny: the security establishment had suffered from a "vain inability to recognize that Yahya Sinwar's messianic speeches and ambitious military rehearsals had been serious." In fact, the official added, information collected by the I.D.F. suggests that Hamas had precise intelligence on the surrounding military bases and kibbutzim, and that its fighters would have gone even deeper into Israel if they had been able to.

The bloodshed and the trauma of the past ten months surpass anything in the history of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. On October 7th, about twelve hundred Israelis were killed, thousands more wounded; approximately two hundred and forty were taken hostage. Whole kibbutzim were destroyed. In the air and ground assaults that continue today, Israel has ravaged the Gaza Strip. The figure of forty thousand deaths is frequently invoked, but it will take a long time before the dead and the injured are fully accounted for. Apartment buildings, mosques, schools, hospitals, and universities have been reduced to rubble. Hundreds of thousands of Gazans

have lost their homes. The international ramifications are still unfolding: the armed exchanges between Israel and Iran, between Israel and Hezbollah, with dark forebodings of an even wider confrontation to come; the Houthi attacks on Israeli ships and even Tel Aviv; the counterattack on Yemen; the immense wave of pro-Palestine demonstrations across Europe, the U.S., and Arab capitals; the accusations of war crimes against both Israel and Hamas in the International Criminal Court; the charges of genocide against Israel. As Khalidi told me, "Something has been started that has changed everything—'changed, changed utterly,' as Yeats put it. We have never been at this level of armed resistance or this level of armed punishment in response. This is Israel's worst defeat, and at the same time this is worse, more deadly, day by day, for Palestinians than the Nakba itself."

Amos Harel, a military and political analyst for *Haaretz*, said that one of the most dispiriting aspects of the current nightmare is the way Sinwar was able to provoke the Netanyahu government into a state of horrific and ruinous fury. "The sense in Israeli society is that we are going down the drain, and Sinwar has helped drag us there," Harel told me. "When we justify things we never would have justified before, we are in the moral gutter. Words like 'revenge' used to be heard only among the Bezalel Smotrichs and the Itamar Ben-Gvirs of the world"—two particularly reactionary ministers in Netanyahu's cabinet. "Now military units and mainstream colonels are using terms like *nekama*, revenge. It's almost part of the norm now. I am not sure it was part of Sinwar's great plan, but that is where we are."

Not long after October 7th, I drove to the Israeli region known as Otef Aza, the Gaza Envelope. There were funerals taking place all over the country, many each day. One of the dead was Tamir Adar, the thirty-eight-year-old nephew of Yuval Bitton, the dentist who helped save Sinwar's life. Adar had died while defending Kibbutz Nir Oz; his killers took his body to Gaza, where it is still being held.

In the afternoon, I went to Kibbutz Be'eri. Established in 1946, Be'eri was known as a particularly old-fashioned left-wing peacenik community. Before the attack, it was a prosperous kibbutz, with twelve hundred residents and a waiting list. Now it was a scene of charred ruins, a dystopia.

Shortly after arriving, I encountered Barak Hiram, an I.D.F. brigadier general. He told me that he had been at home in Tekoa, a West Bank settlement, when he heard the news of the Hamas incursion. He headed south, and eventually led troops in Be'eri. When the fighting was over, he said, he and his men came across corpses everywhere—in the houses, under trees. Later, Hiram and other commanders would be investigated for their actions in Be'eri, including ordering a tank to fire on a house where hostages were being held; they were cleared of any violations.

"They were armed to their teeth," Hiram said of the Hamas fighters. "They had rocket launchers, R.P.G.s, a lot of Russian equipment, AK-47s, antihuman mines, claymores. They tried to booby-trap a lot of civilian bodies with hand grenades, taking out the safety pins and putting them under the body. They knew that someone would come and try to evacuate them. While we were fighting, digging into the kibbutz, trying to get to more civilians, we heard more and more shooting all around. It was a bloodbath. It was a massacre. They went from one house to another, murdering everyone."

Then the general paused and said a single word that has stayed with me: "Einsatzgruppen." These were mobile paramilitary units of the Third Reich, notorious for rounding up and slaughtering Jews, Polish clergy, Romani people—anyone in the path of the Nazi invasion.

Hiram had seen combat before, in Lebanon and Gaza. Eighteen years ago, he lost an eye in a battle with Hezbollah. But he could not fathom the brutality of what he encountered in Be'eri. He wasn't prepared to see Gaza as the Gazans do, as the site of an intolerable existence. Even before October 7th, electricity, potable water, food, and medical supplies were constantly in short supply there. The unemployment rate was more than forty per cent. Children grew up in a world of intermittent war and persistent trauma, of barbed wire and surveillance. Hiram's was a familiar Israeli narrative, though, and not only on the right: we tried to make peace; we got suicide bombers. We withdrew from Gaza; we got only rockets. And now this.

What was next? "We got our orders, and we are ready to fight and diminish Hamas and exterminate them wherever they are," Hiram said.

“Exterminate,” in reference to a small territory crowded with civilians who had nowhere to go, was as jolting as “Einsatzgruppen.”

As hostage and ceasefire negotiations dragged on for months, the fighting shifted to a new phase. The Israeli assaults have been so prolonged and ferocious that Hamas no longer has the troop strength or the command-and-control mechanisms of a competent army. What remains of its military is a diminished insurgent force, with fighters popping up from tunnels or from the rubble to shoot at Israeli soldiers.

It is not clear where Sinwar is hiding, but intelligence sources told me that he could well be back in the tunnels under Khan Younis. One reason the hostage and ceasefire negotiations are so time-consuming, they say, is that it often takes days for Sinwar’s messages to reach the negotiators in Doha or Cairo. Ehud Yaari, the Israeli journalist who visited Sinwar in prison, told me that, about four months into the war, an aide of Sinwar’s had approached him with a communication. “The main message was ‘You have done everything you can in Gaza, in terms of the destruction of Gaza and destroying Hamas capabilities and killing its personnel. There is nothing much more you can do for now,’ ” Yaari told me. “The implication was that he is not in a hurry to go for a hostage deal and strip himself of the defensive shield of hostages around him.”

Under the circumstances, the closest I could come to talking with Sinwar was to talk with one of his associates—in this case, Basem Naim, of the Hamas politburo. Naim earned a medical degree in Germany and practiced surgery at the Al-Shifa Hospital, in Gaza City. In the early days of the war, he unleashed plenty of spin in the international press, denying, for instance, that Hamas soldiers had killed any civilians at all on October 7th. (“Things went out of control,” Sinwar reportedly said in one of his messages, according to the *Wall Street Journal.* Naim blamed, variously, the other Palestinians who breached the fence that day and Israeli friendly fire.)

Like others before him, Naim began by raising the history of Gaza. “A whole generation has been losing any hope of a better future,” he said, speaking from Qatar. “We have tried through peaceful means, protests, diplomatic means to bring down the siege. But Israel was supported by the international powers, especially the U.S., and continues this aggression and

this siege on Gaza. We also have more than fifty-five hundred Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, and some of them are there for decades. So we had to go for a step to oblige Israel to negotiate this release."

The "broader context," he continued, included the approaching normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia; matters related to control of the Al-Aqsa Mosque; the expansion of settlements in the West Bank; and plans that "basically target the elimination of the Palestinians and the undermining of their cause forever."

On October 7th, Ismail Haniyeh, the head of the Hamas politburo, addressed the Jews of Israel. "Get out of our land. Get out of our sight," he said. "You are strangers in this pure and blessed land. There is no place or safety for you." Not long after that, another senior Hamas official, Ghazi Hamad, declared on Lebanese television that the existence of Israel was "illogical" and that it must be eliminated. "We must teach Israel a lesson," he said. "The Al-Aqsa Flood is just the first time, and there will be a second, a third, a fourth."

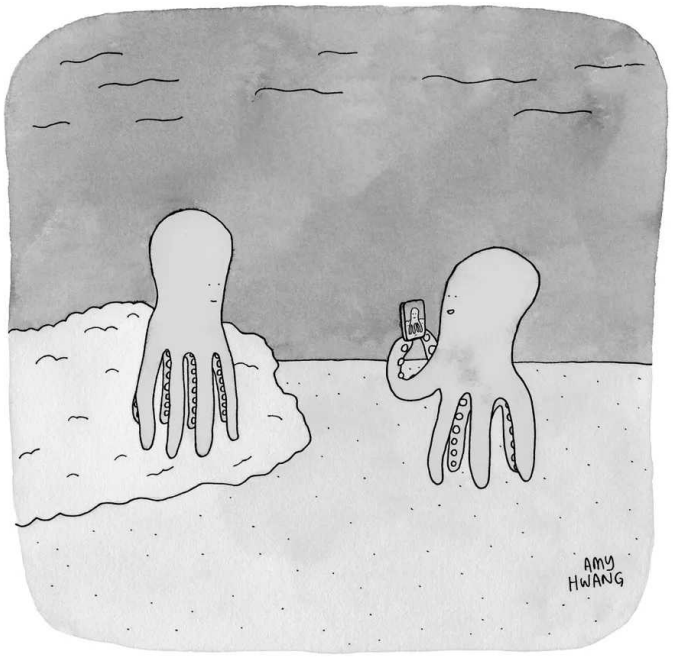
Naim's stance was more modulated in its language, but not in its intent. When I asked if Hamas would repeat such an attack, he responded, "I cannot say no." The essential issue remained, he said: ending the occupation and establishing a Palestinian state. "If we can achieve it politically, O.K., but, if not, we will do it again—maybe like October 7th, or maybe another way." He added that there were other means available to Hamas to "delegitimize the enemy: resistance in the media, peaceful protests, and armed resistance in the West Bank and Jerusalem."

Even with so many dead, with Gaza in ruins, Naim insisted that Hamas had won a great victory. Considering the gap in the "capabilities" of the two sides, he said, "the weaker party can claim victory if it is able to survive." Naim was especially gratified that the war had "undermined Israel's international reputation." His one note of disappointment was that it had not yet become a full-blown regional conflict. "We didn't consult with any other party, but, yes, we expect support from other parties," he said, measuring every word. "How much and how to do it is their decision."

One morning, I drove to East Jerusalem and met Yehuda Shaul, an Israeli peace activist, and Nathan Thrall, a former director of the Arab-Israeli project at the International Crisis Group and the author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about a Palestinian family living under occupation, “A Day in the Life of Abed Salama.”

Shaul is a garrulous, barrel-bellied raconteur in his forties. He grew up in a conservative, religious family in Jerusalem and was radicalized by his experiences in the I.D.F., particularly his months in the West Bank city of Hebron, during the second intifada. As we sat in a park near Mt. Scopus, Shaul recalled how he and his fellow-conscripts were ordered to raid Palestinian homes in the middle of the night, toss shock grenades, light fires on rooftops—a range of harassing activities known as “making our presence felt.”

Toward the end of Shaul’s service, he began gathering testimony from other soldiers about their experiences. He wrote anonymous letters to the press describing what he had seen. In 2004, he co-founded Breaking the Silence, one of a small clutch of left-leaning anti-occupation N.G.O.s in Israel.



We spent the day travelling through the West Bank, to examine how the architecture of the occupation had rendered it ever more entrenched and

impossible to dismantle. We rode in a boxy white van north toward Ramallah, with Shaul pausing to note how a cluster of settlements had been constructed to surround a Palestinian town, and to point out the scene of a recent settler attack on a Palestinian village. Shaul, who describes himself as a "two-state extremist," certainly had no sympathy for the Hamas attack, calling it "murderous." But he has also watched for years as the government kept conditions in Gaza on a "low boil," while undermining the Palestinian Authority, preventing any progress toward an accord. And now, he said, "after October 7th, the camp that opposes Israeli rule over the Palestinians based on a sense of morality and values has shrunk to maybe four per cent of Israeli Jews."

When we reached Ramallah, we called on a middle-aged Palestinian activist who'd just been released after nearly eight months in an Israeli prison. There had been no charges levelled against him; like so many others in the West Bank, he had been the subject of "administrative detention." He wasn't eager for me to reveal his name, lest he attract further attention. A young female activist, who sat nearby, had also been detained for a few weeks. While the man, whom I'll call Abdul, fixed tea in the kitchen, she told me that she had been deeply depressed by the war—she just couldn't take her eyes off the suffering she was seeing on social media—and that she'd recently dropped her legal studies. "I don't believe in law anymore," she said.

Abdul came to the living room to sit with us and several of his old friends. Some of them, too, had been detained. All of them had lost faith in the Palestinian Authority and saw Hamas as the only group with any sense of agency. "To be a Palestinian can't be about being a victim," Abdul said. "The refugees have a right to return, not because they are victims in a refugee camp but because they are human beings."

Shaul, who has known Abdul for a long time, remarked on how much weight he'd lost in prison—more than thirty pounds. "I didn't have anything left to lose," Abdul said, patting his vanished gut.

He sketched out the conditions in the Israeli jail: a two-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot cell for eleven men, a small window, a toilet, a primitive shower, just a tiny opening in the door. So little air that they often grew faint. He

described the daily rations, typically a paltry serving of falafel or cold turkey with a "tiny bit of mushy, half-cooked rice."

Abdul told me that the war and his months in prison had changed him. "I have always believed in nonviolent resistance," he said. "But they say I am a terrorist anyway, that I am like Sinwar. The world talks about international law and the peace process, but we get nothing. Nothing. So how can I believe in international law and negotiation? After October 7th, we've paid a price, but we feel like we are nearer to reaching our goal."

This was hard to hear. Later, when I spoke to one of the most liberal-minded intellectuals in the West Bank, the human-rights lawyer Raja Shehadeh, he said that, when he'd first heard the news that Hamas had broken through the fence on October 7th, his reaction was celebratory, born of a sense that this was a "legitimate" act of resistance. "I thought that it'll finally make it clear for Israel that barriers and fences and wars—even the most sophisticated of wars—will not protect Israel," Shehadeh told me. Then he learned about the cruelty of the ensuing hours—the killings, the kidnappings, the sexual violence. "That is something that should not have happened," he said. "It's a criminal action."

Opinion polls reflect some displeasure with Hamas, particularly in Gaza, where the misery is so profound. "Sinwar spent twenty-odd years in jail, and the radicalization that takes place in jail can go both ways," Ibrahim Dalalsha, a political strategist in Ramallah, told me. "It can go the Nelson Mandela way, and it can go the Sinwar way."

Ghaith al-Omari, a former adviser to the Palestinian Authority who now lives in Washington, was even more critical. "Not many people end up killing people with their own hands," he said. "Sinwar is a criminal and a psychopath, someone willing to do something like October 7th. Forget the killing and kidnapping of Israelis for a moment. He knew what it would bring on his own people. You'd have to be blind not to see that."

But, judging by what I heard in Ramallah, this is now a minority position. As Abdul talked with his friends, Thrall leaned toward me and said that in the West Bank even people who have little sympathy for Hamas believe that the massacre and the global consequences of Israel's assault on Gaza have—

in a phrase I heard everywhere—"put the Palestinian issue back on the table."

Neomi Neumann, who led the research unit of Shin Bet from 2017 to 2021, told me that Sinwar had scored a great political victory by showing that Israel "could be hit hard" and by undermining its international support. The C.I.A. director, William Burns, reportedly told a closed-door meeting that, although Sinwar is concerned about being blamed by many Gazans for sparking the war and is facing pressure from other Hamas commanders to accept a ceasefire deal, he is not concerned about being killed. Palestinian and Israeli sources alike said that Sinwar almost certainly sees himself as the triumphal player in a great historical drama. As Neumann put it, "From his point of view, he is the modern-day Salah al-Din."

In Ramallah, our visit was coming to an end. Abdul said, "I may not support Hamas, but I support the struggle. We cannot go on losing and losing." There was no bottom to his quiet fury. And, like the I.D.F. general in Be'eri, he found his frame of reference in the Second World War. The Israelis, he said, were no longer the victims of Hitler: "They now seem to want to *be* Hitler. 'The most moral army in the world?' All a big lie."

As we got up to leave, I asked Abdul what he thought about Sinwar.

"Sinwar is in every home in Palestine," he said. "He is the most important Palestinian in the world." ♦

(With additional reporting by Ruth Margalit.)

Profiles

What Does Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Actually Want?

The third-party Presidential candidate has a troubled past, a shambolic campaign, and some surprisingly good poll numbers.

By Clare Malone

August 05, 2024

In December of 2021, the pollster Jeremy Zogby began designing a national survey to capture the radical changes that he believed were under way in American life nearly two years into the pandemic. Zogby, who is an avid reader of the psychologist Carl Jung, was especially curious about the kinds of people that Americans considered "heroic," and he came up with a list of archetypes. There was the spiritual leader, the Pope; the female entrepreneur, Oprah; the rogue pundit, Tucker Carlson; and the philanthropist-scientist, Bill Gates. Joe Biden and Donald Trump, as the presumptive Presidential nominees of the major parties, were also included. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the nephew of John F. Kennedy and a prominent opponent of vaccine mandates, struck Zogby as the quintessential *COVID* protester. When the

results of the poll came back, Zogby was shocked to find that Kennedy topped the list. “What it told me was that the name still meant something in the political landscape,” he said.

Zogby flew out to California, where Kennedy lives with his third wife, the actor Cheryl Hines. At the time, leaders in the anti-vaccine movement were encouraging Kennedy, who has long expressed the widely refuted belief that vaccinating children can cause autism, to consider a Presidential bid. Kennedy was skeptical. “I thought about it a little, but I just didn’t want to run if I couldn’t win,” he said. “I knew that Cheryl would never go for it.”

Kennedy was introduced to Hines by Larry David, her co-star on the HBO series “Curb Your Enthusiasm.” (David had met Kennedy through his work in the environmental movement.) In 2022, after Kennedy compared America’s *COVID*-vaccine protocols to the fascism of the Third Reich —“Even in Hitler’s Germany, you could cross the Alps into Switzerland, you could hide in an attic like Anne Frank did”—he suggested to Hines that they publicly separate in order to save her reputation in Hollywood. But Zogby’s polls showed that, “despite all the bad publicity,” Kennedy said, “I still had a lot of popular strength.” That summer, Facebook and Instagram shut down the accounts of his anti-vaccine organization, Children’s Health Defense, for spreading misinformation. Instagram had suspended his personal account a year earlier. Kennedy told me, “I started thinking, Well, the one place that they couldn’t censor me was if I was running for President.”

In April, 2023, Kennedy announced that he would be running for the Democratic nomination. It was a month before a campaign manager came on, the former Democratic congressman Dennis Kucinich. Kennedy’s campaign coördinator in New Hampshire, meanwhile, was Rhonda Rohrabacher, the wife of the former Republican congressman Dana Rohrabacher, who was once warned by the F.B.I. that the Russian government was trying to recruit him as an intelligence asset. That October, after it became clear that Kennedy wouldn’t be competitive in the Democratic primary, he declared his intention to run as an independent. “The Democrats are frightened that I’m going to spoil the election for President Biden, and the Republicans are frightened that I’m going to spoil it

for Trump," Kennedy said. "The truth is—they're both right. My intention is to spoil it for both of them."

Kennedy's views are heterodox. He inveighs against the American "war machine," opposing military aid to Ukraine, but supports Israel's war in Gaza. He is pro-choice and also wants to "seal" the southern border. On the campaign trail, he has embraced his status as an oddball and an outsider. In May, the *Times* reported that Kennedy had once testified, in a divorce deposition, that a parasitic worm had eaten part of his brain; in response, he posted on X, "I offer to eat 5 more brain worms and still beat President Trump and President Biden in a debate." When the Department of Homeland Security denied his requests for a Secret Service detail—typically, such protection is provided only to "major" candidates—the campaign made T-shirts featuring an image of Kennedy, in an airport, wearing a full suit but no shoes or socks, with the words "*NO SHIRT NO SHOES NO SECRET SERVICE.*" (In July, after Trump was nearly assassinated at a rally in Pennsylvania, Biden instructed the Secret Service to assign a team to Kennedy.)

Nationally, Kennedy's polling numbers are hovering around five per cent of the vote, and he has shown particular strength among young and Latino voters. In the battleground states of Arizona, Nevada, Georgia, and Wisconsin, all of which Biden narrowly won in 2020, Kennedy's presence carries the distinct possibility of swinging the race. "He can have an impact in any of these states, because you're looking at ten thousand to twenty thousand votes," Spencer Kimball, the director of Emerson College Polling, told me. Kennedy's approval ratings tend to be higher among Republicans, but Timothy Mellon, a billionaire who backs Trump, has given twenty-five million dollars to a Kennedy-affiliated super *PAC*—a suggestion that, in some circles at least, the Kennedy campaign has been seen as a potential spoiler for Democrats.

Kennedy's family members have been nearly unanimous in opposing his campaign. Last fall, four of his siblings released a statement calling his run "perilous for our country." In private, some have bristled at what they see as a flagrant misuse of the family's legacy. A Super Bowl spot from Kennedy's super *PAC* borrowed the ditty of his uncle's famous 1960 television ad—"a man who's old enough to know and young enough to do." (Kennedy later issued an apology: "I'm so sorry if the Super Bowl advertisement caused anyone in my family pain.") At a campaign event in Detroit this spring, the walls of the venue's lobby displayed various illustrations of Kennedy, including one of him as a knight pulling a sword from a stone labelled "Camelot." A family member who has urged Kennedy to drop out of the race told me, "He's very much running on perpetuating an unfinished Presidential campaign from 1968."

In May, I flew to Atlanta to speak with Kennedy, and we met in his suite at the St. Regis. Kennedy has the septuagenarian face that his father and his uncle never got to age into, which lends him the unsettling effect of a black-and-white photo come to life. His startlingly blue eyes contrast sharply with a shock of white hair, which he stopped dyeing a decade ago. On the trail, he favors skinny ties, often with critters on them—flamingos, bees—and gray suits, a sartorial nod to the nineteen-sixties, when his family set the standard for preppy American glamour. He has suffered from spasmodic dysphonia, a

neurological vocal-cord condition, for more than two decades, and it gives his voice a distinctive, halting rasp that he himself has said is difficult to listen to; in 2022, he travelled to Japan to have a titanium bridge inserted in his throat, a relatively niche treatment intended to mitigate vocal strain.

In Atlanta, I asked Kennedy how his family's legacy had influenced his own political aspirations. "It was realistic to think of myself in the Senate," he said. He added that his uncle Edward Kennedy, a senator from Massachusetts for forty-seven years, "had enormous fun in that job." But, when it came to the Presidency, "I think I was always conscious that it was kind of a dangerous thing to make that my ambition," he said. "I always had at least a part of me that recognized the implausibility of ever achieving that."

As we spoke, Kennedy occasionally grabbed at a fruit platter that sat on the table between us, munching first on some blueberries before going back for a slice of watermelon. Running for President, he said, presented "the danger of hubris and arrogance."

Two weeks earlier, I had driven to a public library in North Kingstown, Rhode Island, to meet with Charles Eisenstein, who has called himself Kennedy's "campaign philosopher." A graduate of Yale, he spent his twenties in Taiwan, working as a translator and becoming immersed in Buddhism and Taoism. "I just completely left the system," he said. At forty, Eisenstein published "The Ascent of Humanity," which he told me was "partly a critique of technology and civilization itself." "I study the transition in the defining myths of our civilization," he said. "The deep stories that we're not even really aware of, that answer questions like 'What is the human being? Why are we here? How does change happen in the world?' "

Eisenstein, who wore a flannel shirt and a thin necklace, is fifty-six and gaunt, with flecks of white in his hair and a wide, toothy grin. In 2021, as he became increasingly critical of *COVID* safety measures, he wrote a Substack post called "Mob Morality and the Unvaxxed," in which he compared unvaccinated people to historical scapegoats, including Jews in Europe. "That really got me cancelled," Eisenstein told me. "The terms 'misinformation' and 'disinformation' have been adopted by governments

and corporations to quash dissent. That's one of the things that drew me to Bobby Kennedy."

In early 2023, Eisenstein struck up a conversation with Kennedy at a fund-raising event for Children's Health Defense. (A subscriber of Eisenstein's Substack had won a raffle to attend and asked him to come along.) Kennedy, who was a month or so from officially launching his bid, invited Eisenstein to share some of his ideas with the campaign's inner circle, many of whom had similarly gained notoriety for expressing anti-establishment views. Del Bigtree, his communications director, is the founder of the Informed Consent Action Network, an anti-vaccine advocacy group; at a rally in Texas in 2019, he wore a yellow Star of David, apparently as a symbol of the persecution of people who refuse to vaccinate their children. Amaryllis Fox Kennedy, who had joined the campaign in an unofficial capacity, is married to Kennedy's oldest son, Robert F. Kennedy III. Her memoir, from 2019, about working as an undercover officer for the C.I.A.—which included details of a meeting with "a feared and battle-hardened jihadi"—was met with skepticism by members of the intelligence community. "You don't go wandering around Karachi on your own," William Murray, a former C.I.A. operations official, told one interviewer. "You'll wind up in some warlord's harem, or you'll wind up dead."

Shortly after Kennedy announced his decision to run as an independent, Kucinich quit and was replaced by Fox Kennedy. Without the backing of a major party, the campaign had to gather hundreds of thousands of signatures to secure ballot access across the country. Nicole Shanahan, the billionaire ex-wife of Sergey Brin, a co-founder of Google, was chosen as Kennedy's running mate in part because she could help finance the effort.

Kennedy ultimately appointed Nick Brana, a former national-political-outreach coördinator for Bernie Sanders and the founder of the progressive group the People's Party, to run his ballot-access operation. Two years earlier, Brana had allegedly tried to force himself onto a female colleague, an accusation that was corroborated by a woman who had walked in on the scene. (Brana has said that the allegation is "false and politically motivated.") The campaign and its super *PAC* have spent millions of dollars working with firms associated with a ballot-access consultant named Trent Pool. In May, Pool was arrested in New York for choking and punching a

woman. (A lawyer for Pool called it “a completely unjustified prosecution.”) So far, Kennedy has got his name on the ballot in about a dozen states.

The campaign has also been beset by disagreements on policy and messaging. Eisenstein nearly quit because of Kennedy’s support for Israel. “He invited me to his house, and we had a pretty long conversation,” Eisenstein said. “But I wouldn’t say it’s resolved. It’s still a point of contention.” In 2023, at the Iowa State Fair, Kennedy told reporters that he was in favor of federal legislation banning abortion after the first three months of pregnancy, a statement that the campaign quickly walked back. In 2024, he told the podcaster Sage Steele that he didn’t believe in any government interference in a woman’s choice. In response, Angela Stanton King, Kennedy’s adviser on Black-voter engagement and a former Trump supporter, resigned from the campaign. Even his running mate appeared confused. “My understanding is that he absolutely believes in limits on abortion, and we’ve talked about this,” Shanahan had told Steele in an episode released a week earlier. In a statement on X, Kennedy said that he supported “the emerging consensus that abortion should be unrestricted up until a certain point.” Kennedy told me that his views had been influenced by his wife and her older sister: “They were all on the phone with me, hot as hornets, and said, ‘It’s always got to be the woman’s right to choose.’ ”

On the campaign trail, Kennedy tells crowds that he wants to redefine which issues should actually matter to them. Abortion, guns, border security, and transgender rights, he says, are distractions that career politicians use to divide voters. He calls chronic disease an “existential” threat facing the U.S. “The cost of diabetes now in this country is higher than the defense budget,” Kennedy told the conservative podcaster Ben Shapiro. In an interview with the podcaster Todd Ault, he said, “Our kids are all on Adderall. They’re all on S.S.R.I.s. Why? Doctors didn’t just start prescribing these for no reason. We have damaged this entire generation. We have poisoned them.”

Notably, there isn't much talk of vaccines at Kennedy's campaign events. "I think what Kennedy learned along the way is that it's not in his interest to go after Tony Fauci and to say, 'Lock him up,' " Zogby, who has conducted polling for the campaign, told me. Kennedy now typically deploys euphemisms such as "medical freedom" and "informed consent" when referring to the issue.

The candidate has sought to widen his appeal in other ways, too. Recently, his campaign released a slick thirty-minute video with a voice-over by Woody Harrelson. In the opening, Kennedy reads a selection of headlines and excerpts from articles criticizing him. "He is a walking, talking conspiracy theory," Kennedy intones, quoting the *Times*. "He is a crank who cranks out whoppers the way Taylor Swift disgorges perfect pop songs." Then he says matter-of-factly, "I wouldn't vote for that guy, either." A title card flashes onscreen: "Who is Bobby Kennedy? What if he's not crazy?"

Kennedy was born in 1954, to Robert F. Kennedy and Ethel Skakel; he was the third of their eleven children. At the time, his father was a Democratic attorney on the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which was then chaired by Joseph McCarthy. Kennedy spent most of his childhood at Hickory Hill, an estate in McLean, Virginia, that had once served as General George McClellan's headquarters for the Union Army. The home

became something of a second White House during the Kennedy Administration. Young women from the Justice Department would babysit. The adults worked and mingled; the children would swim and play touch football.

Les Guthman, whose father was R.F.K.'s press secretary, recalled visiting on the weekends. "I remember meeting Bobby, I think when he was about nine years old," Guthman said. "And he had dozens of animals." Kennedy wanted to be a veterinarian, and the house and grounds were filled with creatures—horses, ducks, dogs, a seal, a giant leopard tortoise. Ethel, whose father had made a fortune selling chemical coke for blast furnaces, was herself an animal-lover; in 1963, she directed Kennedy and his older brother, Joseph, to steal a neighbor's horses because she felt they were being mistreated. "I think my mom liked that chaos, and she endorsed risktaking," Kennedy told the journalist David Samuels last year. He and his siblings were always outside, getting into some kind of trouble. "There were a lot of emergency-room visits," he said.

R.F.K. nurtured his son's love of nature, too, outfitting the house with a walk-in terrarium for his son's collection of lizards. When Kennedy was eleven, he injured his foot jumping off a roof. During his recovery, his father bought him a red-tailed hawk, igniting a lifelong passion for falconry. Kennedy has said that, as a child, he had difficulty concentrating in school. "I broke thermometers and rolled balls of mercury down my desk," he wrote in his 2018 book, "American Values." "I doodled hawks and iguanas and daydreamed about Hungarian homing pigeons." He seemed to thrive on the reactions that his unusual hobbies elicited. One of Kennedy's cousins told me, "He wanted to have something that makes you go, 'Oh, wow! ' "

On June 5, 1968, Kennedy's father won the Democratic Presidential primary in California. He had just delivered his victory speech, in the ballroom of the Ambassador Hotel, in Los Angeles, when he was shot by Sirhan Sirhan. In an iconic photograph from that night, Ethel can be seen crouching over her husband, clasping his hands. Kennedy's younger brother David, who was then thirteen, had travelled with his parents and stayed up late in the hotel room to watch his father's speech; he saw the assassination unfold on live TV. Because of the chaos, it was several hours before anyone thought to

check on him. He was discovered, with the television still on, unable to speak.

Kennedy and his older siblings flew to California to say goodbye to their father, who was in the hospital on life support. Kennedy, fourteen years old, with a thick mop of hair, served as a pallbearer at the burial, in Arlington National Cemetery. Afterward, at their home in Virginia, he went into his father's study, which still smelled of his cologne, and looked at the pictures on the wall: Uncle Joe, a fighter pilot shot down in the Second World War; Aunt Kick, killed in a plane crash at the age of twenty-eight; Uncle Jack, assassinated five years earlier. "I remember sitting there thinking they all looked so young, and they were all dead," Kennedy told an interviewer in 1993. "And I lay there and wept for probably an hour or more."

Kennedy has said that he subscribes to the theory that Sirhan, who opposed R.F.K.'s support of Israel, was not the only participant in the assassination. In 2018, when Kennedy's older sister, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, told the Washington *Post* that she thought the investigation should be reopened, she said, "Bobby makes a compelling case." R.F.K., for instance, suffered a fatal wound behind his ear, but Sirhan, who was convicted of the killing, was standing in front of him. (Investigators have said that R.F.K. turned away from the shooter.) Kennedy has gone further, arguing that his father was assassinated by a supposed C.I.A. asset named Thane Eugene Cesar, who had recently been hired as a security guard at the hotel; the C.I.A. refutes this. When Sirhan was recommended for parole, in 2021, Ethel and most of her children opposed his release, but Kennedy and his younger brother Douglas, a Fox News reporter, advocated for it. (Ultimately, California's governor, Gavin Newsom, reversed a parole board's decision to release Sirhan.)

Kennedy also believes that J.F.K.'s death was part of a C.I.A. conspiracy. In "American Values," he recounts his father's early fears that members of the agency, angered by efforts to curtail their sprawling powers, had been involved in J.F.K.'s assassination. "My dad immediately suspected that the CIA had killed Uncle Jack," Kennedy writes. "He called a yet-unidentified CIA official and asked point-blank, 'Did your outfit have anything to do with this horror?' "

Such suspicions are a theme of Kennedy's thinking. In 2016, he published a book about the conviction of his cousin Michael Skakel, in 2002, for the 1975 murder of fifteen-year-old Martha Moxley, in Greenwich, Connecticut. The case against Skakel was built on circumstantial evidence and fuelled by media speculation. In 2018, his conviction was vacated on the ground that his defense had been inadequate. But Kennedy's version of events was widely seen as outlandish. His book raised the possibility that the crime had been committed by two young men of color from New York City —"unusually big, muscular, and tall"—who were friends with a classmate of Skakel's and who, the classmate claimed, had been in Greenwich that night. The Connecticut Division of Criminal Justice released a statement calling the book "inflammatory," noting it provided "no valid or new information."

A year after his father's death, Kennedy dropped acid in Hyannis Port. He was having a good trip until he went into a diner, looked up, and noticed a picture on the wall of his father, his uncle, and Jesus Christ, their hands folded in prayer. The sight sent Kennedy into a tailspin. Walking home in the Cape Cod morning air, he ran into a group of boys and told them that he was feeling down. They offered him a bump of meth to improve his mood. For the next fourteen years, Kennedy has said, his life was a merry-go-round of chasing a high and coming down into a deep despair.

Ethel, at forty, had become a single mother of eleven children—Kennedy's youngest sibling, Rory, was born six months after R.F.K.'s funeral. Ethel delegated the care of Kennedy to Lem Billings, a close family friend who had been J.F.K.'s roommate at Choate. "I had a very troubled relationship with my mom, but I had people in my life from whom I experienced unconditional love," Kennedy told me. "One of them was a woman who was a housekeeper, a nanny at my home, a Costa Rican woman named Ena Bernard. I felt profound love from her. And I felt that from Lem."

When Kennedy arrived at Harvard, in 1972, he was a celebrity—cool, pleasant, and handsome, with high cheekbones and long, wavy hair. In his room at Winthrop House, he had a water bed; when he moved off campus, he kept a pet owl. He rowed crew and developed close relationships with faculty members, including Robert Coles, a child psychiatrist and a Pulitzer Prize-winning writer, and Marty Peretz, the former publisher of *The New Republic*, who was then a lecturer at Harvard. Kennedy was "a smart boy

and a bad influence," Peretz wrote in his memoir. Peter Kaplan, who would later edit the New York *Observer*, was among Kennedy's closest friends. Their sophomore-year roommate Locke Bowman said, "It was just a constant stream of women and friends."

Many people around Kennedy seemed to think that he was destined for the White House, a notion that he did little to dispel. His cousin and Harvard classmate Stephen Smith, whose father helped manage R.F.K.'s Presidential campaign, told me, "He always wanted to be President."

It was the early seventies, and drugs—pot, cocaine, barbiturates—were ubiquitous. Kennedy has said that he first tried heroin at the age of fifteen. After Kennedy's brother Joseph flipped his car on Nantucket, paralyzing one of his passengers, a friend at Harvard recalled watching Kennedy tie off and shoot up in his dorm room. "Our family, at least the generation that preceded me, went through difficulties, but they had what Bob Coles called the ability to transfigure their suffering," Smith told me. "J.F.K. became a more deep and interesting person because of his war experience, and Robert F. Kennedy became a deeper and more compassionate person because of the loss of his brother. Bobby seems to have had a maladaptive approach to that experience." Drugs could be a part of that, Smith said, but there was also something more: "The way I think Bobby compensated for his lack of a

close relationship with his parents was to surround himself with the comfort of acolytes."

Billings, who was then in his fifties and working as an advertising executive in New York, was a frequent presence at Harvard. He and Kennedy did drugs together, even as Billings encouraged the notion that Kennedy was the heir apparent to the family's political dynasty. "He was more of a comrade-follower who adored Bobby," a family member said. Bowman, Kennedy's college roommate, found Kennedy's relationship with Billings "weird." A longtime Kennedy friend told me that he had always found Billings "creepy" and thought that Billings was in love with Kennedy.

In the book "The Kennedys: An American Drama," which the journalist David Horowitz co-authored with Peter Collier, an ex-girlfriend of one of Kennedy's cousins described a typical scene at Billings's apartment, on Manhattan's Upper East Side: "There was always the period of sitting around making small talk. It was really a period of waiting for somebody to decide when and how we were going to score. Then there would be the fighting over who got to do it first. Bloody needles. Doors slamming. Lem in his bathrobe and shorts yelling, 'Bobby, get in here quick,' and then going in to get his shot. The women were supposed to sit there waiting for the drug leftovers. It was always a macho scene, a shoot-out: which of them could do the most drugs, which of them could do the most women."

Kennedy attended Harvard with his younger brother David, who was also drawn to the drug scene. But while Kennedy was able to turn his senior thesis—on the Alabama judge and champion of civil rights Frank M. Johnson—into a book, David struggled. "He was always coming around —'Anybody got anything? I need some,' " the Harvard friend said of David. "He seemed really lost, and that was really sad." Another person who knew Kennedy at Harvard recalled seeing Ethel walking with Kennedy and David down a street in Cambridge, screaming at them at the top of her lungs. (David would die of a drug overdose, in a Palm Beach hotel room, at the age of twenty-eight.)

After graduating from Harvard, Kennedy attended the University of Virginia law school, where he met his first wife, Emily Black, an Indiana native and the daughter of a widowed schoolteacher. He took a leave of absence to

work on Edward Kennedy's 1980 Presidential campaign and, according to the longtime friend, spent much of it on the campaign trail in Alabama, high on speedballs. He also allowed Horowitz to tag along. In Jerry Oppenheimer's book "RFK Jr.: Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and the Dark Side of the Dream," from 2015, Horowitz said he was shocked by Kennedy's reckless behavior, particularly when it came to women. According to Horowitz, Kennedy had a fling in every city they visited during a three-day swing of Alabama. "It was just insanity, compulsive, nutty with him," Horowitz said.

A number of people who are close to Kennedy described him to me as a lifelong philanderer. "He has a very addictive nature, whatever it is—whether it's drugs, whether it's sex, whether it's attention," the longtime Kennedy friend said. Recently, *Vanity Fair* reported that Kennedy had groped a babysitter who'd cared for his kids; according to the Washington *Post*, after the article appeared, Kennedy sent the woman an apologetic text. Kennedy has developed campaign talking points about his former drug use—he had "a big empty hole inside" that needed filling—and speaks of making, and sometimes breaking, contracts with himself. He told me that his will power is "iron" in all parts of his life outside of his drug use.

In September, 1983, Kennedy was on a flight to South Dakota, where he planned to get treatment for drug addiction, when he overdosed on heroin in the airplane's bathroom. He and Black had married and moved to New York the year before. Kennedy had been named an Assistant Manhattan District Attorney, a job he'd held for a year, despite failing the bar twice. (He passed on the third try.) Billings, who'd died two years earlier, had left Kennedy his Upper East Side apartment. Kennedy would regularly ride the subway uptown to purchase drugs in Harlem. After the plane landed, in Rapid City, Kennedy, who was twenty-nine, was arrested on the tarmac, an event that made national news.

Kennedy spent five months in a New Jersey rehab facility. He'd pleaded guilty to possession charges and was sentenced to two years probation and fifteen hundred hours of community service. To fulfill the requirements, he began volunteering with the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental legal-advocacy group. "I decided now to explore job opportunities in areas that felt truer to my earlier aspirations," Kennedy

wrote in his book “The Riverkeepers,” from 1997, co-authored with the environmentalist John Cronin. John Adams, the N.R.D.C.’s founding director, helped Kennedy stabilize his life. For a time, Kennedy would visit Adams and his wife every day at their home.

In 1984, Adams helped Kennedy get work as a pro-bono lawyer for the Hudson River Fishermen’s Association, which had been founded, in 1966, by Robert Boyle, a former marine and a *Sports Illustrated* writer. A year earlier, the group had launched Riverkeeper, a patrol boat that monitored and reported polluters on the Hudson River. “It was an English concept,” Boyle’s son Alex told me. (Robert Boyle died in 2017.) “A lord who owned a manor, to protect from trespassers and poachers, would have a gamekeeper. They would have a riverkeeper.” Riverkeeper collected a portion of the fines that were levied against the polluters they caught. Kennedy and Black moved, with their two children, into a large home not far from the Hudson River, in New York’s Westchester County.

One of Kennedy’s first projects was helping to bring charges against polluters of Quassaick Creek, a tributary in the lower Hudson River Valley. Kennedy and Cronin swam the creek’s contaminated ponds and streams to gather samples, and they sneaked onto factory rooftops to record evidence of illegal dumping. They eventually identified sixteen polluters, all of whom settled without going to trial, bringing in two hundred thousand dollars in revenue for Riverkeeper. Alex Boyle, who was then a college student, worked with Kennedy on the project. “He realized that this was his ticket back to legitimacy,” Boyle said. “He wanted to muscle in and claim the credit.”

But Boyle’s father saw Kennedy as an asset, particularly for fund-raising. Kennedy used his cachet and his genuine fascination with nature—he kept a pet crow at his desk in the Riverkeeper office—to draw celebrities to the organization’s galas. Lorraine Bracco, Uma Thurman, Glenn Close, and Alec Baldwin became supporters. Liz Barratt-Brown, who worked closely with Kennedy at the N.R.D.C., told me, “He had some sense of who he was and where he was and the world around him and how he could use his name and, really, his ego to do good.”

In 1987, Kennedy began to help run an environmental-law clinic at Pace University and worked with Barratt-Brown at the N.R.D.C. on an international program that advocated for environmental rights. He also began a lucrative speaking career, eventually earning as much as two hundred and fifty thousand dollars at overseas engagements. Kennedy seemed to enjoy the attention. The *Times* book review of "Riverkeepers" noted that it was "tedious to read a list of Kennedy's Op-Ed pieces, to be given accounts of calls from CBS and NBC and front-page articles in The New York *Times*. No doubt gaining press coverage is an important tactic, but it is treated almost as an achievement in itself."

At Riverkeeper, Kennedy's relationship with Robert Boyle became increasingly tense. "In the beginning, Kennedy was all right," Boyle later told *New York* magazine. "But then he started throwing his weight around." In 2000, Boyle became apoplectic when he discovered that Kennedy had hired a staff scientist who'd been arrested for running a rare-bird-smuggling ring. Boyle demanded that Kennedy fire him. Instead, Kennedy won the support of the board; the man remained on staff. Boyle resigned. "He just became very hostile," Kennedy told the Washington *Post* this year. "Bob Boyle was always a curmudgeon, and that was part of his charm. And he became increasingly charming with age." Boyle was furious to be leaving

the organization that he had founded. “He was pissed, livid, very much betrayed,” Alex Boyle said.

Kennedy, who left Riverkeeper in 2017, has continued to have a major impact on the environmental movement, helping to bring successful lawsuits against DuPont and Monsanto. In April, a number of his former colleagues at the N.R.D.C., including Adams and Barratt-Brown, signed an open letter calling on him to drop out of the Presidential race: “In nothing more than a vanity candidacy, RFK Jr. has chosen to play the role of election spoiler to the benefit of Donald Trump—the single worst environmental president our country has ever had.” Barratt-Brown emphasized the deep sense of personal betrayal that the letter’s signatories felt. “That’s his environmental family,” she said. (Kennedy is the godfather to one of Barratt-Brown’s children.) She added that Kennedy’s candidacy has weighed heavily on Adams, who is eighty-eight. “I think he feels the strain of having to speak out that way against somebody he was such a mentor to,” Barratt-Brown said.

In January, 2017, two months before his departure from Riverkeeper, Kennedy had visited Trump, then the President-elect, at Trump Tower. In the building’s lobby, Kennedy told reporters that Trump had asked him to chair a commission on vaccine safety. The Trump campaign denied that such an offer was made. I asked Kennedy if Trump’s 2016 victory had changed the way he thought about his own political future; Trump, like Kennedy, had skeletons in his closet. “I think that it enlarged the notions of what’s possible,” he said.

Mary Richardson had been a Kennedy family friend since she was a teen-ager. She and one of Kennedy’s sisters, Kerry, were roommates at the Putney School, in Vermont, in the seventies, and again at Brown. For a time, Richardson, who had long dark hair and thick eyebrows, lived in SoHo, where she was friends with Andy Warhol. But her attachment to the Kennedys was paramount. The longtime Kennedy friend recalled a car ride with Kerry and Mary when they were in college. “I said, ‘O.K., Mary, what’s your life? Cut to the future,’ ” the friend said. “And there was a long pause. And she said, ‘Well, you know, if I could just have a room in Kerry’s house, that would be so great.’ And this is somebody who is so intelligent and beautiful.”

In 1993, Richardson and Robert Kennedy, Jr., reconnected at an art gallery, in New York. She had studied architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design and was working at Parish-Hadley, a design firm whose two founders had decorated the Kennedy White House. The pair began an affair that quickly became serious. Richardson, who was thirty-four, got pregnant. Kennedy secured a divorce from Black, in the Dominican Republic, and three weeks later he married Richardson on a boat in the Hudson River. Their first child, Conor, was born three months after the wedding.

Richardson moved into Kennedy's Westchester home, where the couple threw dinner parties for a rotating roster of celebrities and city friends. Kennedy was serially unfaithful and often indiscreet. A close friend of the couple's described him hitting on her: "It was disgusting. It was anyone and everyone." Years later, she told Richardson to check her husband's phone. "She was genuinely stunned to find out the stuff that he was texting and sexting with women that were friends of hers," the friend said. Kennedy denied the affairs. "He said, 'You're crazy, you're a downer, you're just negative'—it was always Mary's fault."

Richardson saw Kennedy's infidelity as an aspect of his addictions. One of her confidantes told me, "We would walk the beach, and she would have rosary beads, and she would talk to me about how he was sick and he was a sex addict, and if he would just go back into recovery their marriage could be saved." Another person with knowledge of their relationship said that Kennedy, whose speaking career had taken off, travelled frequently for work. "He also gaslighted her about her own psychiatric health," this person said. "He told her more than once that she was crazy, that she was paranoid, that all the things she feared about what he was doing when he was out and about were fantasies." In 2007, Kennedy called the police on two separate occasions, saying that he was afraid that Richardson would hurt herself. He later claimed that she had physically abused him.

At some point, Richardson became aware of a diary, from 2001, in which Kennedy had logged his sexual conquests. The New York *Post* later obtained and reviewed the contents of the diary, reporting that it included dozens of women, with numbers next to their names to indicate sexual acts; ten meant intercourse. According to the *Post*, Kennedy seemed to have recorded the encounters as a way of policing himself. In one entry, he recalls

being propositioned to have sex with two women: “It was tempting but I prayed and God gave me the strength to say no.” In another, he reminded himself to “avoid the company of women. You have not the strength to resist their charms.” He admonished himself to “be humble like a monk. Keep your hands to yourself. Avert your eyes.”

In the spring of 2001, Kennedy was arrested in Puerto Rico while participating in a protest against U.S. military exercises on the island, which he said at the time were making local populations sick. He was convicted, along with several others, including Al Sharpton, for trespassing, and served thirty days in jail. Richardson gave birth to their fourth child while he was incarcerated, but Kennedy seemed perfectly content behind bars. “I have to say it. There’s no women. I’m happy!” he wrote in the diary. “It’s not misogyny. It’s the opposite! I love them too much.” He called his “lust demons” his “greatest defect” and wrote that, after his father died, “every time I was afflicted with sexual thoughts, I felt a failure. I hated myself. I began to lie—to make up a character who was the hero and leader that I wished I was.”

Kennedy told me that part of his addiction recovery was a commitment to a more personally vigilant existence. “I just said, ‘I’m going to act as if there’s a God out there watching me all the time and I have to behave myself, even when I don’t have an audience.’ ”

In May, 2010, Kennedy filed for divorce. Three days later, Richardson was arrested for driving under the influence. “This gets to the core of Mary—she couldn’t not be Mrs. Robert F. Kennedy,” the longtime Kennedy friend said. “It just gave her a sense of being that she didn’t have otherwise.” Those who knew the couple said that Richardson repeatedly begged Kennedy to take her back, even after he began dating Hines. *People* magazine later reported that, while the couple was separated, Kennedy called child-protective services on Richardson. “I know Bobby was concerned about the kids,” his friend Peter Michaelis, a TV producer, told the magazine. Richardson’s contact with the children was limited to supervised visits. Peter Kaplan, Kennedy’s Harvard roommate, who died in 2013, was troubled by Kennedy’s treatment of Richardson. According to one former friend, “He thought Bobby was cruel to her during that divorce.”

By Mother's Day of 2012, the kids were living with Kennedy, who was pursuing full custody. Three days later, Richardson was found dead in the garage of the Westchester house; she had hanged herself. Almost immediately, Kennedy went into damage control. The day after Richardson's death, he and his sister Kerry gave an interview to the *Times* in which they detailed Richardson's struggles with depression and sobriety. "A lot of times, I don't know how she made it through the day," Kennedy said. In his eulogy at a memorial service, in Bedford, New York, that was not attended by Richardson's family, Kennedy said, "I know I did everything I could for her. And she knew that."

A month later, *Newsweek* published a story based largely on Kennedy's divorce affidavit, which said that Richardson had been given a diagnosis of borderline personality disorder. Appended to the piece was an editor's note with a statement from Richardson's family: "The affidavit, which Mary repudiated at the time, is full of vindictive lies. This latest piling on is proof perfect of the unbelievable emotional and psychological abuse that Mary endured during the last years of her life, and now in death. The false claim that Mary suffered from BPD is also an insult to those who do struggle with this serious mental illness."

The Richardsons had sued to have Mary buried in Westchester, but Kennedy won the right to bury her in the Kennedy family plot on Cape Cod. At the burial, Conor, a skinny seventeen-year-old with mussed hair, bent over his mother's coffin, looking eerily similar to Kennedy at his father's funeral forty-four years earlier. A month later, Kennedy had Richardson's body exhumed and moved to a separate part of the cemetery, because, he said, it offered more space. Afterward, many of Kennedy's friends began to distance themselves. Tim Hagan, a retired Democratic Party official, who has been close to the family for decades, told me, "I think it was a real unravelling in many ways."

In August, 2003, Sarah Bridges, a Minnesota mother, wrote a harrowing account in the *Washington Post Magazine* about the struggles of her second child, who, at four months, had spiked a fever after a vaccination and experienced a grand-mal seizure. Bridges's son was later diagnosed with autism, and he has continued to experience seizures and other serious problems. "I was getting my Ph.D. in neuropsychology, a total science mom, all my kids were vaccinated," Bridges told me. "I came to this as a total skeptic, but what happened to my son made it very stark."

Bridges was researching the potential causes of her son's condition when a college friend, the wife of Kennedy's brother Max, mentioned that her brother-in-law was interested in looking at the deleterious effects of mercury. In public talks, Kennedy often spoke about the dangers of mercury contamination in fish, which is a by-product of coal plants. (Kennedy has said that he likely got mercury poisoning from eating too many tuna-fish sandwiches.) Thimerosal, a mercury-based preservative, had been used for decades in vaccines, though, in the early two-thousands, it was largely phased out. Kennedy's sister-in-law told Bridges where she could find the Kennedy compound in Hyannis Port. Bridges, armed with a Bankers Box full of studies, showed up unannounced.

"I think I got about three sentences in and he said 'I'm not interested,' " Bridges recalled. She started telling Kennedy about the studies. "And he said, 'I need to go sailing,' and he literally walked away." Kennedy was gone for hours. When he returned, Bridges was still there, and he promised to look at the studies. "I think mainly to get rid of me," Bridges said. The

next day, when she went back to Hyannis Port, “he said, ‘I’m going to make some phone calls. There’s something going on here.’ ”

Like Bridges, Kennedy had experienced a feeling of helplessness when it came to the health of his children. Conor had serious food allergies; anaphylaxis had sent him to the emergency room twenty-nine times before age three. Another son, Finn, also developed severe allergies. In 1998, Kennedy helped found the Food Allergy Initiative, and he and Richardson often attended the annual Food Allergy Ball, in Manhattan. In recent years, he has suggested that such allergies could be caused by vaccines. (Conor, who is now thirty, formerly dated Taylor Swift and, in 2022, briefly volunteered with Ukraine’s International Legion.)

In 2005, Kennedy approached his friend Jann Wenner, the co-founder of *Rolling Stone*, with an idea for a story about what he said were links between vaccines and autism. Kennedy was well liked at the magazine; two years earlier, he had written an article on the environmental movement. “He’s an incredibly charismatic presence,” Will Dana, the former managing editor of the magazine, said. “One time, he gave this speech in the *Rolling Stone* conference room about environmentalism, and I swear to God he practically had everyone in tears.” Still, Dana went on, he could display a certain sense of entitlement. “He came in one day carrying a bucket with a little injured baby bird,” Dana said. “So then we have our meeting, and we do our thing, and suddenly he’s, like, ‘I gotta go. Um, can you get one of your interns to take the bird to the vet?’ ” (When asked to comment, Kennedy said, “This is a lie.”)

Kennedy’s previous work for the magazine was sometimes problematic. “He would turn in these manuscripts, and it’s barely exaggerating to say, like, eighty to ninety per cent of the facts would be incorrect, even the simple ones,” Dana said. “It’s because he’s not a journalist. He’s a lawyer. He’s more about making arguments than about trying to communicate the truth.” The former friend remembered attending a dinner party with Kennedy and finding his case against vaccines persuasive and nimble, even though the former friend knew that the facts were wrong. “People think he’s an idiot—he’s not an idiot,” the person said. But the vaccine story for *Rolling Stone* was riddled with errors. Eric Bates, an editor at the magazine, tried to slow-roll the piece, but Wenner pushed it through. (Wenner said that, if he had

known that the piece was “flawed that deeply,” he wouldn’t have published it.)

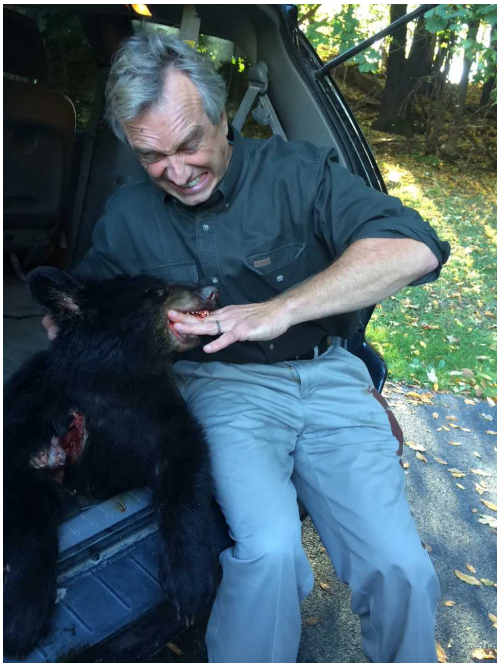
The article, titled “Deadly Immunity”—which stated that “the link between thimerosal and the epidemic of childhood neurological disorders is real”—required a number of major corrections. Kennedy falsely reported the amount of ethylmercury that infants receive in their vaccinations and misrepresented the transcript of a meeting of doctors in order to support his thesis that they were conspiring with the pharmaceutical industry to push unsafe vaccines. The magazine staff agonized over the fallout, but Kennedy seemed unfazed. “Bobby never had a moment of doubt,” a former staffer told me. “He was already convinced in the overarching argument, so the loss of any one piece or all of the pieces of data didn’t put a dent in that.”

Kennedy told me that, in the aftermath, he stepped away from the vaccine issue. “I did the *Rolling Stone* article, and I felt like I’d done my part,” he said. “Things kind of calmed down.” A year later, he published a piece for the magazine suggesting that George W. Bush stole the 2004 election. In Kennedy’s telling, he was dragged back into the vaccine debate in 2011, when Salon—which had co-published “Deadly Immunity”—retracted and removed the story from its Web site. “By then, I was watching the science on this issue, on neurological harms from certain vaccines,” Kennedy told me.

In 2014, he published “Thimerosal: Let the Science Speak,” an expansion on his refuted claims in Rolling Stone that vaccines contain dangerous amounts of ethylmercury. He told the Washington Post that friends and colleagues had urged him not to pursue the project. But, when we spoke in Atlanta, he seemed to suggest that his honor had been besmirched, forcing him to respond. “At that point,” he said, “it was like a declaration of war from pharma.”

One day, in the fall of 2014, Kennedy was driving to a falconry outing in upstate New York when he passed a furry brown mound on the side of the road. He pulled over and discovered that it was the carcass of a black-bear cub. Kennedy was tickled by the find. He loaded the dead bear into the rear hatch of his car and later showed it off to his friends. In a picture from that day, Kennedy is putting his fingers inside the bear’s bloody mouth, a

comical grimace across his face. (When I asked Kennedy about the incident, he said, “Maybe that’s where I got my brain worm.”)



After the outing, Kennedy, who was then sixty and recently married to Hines, got an idea. He drove to Manhattan and, as darkness fell, entered Central Park with the bear and a bicycle. A person with knowledge of the event said that Kennedy thought it would be funny to make it look as if the animal had been killed by an errant cyclist. The next day, the bear was discovered by two women walking their dogs, setting off an investigation by the N.Y.P.D. “This is a highly unusual situation,” a spokeswoman for the Central Park Conservancy told the *Times*. “It’s awful.” In a follow-up piece for the *Times*, which was coincidentally written by Tatiana Schlossberg, one of J.F.K.’s granddaughters, a retired Bronx homicide commander commented, “People are crazy.”

That year, Kennedy moved with Hines to Los Angeles, where he soon became acquainted with Eric Gladen, a vaccine skeptic who, in 2007, founded a group called World Mercury Project. According to an Associated Press investigation, the group—which was later renamed Children’s Health Defense—reported $13,114 in revenue on its 2014 tax filings. But, in 2015, after Kennedy joined the group’s board, revenue shot up to $467,443. At an event in Sacramento to promote a film by Gladen, “Trace Amounts,”

Kennedy told a crowd that, when children receive vaccines, “that night they have a fever of a hundred and three, they go to sleep, and three months later their brain is gone. This is a holocaust, what this is doing to our country.”

In May, 2019, as a measles outbreak rippled across the country, Kennedy’s older brother, Joseph, his older sister, Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, and Townsend’s daughter Maeve published an op-ed in Politico about Kennedy’s anti-vaccination efforts. “He has helped to spread dangerous misinformation over social media and is complicit in sowing distrust of the science behind vaccines,” they wrote. That summer, Kennedy and the actress Jessica Biel spearheaded a high-profile campaign against mandatory vaccination in California schools. By the end of the year, the journal *Vaccine* found that, during a two-month period, two groups accounted for more than half of the ads spreading misinformation on Facebook about vaccines. One was Children’s Health Defense, which, in 2021, paid Kennedy an annual salary of five hundred thousand dollars.

With the arrival of *COVID*, Kennedy’s reach exploded. He churned out books: “The Real Anthony Fauci,” “Vax-UnVax: Let the Science Speak,” and “A Letter to Liberals: Censorship and Covid.” In the summer of 2021, as *COVID* vaccines were rolling out, Children’s Health Defense promoted its film “Medical Racism: The New Apartheid,” which was seemingly aimed at Black Americans. During the early weeks of Kennedy’s Presidential campaign, the New York Post published a video in which Kennedy said that *COVID* was “targeted to attack Caucasians and Black people” and that “the people who are most immune are Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese.” Researchers in China, Russia, and the U.S., he went on, are developing “ethnic bioweapons” to “target people by race.” (Kennedy said that his remarks were taken out of context.)

Kennedy has long been drawn to questionable science. But some of his former close friends have grown alarmed at the changes they’ve seen in him more recently. Last summer, Kennedy posted a video of himself shirtless, doing pushups, a sunburn blooming across his well-defined back and torso. The implication was that his then rivals, Trump, at seventy-seven, and Biden, at eighty, were comparatively old and enfeebled. On a podcast last year, Kennedy said that he was taking testosterone-replacement therapy under the guidance of a doctor. One of the side effects of that treatment is

increased muscle mass. But the longtime friend told me, “It’s almost like he’s been body-snatched. I look at pictures of him, and he’s unrecognizable. His sense of humor is all but gone. There’s this anger.”

The tragedy of Kennedy, the former friend said, is that there is a lot of good in him. Kennedy is said to have a natural affinity with children, taking them fishing or falconing, enthusiastically explaining nature and animals. “That guy was kind of magical,” the former friend said. “And that guy appears to be gone.” The longtime Kennedy friend said that he has tried talking to Kennedy about the environmental havoc that, he believes, Trump will unleash. In response, he said, Kennedy just “goes on a rant about the D.N.C.” Nearly everyone who knows him is perplexed by his belief that he can win the Presidency. “Sure, he was anti-corporate when we worked together,” Barratt-Brown said. “But he is now anti-government in such a dark way.”

In early May, the Kennedy campaign invited the media to a press conference with the candidate in Brooklyn, though what unfolded was more of a state-of-the-race briefing from the campaign’s perspective. Amaryllis Fox Kennedy, the campaign manager, led a slide-show presentation, striding across a stage in black riding boots and a blazer with leather-panelled sleeves. “The D.N.C. has been demanding that Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., drop out of this race in the name of saving democracy,” she said. But really, Fox Kennedy continued, it was Biden who was playing the spoiler. “He cannot win in either scenario, and by being in the race he prevents the only person who can beat Donald Trump from doing so in November. How do you like them apples?”

Kennedy sat on a stool at the side of the stage, sipping from a venti Starbucks. Electoral maps appeared on the screen, one showing how Kennedy would beat Biden in a two-way race, another how he would beat Trump. Neither image included the fact that, for now, Kennedy hasn’t formally qualified to be on the ballot in most states. At the end of the event, as Kennedy was hustled into a black Mercedes, a reporter shouted a question: Had Trump’s team been in touch about debates this summer? “Oh, I’m available for debates,” Kennedy replied. “Anytime, anywhere.”

A month later, in a debate with Trump at CNN's studios, in Atlanta, Biden's responses were so incoherent and awkward that, afterward, Democrats joined Republicans in calling for him to step aside. Kennedy, who wasn't invited to participate, held what his campaign called "the real debate," a video stream of him, alone on a stage, answering the same questions that Biden and Trump were asked. Fox Kennedy recently told me that the campaign wasn't surprised by Biden's poor performance. When Kennedy had first approached her, in the fall of 2022, about the possibility of his running for President, she recalled, "even then, he said, 'I think Biden has Parkinson's.' "

On July 13th, at a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, Trump narrowly survived an assassination attempt. That night, Kennedy appeared on Sean Hannity's Fox News show and said that the "courage" Trump had shown during the shooting was "inspirational." "All of us are complicit in some ways in what happened tonight," he added. "How do we change the tone of the political dialogue in this country and start to forgive each other, to reconcile, to love each other again, and to see each other, and to be able to have differences with each other without wanting to murder each other?"

Soon after, Trump and Kennedy spoke on the phone. In a video of the call, which Kennedy's oldest son, Robert Kennedy III, posted online, Trump can be heard discussing his own vaccine skepticism—"And then you see the baby all of a sudden starting to change radically," Trump says—before seeming to offer Kennedy the possibility of a spot in his Administration: "I would love you to do stuff, and I think it would be so good for you, and so big for you, and we're going to win. We're going to win." Kennedy replies, "Yeah."

The following week, Kennedy was at the Republican National Convention, in Milwaukee, where a Trump victory was treated as a near-inevitability. In a recent text exchange, Kennedy told one person that Trump was "a terrible human being. The worse president ever and barely human. He is probably a sociopath." But, Kennedy went on, Biden was "more dangerous to the Republic and the planet." At the Convention, Fox Kennedy said, Trump alluded to the possibility of Kennedy ending his run. "They said, 'You know, we know that you take more from us than you take from Biden,' " she recalled. Trump and his team, she went on, had asked Kennedy, " 'Is there

something that you would want to do?' " Kennedy is not opposed to serving in a Trump Administration. Secretary of Health and Human Services, Fox Kennedy said, "is an incredibly interesting one."

That Sunday, Joe Biden announced that he was withdrawing from the campaign, and he endorsed his Vice-President, Kamala Harris, for President. Early polling suggests that Harris is gaining ground with certain traditionally Democratic voters who were disillusioned with Biden. Kennedy's numbers are slipping. If the youth vote goes to Harris, Kimball, the pollster, said, "that's going to hurt him." (Fox Kennedy told me that Kennedy would also be open to offers from a Harris Administration.)

For now, Fox Kennedy said, the campaign is not focussing on specific states but, rather, on constituencies, mainly Democrats in reliably Republican states and Republicans in reliably Democratic states. One way in which she sees Kennedy becoming President is in a contingent election, a scenario in which no one candidate receives enough Electoral College votes to win outright, and the House of Representatives picks the President. (It was also a plot device on the HBO comedy series "Veep.") Fox Kennedy told me, "We've always said, as soon as people realize Bobby can win, he will win."

In Atlanta, I asked Kennedy how the deaths of his loved ones had affected his political identity. He told me that, after his brother David died, he turned to his mother for solace. "I said to her, 'Does the hole that they leave in you when they die, does it ever get any smaller?' " Kennedy recalled. "And she said, 'It never gets any smaller, but our job is to grow ourselves bigger around the hole.' " He added, "In doing that, we make ourselves larger, and the hole becomes proportionately smaller." ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

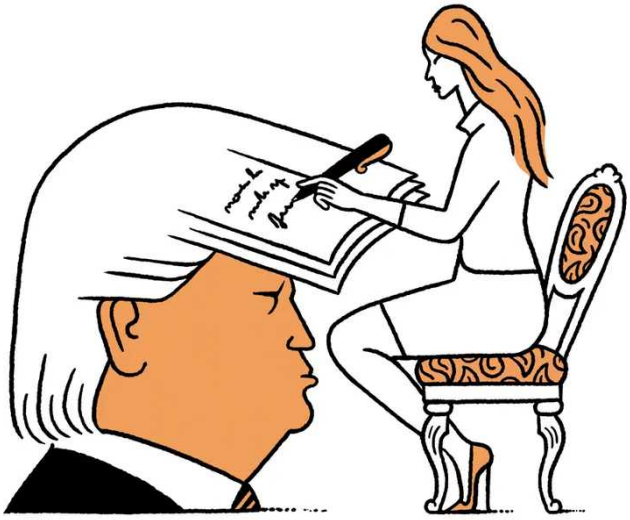
- “Me, Lania”: A First Lady’s Memoir

Shouts & Murmurs

“Me, Lania”: A First Lady’s Memoir

By Paul Rudnick

August 05, 2024



> Melania Trump to Tell Her Story in Memoir, “Melania,” Scheduled for This Fall
>
> —*Associated Press.*

Chapter 1. Caviar Wishes, Metamucil Dreams

As a little girl in Slovenia, I had the same dreams as any child: to immigrate to America on a bogus “genius visa,” to model acrylic sweaters in a catalogue, and to meet a rich man almost twice my age and enter into a financially advantageous marriage with as little physical contact as possible. I’d have my Barbie doll flirt with a small boulder, asking the boulder, “So, you’re separated?” People would warn me, “Dreams don’t always come true,” to which I’d reply, “Yeah, like once I’m rich I’ll ever talk to you again.”

Chapter 2. Education. Blah, Blah.

I believe that education is critical to any person's success in life, which is why I enrolled at college for a year until I realized I was expected to take classes, so I dropped out. Donald claims I speak at least five languages, although no one has ever heard me do this. But, for all you know, right now I might be yelling at my maid to iron my capes more carefully in Spanish or German or whatever French people speak.

Chapter 5. Early Days of Struggle and Cabs

While I was a very successful supermodel, I wanted to fully explore all of life's possibilities, especially private air travel. I met Donald Trump at a party where models like myself, only not as pretty—I mean, not even first-two-wives pretty—could meet men who resembled rotting farm-stand produce. But Donald was very virile and handsome, by which I mean compared with Giuliani. We immediately started talking and discovered we had so much in common, like the fact that we were both talking. Donald asked for my number, which confused me, as my college education had not included numbers. Then it dawned on me that he wanted my phone number, which I didn't give out to anyone without seeing a notarized bank statement, but Donald took me to the window and said, "See that? I own that." And I thought, O.K., he has a falafel cart, but Donald said, "No, all those ugly buildings with my name on them." And I asked, "Are you Donald Dunkin' Donuts?" And he said, "I'm Donald Trump," so I gave him my number and the next thing I knew I was living in a penthouse at Trump Tower and asking Alan Dershowitz to stop eating on the couch.

Chapter 28. My Vogue Cover

I was photographed in my couture wedding gown for the cover of *Vogue*, which was the happiest day of my life that did not involve Ambien. I'd achieved the pinnacle of my profession, because I could set a drink down on my own face. Of course, *Vogue* has featured every American First Lady on the cover, including Martha Washington and whoever married Steve Bannon, who told me he was a "shadow President." But during my White House years I was never on the cover again, a scandal that I blame on socialism, something homely people use to feel better about themselves.

Chapter 271. Stepkids (Not Tiffany)

When I married Donald I acquired several stepchildren, or so I've been told.

There are two boys who Donald pays to sit in empty offices and play video games, a sad girl named Ivanka, and another one who Donald calls "another one." Some claim there's a rivalry between me and Ivanka, and that she wanted to be the acting First Lady, but this is false. If I am asked to stand beside her at the rare events that either of us is willing to attend, I turn and say, "Hello, Lara," just to watch her head explode. This is how I express affection without Bitcoin.

As for that other one, Donald neglects her; he once told me, "I think she's named after a store." So whenever I see her, through the window as she's trying to pick the lock, I shout, "Hello there, Men's Wearhouse!"

Chapter 758. My White House Years or Where Is the Gold Toilet?

Some people say I didn't enjoy being First Lady but this is a lie. I just didn't like having to remember the words "Ohio," "welcome," and "Karen Pence." Mainly I focussed on the thought, If I don't get another *Vogue* cover I'm not leaving my bedroom.

I was once cruelly tricked into visiting a children's hospital, where I was told there was a sale on suède boots. But, no, there were all these children, who seemed sweet, but, of course, none of them worked at *Vogue*. I asked one little girl if she would like to hug my assistant, and when she said yes I watched with tears in my eyes, once the little girl's Venmo had gone through.

In Conclusion, Because I Have a Hair Appointment

I've been asked what I've learned in my glamorous and book-worthy life. First, dream big, but two minutes of trying to pay attention on a convention stage is a very long time. Secondly, family is everything once the prenup has been renegotiated. Finally, life is all about love, not money or diamonds or *Vogue* covers.

(I just reread this last sentence, by my ghostwriter, and asked her to add the words "Yeah, right—on what planet?") ♦

Fiction

- Clay

Fiction

Clay

By Caleb Crain

August 04, 2024

The county had recently put in a light at the intersection of 14 and 273, because of all the semis that were coming through. The Old Spot was a little south of that. It was a bar in what had once been a Mexican place, and a big wooden board with the old menu, painted by hand, was still standing in the empty lot beside it.

When Jane drove by, on her way home, she was pretty sure she saw her husband's truck parked out front. A red Ford F-150. But it was almost dark, and she wasn't sure. This would be the third night in a row, if it was him. There was no red F-150 in her and Lindy's carport when she got home.

She pushed open the back door of the house, and their cat, Gray, trotted toward her on stiff legs. "Lindy?" she said into the empty rooms.

During his shift, he got so bored, he had once explained. He had never been one for sitting in a chair, and at the motel that was pretty much all he had to

do.

“Weeyeh,” Gray sighed. Jane put a can of his food into the machine to open it. Behind the machine was where she tucked the bills she hadn’t paid yet.

She would take Gray with her if she ever decided to leave. It wasn’t as though Lindy would starve. His mother was always ready to bring over a casserole she’d made or a roast chicken she’d picked up at the H-E-B in Fuller. Jane couldn’t actually see herself leaving, of course. A future where she left wouldn’t have a yellow sofa in it, for one thing, she thought, as she sat down on their yellow sofa, having poured herself a glass of water. She and Lindy had bought it at Modry’s around the same time they bought the house, seven years before. His parents had helped with the house, but the two of them had bought the sofa on their own. Lindy had been working at the dealership then. She fingered the sofa’s slightly rough waffle pattern. She wasn’t strongly attached to it for its own sake. But the texture of things as they actually were made them convincing. Made it a little easier to continue believing in them.

Gray was bolting down his food in gobbets, as if until she arrived he had believed he’d been abandoned.

When he finished, Jane took up his bowl. She washed it and then set about frying a couple of pork chops. When Lindy did get home, he would need to eat right away and go straight to bed if he was going to get any sleep at all. His shift started at 4 *A.M.*

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice
Listen to Caleb Crain read “Clay”

He still wasn’t home when the pork chops were ready, though, so she went ahead and served herself one. Gray sat in Lindy’s chair, beside her. Whenever she looked over, he blinked and looked away, as if he wasn’t trying to persuade her to relax the rules about animals being given people food at the table. She had also made a salad, her half of which she was eating without any dressing rather than dress it and have it be wilted by the time Lindy got home. You’re not a rabbit, her mother would say, if she could see her, but Jane didn’t mind. She also didn’t mind that, even though there

was no celery in the salad, you could taste the celery she had been keeping in the refrigerator. She was unfinished on the inside, as a person, she sometimes thought. If she ever did live by herself, she would probably get to be very odd. She probably wouldn't mind that, either.

She draped a damp kitchen towel over Lindy's portion of the salad and stretched cling wrap over the plate with his pork chop and put it all in the fridge. After she did the dishes, she stared for a while at the phone—they still had a landline. Cell-phone service wasn't very good where they were. They also still had one of those little phone books, the size of a clutch, that the phone companies used to make before they gave up on them. It had only the numbers in their exchange and a few exchanges nearby, in their town and the next town over. To get you to want to keep the book, the phone company had chosen a local scene for the cover: the county courthouse, colossal and delicate, where Jane happened to work, its ornately carved red sandstone façade weathered to dusty pink. The grass in front neat and pert. She worked as a bailiff. It wasn't a woman's job, except that it was. Helping people in a corner do what they had no choice but to do—to stand up, to say the words. She was proud of her blue uniform, a little darker even than navy, and of her service revolver, which she cleaned every weekend. At home, she kept it on a shelf in the hall closet, the same closet where the washer and dryer were, just outside her and Lindy's bedroom. She was proud, too, of the ways she sometimes found of winning people's trust. Asking what kind of dog they had, for example, if it was on account of a dog that they had got a ticket, or how old their little girl was, if they had had to bring her with them—kindnesses that, despite how easy they were, always seemed to take people by surprise. "Well, I guess you're the law now, aren't you?" Lindy said when he caught her being proud. His father had been the town sheriff for almost twenty years, so the law was something he thought of as on his side and also, at the same time, against him, a tension that, in high school, he had made the most of by being the class cutup. She had been one of the girls who were always watching out for his jokes and laughing loudly when he made one. She had been able to see that the jokes were so sharp that he sometimes cut himself on them, which had impressed her. His willingness to be cut had led her to think he was strong.

In the sky beside the courthouse, Lindy had inscribed a phone number in ballpoint, and Jane was in the habit, whenever she was on the phone, of sort

of filigreeing this number with a pencil, elaborating the digits. In time, her decorations became so baroque that one day she noticed that the numerals beneath were hardly legible, at least not without a fair amount of effort. It didn't matter, Lindy had said, when she pointed it out. She was going to do what she was going to do, wasn't she? Anyway, he said, he couldn't remember whose number the number had been.

Her bedtime came around, and there was still no sign of Lindy. She didn't like to turn in while there was still food trash in the house, so she opened the little door under the sink, gathered the mouth of the plastic sack from around the rim of the wastebasket, slipped her feet into the old sneakers she kept by the back door, and went outside. It was winter, but in Texas winter means dark and silent, not cold, for the most part. The light in the carport ceiling clicked on, from the motion detector.

A creature of some kind was hunched at the edge of the concrete driveway, beside the two steel trash cans, staring at her.

It was too big to be a rat, but like a rat it had a bald tail that looked like a large worm. Its rump was wide and its head narrow, and its belly tapered from one end to the other in roughly the shape of a turnip. Its hair was pale and wispy; even in the weak light, you could see through the hair to the white skin glowing underneath.

"Shoo," Jane said, not very loudly.

The creature's snout wavered for a moment in the air, as if it were having trouble keeping its balance. Then it swivelled its head away. The rest of its body followed, very slowly. It seemed to need to feel its way forward, palpating the concrete with its feet, which were hairless, like its nose.

It was a possum, she was pretty sure. She had seen one once before, when she was a little girl. She had been alone that time, too.

She watched it saunter off.

She put the bag of trash into one of the steel cans and clanged the lid down hard. She and Lindy should probably get a brick or a cinder block to put on

top. In the absence of such a weight, she made the lid as snug as she could.

Gray looked at her blankly when she came back inside, as if he didn't know that anything had happened, or didn't want to admit that he knew.

She dialled her mother's number. "Is it too late to call?" she asked. "I saw a possum."

"You can do them with rat poison."

"Mother! What about Gray?"

"Oh, that's right," her mother said.

"It had a pink nose."

"Lindy's not home?"

"He's out with friends."

"Who?"

"Well, by now he might be over at his parents'."

"I don't know why his father doesn't find him something."

"His father's retired."

"He still knows them all over there."

"It wasn't doing anything," Jane said, going back to the possum. "It wasn't actually in the garbage."

"Listen to you," her mother said. "You always did like animals."

When, from bed, she heard Lindy open the back door and drop his keys on the kitchen counter, she opened her eyes and touched the side of her phone, to see the time. Gray, in the easy chair beside her dresser, had opened his eyes, too. There were still a few hours left for Lindy to get some sleep. And he might be able to doze a little in the first part of his shift. Not much

happened at four in the morning, even at a motel. Most of the guests were long-stay, Lindy had told her, on a hitch at one of the local rigs, where they were worked too hard to have the energy left over to make much trouble.

She looked again for the shadow in the chair that was Gray, but the cat had slipped out of the room. Her head fell back on the pillow. She heard the yawn of the refrigerator being opened, and then she heard the little smack of its lips as it closed.

After that, she must have fallen asleep again, because the next thing she knew the mattress was wheezing as Lindy sat down on his side of it to take his pants off.

“There’s a pork chop in the fridge,” she said.

“I saw,” he said. “Did you get the mail?”

Their mailbox was at the end of the sidewalk in front of the house, which neither of them ever walked past or even drove past, because of the way the house was placed, on a corner, so that you could drive into their carport from the main road without ever turning onto the road their house was officially on. There weren’t any other houses at this end of the road. It was a cut-through between Old Fuller Road and 301 which there wasn’t much reason for anyone to take. “I didn’t get out there,” she said.

Without saying anything, he put his pants back on. He must have been expecting something. She heard him go out the front door.

She meant to stay awake so she could tell him about the possum, but she fell asleep again and didn’t hear him come back in. She didn’t hear him get out of bed and get dressed a few hours later, either. The flutter-thump of the back door being pulled shut behind him as he left for work, however, did wake her. She listened for a while, without moving, to the soft buzz of the fluorescent light in the hall utility closet. There was no need for it to be on, but it wasn’t worth getting out of bed for. She let herself drift off.

She walked down the three green-painted steps at the back of her grandmother’s house, which had represented the limit, in her childhood, of

as much of the world as her grandmother had made safe. The paint on the last step was chipped, and the exposed wood was gray. Just beyond were two flagstones, almost swallowed by the grass that grew thickly around and between them, like two rocks in a stream, to hop across. Like toes just breaking the surface of the water in a bathtub. There was no third flagstone, so after the second Jane stepped onto the lawn, where she could be bit by chiggers, she knew, if she didn't have her shoes on.

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

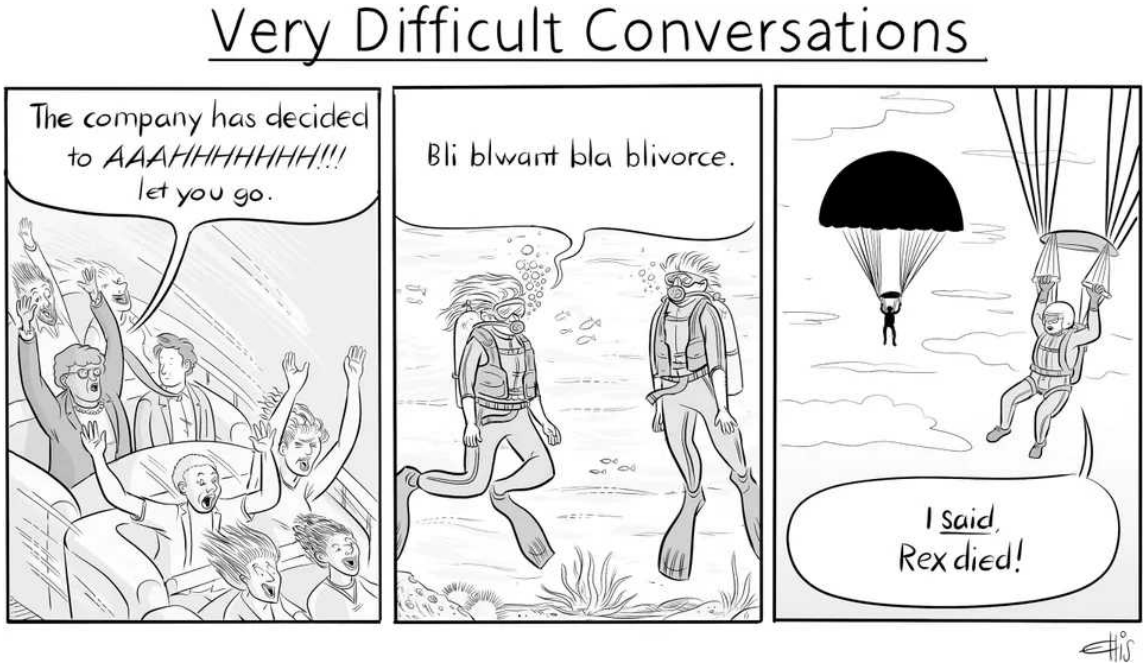
But she did have them on. That was a relief. She wasn't always so responsible, but this time she seemed to have done the right thing. She was by now some distance from the house. Did her mother know she was out here? But she was a grownup; a grownup is allowed to take a walk now and then, if she wants to. Two pecan trees had always stood in her grandmother's back yard, and now, as she approached them, she discovered that they had companions—they were the start of a grove she had for some reason never explored. The trees had recently flowered, and the lawn under their branches was littered with dusty, brittle catkins. She turned down a broad but crooked double file of the trees. The sun was setting, and there was an amber, slanting light. It was the end of the day the way the steps had been the end of her grandmother's world. There was that feeling of coming to the last part of something. Of letting go.

She walked between the two rows of trees, which sloped gently downhill. Could all of this land really belong to her grandmother? Jane was quite far from the house at this point. She wondered if there were as many pecan trees in this grove as there were stars in the flag of Texas, which, in her mind, at that moment, numbered fifty, in the way dreams sometimes have of quietly contradicting reality. Maybe the land belonged to the state. Maybe that was why there was so much of it undeveloped right here in the center of town. If there was water on the property, there might be a conservation easement—and no sooner did she have this thought than she heard water, and saw the falloff where a creek had undermined the earth and eaten it away.

Just before the falloff, a station wagon was parked. It was such an old-fashioned car. Who drove a station wagon anymore? The grass around it didn't have the folded-over look of grass that has been recently driven on, so

the station wagon must have been parked there for a while. She cupped her eyes to look in the window: in the back seat, a baby girl was pushing down with her feet and shoulders, arching up her tummy. The baby was hers. *Oh, my mother will be so happy to have a baby, finally,* she thought. The little girl was lying on a fuzzy lavender bunting that had been unzipped into a blanket. The bunting had paws and ears. The little girl's eyes were the color of the meat of a pecan, and her skin and hair were the colors of the shell of one. Who was the little girl's father, then? That Jane couldn't remember seemed like a kind of joke. It would come to her. Of course, she shouldn't have left the little girl alone all this time. Was the girl all right? She seemed all right. Jane would have to be careful to introduce her to her mother in such a way that her mother's first impression was of how beautiful she was. Jane opened one of the station wagon's back doors, to climb inside. To be with her daughter.

As Jane lifted her second foot off the ground, there was a click and then a shuttling sound, which must have been the parking brake coming somehow unhitched, maybe because of the weight that her body added to the car. Or maybe the creek had undermined more of the ground than she had realized. The car was lurching.



She opened her eyes and sat up. Lindy had come home. He never put the parking brake on. He was a silhouette against the triangle of light that was falling out of the utility closet. “Lindy?” she asked. His head was hunched forward and his right arm was out. He was pointing something at her. A gun. Her gun? She looked away. She would have given him anything he asked for. There was a sudden light.

She tried to get up. It felt like she was wearing one of those lead blankets they put over your lap before they take an X-ray. Her legs felt so heavy she couldn’t move them. One of her hands was heavy like her legs, but she was able to raise the other one, she discovered. For some reason it was wet.

Her left hand.

Sun was cutting in along the sides of the blinds of the bedroom windows. Her left hand was red and glittering like a hand a baby has put in its mouth.

Her ears were ringing. The morning sun made it hard to be sure, but it looked like the light in the hall utility closet was off now. She extended her left hand, which seemed to be the only one that was working, toward her phone, but, because she had to reach it across her body, she could only just barely touch the bedside table. Digging her left hand into the bed, she scooted herself closer.

There was a sharp pain in her neck. Her head had dipped to the side while she was scooting and was crooked. She reached her left hand up to straighten it and there was that eerie half-numb feeling: her hand could feel her head, the hair strangely matted, but her head couldn’t feel the touch of her hand. She balanced her head on the stem of her neck as if it were a thing. As if it were a wobbly pumpkin. Like in “Ozma of Oz.” She reached again for her phone. Now she was close enough. She brought it to her face with the charging cable still attached.

It didn’t recognize her. With the thumb of the hand with which she was holding it, she tried to tap her passcode, but her thumb was sticky and smeared the screen. It was blood, she realized. That was what was on her hand. She tried to wipe her thumb on her camisole, but her camisole was slick with it, too. She wondered how much she had lost. She found a dry

spot of sheet. She rubbed dry her thumb and the screen of her phone. The cable slipped out of the socket at the bottom of the phone and slithered away from her and off the bed. She tried again to tap her code. But her hand was trembling so hard that she mistyped.

No one wanted her. No one had ever wanted her, and everyone knew it. No one was waiting for her to call. She let hand and phone collapse together on the wet stomach of her camisole. She took a few breaths. She had been taught to take breaths.

Then she rubbed the phone dry again and one more time, very slowly, she tapped.

As the call was going through—she hoped the signal was strong enough—two bars—it occurred to her that she might not be able to speak.

"Please state your emergency," the dispatcher said. The town contracted the work out, so it wasn't anyone she knew.

"He shot me," she said. Something flooded her as she said it. A kind of relief.

She stayed conscious and the dispatcher kept her talking until the police broke down the front door for the E.M.T.s.

When a nurse came in, she was feeling her scalp where it wasn't bandaged. There was a soft stubble. She was feeling with her left hand. She was in a white room, and it was midday, and no one had lowered the blind.

"Do you want to sit up?" the nurse asked.

She was able to nod. When she touched the bandages on her head, they felt cool and dry, like diapers, and they made a similar rustling sound against the pillowcase as she nodded.

The idea of diapers reminded her of the baby in her dream. She was probably never going to have a baby.

The nurse held down a button that made the bed hum and slowly perform a kind of sit-up. “We’ve been keeping your head elevated, but we can go a little higher now that you’re awake.”

“Brown,” she said. It was the nurse’s name.

“Well, bless your heart.”

“Church.”

“I thought you looked familiar. Don’t tell anyone, but I haven’t been in ages.”

“Nee,” she said. She meant *Me, neither*. The woman seemed to understand.

“Now, are you in any pain, dear?”

“Ow.”

“I imagine. They say it feels like getting beat up. You’ve had a little something for it already today but you let me know if you need any more. Now I’m here to take off your dressing for a minute because the doctor wants to see how things are healing. Then I’ll fix you right back up again.”

Jane bowed her head. With a pair of bright shears, the nurse sliced away a nest of white tape and gauze. Jane looked to see if it was stained but the nurse as a professional seemed to be indifferent.

“Your husband was in this morning,” the nurse said, conversationally.

“No.”

“No?”

“Stay.”

“I can only stay a little bit. But I’ll say no visitors. Is that what you mean? What about your mother? She came by yesterday, I think.”

“No.”

“O.K., nobody at all just yet. I understand.”

He shot me, Jane thought, but the words had lost something.

“I’ll just clean you up a little,” the nurse said, and, with a cotton swab that had been dipped in something cool, she wiped short gentle radii that converged on a site behind and above Jane’s left temple.

He shot me, she repeated to herself. Because of her job, she knew, unlike most people, that bad things do sometimes happen. A defendant had once taken a knife out of one of his boots and stuck her with it. It had been a surprise. It had seemed almost to be a surprise to him, too. Most people did what they could to avoid having to know that something like that could happen in the world they lived in.

“Almost done here,” the nurse informed her. And then she started daubing another site, on the back of Jane’s head on the right.

“Two?” Jane asked, in alarm.

“No,” the nurse said. “Back here is where Dr. Whitmire took it out. It ran around the inside from the front to the back, is what they think happened, instead of going through. Like a marble in a can. You’re very lucky.”

At that moment the doctor came in, the skirts of his coat flouncing. “Jim Whitmire,” he said. “I had the honor of being your surgeon the other night.”

“Yeah,” Jane said.

The doctor looked at the nurse.

“She recognized me,” the nurse told him.

“From when she came in?” the doctor asked.

“From church.”

“Bi-den,” Jane said.

“Biden?” the doctor echoed.

The nurse laughed. “I think she means she knows who the President is.”

The doctor inspected his cutting and sewing. “I’m very happy with the way the surface incisions are healing,” he said. “What we did is, we had to neaten things up a little here in front—there were some fragments that had splintered and weren’t going to mend—and then in back we had to do a little procedure where we removed a small circular section, for access.”

“Back.”

“Well, you can’t put that sort of thing back, but, once we took the bullet out, we put a metal disk in place that’s just as strong as bone, maybe even stronger, and the nice thing about a good head of hair like yours is, once it grows in, no one will ever know.”

“Show.”

“I can show you, yes.” He scooted his chair away from her bed and in a drawer found two hand mirrors with white plastic handles. “Now, if I hold this one behind your head and Kimberley holds the other one in front of you . . .”

“Me,” Jane said, reaching for one of the mirrors herself.

“There’s been some swelling,” he cautioned.

The features of the face in the mirror were distorted. The left temple was a taut purple pouch that sagged over and almost closed the left eye. The pouch was crossed by three curving seams that were knotted shut with railroad tracks of black wiry thread. Elsewhere on the face the skin was yellow. Even the mouth was askew, the lips unevenly enlarged.

She realized they were waiting for her. She looked in her mirror for the mirror the doctor was holding.

“That’s right,” the doctor said, when he saw that she had aligned the angles.

Her mother trundled a chair into the room. “Look what they did to you.”

Did she mean the doctors? Jane wondered. She closed her eyes for a moment.

“You know, they told me you might not make it,” her mother said. “When they called me that morning. I was so upset. To think I might lose my baby.” She pulled a crumpled bandanna out of her purse and blew her nose. “They haven’t found him yet. They’re calling him the intruder. I don’t think they can have tried very hard to find him, because how do they know what they’re looking for. They’ll be looking for someone who shouldn’t be here, and there’s been so much of that lately. They haven’t even found the gun.”

“Mine.”

“They’re pretty sure it was yours. But it’s probably on a bus to New York by now. Oh, I shouldn’t be talking about all this to you, should I? About all these horrible things. Are they taking good care of you? I would have brought you something if I had known you were awake.”

“Fine.”

“You’ll tell me if you need anything, you hear.”

Jane shook her head, but then she did think of something. “Gray.”

“Gray?” her mother echoed, wonderingly. “Gray hasn’t been seen, but I think Joe and Meryl are still putting out food for him, at the back door. Don’t you worry. Cats have a way.”

Joe and Meryl were Lindy’s parents.

“They’ve been so good,” her mother continued. “They went over and cleaned up, right after the ambulance took you away. Lindy must have called them. He was so upset. Nobody thought you would want to come home to *that* mess.”

“Phone,” she said to Brown after her mother was gone.

“I don’t know why we haven’t brought you a TV.”

“Phone,” she repeated.

“I’ll ask Dr. Whitmire where they put your personal effects.”

When Jane asked for Brown a little later, however, she was told the nurse had gone home for the day.

She was resting after having brushed her own teeth for the first time when she looked up and saw Lindy.

His hair was slick from having just showered. His eyes had a quizzical expression.

“Janey,” he said.

She tried to make a noise, but the croak that came out wasn’t loud enough and sounded deliberate, in a confused way, rather than frightened.

“Janey,” he said. “They haven’t found him yet.”

She started to unsnap the wires from the metal dots taped to her chest. An alarm began to gong and an orange rectangular light to flash.

“What are you—” he asked.

A nurse came in. “What’s all this, sweetie? Did something come loose again?”

Jane pointed at Lindy.

“I was telling her we’re going to find him,” Lindy said. “I’m her husband.”

“Yes, sir,” the nurse said.

Jane’s still extended finger reminded her, and must have reminded him, of the way he had pointed the gun. “Go,” she said.

“We’re going to find him,” Lindy repeated. “Don’t you worry.”

The nurse, holding against her bosom the drooping spray of white-coated wires that Jane had detached, seemed to be waiting for a cue.

“Go,” Jane whispered.

“Now, Janey, don’t be ugly,” Lindy said. “I’ll come back when she’s feeling better,” he told the nurse.

When the current sheriff, the one who had replaced Lindy’s father, finally visited, Jane was in the corridor outside her room, practicing walking, an aide at her side.

“Paul,” she said.

“Janey, I’m so sorry.”

He fell into step behind her, her aide, and her rattling I.V. stand. In her room, she sat down on the side of her hospital bed.

“Tell me what happened that night, Janey.” He took out a steno pad.

“Late,” she said.

“It was late.”

“Lindy.”

“Lindy was late.”

She nodded.

“And then?” he prompted.

“Left.”

“He left. He came home late and then he left again. For the motel, I’m assuming. And then?”

“Back.”

“He came back? Lindy came back. About what time?”

She shook her head. Raising her left hand in the shape of a pistol, she shot it at the sheriff.

“Are you sure it was Lindy? Did you get a good look at him? Did you see his face?”

She didn’t reply.

“Janey, I want to be able to help you.”

“Lindy,” she said.

“O.K.,” the sheriff said. “But you’ve stood long enough in enough courtrooms. Is there any way it could have been someone else?”

It hadn’t been, but she saw the problem. “Brain,” she said.

“That’s going to be a concern. Dr. Whitmire says memories can get confused when something like this happens. You ask a question, and the patient just

names the last person they saw. Doesn't matter the question."

"No," she said.

"I understand," the sheriff said. "I hear you."

"Scene," she said.

"Nobody saw Lindy leave the motel. Is that what you're asking? No one saw him move his truck. Of course, I suppose he could have walked to your place and back if he walked fast enough."

"Scene," she repeated. "*Scene*."

"Oh, *scene*, yes. Joe and Meryl did clean it up. They meant well. They just thought . . ."

Jane looked at her hands. "Scene," she said one more time, bitterly. "Sheriff."

"He did use to be sheriff," Paul agreed. "And so he should have known better. I'm sorry, Janey."

She shook her head.

After Jane was discharged, she rented a place in a nice part of town. A woman who had spent a few years in California had turned her garage into an apartment. It had a stove and a refrigerator and a shower.

Gray never turned up, but Jane didn't mind being on her own. She slept with her gun on her bedside table now, next to her phone.

She recovered her ability to put words together into sentences, but she could do it only by precipitating herself into a strange hurry, in which she seemed to lose track of the endings of words, as if her mind grew impatient and as soon as a word was launched stopped paying attention to it. On Mondays and Wednesdays, she went to see a speech therapist at a brain-injury rehabilitation unit. It was in a new wing of the medical center, with glass walls and gray carpets. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, she saw a physical

therapist in the same unit, and they worked on her right hand and her right side, generally, as well as her balance. The medical center was in the county seat, so her drive there was almost the same as the one she used to make every day to the courthouse. She still went past the Old Spot.

Her favorite day was Friday, when they had a kind of art class at the unit. The teacher had just graduated from college; she had long blond hair that she kept pinned up on top of her head as if she were an old lady. There were usually three or four patients in the room. One woman still had hair as short as Jane's and slurred her words, but otherwise you would never know, from looking at them. Unless you could tell just from their being adults who were playing in the middle of the day on a weekday.

Her and Lindy's old place was listed but hadn't sold yet, and the mail was being forwarded to her garage apartment. One day a notice came saying that a life-insurance policy in her name was about to be cancelled because the premiums hadn't been paid. Jane had never heard of this policy, and she had her mother call. It turned out that the policy had been taken out a month before the shooting. That was enough for the sheriff but not for the D.A., who said it would have made sense to insure her—she was the one who had a job with the county and a reliable salary that even came with health insurance. Lindy's lawyers, the D.A. said, would argue that her memory of the policy had been interrupted, just like her memory of that night had been. She could attempt a civil case if she wanted, but he worked for the taxpayers and couldn't bring a criminal case he didn't think he could win. They might still find that intruder.

In order to bring a civil case, she would need to be able to persuade a lawyer to take a chance. But there were no assets, on Lindy's side, to make a chance worthwhile.

That Friday, the teacher brought in modelling clay, which came in bars the size of sticks of butter. She gave Jane a pale-yellow one. What are we making? Jane asked. Vegetables, the teacher said. Flower? the woman who slurred her words asked. You can make a flower if you prefer, the teacher allowed.

Warm the clay up, the teacher suggested, by shaping it first into a ball and then into a pancake. And then into a ball and then into a pancake again.

The cold, thick compound resisted the immediate pressure of Jane's fingers. This is good for us, she thought. It's good for our nerves and muscles to have this feedback. It's good to push our hands into and against a substance that doesn't give in right away. Like the old politician who fixed his stammer by loading pebbles into his mouth. The color of her clay, and maybe an association with the idea of butter, made Jane think of an ear of corn. She pulled on the mass in her hands to make it into a cylinder, but it came out with one end much fatter than the other, more lopsided than an ear of corn. She rolled it against the table. It reminded her of something. A carrot? A turnip. A turnip was tapered like that. She started smudging even more of the matter toward the thicker end of the cylinder. The thicker end could be the fat head of the turnip.

"The fat ass of the possum."

Had she spoken? No one was responding. She hoped she hadn't. For a moment, she was a little afraid to touch the clay.

Maybe her cylinder had come out uneven because her right hand was still so much weaker.

She hadn't really disliked the possum, is the thing. She gathered a lump from the front of her cylinder into a little spade-shaped head, and she tweezed a tail out of the rear. The tail got too thin and fell off, and she had to reattach it. From the sides and the bottom she pinched four paws.

That's a funny-looking potato, the man next to her said. He didn't mean any harm.

The making was a kind of remembering. Who had she been, when she saw the possum? Was she still that person? Her brain had been changed, and she had been changed, in the way you always are when something happens to you. The night she saw the possum, she hadn't known she was in any danger. She had just been living. She hadn't understood she wasn't wanted,

any more than a possum did. She had been living, like the possum, in a kind of night world.

In order to get the shape of the animal more or less right—in order to feel her way—she imagined herself holding the animal, cradling it, as she worked. She imagined the feel of it at the same time that she was bringing it into being. Even though there wasn't really anything sad about making a shape out of clay, a catch came into her throat, and for a moment she thought she might cry. Over an old sorrow. She wasn't sure what. Something much older than Lindy.

In the center of the table the teacher had scattered wooden tools for detailing. At the end of one was a row of small wires, so that it was a kind of comb, and she began to give the creature a coat of fur by using the comb to gently stroke and ruffle the surface of the clay. She combed the creature's back, rump, and belly. Because the creature's head was still bare, it looked at this point a little like an armadillo. When she combed the head, to give it fur there, too, she had to be careful not to bend the head out of shape—it was made from a much smaller wedge of clay—so she worked even more slowly and gently.

Once the fur on the head was finished, she took a wooden tool with a point and swirled in eyes. For ears, she flattened a bit from the tail into two tiny saucers that she folded slightly and fastened to the back of the head. In her dream, she remembered, her baby's bunting had had paws and ears. She drew toes on her creature's feet.

It's beautiful, the teacher said, when she came around the table to Jane. The other students oohed and ahed.

It was really good, to be honest. It was the first time since the shooting that something had made her happy. Before she smushed it back into a lump, she took a picture with her phone. ♦

The Critics

The Art World

The Bad Dream of Surrealism

A hundred years ago, the movement hoped to topple reality and reason. Its true achievements lie elsewhere.

By Jackson Arn

August 05, 2024

Yvan Goll was born in 1891. In his twenties, he moved to Paris, where he wrote antiwar poetry and absurdist drama, met Picasso and Chagall, and gorged himself on the era's avant-garde buffet. Photographs show us a laser-eyed face that is either wrapping up a sneer or embarking on a new one. He looks like the kind of person who would pen an attack on the young rascals who called themselves Surrealists, and, in 1924, he did. By making "Freud a new muse," Goll wrote, Surrealists were "confusing art and psychiatry," producing glib, trivial work that strained to "shock the public." The good news was that it would "quickly disappear from the scene." I should add that Goll considered himself a Surrealist, and that he was jabbing at his rivals' ideas in an issue of *Surréalisme*, the journal he founded. You should also know that he did the jabbing days before the poet André Breton published his first Surrealist manifesto.

Let's assume, as a flurry of exhibitions have this year, that the appearance of Breton's manifesto, a century ago, marks the birth of Surrealism as we know it. This would mean that people have been trying to kill Surrealism since it was in the womb. Childhood was no less eventful: in 1930, members of the far-right League of Patriots interrupted a screening of Luis Buñuel's Surrealist film "L'Âge d'Or" to drop stink bombs and throw ink at the screen, which sounds suspiciously like a Surrealist stunt itself. Still harsher assaults came from within. In 1939, Breton, in his capacity as the leader of the group he'd defined, kicked out the world's most famous Surrealist, Salvador Dalí, for being too flamboyant, too right-wing, and (probably) too charismatic. René Magritte, maybe the most famous Surrealist not named Dalí, left to found his own spinoff. In 1968, pirate-costumed Yippies gathered outside *MOMA* to celebrate Surrealism and protest the lobotomized version trapped inside.

The paradox is that these endless attacks didn't ruin things; they seem to have made Surrealism indestructible, free to spread wherever it pleases. The screechy orange in "The Elephants" must have been a sight to see in 1948, when Dalí painted it, but now anybody can find it in the sky when California or Canada is on fire, or in the hair of the forty-fifth President, or on the Sphere, in Las Vegas, when it turns into a giant jack-o'-lantern. Illogic and uncanniness barely require pointing out; social media is a chorale of non sequiturs, and, for long chunks of the pandemic, time was measured by the melting-watch minutes of "The Persistence of Memory." Only one kind of art has been whisked into the batter of our world until it flavors everything.

But every kind of art, like every kind of person, has its own unconscious—its own primal memories and guilty ambitions. Because Surrealism has always worn its nightmares on its sleeve, it can be hard to imagine anything else underneath. A snippet from Goll, the Surrealist leader who wasn't, comes to mind, though: "Reality is the basis of all great art. Without it there is no life, no substance." Much of art depicts a world we know and hints at the otherworldly. What if Surrealism, beneath the burning giraffes and furry teacups, has always dreamed of waking up?

Let me begin by throwing some ink of my own: the first Surrealist manifesto —Breton's, not Goll's—is a triumph of tediousness. I am not alone in feeling this way. "It's actually a very boring document," the novelist Tom

McCarthy said, speaking on behalf of the countless arty teen-agers who've fallen in love with Dalí, looked up the text that inspired him, and lost interest by page 2. Those who stick with it will find Breton defining Surrealism as "psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express . . . the actual functioning of thought," and vowing to resolve dreams and waking life by restoring a sense of "the marvelous" to the latter. The movement owed lots to the Dadaist artists who emerged during the First World War, and who pledged themselves to nonsense as fervidly as wise, levelheaded civilization had pledged itself to mass slaughter. It owed at least as much to Freud, whose work Breton had studied as a young medical student, and to the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, who coined the term in 1917 but graciously left most of the explaining to others.

At first, words held more sway over Surrealism than images did, but within a few years artists of all stripes had joined up. The movement's devotion to the pleasure principle can't have hurt, and soon it had constructed a series of monuments to its own drooly libido: Man Ray's photographs of Lee Miller; Max Ernst's chimeric nudes; most of Dalí. Same-sex desire, you can deduce from this list, was low among the freedoms Breton sought to celebrate—he accused male homosexuals of "mental and moral deficiency." Female Surrealists fared somewhat better, though the most talented ones were often conscripted into being their husbands' muses.

The exalted subconscious, the spurning of reason—these are the precepts of Breton's manifesto, familiar from any art-history textbook. What the textbooks rarely report is that he begins by dunking on Dostoyevsky—specifically, a short description of a room from "Crime and Punishment." The room is small, and outfitted with yellowish furniture, yellow wallpaper, muslin curtains, and geraniums in the windows. That's it, more or less; the writing isn't great, but far from terrible. To Breton, however, this passage demonstrates what's so wretched about realism in art: it dares to wallow in everyday *reality*, the stuff that he calls "the empty moments of my life." All avant-gardes need a devil. Surrealism, via faith in the id's boundless originality, was meant to save our souls from endless stacks of "school-boy description," so clichéd that Dostoyevsky could have taken them from "some stock catalogue."

It is hard to trust a writer who hates Dostoyevsky, let alone one who thinks that the author of "The Grand Inquisitor" wrote realist Mad Libs. But Breton was an odd duck, forever flitting between polemic and clenched restraint: apparently, the man who trumpeted the aesthetics of louche, feral freedom had no taste for drugs, brothels, or staying out late. Even in his heyday, when his charisma could vaporize entire careers, fellow-Surrealists mocked his primness—he insisted on kissing women on the hand, a custom only slightly hipper a century ago than it is today. Still, someone had to drive the bus. In "Why Surrealism Matters" (Yale), published earlier this year, Mark Polizzotti does an elegant job of defending Breton, as well he might, having also authored a seven-hundred-page biography of the poet. "We have to wonder," he writes, "whether Breton's tendency to hold back was precisely what allowed him to sustain the Surrealist group for almost half a century, and to ensure its legacy."

Pluck this man out of Surrealism's history, and he takes plenty with him. Yes, Breton did too much plucking himself—not just Dalí but Antonin Artaud, Georges Bataille, and other mutinous geniuses—and, yes, he wasted years on a merger with the Communist Party that, with the benefit of hindsight, seems doomed from Day One. But he evangelized as much as he excommunicated. One of the explicit aims of the Met's 2021 mega-survey "Surrealism Beyond Borders" was to tell a story of a global movement without Breton (or anyone else) at the center, but it left him looking more central than ever: the Johnny Appleseed of id art, spreading it to Mexico and Martinique, lecturing on it in New Haven and Port-au-Prince, and rousing the great Chicago Surrealist Ted Joans to undertake a pilgrimage to Paris, where the two men bumped into each other at a bus stop.

Central doesn't have to mean most important. In this case, it may not even mean most coherent. The complaint is often made that what we now call surreal has been watered down to the point of senselessness, as though it were once a strict, bulleted ideology, when the fact is that Surrealism was always a sly combination of specific and vague. In his biography, Polizzotti praises Breton's manifesto for making Surrealism sound both woozy and clinical, arming it with the double authority of the poet and the doctor. Goll had already pointed out that these two didn't go together; his mistake was to assume that this was a weakness instead of the beguiling imperfection that inspired a century of riffs and revisions.

Examining Surrealist art, one is often relieved that Breton never decided exactly what it was. Have another look at his definition—how would it even work for visual art? Can any painting evince *pure* psychic automatism? An abstract splatter, maybe, except that Breton had trouble admitting that abstraction could be Surrealist. And yet Surrealism, like the Roman Empire or Amazon, had an extraordinary knack for absorbing its dissenters. The finest thing in "Surrealism Beyond Borders" may have been a painting by the Ethiopian Armenian artist Skunder Boghossian, "Night Flight of Dread and Delight" (1964), which shows a bird fluttering over a landscape, its eyes two more celestial bodies in a sky ready to burst with them. The paradox (Surrealism, you'll have noticed, is all paradoxes) is that this image's dreamy, figurative bits may well be its least surreal—my eyes always sink to the lower right-hand corner, where the frenzy of dots becomes totally, gleefully abstract. This isn't the Surrealism that Breton prescribed; it's far more surreal than that, too sloshed on the sheer possibilities of paint to care whether it's staying true to psychic automatism. Half of all writers, per the old joke, try to imitate Hemingway, while the other half try not to. Surrealism's trick was to jolt painters like Boghossian into embracing its tenets and moving past them on the same canvas.

Surrealism's contradictions burn hottest in paintings, which make up the better portion of one of the year's major centennial shows, "*IMAGINE!* 100 Years of International Surrealism." I saw it at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, in Brussels, but it will move to Paris, in September, and after that to Hamburg, Madrid, and Philadelphia, shedding and gaining works along the way. The Brussels curators were as shamelessly European in their selections as the Met's were doggedly international, featuring a group of largely canonical names and classifying their creations by motif: the forest, the labyrinth, and so on.

There is a dryness to much Surrealist art, as though a hallucination were being recounted in monotone. One virtue of "*IMAGINE!*" was its attention to this quality, putting Surrealism side by side with its kooky uncle, Belgian Symbolism, the fin-de-siècle aesthetic of Jean Delville, Fernand Khnopff, and William Degouve de Nuncques, all of whom delighted in depicting mythic figures and objects with a shimmery mystery that can come off as merely schlocky. De Nuncques's "The Enchanted Forest" (1896) is all glow and shadow, hinting at some vast secret. Surrealist treatments of the same

subject, like “Landscape,” Magritte’s sylvan scene from 1927, or “Undergrowth,” André Masson’s from a few years earlier, hold less back: the secrets arrive in broad daylight, one frank brushstroke at a time. Stylistic peacockery in general is rarer than you might expect—walking through the exhibition, I wasn’t often struck by a provocative color contrast, a virtuosic line, a deft impasto patch. The “how” of these images steals very few scenes from the “what.”

As for the “what”: to the best of my recollection, I have never dreamed about the desert, even though I spent the first eighteen years of my life in one. I say this because the Surrealists sometimes appear to have dreamed about little else. Psychic automatism is a dubious technique but a splendid alibi, enabling many of the artists in the exhibition to get away with imagery that, if not outright cliché, looks a lot like it. In “The Women’s Uprising” (1940), Rita Kernn-Larsen gives trees breasts and curvy hips; tree-women also star in paintings by Méret Oppenheim and Paul Delvaux, though they’re perhaps slightly outnumbered by all the bird-women, and both are *severely* outnumbered by the deserts. Once you start to notice these, it is hard to stop. Poetically barren landscapes—gravelly in front, mountainous in back, tired all over—figure in paintings by Delvaux, Dalí, Marion Adnams, and Yves Tanguy, and also Ramses Younan and Adnan Muyassar, if we count the Met show. Freud got many things wrong, but projection wasn’t one: Surrealism, which talked so tough about realism’s silly conventions, ended up with enough of its own that they may as well have been—how should I put this? —taken from some stock catalogue.

The marvellous, to be fair, is a tricky thing to promote. The more successful the promoting, the less marvellous the results. Everybody knows this from living in the current millennium, but “*IMAGINE!*” provides a concentrated refresher: most of its wonders come fast and fade faster, disrupting nothing but one another. I’ve had a similar feeling while messing around with *DALL-E*, the Surrealist-named A.I. system that translates text descriptions into glassy images. It’s miraculous, and boring in its miracles—the ease with which the technology vomits up content exactly mirrors the ease with which I get weary of it. Maybe I’m ungrateful, or maybe the id gets tedious when invited to speak too freely. Call this the deepest paradox of Surrealism: the voice of the unconscious, whether babbling away in comments sections, ads, or Presidential debates, is the dullest one on the planet.

Surrealism can take a few hits, probably needs them. Chisel away what's lacklustre, and you are left with the good, more lustrous than ever. The final galleries of "*IMAGINE!*," devoted to the motif of the cosmos, attempt to end the story with a flourish. They don't, and the problem has nothing to do with curation.

"Instead of creating a magical world," the onetime Surrealist Barnett Newman wrote, "the Surrealists succeeded only in illustrating it." Fair enough, but only if you accept that their goal was to find wonder in galaxies, or to fill landscapes with flying apples and tiny trains. These were the sorts of things that first attracted me, like so many others, to Magritte's paintings. When I look now, I'm indifferent to the obviously surreal bits but awed by the ordinary, utilitarian realities—the streets, the bowler hats, the neat bourgeois interiors. On the surface, it's perplexing that plain, unadorned tobacco pipes show up in so many Surrealist works: Magritte's paintings of pipes that aren't, of course, as well as Man Ray's photographs and the wooden boxes of bric-a-brac assembled by Joseph Cornell. But have you ever seen—really, deeply *seen*—a pipe? I'm not sure I had before getting acquainted with the various examples in Cornell, none of which will ever tar a set of lungs again. Pale, lopsided creatures, they have nothing to do anymore but occupy their corners of Cornell's zoo. To seem surreal, mundane things don't need to be transformed, exactly, just allowed to breathe.

We're arriving at our final paradox. Breton spent more than forty years describing Surrealism, spreading its doctrine, expelling anyone who challenged him—and, after all that, Surrealism turned out like the version Goll wrote about in 1924, while Breton was still getting warmed up. You can think of the difference in terms of wallpaper. When Breton read about the stuff in "Crime and Punishment," he saw something for Surrealists to skip over. Goll saw the essence of life, and art—the greatest creators, he hoped, could bow down to "the simplest, the most worthless object," even "a piece of wallpaper, in its full reality."

Where are we with Surrealism, then? Quite possibly in the same plain little room where we began. The lighting is clear, the walls straight, the corners decorously right-angled. Something is off, but psychoanalysis won't help us.

An early painting by Leonora Carrington, among her most famous, is set in the kind of room I'm talking about—may, in fact, be a painting of this room. The title, "Self-Portrait (Inn of the Dawn Horse)," doesn't clarify much. Nor does the image, not right away: Carrington, sitting in a blue chair on the right, could be the main character or one of the many ingredients in the scene's stew. She began the painting in 1937, a few months into her twenties, and shortly after she'd met her soon-to-be lover Max Ernst. Five years later, by which time Ernst had left her for Peggy Guggenheim, she relocated to Mexico, where she'd spend most of her remaining sixty-nine years. Gusts of activity and passivity blow through her biography; one feels them in this painting, too. The seated figure's glare advertises control of everything around her: the hyena to her right, the wooden rocking horse above her, the actual horse seen through the draped window behind her. Her right hand is raised, as though we've interrupted her in mid-abracadabra, but her left rests on her chair with a peculiar tensed caution.

If you didn't know what gravity was and had only "Self-Portrait" to guide you, you might guess that it tugs downward but gets bored easily. Carrington could be sitting in her chair or barely touching it, the way that the rocking horse could be attached to the wall or just hovering nearby. It's the room itself, the calm Euclidean certainties of reddish floor tiles and bluish walls, that makes these mysteries palpable. You can get used to the hyena, the most conspicuously Surrealist thing about this painting, but the room refuses to be tamed. Notice, for instance, the smudge on the lower left-hand side, where there should be more tiles; Carrington seems to have painted something there, reconsidered, and moved on without bothering to paint the floor back, though doing so probably wouldn't have taken more than a few minutes. It's the strangest part of the image by far, if not the strangest thing a Surrealist ever painted: ordinary, three-dimensional space that could be occupied by anything, at any time. The world that the finest Surrealists succeeded in illustrating, in short, is the one we've always lived in. We still have a hard time noticing. ♦

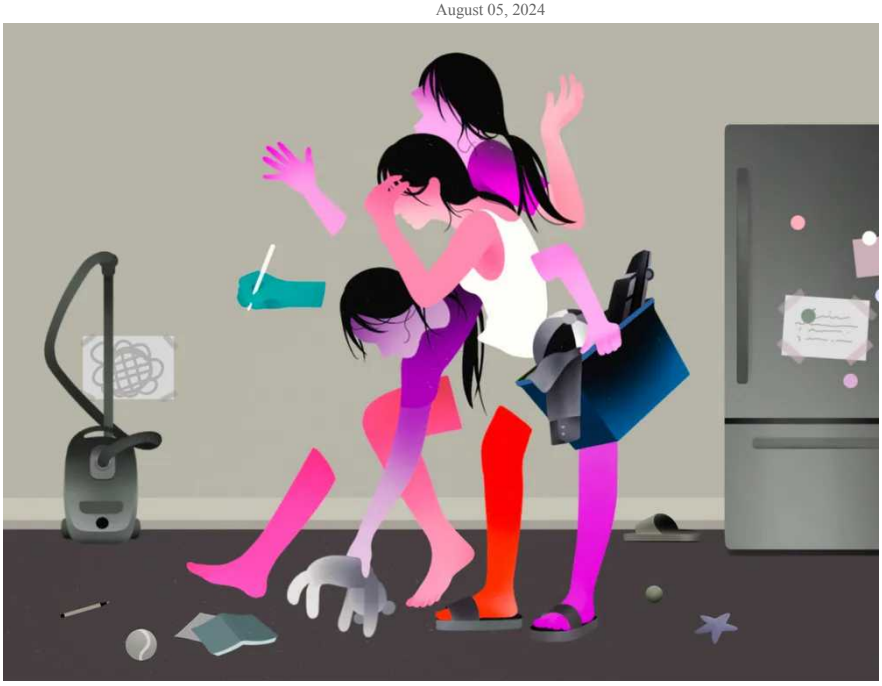
Books

Is the End of Marriage the Beginning of Self-Knowledge?

In “Liars,” Sarah Manguso presents divorce as a way for women to reassert an essential identity that’s been effaced by coercive social scripts.

By Parul Sehgal

August 05, 2024



Sex, like hemlines, follows fashions of its own, if novels are to be believed. The eighteen-hundreds was the peak era for the covert carriage assignation, and early-twentieth-century fiction revelled in sex al fresco—leave your britches on the riverbank, step right in for your marshy and mystical Lawrentian communion. The nineteen-sixties saw some awestruck, and genuinely ghastly, odes to anal sex by Norman Mailer and James Salter (from “A Sport and a Pastime”: “She rolls over and in the full daylight he slowly inserts this gleaming declaration”). Sadism bordering on snuff was all the rage in the nineties, in the work of Dennis Cooper, Heather Lewis, and Susanna Moore. In the past decade, in what has been called the “millennial sex novel,” masochism had a heyday, as sad-eyed young women

in books by Sally Rooney, Miranda Popkey, and Raven Leilani slouched forward with plaintive appeals to be hit and hurt, just a little.

And lately? Lately, our heroines can't keep their hands off themselves. The signature sex act du jour might be the furtive solo session, at least according to new novels such as Miranda July's "All Fours," Eva Baltasar's "Mammoth," and Kimberly King Parsons's "We Were the Universe." "It's not that I want to masturbate in the vestibule of the Tiny Toads gymnastics class, specifically," the narrator of Parsons's novel confesses—and yet. These scenes are very often fun, filthy, hot, and, frankly, a relief after so much doleful, droopy coupling. It might be overkill to mine them for meaning, but their significance feels overt: these self-sufficient women star in stories that are very often about self-understanding, about locating and reasserting an essential identity that's drowning beneath the commotion of work and family life. It's been the mood of the moment, to judge by the best-seller lists, on which July's novel is one of many books about the marital crises of white women in their forties. Memoirs by Leslie Jamison, Maggie Smith, and Lyz Lenz revise the well-worn story in which art-making and child rearing are pitted against each other. Babies, it turns out, have been falsely accused; babies, these writers suggest, were never really to blame. It was the husbands all along—husbands who were useless with the children and domestic duties, who themselves needed constant care, whose envy of their wives' professional success could drip a slow stream of poison into the marriage. In "Splinters," Jamison recounts preparing for a nineteen-city book tour. Her husband at the time, also a writer, once told her, "I'll be damned if I'm going to stand there holding your purse."

Jane, they're singing your song. The narrator of Sarah Manguso's new novel, "Liars" (Hogarth), lies awake next to her husband, dully, resentfully making herself come. "*The smell of a woman's cunt on her own fingers*, I wrote in my notebook that night. It felt important," she tells us. This is what passes for epiphany for the solemn, solitary Jane, who searches for self-knowledge in a woebegone key. She is in full wilt, exhausted by trying (and failing) to balance full-time parenthood with her work as a writer and a teacher, to say nothing of her constant itinerancy; she and her husband, John, move six times in eight years, as he founds (or is fired from) a series of businesses. Feckless, beautiful John. Jane desires him terribly—his heavy limbs and cedar smell, his "raucous black bloom of pubic hair"—even as he

squanders their money, even as he refuses to touch her. In the next room, she can hear him on the phone with another woman. Told in tight vignettes, gusts of fury, the novel is not so much the story of the slow implosion of a marriage over the years as it is the black box found amid its wreckage, a play-by-play accounting, from Jane's point of view, of her own annihilation.

You'll recognize Jane. She's a familiar Manguso character—laconic, deadpan, elaborately controlled (at least at first)—if not a version of the author herself. Manguso's middle name is Jane, and their lives overlap; several events in the novel have shown up in Manguso's first memoir, "The Two Kinds of Decay" (2008), and in her autobiographical book "Ongoingness: The End of a Diary" (2015). The similarities don't feel hidden or coy. Manguso has spoken of her husband abruptly leaving her, in 2020, and she gives John elements of his background and similar artistic ambitions.

John worries about becoming a footnote in Jane's biography. "He said he didn't want to be the unsuccessful partner of the successful person," she says. "Then he apologized and said that he'd just wanted to be honest. I said, *It was brave and considerate to tell me*." Unlike Jamison's memoir, in which we see a loving relationship turn sour, "Liars" makes the rot in this marriage visible from the beginning. John does not conceal his insecurity or entitlement. Jane, in turn, admits her contempt: "I noticed that he used the word *phenomena* as a singular noun, couldn't spell the word *necessary*, couldn't write a coherent paragraph. Next to him, I was brilliant. Next to me, he was beautiful, charming, and initially capable of hiding all the things that, in my wrinkly little heart, made me consider him inferior." His haplessness confounds her. A framed picture falls on the floor one day and shatters. After sweeping up, John jokes, "*Being an adult is really annoying*." "Had he never swept a floor?" Jane wonders. "I tucked away the little shard of the day because I couldn't imagine that it could be true, that he would actually think what he appeared to be thinking." In "Liars," Jane empties her pockets and lets fall more than a decade's worth of painstakingly hoarded splinters and shards. She begins to tally: "By noon I'd showered, dressed, tidied the house of John's shoes and clothes, put away laundry, swept the floor, watered the garden, moved boxes to the garage, cooked breakfast, eaten, done the dishes, taken out the recycling, handled correspondence, and made the bed. John had gotten up and taken a shit."

The book is a balance sheet. Jane documents a few serious, even scary episodes. She slaps him; he shoves her. On one occasion, he is found drunk, passed out on a sidewalk; a terrified and heavily pregnant Jane mops up his vomit and tries to sleep on the floor of the emergency room as he is scanned for a brain bleed. The majority of the incidents, however, are what the writer Dawn Powell described as the "pinpricks" of domestic life. John washes most but not all of the dishes. John does the dishes, but he puts the refillable seltzer bottles in the dishwasher and melts them. John forgets to clean the cutting boards. John forgets to buy the muesli. John arrives late to parties and forgets the gifts. John buys another stack of comic books and spends too much money on cheese again. John promises to vacuum but pleads back spasms. John spends forty dollars on sushi. John promises to be home before eleven o'clock to fuck Jane; at eleven o'clock, Jane, alone at home, begins washing the dishes.

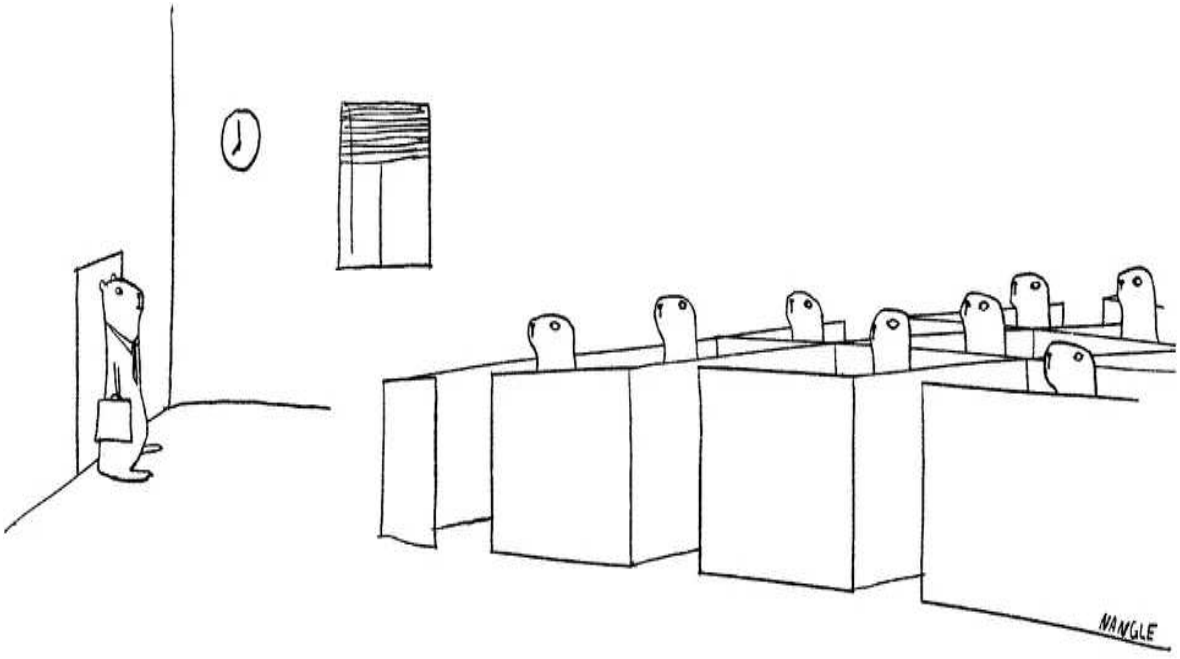
Virtuous Jane! Jane spot-cleans, area-cleans, rage-cleans, and nurses the baby seven times. Jane plays Mozart for the child. Jane plays "Rhapsody in Blue" for the child. Jane makes origami polyhedra with the child. Jane kneads two batches of cookie dough—after her hysterectomy! Jane packs and unpacks their belongings, hires and fires babysitters. Jane gets John's phone turned back on after he forgets to pay his bill. Jane makes herself come, again. Jane roasts carrots. Jane, pointedly, does not include any information that challenges or complicates her version of events.

John's surname—Bridges—recalls Evan S. Connell's paired novels, "Mrs. Bridge" (1959) and "Mr. Bridge" (1969), which tell the story of a marriage from the perspective of each half of a deeply repressed Midwestern couple. The books have provided a template of sorts for recent fiction like "Fleishman Is in Trouble" and "Fates and Furies," in which we get the husband's and the wife's interpretations, each of them annotating the other's story. "Liars," however, belongs only to Jane. It is her aria—of laundry loads and slights—as she repeats the details of her life back to herself in disbelief: "Every day I had to write it all down again so I could see it all in one place, but it didn't sink in. I kept having to say the same things over and over."

Why do you stay? a neighbor asks, listening to her litany. After a screaming fight, after John admits that he cannot contribute to the joint bank account that month, after Jane cries "from the deepest part of the pain tank," she

admits, “I understood why people divorce.” The reader’s heart lifts—see Jane run?—but then drops, realizing that there are more than two hundred pages to go. Eventually, it’s John who will leave, for another woman, and Jane who will beg him to stay.

“Liars” was not a novel Manguso intended to write. She had a contract for a different book, a long-planned study of whiteness and migration to New England, marrying history, sociology, and her own family’s story. She has approached such topics before, in her novel “Very Cold People” (2022), which explores the wages of secrecy around sexual violation in a small Massachusetts town. Writers are often encouraged to find their voices, but it has always been Manguso’s silences that have felt distinctive—she is a sculptor of omission, distinguishing what has not been said from what cannot be said. Negative space is a key feature of her form. In “The Two Kinds of Decay,” she describes undergoing treatment for a rare neurological disease, during which her blood plasma was removed and replaced more than fifty times. “I was brought upstairs from Emergency to Intensive Care and given a treatment called *apheresis*,” she writes. “From the Greek *aphairein*, to take away. In the hematological context, apheresis is the process of separating blood into its components (red cells, white cells, platelets, plasma), removing the component that’s sick.” Much of Manguso’s writing pursues a similar effect in its calm, cool fragmentation, which slows down the narration and allows her to carve away as much as she can in order to isolate pure states of being. “Ongoingness” is a distillation of her eight-hundred-thousand-word diary, less interested in preserving a record than in capturing the essence of the desire to preserve. Her collection “300 Arguments” (2017) is even more compressed, comprising mostly aphorisms (“inner beauty can fade, too”), just the lines Manguso imagines being underlined in a much longer book.



“Liars” seems, at first, like a departure from her aloof, even icy work of the past. Here the writing scalds and gives the appearance of holding nothing back. But key omissions are, in fact, central to its architecture. John’s version of events—his intentions and perspective—is entirely absent. Jane does not seem to entertain them, nor does Manguso. There is a strange lack of motive in the book. We receive blurry, shifting notions of why the couple act as they do: why they married, why they hurt each other. Instead, from the opening lines, from the very names—John and Jane—there is a sense of a universal story being unfurled, a fable. “In the beginning I was only myself,” Jane says. “Everything that happened to me, I thought, was mine alone. Then I married a man, as women do. My life became archetypal, a drag show of nuclear familyhood. I got enmeshed in a story that had already been told ten billion times.”

A woman marries, and she steps into—and is effaced by—a story and a script. There are no choices to interrogate, no motive to examine; the why is a given. It is patriarchy. Even Jane’s desire for her husband, the thing that binds her to him, is beyond her volition. It is biology. Her body wants him, despite herself. She is commandeered by her ever-optimistic eggs, her hormones: “I ovulated hard, as I always did then. I ovulated like a mother. Every time John was kind to me, my body immediately responded. It wanted me to get pregnant again.” To ask why she stays, why she suffers, borders on

offense. “No married woman I knew was any better off, so I was determined to carry on,” she says. “I was exactly as angry as every other woman I knew. It wasn’t that we’d been born angry; we’d become women and ended up angry. Anger is one of the last privileges of the truly helpless. Infants are angry.”

Manguso presents Jane’s logic not as a curiosity, not as intriguingly unreliable narration, but as primal truth. The book is called “Liars” because both husband and wife are lying; Jane, Manguso suggests, lies to conceal her exploitation and abuse from herself. A reader could be forgiven for thinking that Jane is also lying to herself about her own impulses. When a journalist visits her for an interview, she is strangely compelled to sexually service him. “Even though I wasn’t attracted to him and would have been disgusted if I’d had to kiss him, having an unfamiliar cock in the house made me want to suck and fuck it. I couldn’t tell if the urge was entirely separate from my habit of locating any nearby need for emotional labor and immediately fulfilling it, but it didn’t matter. Either way, when an entire civilization tells you that you owe that cock a good suck and fuck, it isn’t a personal failure when you give in. You’ve been coerced.”

What is this vision of womanhood, of sexually indiscriminate infants running households? For all her subtlety, Manguso has always evinced a tendency to make broad, sometimes crude generalizations, to break the world into types. In “Very Cold People,” characters lose any sense of individuality or inner life after experiencing abuse—they become lumped together as “all the Waitsfield girls,” reduced to the sheer fact of a suffering that seems not merely inevitable but ordained. Such simplification shaded into something uglier in “The Two Kinds of Decay.” Manguso describes one of her doctors bungling a procedure, writing, with rage and disgust, about his clumsiness, his body odor. She never names him, but he provides the chapter heading: “The Sikh.” My breath catches every time I recall it, her easy, unembarrassed way of not only reducing the man to his identity but having his identity announce the chapter, float over it, as if to explain his incompetence, his smell.

Manguso’s secret weapon has always been the sudden, blunt moment of self-implication—her disappointment, for example, in her first memoir, when she realizes that her illness has not made her a better person but, rather,

transformed her into a monster of entitlement. That book, however, was written after seven years of remission. “Liars” seems to have been written in the heat of the crisis. “The blood jet” is what Sylvia Plath called her sudden outpouring of poetry after Ted Hughes left her for another woman. But novels require different fuel; among their essential ingredients are doubt and time. This book, in its blazing assurance, tells a thin and partial tale, frayed by silences that feel more like blind spots than like the canny omissions of old. A writer, lancing and fluent on what cannot be said, founders here in her inability to reckon with what she has yet to see.

Signed and sealed, “Liars” is almost impenetrable in its self-conviction—but there is a clue to understanding it, embedded in the acknowledgments. Manguso thanks the cartoonist Tracy Schorn “and the life-saving community of Chump Nation,” an online network of people who follow Schorn’s writing on infidelity. Manguso became a daily visitor to their forums after her husband left her; it was, she said on Schorn’s podcast, her therapy. The group shares a particular vocabulary and framework for understanding infidelity. The betrayed party is “the chump,” the cheater is a “fuckwit,” and the cheating partner is, incredibly, “the schmoopie.” A chump minimizing a fuckwit’s harm is said to be engaged in “spackling.” For the chump to compete with the schmoopie for the fuckwit’s attention is to do the “pick-me dance.” To try to understand the cheater’s motivation is to be entangled in “the skein of crazy.” Chump Nation has a mission to reframe cheating as abuse and to push back against “the reconciliation-industrial complex.” “Lose a cheater, gain a life” is the motto.

These steely certainties, swaddled in baby talk and baby thinking, are the unfortunate scaffolding of “Liars,” which employs language not of harm, hurt, or humiliation but of domestic abuse. “It’s the critical mass of details that makes John’s abuse impossible to deny,” Manguso said on the podcast. “We need to get specific when we talk about covert domestic abuses.” Heterosexual marriage itself is regarded as only questionably consensual. “We are impelled to make this bad choice,” Manguso added. “The entire civilization is screaming it at us . . . from the cradle.”

A little proportion, please. As the product of generations of arranged marriages, a number of them coerced, I find that such claims feel strange, if not obscene. It’s not merely that bandying around these neon words—abuse,

coercion—dilutes their power; it's that these words are being deployed to foreclose thought and impose silences of their own. Chump Nation cautions against posing too many questions about why someone cheats, about marital dynamics or psychology, to avoid revictimizing the chump. The finality of such diagnoses stunts Manguso's account, keeps it from becoming a more persuasive story, where we would genuinely feel for and trust the protagonist, experience the full measure of her loss and exploitation. There are occasional glimpses of a more complex portrait. (Manguso is too interesting a writer to hew completely to the program.) "Being ignored—was that my trigger?" Jane wonders, considering an old pattern with John. "For rage and, somehow, also, for desire? *It turns me on when you ignore me*." Later, when considering her own decisions, her orientation toward freedom or constraint, she admits to herself, "I was a logical person, and I chose restriction, over and over, because it felt good."

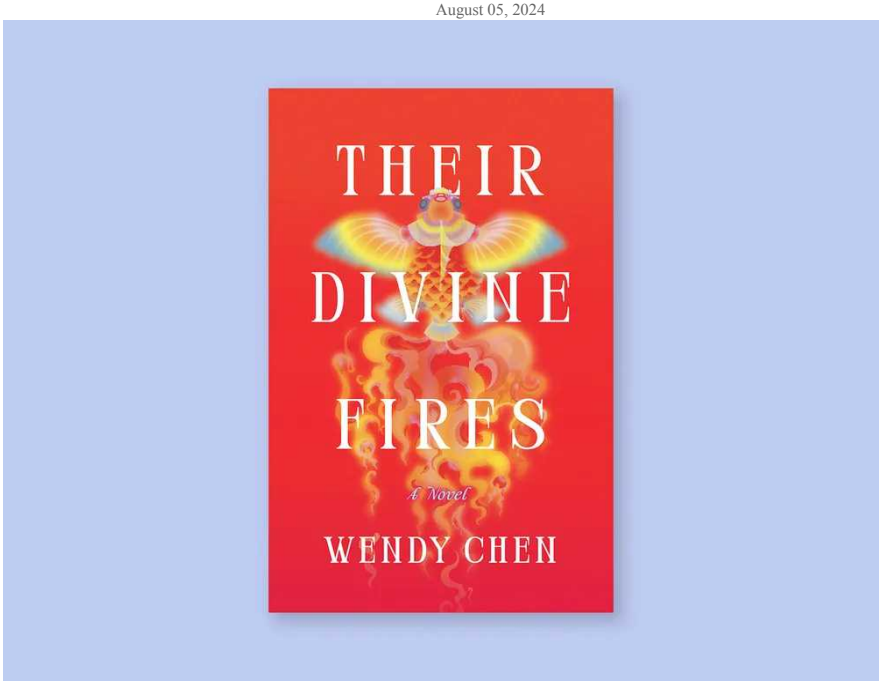
"Is the end of the marriage plot the beginning of a woman's self-knowledge?" the writer Joanna Biggs, reflecting on her recent book about divorce, "A Life of One's Own," asked in the *Guardian*. It can be, Biggs finds, if an individual can embrace plotlessness for a time, if she is willing to reëxamine her premises and her path, to think. To do so, to try to understand, is not an act of exoneration but an act of attention. And attention, as Manguso noted in her first memoir, is "suffering's lesson." "*Pay attention*," she wrote. "The important part might come in a form you do not recognize." Stay alert, stay inquisitive. Don't just trade one lie for another. Don't be *that* chump. ♦

Books

Briefly Noted

“Fifteen Cents on the Dollar,” “Jane Austen and the Price of Happiness,” “Swift River,” and “Their Divine Fires.”

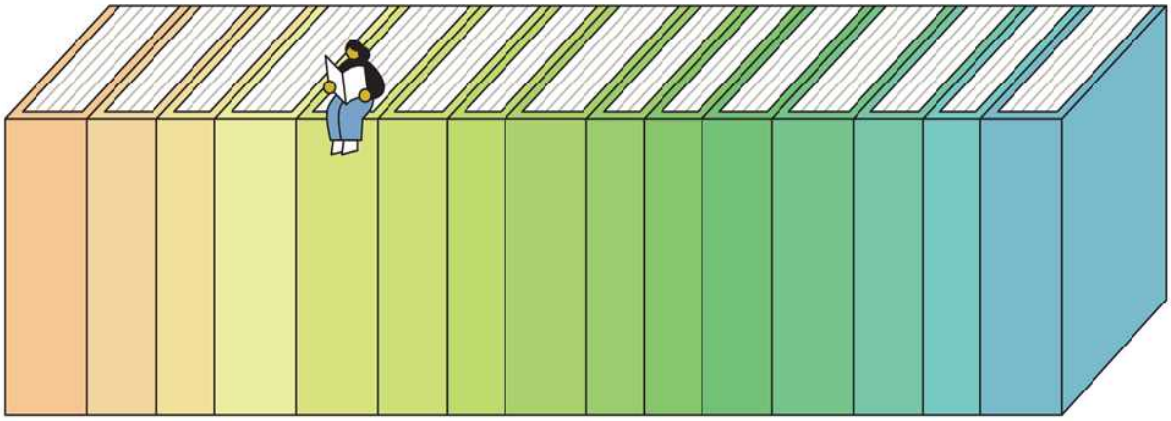
August 05, 2024



Fifteen Cents on the Dollar, *by Louise Story and Ebony Reed (Harper)*. The title of this deeply researched book points to the authors' sobering calculation that, for every dollar of wealth that a typical white family has, a typical Black family has about fifteen cents. The writers attribute this stark gap to, among other culprits, the 2008 financial crisis, predatory lending practices, discrimination, and risk-based pricing models used by the insurance industry. Focussing on Atlanta, Story and Reed relate the lives of several residents, including a former president of the Georgia N.A.A.C.P. and the son of a man shot by a police officer, to elucidate both the Black-white wealth gap and the "Black-Black wealth gap"—the divide between wealthy Black Atlantans and their poorer counterparts.

Jane Austen and the Price of Happiness, *by Inger Sigrun Bredkjær Brodey (Johns Hopkins)*. This astute treatise by an Austen scholar questions the deep association in popular culture between the beloved writer's work and happy endings. Although the heroines of Austen's six novels marry well—and, crucially, for love—Brodey argues that the author's use of irony, rushed pacing, and narrative elision and intrusion undermine the marriage plot. Amid the continued adoration of Austen's œuvre, Brodey's observations are a reminder of the ways in which fandom can unintentionally smooth out the rougher, more interesting edges of complex art.

What We're Reading



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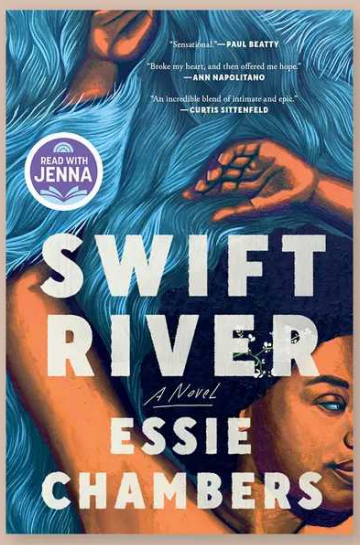
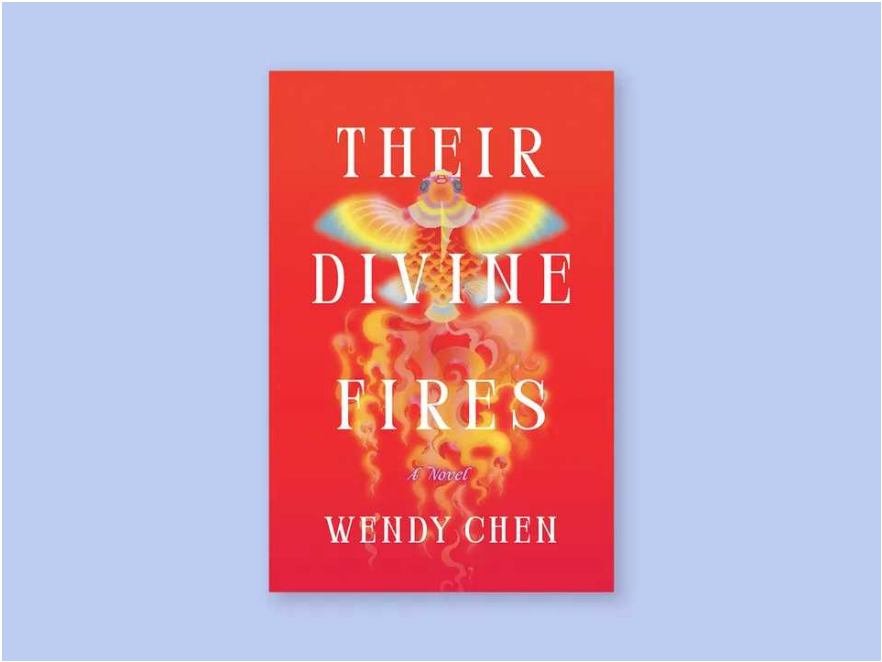


Swift River, *by Essie Chambers (Simon & Schuster)*. Diamond, the teen-age narrator of this powerful début novel set in the nineteen-eighties, is the only

Black person in her New England mill town, where she lives with her mother. Diamond wrestles with the memory of her father, with ordinary teen angst, and—after she receives a letter from a long-lost aunt—with a rupture in the town's past: the expulsion, seven decades earlier, of the community's Black residents. Throughout, Chambers's sharply observed characters butt up against one another in funny and poignant ways. Diamond's unexpected friendship with another girl propels the story in surprising directions, but it is Diamond's fraught relationship with her mother that forms the heart of this ultimately hopeful coming-of-age story.



Their Divine Fires, *by Wendy Chen (Algonquin)*. This story of emotional inheritances begins in China in 1927, when a young woman named Yunhong marries the man of her dreams, the son of a wealthy lord. The wedding takes place on the eve of the Civil War, which will dramatically shape her fate, and that of the rest of her family. Spanning four generations and two continents, Chen's novel draws extensively on folklore, incorporating dragons, tigers, and "hungry ghosts"—restless spirits whose untimely deaths condemn them to wander the earth forever. The narrative, told from the perspectives of Yunhong and her female descendants, examines how children raised in households with unspoken traumas become haunted by the holes in their family histories.

Books

Deals with the Devil Aren’t What They Used to Be

Tales of Faust’s bargain teased and consoled an earlier culture with the lure of freedom, the promise of a wider world. But Hell is everywhere now.

By James Wood

August 05, 2024

How many who piously lament the “disenchantment” of the secular world would have been able to bear ordinary life in, say, seventeenth-century Europe? We are bereft, the elegy goes, because modern knowledge has stripped us of ancient magic. We can’t wander like our ancestors in the spirit-filled woods, or hear the music of the spheres, because the sacred spaces became concrete deserts. The cathedrals were displaced by malls. To “understand” the solar system, the charge continues, is to be dead to it. No longer open to the pressing torque of divinities and djinns, we moderns are closed off and shut down, buffered and buttressed, marching efficiently through our merely material world, grim-faced assassins of mystery.

But consider for a moment the nature of those early modern supernaturalisms. In a classic study, "Religion and the Decline of Magic" (1971), Keith Thomas patiently restored, parish record by parish record, the old enchanted English world of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For most people, life was a business of terrifying external forces and arbitrary powers, both spiritual and legal. Credulity cut both ways: when religion was still magical, and magic was still religious, then both were supported by alarming superstition. Prayers were also placatory spells, and harmless charismatics might well be witches. The local doctor was really just a helpless conjurer, while the lazy village priest got endowed with unwarranted godlike powers. Thomas is particularly good at depicting the centrality of the Devil in ordinary life. Medieval Christianity was effectively Manichaean. Christ and his angels battled for your salvation, while the Devil and his many demonic spirits sought to trick and tempt, to pull you into their infernal kingdom. King James I called the Devil "God's hangman." Demons had no bodily presence, Thomas writes, but it was understood that they could borrow a human form. Preachers spiced up their sermons with frightening reports of abduction and deception.

In England, the Protestant Reformation of the early sixteenth century did nothing to ameliorate this regime. Protestantism's obsession with human sinfulness and the arbitrariness of salvation exposed the self only more acutely to the battleground of warring deities. For Martin Luther, who famously threw his inkpot at the Devil, Satan was as elemental and omnipresent as excrement. (Luther essentially told Satan to eat shit.) Keith Thomas tells the story of an English boy who, for five or six years, "went to sleep with his hands clasped in a praying position, so that if the devils came for him they would find him prepared." This is the world brilliantly evoked in Daniel Kehlmann's novel "Tyll" (2017), set in early-seventeenth-century Germany, in which Claus, a village miller who has been dabbling in magic and necromancy, is quickly forced to confess by Jesuit inquisitors and sentenced to hang. Claus humbly accepts that he's done something wrong, though he doesn't know what it is. The local hangman reassures him that execution is much nicer than it used to be: "These are better days. In the past you were all burned to death. That takes time, it's not pleasant. But hanging is nothing. It happens quickly. You climb onto the scaffold and before you know it, you're standing before the Creator. You're incinerated afterward,

but by then you're dead, it doesn't bother you at all, you'll see." "Good," the unlucky Claus replies.

It was a logical step from this apprehension of the Devil to the suspicion that certain people had done deals and bargains with him, selling their immortal souls for worldly benefits. My favorite of the many stories that Thomas recounts involves a student at Cambridge University, who was struggling to understand one of his scholarly texts. The Devil appeared in the guise of a Master of Arts, who elucidated the text and offered the student a trip to Italy and a degree from the University of Padua. "Two days later," we learn, "the hapless student's gown was found floating in the river," the student having paid a rather steep price for a spot of academic help.

These kinds of tales, as Ed Simon explores in his lively new book, "Devil's Contract: The History of the Faustian Bargain" (Melville House), existed as myths that enacted both resistance and control. A cowed culture flirted with the danger of freedom and blasphemous knowledge—literally, the danger of reading the wrong things—while the shape of the Faustian tale almost always enforced the proper religious and social punishment, in the form of Faust's death and eternal damnation. Reading Simon, I was often put in mind of the English critic Tony Tanner's observation that the nineteenth-century novel of adultery wrote judgment but dreamed transgression. The Faustian tale teased and consoled an earlier culture in similar ways. In these stories, knowledge itself functions a bit like the heroine's extramarital affair in the novel of adultery. It's the lure of freedom, the understandable temptation, the promise of a wider world (Emma Bovary imagining the streets and shops of Paris). In Christopher Marlowe's play "Doctor Faustus," written at the end of the sixteenth century, the Devil gets Faustus, who has a doctorate from the University of Wittenberg and is bored with the standard academic disciplines, to sign a contract in his own blood. For twenty-four years, Faustus can have whatever he desires. He gets to dabble in magic, to meet the seven deadly sins, to make himself invisible and play tricks on the Pope's court in Rome, even to conjure up Helen of Troy. For twenty-four years, he flies high, and views the world as if he were one of God's spies (to steal a phrase from a certain rival playwright). But, when the time is up, there's only one possible outcome. He must pay for his expensive error. In the final scene, the devils arrive to cart Faustus off to Hell.

Simon is especially alive to the transgressive. To begin his account, he reaches back to the Bible, and locates two early Faustian stories that shimmer with peril. Each exists on the sharp edge between orthodoxy and doubt. The first concerns Simon Magus, or Simon the Sorcerer, a trickster and Gnostic chancer who appears briefly in the New Testament's Book of Acts. Simon was a kind of rival Messiah, who had been claiming miraculous powers from God. Obsessed with the actual spiritual powers of Jesus' apostles Peter and John, Simon offered them money, in exchange for knowledge of the Holy Ghost. Scandalized, Peter and John denounced Simon's false heart, and commanded him to repent. In other, less canonical, texts of this period, stories are told in which Simon moved to Rome, where he founded a cult with his lover Helen, a reformed prostitute. Perhaps, other accounts suggest, Simon promised to levitate over the rooftops of Rome, and was brought down by Peter's furious orthodox prayers—what Ed Simon (a relation to the Magus only in his own pleasing addiction to dangerous knowledge) nicely calls a kind of "prayer battle." An angry crowd subsequently stoned the Magus to death.

Ed Simon's second early tale is more canonical, but its designation as Faustian might be more controversial—it's the story of Christ's temptation in the wilderness, when the Devil comes to entice Jesus with the fruits of worldly power. If you are hungry, the Devil teases, turn these stones into bread; you surely have the magical power. Jesus, in his usual style, replies gnomically, converting material advantages into spiritual ones: man does not live on bread alone. The Devil tries again. He shows Jesus "all of the kingdoms of the world," offering him all earthly power if Jesus will bow down to him. Jesus again rejects material gain, and finally banishes the tempter: Satan is not the real God, because there is only one God; the Devil doesn't have the best tunes.

In these two early stories lie most of the subsequent Faustian motifs: the temptations of knowledge and power; the bargaining away of more distant spiritual gains for nearer material ones; the almost symmetrical rivalry of good and evil forces; the taint of the commercial or contractual bond; the picaresque flights through time and space; even the odd obsession with exciting women called Helen. More interesting still is the note of blasphemous danger: in this way, these stories function like theological safety valves.

The Simon Magus tale is perilously perched on the narrow base between magical faith and religious faith. As a narrative, it merely insists on the orthodoxy of the latter over the former, with all the arbitrariness of the horticulturist who denominates some alluring plant as a weed rather than a flower. Simon Magus is sometimes called the founder of Gnosticism, which was an early Christian heresy, a kind of Manichaeism that posited that the world we live in is really the creation of a rival or false god, a diabolical Demiurge. So, as Ed Simon shrewdly notes, we might see Simon Magus's desired pact as one made not with the Devil but with the Devil-in-Chief, "that equally malevolent deity known as God." Theology gathers its cassock skirts and anxiously casts Simon out as a magician or a sorcerer. But on what basis? Note that Jesus, though he banishes the Devil, does not, or cannot, vanquish him: an essentially Manichaean world continues to breathe all around the Messiah. Indeed, long before Jesus arrived on the scene, the Book of Job had depicted God flippantly agreeing to a deal with Satan, in order to test Job's righteousness, as if God and the Devil were two buddies killing time at a bar, dabbling in destruction.

A story is essentially just a rather entitled hypothesis; inherently and unstably suggestive, story is always offering up the ghosts of its shadowy alternatives. This becomes very interesting when stories are at all theological. In these cases, the "What if?" is potentially blasphemous. What if Jesus had become the first Faust, by succumbing to the Devil's successful temptation? Equally, the existence of this story puts some pressure on the notion of Jesus' divinity. Humans are susceptible to temptation, and of course Jesus was also human, but shouldn't God be above or beyond such things? The Faustian tale is always a diabolically theological one, an orthodox tale with doubt, risk, and disobedience at its center. So the truly diabolical temptation might be not the one depicted in these stories but the one the story *as story* teases: the reader's own religious surety. Ed Simon makes the point nicely: whether you sell your soul to Satan or to God, "you've still sold your soul."

The Faustian tale is one of those myths that allow a culture to project its anxieties and desires. The celebrated historian of the novel's rise, Ian Watt, counted the Faustian bargain, along with the tales of Robinson Crusoe, Don Juan, and Don Quixote, as four great "myths of modern individualism," in a book of that title published in 1996. Watt's emphasis falls on the Faustian

myth as a religious culture's way of maintaining theological and social order. He makes the point that Protestantism (and, of course, Christianity generally) had a need to enforce the discipline of delayed gratification. Since "one had to make people believe that pleasure in this world must bring pain in the next," what better than a popular story that taught the ultimate dangers of sacrificing the eternal afterlife for the fleeting pleasures of this worldly existence? Ed Simon, though, tends to see the Faustian myth as more liberatory than punitive. He enjoys its heresies and dangers, its madcap adventures, the magical-realist wildness; and, since he has read extremely widely, he relishes sharing all of that narrative wealth with his lucky readers.

With his help, we can make out the tale's distinct historical phases. Myths about the dangers of knowledge (Pandora, Genesis) may be as old as humanity, but the Faustian tale as such really gets going only in the early modern period, when magic, necromancy, and sorcery became intellectual options for educated humanists while remaining potentially heretical choices as far as the established church was concerned. A man with the last name of Faust seems to have existed somewhere in Germany in the late fifteenth century. Perhaps he was an alchemist or a theological student, or both; perhaps he was from Heidelberg, or Roda, or Knittlingen. Simon mentions a record from 1507, in which Faust is an itinerant monk and "the prince of necromancers." This Faust may have been sacked from a teaching position owing to "nefarious fornication." From these modest beginnings, the myth balloons. The German Lutheran reformer Philip Melanchthon told of a Faust who tried to do a Simon Magus over the rooftops of Venice, crashing to his death in a canal. In 1548, Johannes Gast wrote about a Faust who had played tricks on a group of monks by introducing a poltergeist into the monastery. The Frankfurt "Faustbuch" of 1587, a highly popular collection of themed stories which became Marlowe's source, told the story of Faust's infernal contract.

These roomy tales could accommodate a lot of narrative baggage—Faust's journeying across Europe, plenty of ribald comedy, easy racism. As with most stories concerning tricksters and con men, the tales existed as ways of desiring and demonizing a marked outsider. Faust could be considered heretical (though perhaps lovably or sympathetically so), whereas the Devil's emissary or broker (ultimately named Mephistopheles) might be a "hellish prince of Orient," or—of course—a seductive Jew. Great pleasure

was had in imagining Faust's inevitably sticky end: he might have been suffocated by Satan, hurled to the ground, or found with his head twisted violently backward.

Gradually, the tale's strict theological obsessions were supplanted by a more general interest in the temptation of knowledge itself. Marlowe's Faustus belongs quite explicitly to an academic setting—he has students, for instance, who ask him if he can summon the apparition of Helen of Troy. (He obliges: the ultimate PowerPoint.) In Goethe's fairly incoherent verse play "Faust," written in two parts between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the protagonist is an elderly scholar, and Mephistopheles appears in the guise of a wandering student. In the second part of the play, published in 1832, Goethe jettisons the orthodox punishments of the canonical accounts and has Faust sweetly ascend to Heaven: in the nineteenth century, the old theology is becoming romantically weightless.

Once the doctrinal dilemmas had been hollowed out, the tale could expand itself into the figurative, and become what it was always ready to be: not so much a story about the loss of an eternal soul as an allegory about any kind of painful exchange in which short-term gain threatens long-term security. Ed Simon, roaming far and wide with his own appealingly Faustian energies, points to the Brothers Grimm fairy tale "Rumpelstiltskin" (their version was published in 1812) as an example of this new, de-theologized Faustian fable: the eponymous imp does a deal with a miller's daughter, in which he spins straw into gold for her, and secures, in return, her promise that he can take her firstborn child. But she ultimately vanquishes the devilish fellow, and protects her progeny. Simon notes the enormous popularity of Faustian fables in the nineteenth century, characterized by something new: "the possibility of people being victorious against the cloven-hoofed one, of being more talented in the skills of wit and duplicity." Thomas Mann's great postwar novel "Doctor Faustus" (1947) takes the Faustian bargain and allegorizes the exchange into nothing less than the moral balance sheet of German history itself, as his Faust, the brilliant composer Adrian Leverkühn, bargains away his soul for twenty-four years of musical genius. Adrian started out as a theology student, but the stakes of Mann's novel are not, at heart, theological—Adrian has a maddening case of

syphilis, and that is the secular portal through which Mephistopheles makes his entry.

Today, Hell is here, inside us; it is not elsewhere. We're all Faustians now. These days, Simon argues, in an excoriating, eloquent final chapter, we write our contracts not in blood but in silicon—both figuratively, insofar as we sign away our identities and privacies for all the short-term benefits of material ease, and literally, whenever we scroll rapidly through one of those unreadable online contracts, eager only to assent. Somewhere out there in the ether, the ghost in the machine hears our weak little mouse clicks and pricks up his horns. ♦

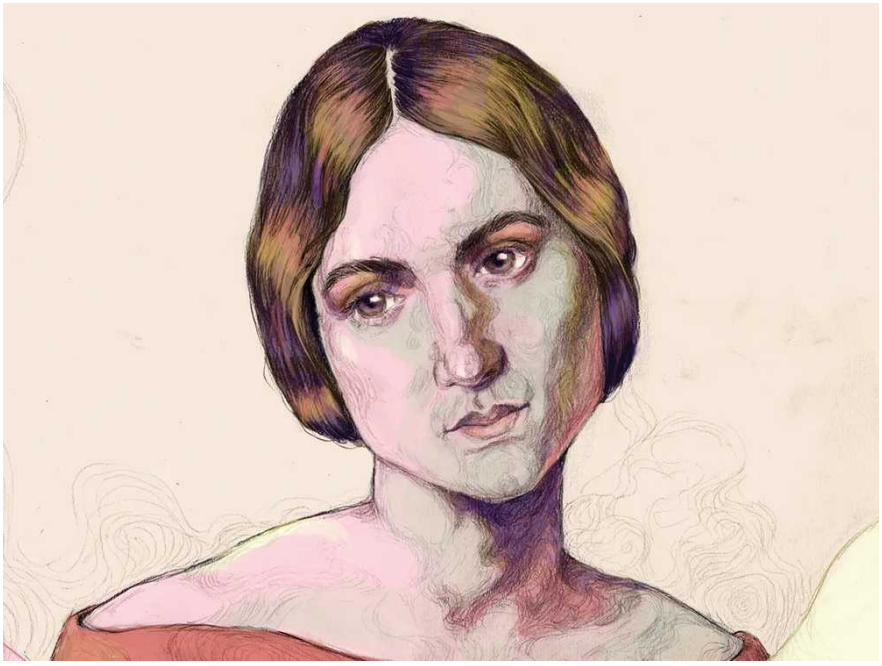
Musical Events

Two Centuries Later, a Female Composer Is Rediscovered

Carolina Uccelli's opera "Anna di Resburgo" was remarkably inventive—but it vanished after its première. Teatro Nuovo has brought it back to life.

By Alex Ross

August 05, 2024



"A secret appointment exists between past generations and our own," Walter Benjamin wrote. "Our arrival on earth was expected." At pivotal moments, the philosopher argued, voices from the past reach out to us with prophetic force, escaping oblivion as a result. The past is not a fixed, eternal image; it is shaped by present concerns.

A few years back, Will Crutchfield, the artistic director of the Teatro Nuovo opera company, happened upon the name of Carolina Uccelli, a Florentine composer, singer, and poet who lived from 1810 to 1858. Her opera "Anna di Resburgo" had its première in Naples, in 1835, and then dropped from sight. The idea that a woman had gained a foothold in the otherwise all-male

world of Italian operatic composition intrigued Crutchfield, and he got hold of the score. Convinced that it merited a second chance, he brought it to Teatro Nuovo. A pair of performances last month, at Montclair State University and at Jazz at Lincoln Center, proved him emphatically right. “Anna” is a formidable achievement for a composer in her mid-twenties. It feels like the slightly overstuffed but hugely promising early work of a major voice. The fact that Uccelli never completed another opera shows the extent to which musical history is influenced by forces that have little to do with innate talent.

Not much is known of Uccelli’s background, yet her precocious early songs —Teatro Nuovo offered several of them at a recital before the main event— suggest that she steeped herself in opera from a young age. In her late teens, she married a noted surgeon, Filippo Uccelli, who believed in her talent and helped further her career. She obtained a testimonial from Rossini, who praised her “expressiveness and elegance in declamation and melody.” Her first opera, “Saul,” now lost, had some success. “Anna,” however, was a flop, and the reason is woefully clear: the plot, set among warring families in the Scottish Lowlands, too closely resembled that of Donizetti’s “Lucia di Lammermoor,” which had had a sensational première in Naples a month before “Anna” opened. Although Uccelli went on composing, her operatic dreams ended.

Bel-canto opera is governed by formulas. The overture should be capped by a relentlessly scampering Rossini crescendo. A slow cavatina gives way to an up-tempo cabaletta after someone enters with breaking news (the duke is dead, the duke is alive, etc.). Toward the end of the first act, everyone onstage stops short in hushed astonishment at some other turn of events. The tenor is often a nobleman on the run from malevolent forces; in “Anna,” he is Edemondo, falsely accused of killing his own father. At his side is a soprano who may or may not survive a labyrinth of intrigue. In this case, Anna, the fugitive’s wife, disguises herself as a shepherdess so that she can be near their child. The adversarial role usually belongs to the baritone— here, the rival potentate Norcesto, who knows that his own father committed the murder. The libretto was itself a familiar quantity; Meyerbeer had used it, in 1819, for his opera “Emma di Resburgo.”

Uccelli handles the formulas with ease, yet she does more than demonstrate proficiency. “Anna” gives the impression of a wide-ranging musical mind that possesses historical consciousness and experimental intelligence in equal measure. The overture begins with horns holding a spacious open fifth, as at the start of Beethoven’s Ninth. Some of the choral lines have a solemn contrapuntal richness that harks back to the Baroque. At the same time, the harmonic writing simmers with invention. During one recitative, Anna realizes that Olfredo—a landholder who has been sheltering her child—knows who she really is. Her shock is conveyed in a progression that pinballs from C-sharp major to A major by way of an E dominant seventh—a wacky jolt worthy of Berlioz.

At times, such idiosyncrasies become distracting. Like many a young artist, Uccelli can’t resist making things more complicated than they need to be; Anna’s chord changes seem to convey the composer’s restlessness more than the character’s. For the most part, though, Uccelli’s inspirations advance the story. In that same stretch of recitative, Olfredo’s steadying influence is evident in the way he tries to guide Anna back to B-flat major, the key in which her previous aria had ended. This flair for harmonic psychologizing particularly enhances the figure of Norcesto, who strives to project power while feeling tormented by the legacy of his father, now deceased. To the populace, he sings, “Come to the father, my dear ones, rejoice in peace, cast away fear.” In the middle of this utterance, the music dips from F major into C minor, giving his reassurances an ominous cast.

As Crutchfield points out in a program note, Uccelli significantly changed the libretto, creating a scene in which Norcesto undergoes a spiritual crisis. The setting is the cemetery where the antagonists’ fathers lie buried and where Edemondo is now scheduled to be executed. Before the ceremony begins—Uccelli writes a dire funeral march for the occasion, complete with a zombielike walking bass—Norcesto is haunted by a vision of the murdered man, who speaks to him through a solitary floating flute. Donizetti, as it happens, gave the flute a starring role at the climax of “Lucia,” in the title character’s mad scene. There, the instrument is an evocation of female helplessness. Here, in the hands of a female composer, the flute unravels male guilt. When, at the end, Norcesto confesses his father’s crime, his change of heart no longer comes out of the blue, as it does in Meyerbeer.

Throughout, Uccelli's orchestration adds fascinating nuances to the narrative.

Even in a mediocre rendition, "Anna" would have revealed its worth, but the performance at Jazz at Lincoln Center, in the Rose Theatre, was an outright triumph. Chelsea Lehnea, a soprano with a gleaming upper register, radiated righteous force in the title role. Santiago Ballerini, in the somewhat underwritten part of Edemondo, sang with an idiomatic ache. Ricardo José Rivera evinced star quality as Norcesto, his chest voice resonant and his high notes brilliant. Lucas Levy and Elisse Albian lent vocal and emotional warmth to Olfredo and his daughter Etelia. All the singers supplied the kind of lively ornamentation that has long been a feature of Crutchfield's undertakings, first in the Bel Canto at Caramoor series and now at Teatro Nuovo. The orchestra, using period instruments, played fiercely and flavorfully under the direction of the violinist and conductor Elisa Citterio.

Crutchfield shies away from claiming too much for his discovery, writing, "I would not call 'Anna di Resburgo' a masterpiece, but it has exciting stretches that make me easily believe her fourth or fifth opera might have been one." Masterpiece or no, "Anna" holds its own against many well-travelled bel-canto operas of its era. It is, in some ways, a more tightly constructed work than Bellini's contemporaneous "I Capuleti e i Montecchi," which Teatro Nuovo also featured in its summer season. Above all, there was a sense of justice being done. The present kept its appointment with the past, and an overlooked talent stepped into the light.

The tremolo of excitement in the Rose Theatre reminded me of previous summertime glories there, under the aegis of the Mostly Mozart Festival and the Lincoln Center Festival. Yet Teatro Nuovo is independent of Lincoln Center, where the traditional performing arts have lost ground in recent years. All that remains of Mostly Mozart is the Festival Orchestra of Lincoln Center—the rare festival orchestra with no festival attached. The group's music director is Jonathon Heyward, an American-born, British-trained conductor who also leads the Baltimore Symphony. At his first two concerts, he came across as an elegant, thoughtful interpreter, but he lacked the zing that Louis Langrée brought to Mostly Mozart. Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony was lithe and lucid but oddly inert. Huang Ruo's "City of

Floating Sounds," an overlong study in slow-shifting atmospheres, was given a desultory run-through.

The Festival Orchestra season consists of seven programs over three weeks, with core-repertory works supplemented by more modern fare. Lincoln Center attempted to frame this modest array as a leap forward. Advance press proposed that Heyward's habit of wearing sneakers on the podium constituted a blow against élitism. The first concert, titled "Symphony of Choice," set forth a tasting menu of excerpts from forthcoming programs; concertgoers were invited to vote, via text, for their favorites. Before the Huang Ruo piece, audience members could go on a soundwalk, listening to a version of the score on their smartphones while proceeding from designated starting points toward Lincoln Center. (My group set out from the Eleanor Roosevelt Memorial, off Riverside Drive, with the ding-dings of irritated cyclists augmenting the texture.) All this smacked of trends that circulated in classical music fifteen or so years ago, when organizations were trying to get youngsters to blog or tweet about concerts. An institution that calls itself the "world's leading performing arts center" is lagging far behind.

Henry Timms, who became the president and C.E.O. of Lincoln Center in 2019 and led the way in downsizing its ambitions, has moved on, to the field of P.R. His successor, yet to be named, will need to restore vitality both to the summer schedule and to programming year-round. The throng that turned out for Teatro Nuovo showed that audiences are ready to be led into new realms. If we had been voting on our phones, no one would have suggested Uccelli. ♦

On Television

In “Lady in the Lake,” Ambition Is Everything

Natalie Portman stars in the Apple TV+ mystery as a sixties housewife who leaves her family for her career—and gets tangled up in a murder.

By Inkoo Kang

August 02, 2024

It’s fitting that the first time Maddie Schwartz and Cleo Johnson, the two women at the center of the stylish new murder mystery “Lady in the Lake,” lay eyes on each other, it’s through a department-store display window—that engine of female desire. Maddie (Natalie Portman), a Baltimore housewife, quickly makes up her mind to buy the yellow dress modelled by Cleo (Moses Ingram), one of the store’s living mannequins. Cleo’s attention is caught by the rivulet of blood on Maddie’s mustard-colored skirt suit. The year is 1966, and both will soon be on their way to political gatherings—Maddie to a fund-raiser for a Jewish civil-liberties group, Cleo to a rally for Maryland’s first Black woman state senator—though nothing as nebulous as social change can fulfill either woman’s long-stifled aspirations. In a matter

of days, Maddie will leave her husband (Brett Gelman) and her teen-age son, Seth (Noah Jupe), to pursue a career in journalism, and Cleo will dip her toe into a criminal underworld that quickly pulls her underwater. Afterward, in a voice-over, she expresses her resentment at having been made a supporting character in Maddie's second act: "Your writing dreams ruined your life. Now you want those same dreams to rewrite it. But why did you need to drag my dead body into it?"

The Apple TV+ drama, like the Laura Lippman novel on which it's loosely based, tackles a grab bag of social issues—the second-wave feminist movement, increasing Jewish assimilation, nascent desegregation and the attendant white backlash—through its protagonists' private struggles. Maddie, whose literary hopes were discouraged by her conservative milieu, is both a textbook case of the problem with no name and the epitome of an ambition monster. ("You think every story is your story," Seth tells her ruefully.) While Maddie's thwarted desires burn white-hot inside her, sometimes seeming to leave a hole where her heart should be—she deems her son "selfish" for being destabilized by her abrupt departure—Cleo has long since laid aside her yearning for the spotlight in order to take care of her children. A bartender and a bookkeeper for an influential local gangster named Shell Gordon (Wood Harris), Cleo keeps her dreams small: she just wants legitimate employment helping ordinary folks like herself, even if no one will help her.

"Lady in the Lake" is a solid series, but not a stellar one. Like much recent prestige programming, it often feels like an amalgamation of tropes from the two-thousands' golden age of television. There are hat tips to "Mad Men" in its swinging-sixties palette, its infatuation with period knickknacks, and its attunement to that era's misogyny; a subplot finds a financially precarious Maddie unable to sell her car without her estranged husband's signature, despite it being registered under her name. The series, created and directed by Alma Har'el ("Honey Boy"), indulges in enough oneiric sequences to rival "The Sopranos," including one in which Maddie tells Tessie Durst, a child murder victim, that she's no longer worth writing about: "You're old news." There are flashes of "The Wire," too, a comparison made inescapable by Lippman's onetime marriage to its creator, David Simon; the series' sociological aims; and the decision to cast Harris, who played Avon Barksdale for half a decade, as another ruthless Charm City kingpin.

Lippman, like Simon, spent years as a reporter at the Baltimore *Sun*. Her book was inspired by two real-life cases from her native city: the 1969 deaths of Esther Lebowitz, a white girl whose murder received considerable attention, and Shirley Parker, a Black woman whose killing went ignored by the mainstream press. In the series, before a lady is found in the lake, a girl is found there. Tessie, the younger, white victim, was last seen in a pet store with two men—Stephan (Dylan Arnold), the violent son of a Polish-immigrant shopkeeper, and Reggie (Josiah Cross), Shell's perpetually ill-at-ease deputy. When Stephan is arrested, based on circumstantial evidence, Maddie interviews him about the wartime experiences that may have contributed to his aggressive tendencies. Her seeming sympathy for the alleged killer enrages Tessie's father—an outcome that doesn't seem to have occurred to her.

This amorality and obliviousness help make Maddie the show's most interesting character, at least at first. She's introduced as a classic Natalie Portman type: a perfectionist striving for straight A's on a report card that exists only in her head. But flashbacks gradually reveal that, whatever she had, Maddie's always wanted something else—and that the staid, conventional life she abandons at the start of the show is a consequence of a more reckless youth. (As in her recent film "May December," Portman is playing both to and against type, her usual prim persona riven by surprising sexuality.) When she finally fumbles toward an existence that broadens her possibilities, Seth dismisses the move as a "phony adventure in Negrotown." He's mean about it, but probably not entirely wrong. Once Maddie starts investigating the second murder by asking questions around the neighborhood, Cleo's exasperated widower (Byron Bowers) cautions, "You don't know whose floor you're dancing on."

She's forced to confront reality as she discovers that stories about Stephan and Tessie are an easier sell than those about Cleo. This epiphany feels organic; other political subplots—like a story line that alludes to the coming campaign against antimiscegenation laws, which Maddie defies in a new romance with a Black cop (Y'lan Noel), and an eleventh-hour arc about the exploitative nature of the Maryland state lottery, which threatens to supplant Shell's numbers game—have been shoehorned in. Despite this unwieldy earnestness, "Lady in the Lake" is not a schematic parable about racial inequality but a largely well-plotted whodunnit that keeps pulling off

satisfying surprises. The performances sing, too, with the series making use of Portman's gift for self-righteous sanctimony and Ingram's ability to sell both disillusionment and swashbuckling heroism as the situation demands it.

Those triumphs make up for thematic messiness, narratively convenient coincidences, and occasionally clunky dialogue. So, too, does the atmospheric richness: in the course of seven episodes, Har'el fleshes out the book's characters of color, particularly Cleo, whose bid to better her station in life—and willingness to put herself at real risk to do so—makes her something much grander than Maddie's foil. In the end, she and her cohort are shown to be as pleasingly complicated as their white counterparts. Their world is full of predators, including Shell, who lures his prey with false promises of Black empowerment, and the "prophet" who tells Cleo that the best way to help her sickly young son is to tithe to his church. Some find respite in Shell's night club, where musical performances, especially by the drug-addled Dora (Jennifer Mogbock), render the scenes transportive.

Early in the series, Dora is lying in a hotel bed with Cleo, who has been her confidante since the two started singing together as mere teen-agers. Dora, for all her cynicism about figures like Cleo's favored politician, has become dependent on the men around her, and on the heroin they provide; Cleo is attempting to warn her friend off her current path, not suspecting that she herself will shortly be deemed disposable by Shell and his cronies. Neither succeeds in persuading the other to abandon her hopes. Dora, who daydreams of taking her talents to Paris, says with a sigh, "Can you imagine? Leaving this whole damn country behind." She almost certainly won't make it across the Atlantic—but "Lady in the Lake" understands the poignancy of an impossible escape. ♦

Poems

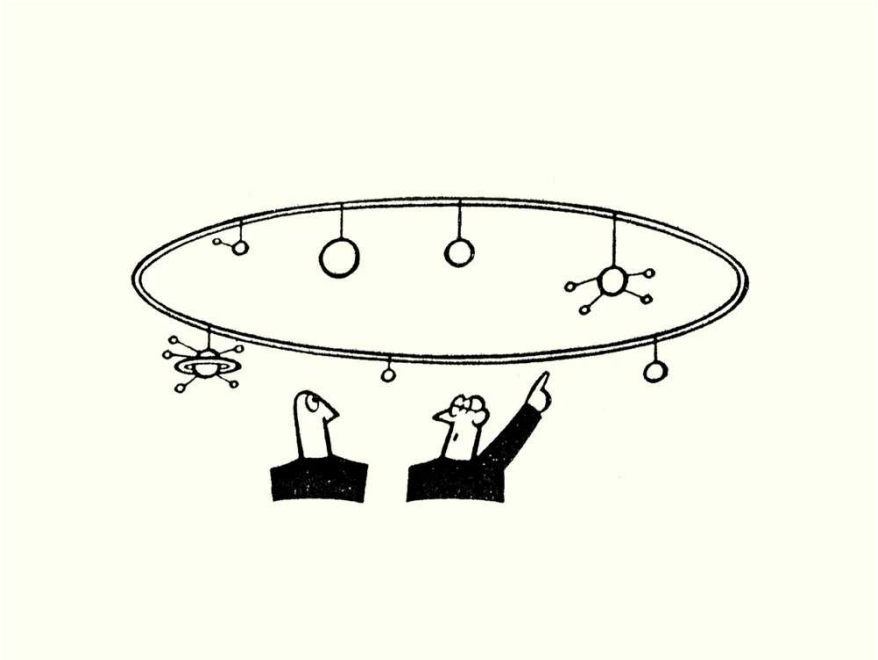
- Mr. Cogito and Certain Mechanisms of Memory
- Italian Lesson

Poems

Mr. Cogito and Certain Mechanisms of Memory

By Zbigniew Herbert

August 05, 2024



I

Suddenly it seems there is nothing more fragile than a landscape
One motion of the eyelid annihilates a mountain range buries the Alps
A head turned away dries up the ocean of memory an ocean transformed into a lump of salt
An abandoned forest is as hard to remember as a hotel room
Only the landscape of childhood only that landscape
we carry always in the depths of all memories
its colors are muted a drawing concave as a stamp
an intense smell of roots and unexpected glimmerings shaded by an eyelash

II

The landscape of childhood overgrown with reeds
the landscape of youth passed by at a gallop
Through the cracks of distraction between parted legs the pages of an open newspaper
through a windowpane through a breath we see the landscape of maturity
All of this should fall apart someday
turn black like old decorations
fall silent like murmuring choirs
marring the pure aria of our existence

III

What happens is quite the reverse no doubt against our will
landscapes return invading our memory
repeating themselves sleeplessly whole chains of them vast herds
twilight in the orchard crooked apple trees a steep slope or a house with green shutters
and a black tar-paper roof (one window open)—the sun on a yellow wall
covered in grapevines the orchard the wall of the house a boat at the water's edge—
blue tracks running out of the forest—what flute leads them out from our memory
who will cut the celluloid reel

IV

It is not language at all it's wrong to draw out symbols
this is the brutal victory of a background
alien to our existence
a river took the legs a branch struck out the head
where the shoulder lay there is now a line of hills
in the place of the heart a foreign city dry as an etching

V

Conclusion

If it is mildew growing if the bacteria of images
multiply so fast as if we were their nourishment
and nothing more the lesson must be
write your name on tree bark
put your faith in wise stones
imprint your hand on the air and water
if that moment comes
don't clutch at the curtain
but disappear into the folds
—unreconciled to be sure

—Zbigniew Herbert (1924-98)

(Translated, from the Polish, by Alissa Valles.)

This is drawn from "Reconstruction of the Poet."

Poems

Italian Lesson

By Cynthia Zarin

August 05, 2024

the boy plays with the wooden horse il ragazzo gioca con il cavallo di legno
the seasons change le stagioni cambiano
I have never seen a volcano non ho mai visto un vulcano
we need wood for the fire abbiamo bisogno di legno per il fuoco
the wet wood is not good il legno bagnato non è buono
he saw smoke in the sky ha visto fumo nel cielo
then it is a volcano allora è un vulcano
there is sand in my shoes c'è sabbia nelle mie scarpe
the children build sandcastles i bambini costruiscono i castelli di sabbia
the clouds were getting darker le nuvole stavano diventando più scure
we could see nothing but fog non vedevamo niente a parte la nebbia
the fog is a cloud on the ground la nebbia è una nuvola sulla terra
the fog doesn't let us see anything la nebbia non ci lascia vedere nulla
there is a flower on the bed c'è un fiore sul letto

there is a flower on the table c'è un fiore sul tavolo
we are in the forest siamo nella foresta
it is dangerous to swim in this lake è pericoloso nuotare in questo lago
I have only a small garden ho solo un piccolo giardino
we can hear the ocean from here possiamo sentire l'oceano da qua
where do you see the moon? dove vedi la luna?
she sees the sea lei vede il mare
the climate in the mountains is different il clima nelle montagne è diverso
it could rain this evening potrebbe piovere stasera
the rain follows me everywhere la pioggia mi segue dappertutto
he sees the sky lui vede il cielo
the region has many rivers la regione ha molti fiumi
are you lost? heaven is far from here ti sei perso? il paradiso è lontano da qua
which planet are you on? su quale pianeta ti trovi?
the sea is not blue today il mare non è azzurro oggi
the storm has passed il temporale è passato
in autumn the moon is beautiful in autunno la luna è bella
the snake waits under the rock il serpente aspetta sotto la roccia
the children play in the snow in December i bambini giocano nella neve a dicembre
the snow is beautiful la neve è bellissima
this morning we go to look at the sunrise questa mattina andiamo a guardare l'alba
there wasn't a cloud in the sky non c'era una nuvola nel cielo
the sea, the hills, the little mountains il mare, le colline, le piccole montagne
yesterday I went fishing in the river ieri sono andata a pescare nel fiume
the sun this evening is not yellow it is orange il sole stasera non è giallo è arancione
how many stars do you see? quante stelle vedi?

there are many stars in the universe ci sono molte stelle nell'universo

This is drawn from "Next Day: New and Selected Poems."

Puzzles & Games

- The Crossword: Monday, August 5, 2024

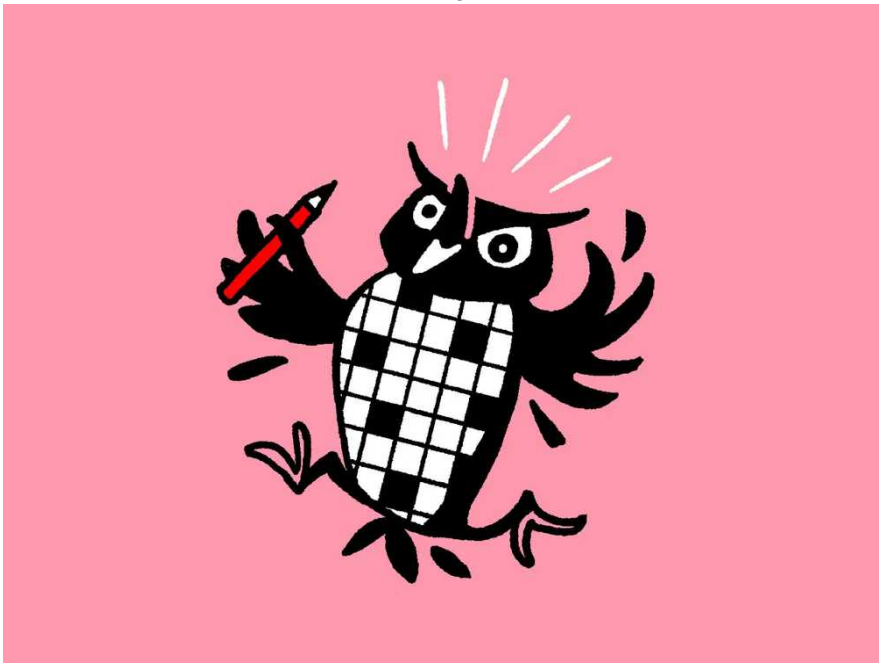
Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, August 5, 2024

A challenging puzzle.

By Natan Last

August 05, 2024



The Mail

- Letters from Our Readers

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Ian Frazier's article about the Bronx and Daniel Immerwahr's piece about pirates.

August 05, 2024

Bronx Cheer

Ian Frazier, in his article about the Bronx, reminds us of the storied visit to the borough by President Jimmy Carter, in 1977 ("Paradise Bronx," July 22nd). The scenes of devastation that he witnessed seemed like the epitome of urban blight. But few remember Bill Clinton's visit in 1997, when Clinton was persuaded to go to the South Bronx by his Secretary of the Treasury, Robert Rubin, who had been impressed by the extent of the rejuvenation that had occurred there and that was so contrary to the image that people had of the area. As the New York *Times* reported, Clinton spent part of an afternoon walking the streets and talking to residents. The revitalization came about in large part because of the leadership provided by local nonprofits known as Community Development Corporations and the unprecedented coöperation between the city and financial and philanthropic institutions.

Paul S. Grogan
Boston, Mass.

I was delighted to read Frazier's article about the wonderful history of the Bronx. As a Bronx girl born in 1932, I lived there through much of the thirties and forties. I started out on Forest Avenue, in the east, and when I left, in 1947, I was living on Featherbed Lane, on the side of the street that was destroyed for the construction of the expressway. Seeing my lovely little street named in print proved that it really existed and was not a figment of my imagination.

Glenna Kravat Shutkin
Glendale, Wis.

Pirates in the Present

I enjoyed reading Daniel Immerwahr's piece on the role that pirates have played in our history and collective psyche, but I was disappointed that he stopped short of the present ("The Power of the Pirates," July 22nd). We may no longer be in the golden age of pirates, but they are still active around the world, reacting to grim realities. Piracy originating from Somalia, for example, has corresponded with the collapse of local fisheries. Like their predecessors, modern-day pirates may be driven more by economic desperation than by any swashbuckling idealism.

Jake Hanft
San Francisco, Calif.

As the director of the Quedagh Merchant investigations at Indiana University, I wanted to share some insights from our work on the site of the remains of the ship, which had been captured by William Kidd. Since the ship's discovery, in 2007, off the coast of the Dominican Republic, our archeological efforts have provided conclusive evidence of its identity and Armenian ownership, offering a tangible connection to the era of piracy and trade in the seventeenth century. At his trial, Kidd is recorded as saying, "Give me my documents and I will prove my innocence," referring to the French passes obtained from the Quedagh Merchant's captain; the passes were misplaced, however. Hundreds of years later, they were found, proving that the ship and the cargo were indeed legitimate prey for privateers, at least according to the law at the time. Today, we know that Kidd was a victim of changing politics. On May 23, 2011, the three-hundred-and-tenth anniversary of Kidd's hanging, we dedicated the underwater site as the Captain Kidd Living Museum of the Sea, preserving its rich history and the associated marine environment.

Charles Beeker
Center for Underwater Science
Indiana University
Bloomington, Ind.

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

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