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# THE NEW YORKER



# The New Yorker Magazine

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## Goings On

### • **God Bless “A Christmas Carol,” Every One**

Also: the galloping Americana of Ryan Davis, Michael Urie’s tragic “Richard II,” a holiday roundup, Inkoo Kang’s TV picks, and more.

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[Goings On](#)

## God Bless “A Christmas Carol,” Every One

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By [Dan Stahl](#), [Holden Seidlitz](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Richard Brody](#), and [Inkoo Kang](#)

November 28, 2025

No less characteristic of the holidays than tree lights or candy canes are stagings of **“A Christmas Carol,”** Charles Dickens’s 1843 novella about the importance of valuing people over profits. Prominent among this year’s New York productions is a British import: PAC NYC hosts Matthew Warchus and Jack Thorne’s immersive, [lantern-lit adaptation](#) (through Jan. 4), complete with gingerbread cookies and clementines for the audience. First performed at the Old Vic, in 2017, the show has been revived in London every year since and has toured on Broadway and beyond. The current iteration stars Michael Cerveris as the harrumphing miser Ebenezer Scrooge; Cerveris’s experience playing prickly types, from the emotionally withholding father in “Fun Home” to the sociopathic Sweeney Todd, should make for a potent incarnation.



*“A Christmas Carol” at Old Vic, now playing at PAC NYC.  
Photograph by Manuel Harlan*

Elsewhere downtown, Dickens himself—as embodied by John Kevin Jones and Vince Gatton, in rotating performances—takes up his tale. Summoners Ensemble Theatre presents its thirteenth annual “**A Christmas Carol**” (through Dec. 27), set within the frame of a real-life visit that Dickens made to New York in December, 1867, to give a reading of his story. The show’s venue, Merchant’s House, is a landmarked nineteenth-century home whose damask drapes and gaslit chandelier supply period vibes—for anyone really wanting to feel them, select performances include a reception with mulled wine.

Also in its thirteenth installment is the less conventional “**Thirty Years Christmas Carol**” (Ars Nova; Dec. 8-9), an annual series that began in 2013 and will continue through 2042. Every year, the same couple—played by Andrew Farmer and Ryann Weir—age in real time as they navigate the vicissitudes of life, which so far have included a pandemic, a marriage, and a baby. But regardless of what’s going on in their lives, they always make a point of reading Dickens’s story aloud together over the holidays.—*Dan Stahl*

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## About Town

### Americana

As a teen, the songwriter **Ryan Davis** was a skater sweating it out in the Louisville hardcore scene. Now he makes winking nine-minute literary ballads for the countryside cognoscenti. His latest record, “New Threats from the Soul,” feels like just that—unjiltable paeans to and from the down-and-out, not the guys on the starting line but those watching from the parking lot. (“You can see the kingdom / From the tailgate, if you stack a couple coolers,” he sings.) His slunk-shouldered Americana grooves with the standard-fare fiddle and pedal steel, but gallops with synthesized breakbeats. Davis and his Roadhouse Band play three Brooklyn shows, including a matinée. For fans of David Berman, Sam Shepard, tobacco-reeking leather, seventies Cadillacs, jokes with two punch lines.—*Holden Seidlitz (Union Pool; Dec. 5-6.)*

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### Off Broadway

In Nazareth Hassan’s stunning new satire “**Practice**,” directed by Keenan Tyler Oliphant, Asa, a guru-like artist (the hypnotic Ronald Peet), forms a performance collective and—cunningly, over months—shapes it into a cult. To devise a theatre piece (they’ve got a booking in Berlin!), the actors willingly share secrets; each painful revelation feeds Asa’s vampiric appetite for psychic control. The audacity of Asa’s manipulations can startle us to laughter, but the play comes closer to horror than to comedy, partly because Hassan’s own control is so total. The dialogue shifts between weaselly art-speak (calling self-sacrifice “rigor”) and flights of literary beauty, but it’s the daring way that Hassan uses time—

stretching the first act to two delicious hours—that had me following wherever they led.—*Helen Shaw (Playwrights Horizons; through Dec. 7.)*

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## Indie Rock



*Snocaps.*

Photograph by Chris Black

Since the late two-thousands, the twin musicians Katie and Allison Crutchfield have been fixtures of the indie-rock scene, both separately and together. Katie is a critical darling, primarily as the front person for the solo project Waxahatchee, but also, in a team-up with the folk singer-songwriter Jess Williamson, as Plains. Allison has become a cult hero as a singer and guitarist for the punk band Swearin'. The sisters Crutchfield have played together for various other projects, but haven't been a unit since the split of P.S. Eliot in 2016. They finally reunited on Halloween for **Snocaps**, a band with the rock wunderkind MJ Lenderman and the producer Brad Cook. Snocaps concludes a run of its first-ever shows, supporting its self-titled début album, with [two nights in Manhattan](#); Ryan Davis (see above) opens on Dec. 8.—*Sheldon Pearce (Bowery Ballroom; Dec. 7-8.)*

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## Dance

Ephrat Asherie, an Israeli-born choreographer also known as Bounce, came up as a B-girl in New York's underground dance-club scene. **Arturo O'Farrill**, a pianist and composer, is the scion of an Afro-Cuban jazz dynasty. Despite those disparate backgrounds, it makes sense that these two artists would hit it off, since both are agile and eager mixers of styles. In their new collaboration, "Shadow Cities," they bring together Asherie's company, **Ephrat Asherie Dance**, and other musicians to explore cultural hybrids, fluid and hyphenate identities, and in-between spaces.—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Dec. 3-7.)*

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## Off Broadway



*Lux Pascal and Ryan Spahn in "Richard II."*

*Photograph by Carol Rosegg*

It's a relief to see Michael Urie star in "**Richard II**," Craig Baldwin's adroit Shakespeare adaptation, produced by Red Bull—Richard is the part Urie was born to play. Urie has long been a comic mainstay on Broadway and television, but Baldwin's nineteen-eighties version of the Elizabethan history play (shoulder pads, the Eurythmics, neon) triggers his impressive tragic capacity. This coked-up, sexually voracious Plantagenet king parties till the bill comes due, distracted by an appetite he mistakes for a divine mandate. Baldwin tailors the plot so that Richard's most loving playmate betrays him; at the moment of revelation, Urie seems to

relive the entire drama in reverse—you see him recall each kiss, each lie, with a grave, unsurprised sorrow.—*H. Shaw (Astor Place Theatre; through Dec. 14.)*

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## Movies

The unusual preconditions for Robinson Devor's astonishing documentary “**Suburban Fury**” gave rise to its original form. In San Francisco, in 1975, Sara Jane Moore attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford; released from prison in 2007, she agreed to talk on camera with Devor provided that no one else be interviewed for the film. Moore’s extensive monologues detail her romantic frustrations and her failed efforts at an acting career, along with her pivot to radical action. While involved with such groups as the Black Panthers and the Symbionese Liberation Army, she also bonded with an F.B.I. handler, given voice by Devor. The context is filled out with a tangy gathering of archival clips; the effect is a refraction of history through a uniquely warped prism, to nonetheless revelatory effect.—*Richard Brody (Alamo Drafthouse.)*

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## Celebrating the Holidays



*Illustration by Sophia Baidouri*

*Highlights of the city’s holiday events.*

## **Metropolitan Museum Crèche**

There is a street in Naples, Via San Gregorio Armeno, where you can find shop after shop presided over by artisans whose specialty is building Nativity scenes out of papier-maché, terra-cotta, wax, and cloth. It is an art with roots in the eighteenth century, of which the Baroque crèche brought out by the Metropolitan Museum every year is a splendid example. This installation depicts entire street scenes: animals, food stands, fishermen, the Magi—and, of course, the cozy Nativity itself. (*Metropolitan Museum of Art; through Jan. 6.*)

### **“Radio City Christmas Spectacular”**

The Radio City Rockettes kicked off a hundred years ago, in St. Louis. Their “Christmas Spectacular” in New York is a relatively young ninety-two. Over the decades, some technological innovations have accrued, including, this year, a new sound system. The group’s centenary hasn’t occasioned new material, but oldest is best anyway in this show: the well-maintained precision of the tapping, kicking dancers; and the built-to-last construction of the “Parade of Wooden Soldiers” number, which has been collapsing in slow motion since the Spectacular began. (*Radio City Music Hall; through Jan. 5.*)

### **Nutcrackers Galore**

There is a point in December when “The Nutcracker” becomes ubiquitous; love it or hate it, it’s here to stay. But not all “Nutcrackers” are the same. In addition to the canonical version —“[George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker](#),” at New York City Ballet (*David H. Koch Theatre; through Jan. 4*)—also worth a mention is “[Nut/Cracked](#),” by the Bang Group, featuring tap dance in pointe shoes and a snow waltz in which everyone keeps slipping and falling on imaginary ice. (*92Y, Dec. 13-16.*) And “[Nutcracker Rouge](#),” a naughty burlesque for the adult crowd, is set in a visually splendid, Baroque-inspired world filled with sensual Christmas delights. (*Théâtre XIV; through Jan. 31.*)

## **“It’s a Wonderful Life!”**

The story of George Bailey, a small-town banker whose intentions of suicide dissipate after an angel shows him his life’s importance, is a gift that keeps on giving. It originated as a 1943 short story, became an iconic Frank Capra film three years later, and, in 2012, got the stage treatment at Irish Rep, reframed by Anthony E. Palermo as a radio play broadcast by actors in a sound studio. Following revivals in 2013 and 2017, it [returns to the Rep stage](#) this year (*Dec. 3-31*).

## **“Advent Carolndar” and “Sugar & Booze: A Holiday Spectacular”**

For anyone liable to go full Grinch after hearing “White Christmas” one more time, Julia Mattison and Joel Waggoner’s [“Advent Carolndar”](#) (*Joe’s Pub; Dec. 4-15*) offers a refuge of holiday non-standards, drawn largely from the comedians’ 2019-21 Instagram series, which presented an original carol every day from December 1st through the 25th. Also reinvigorating ye olde merriment is Ana Gasteyer’s concert [“Sugar & Booze”](#) (*Town Hall; Dec. 15*), featuring music from her jazzy 2019 Christmas album; the title refers to, in her brassily sung phrasing, “the best part of the holidays.”

## **[“Peter and the Wolf”](#)**

Sergei Prokofiev wrote “Peter and the Wolf” in 1936, for a children’s theatre in Moscow. It is both a parable and a clever example of music education using orchestra instruments. Peter is personified by a beautiful, forthright melody, on strings; he encounters a duck (oboe), a cat (clarinet), and, of course, the wolf (French horns). Isaac Mizrahi is the avuncular narrator; John Heginbotham conceived the witty choreography; Prokofiev’s characterful music is played by Ensemble Connect. (*Works & Process, Guggenheim Museum; Dec. 5-14.*)

## Holiday Carols

Will there be snow to dash through this year? Who knows, but we can still sing about it. Jingle all the way to Judson Memorial Church, for West Village Chorale's annual [Caroling Walk](#) around the neighborhood (*Dec. 20*). Or take your one-horse open sleigh to Brooklyn, for the Dessoff Choirs' "[Welcome Yule](#)" concert (*Dec. 6*). Maybe bells on bobtails will ring (whatever that means) as you sway along with the songs of "[A Goyishe Christmas to You!](#)" at the Kaufman Center (*Dec. 10*). The opportunities are plentiful, and they might even make spirits bright.

## "A Very Sw!ng Out Holiday"

This seasonal variation on "[Sw!ng Out](#)"—a show that presents swing dancing, born in nineteen-twenties Harlem, as a form very much alive in the present—has happily become a tradition. The Eyal Vilner Big Band swings holiday songs, fabulous dancers including Caleb Teicher and LaTasha Barnes respond in motion, and, after the show is over, the band keeps playing for audience members to express their own holiday spirit on the dance floor. (*Joyce Theatre; Dec. 9-14.*)

## "Messiah"s

If you close your eyes and listen carefully, you may be able to hear faint chants of "Hallelujah" starting to emerge from classical-music venues throughout the city. That's right, it's "Messiah" season. Catch Handel's masterpiece at Carnegie Hall, with the [Oratorio Society](#) (*Dec. 22*); at Lincoln Center, with the [New York Philharmonic](#) (*Dec. 10-13*) or [National Chorale](#) (*Dec. 15*); or at [Trinity Church](#) (*Dec. 10-12*), [St. Thomas Church](#) (*Dec. 11*), [St. Helena Church](#) (*Dec. 13*), or [St. Ann's Church](#) (*Dec. 22*). Probably any church, really. They like this kind of thing.

## Jazz at Lincoln Center

For the thirteenth straight year, Jazz at Lincoln Center continues a beloved holiday tradition: [Big Band Holidays](#), where festive favorites are transformed by the swagger and swing of an epic jazz orchestra. Directed by the J.L.C.O. trombonist and arranger Chris Crenshaw, in collaboration with the vocalists Shenel Johns and Kate Kortum, the series arrives along with an album collection that mirrors the show, created with the trumpeter and composer Wynton Marsalis and featuring such classics as “Christmas Time Is Here” and “Little Drummer Boy.” (*Rose Theatre; Dec. 16-21.*)

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## What to Watch

*Inkoo Kang on shows to watch while navigating the holidays.*

It's impossible not to think about family as we head into the holiday season. This is the time of year when we're faced with the joys and the obligations of kinship. It's also, perhaps, a period when it helps to be mired in other people's troubles. Television is a particularly fruitful medium through which to pore over family dynamics—often layered and multigenerational. If you're already familiar with the dysfunctions on “The Sopranos,” “The Americans,” “The Righteous Gemstones,” and “Succession,” here are some lesser-known family portraits that are no less compelling.



*A still from the “Jerrod Carmichael Reality Show.”*

*Photograph courtesy HBO Max*

## **“Jerrod Carmichael Reality Show” (2024, streaming on HBO Max)**

The comedian Jerrod Carmichael came out at the age of thirty-four, in his 2022 standup special, revealing not only his sexuality but also the profound strain that it caused in his relationship with his religious mother. He aims for even greater self-disclosure in this follow-up, in which he examines his shortcomings as a friend, a partner, and a son, particularly after Hollywood success. Though wide-ranging, the series has at its poignant core Carmichael’s attempts to introduce his mother to his boyfriend—and to reconcile with the fact that he feels impelled to repeat family dynamics he’d prefer to put in the past.

## **“Nuclear Family” (2021, streaming on HBO Max)**

When the director Ry Russo-Young was born to two mothers, in 1981, the idea of gay parents still seemed impossible to many in the L.G.B.T.Q. community. Russo-Young revisits her family’s unique—and headline-making—history in this engrossing docuseries about her biological father, a gay sperm donor, suing for paternity rights, and the lawsuit that threatened her already vulnerable family.

## **“The Other Two” (2019, streaming on HBO Max)**

One of the best comedies of the past decade happens to be this painfully sharp exploration of how viral fame—and unresolved grief—can warp a family. After their thirteen-year-old brother becomes a YouTube celebrity overnight, flailing adult siblings Cary (Drew Tarver) and Brooke (Heléne Yorke) spin out until they discover how they can support the guileless boy and their equally lost mother (Molly Shannon) in a demented new-media ecosystem none of them quite knows how to navigate.

## **“Ramy” (2019, streaming on Hulu)**

Ramy Youssef's dark comedy centers on a thirtyish Egyptian American dude who is figuring out what he wants from life, but its strongest episodes focus on his parents and his sister, with whom he still shares a slightly cramped home in the New Jersey suburbs. The house practically seethes with unexpressed longing and resentment; each member of the family feels trapped in a role they can't seem to get out of playing. Its relatable grimness makes for a counterintuitive comfort watch.

### **“Vida” (2018, streaming on Starz)**

Two estranged sisters (Melissa Barrera and Mishel Prada) return home after the death of their mother, only to be confronted with a major family secret and the intense gentrification of their Mexican American Los Angeles neighborhood. The show follows their journey as they try to rebuild their family and restore their mother's bar as a community pillar—one that pays tribute to cultural traditions but reflects their progressive values. TV has too few shows like this angry and sexy and electrifying half-hour drama.

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

- [\*Charli XCX has a substack now\*](#)
- [\*Winona Ryder’s spat with Arthur Miller\*](#)
- [\*Postscript to an open marriage\*](#)

*Dan Stahl* is a member of *The New Yorker*'s editorial staff.

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*Helen Shaw* joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.

*Sheldon Pearce* is a music writer for *The New Yorker*'s Goings On newsletter.

*Brian Seibert* has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of “[\*What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing\*](#),” which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

*Richard Brody*, a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of “[\*Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard\*](#).”

*Inkoo Kang*, a staff writer, has been a television critic for *The New Yorker* since 2022.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/god-bless-a-christmas-carol-every-one>

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# The Talk of the Town

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The Department of Health and Human Services maintains that it is hewing to “gold standard, evidence-based science”—doublespeak that might unsettle Orwell.

- **[Mamdani Family Values](#)**

Mahmood Mamdani, Zohran’s father, just published his twelfth book. The subject? Dictators.

- **[Tartuffe Times Two](#)**

Matthew Broderick and André De Shields have both undertaken Molière’s con-man character. They feel he has a few things in common with a certain orange President.

- **[Donna Lieberman Is at the Wheel](#)**

The head of the New York Civil Liberties Union doesn’t only lead the fight against injustice. She can also make you a great pottery bowl.

- **[Hey, Kids! Get Yer Epstein Files Activity Fun Page!](#)**

Maybe the Justice Department should try a Word Search puzzle and a Connect the Dots.

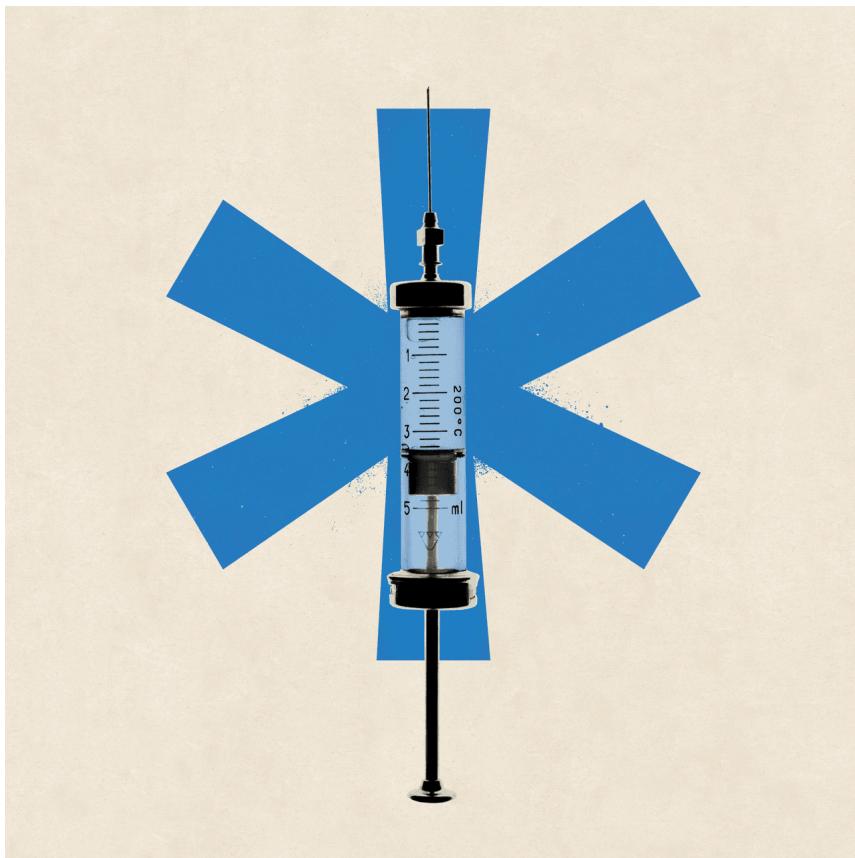
[Comment](#)

## The Undermining of the C.D.C.

The Department of Health and Human Services maintains that it is hewing to “gold standard, evidence-based science”—doublespeak that might unsettle Orwell.

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

November 30, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photograph from Getty*

Two weeks ago, by inserting what must be the most notorious asterisk in modern public health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention caveated its long-standing position that vaccines do not cause autism. Under the direction of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the Secretary of Health and Human Services, a C.D.C. web page now contends that this is “not an evidence-based claim” and that research linking vaccines to autism has been “ignored by health authorities.” The fact that the original statement remains at all is

due to an agreement with Senator Bill Cassidy, a physician and the chair of the Senate health committee, who disregarded decades of Kennedy's vaccine skepticism to advance his confirmation after extracting a set of flimsy commitments that Kennedy is now betraying. The Autism Science Foundation said that it is "appalled" by the C.D.C.'s new stance; the American Medical Association warned of "dangerous consequences."

The Department of Health and Human Services maintains that it is hewing to "gold standard, evidence-based science"—a piece of doublespeak so thick that it might unsettle Orwell. Discounting dozens of rigorous studies that have analyzed millions of patients and failed to connect vaccines to autism, the C.D.C. website claims that about half of parents of children with autism believe vaccines contributed to that autism. It cited a decades-old paper that surveyed a few dozen parents who strongly embraced alternative medicine, at two private practices in the Northeast. The web page points out that autism rates have risen in recent decades and so has the number of infant vaccinations—an observation that might also be made about prestige TV shows and pumpkin-spice lattes. The H.H.S. will now provide "appropriate funding" for studies on vaccines and autism, and last week it appointed a physician with a history of vaccine skepticism as the second-in-command at the C.D.C. The episode puts to rest any doubts about whether Americans can still trust information from the nation's top health agency.

At stake is a question of the quality of information that should be taken seriously in public discourse and how that information should be communicated. Science may be the most powerful engine for grasping reality, but it suffers a rhetorical disadvantage. In science, the burden of proof falls on the one aiming to overturn the "null hypothesis"—the default position that one thing doesn't cause another. But conspiratorial thinking is fuelled by the inverse: self-assured conjecture that demands a level of refutation no amount of evidence can offer. Proving the absence of a connection will always

be harder than speculating about its existence. The language of science is measured and provisional; the language of politics is declarative and bombastic. In September, President Donald Trump told pregnant women to “fight like hell” not to take Tylenol, because of a potentially increased risk of autism in children; his Food and Drug Administration clarified that “a causal relationship has not been established and there are contrary studies in the scientific literature.” Tylenol, the agency wrote, remains “the safest over-the-counter” option for treating fever or pain.

The privilege that American scientists have taken for granted—one that is now being trampled—is the ability to go about their work free of political interference. With few exceptions, both Republicans and Democrats have supported independent science, understanding that the nation benefits from research that promotes health, innovation, and economic growth. But since Trump returned to office his Administration has fired or muzzled government scientists with disfavored views on nutrition and climate change; cancelled funding for long-running surveys on food insecurity and global health; dismissed independent committees focussed on air pollution, health-care disparities, and hospital infections; and pulled support for research into vaccines. This month, leading members of the National Institutes of Health, who ascended to their roles in large part based on their criticism of *COVID*-era mandates, published an article arguing that we should plan for the next pandemic not by trying to identify dangerous pathogens or by developing vaccines and medications to mitigate their damage but by encouraging people to be healthier: by abstaining from smoking, by eating nutritious food, and by “getting up and walking more.”

“The best pandemic preparedness playbook,” the authors wrote, unironically, “is making America healthy again.” Leaving aside that mRNA vaccines saved millions of lives during the *covid* pandemic, and that a society might like to prepare both by promoting healthy habits and by investing in biotechnology, this ignores the fact that, in some outbreaks, young and healthy people

have had among the highest rates of death, and that with any infectious disease many people will remain vulnerable no matter what they do. (This year, a variant of the H3N2 influenza virus, known as subclade K, has caused a surge in cases in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Japan, and appears to be most perilous for children and older adults.) The unpredictability of pathogens is precisely why a broad-based strategy is needed. Pushups won't save you from Ebola.

In the nineteen-thirties, a Soviet biologist named Trofim Lysenko gained the patronage of Joseph Stalin. Lysenko, who was tapped to guide the country's agricultural reforms, had a range of pseudoscientific ideas, including that the environment, not genes, primarily determined an organism's traits and that members of the same species don't compete. He oversaw a series of biologically wrongheaded programs that contributed to famine, misery, and death for millions of people. (A British botanist once said that talking to Lysenko "was like trying to explain differential calculus to a man who didn't know his twelve times table.") With Stalin's backing, Lysenko purged scientists who disagreed with him and set the country's once preëminent genetics research back by decades.

A reason that the U.S. became the world's biomedical leader—indeed, a reason that it emerged from the Cold War victorious—is that democratic governance allows for a level of self-correction that authoritarianism does not. Bad ideas can be beaten back at the ballot box, in the public square, and through the halls of Congress. The country is under no obligation to tolerate institutionalized quackery or elected officials who, through feckless appeals and half measures, have become complicit in it. Truly making America healthy will involve more than removing an asterisk. It will require turning the page. ♦

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/the-undermining-of-the-cdc>

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## Mamdani Family Values

Mahmood Mamdani, Zohran's father, just published his twelfth book. The subject? Dictators.

By [Jake Offenhartz](#)

December 1, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On a recent Thursday, the eve of [Zohran Mamdani](#)'s first meeting with President [Donald Trump](#), the Mayor-elect stopped by a reading at Book Culture, near [Columbia University](#). The subject of

the book was dictators. The author: his dad, Mahmood Mamdani, a leading scholar in the field of post-colonial studies. The elder Mamdani, who wore a maroon scarf looped over a dark blazer, was describing his firsthand experience with authoritarian rule, in Uganda. “Power corrupts, to different degrees,” he said, drawing laughs from the crowd of about eighty. “You have to be on your watch, every minute and every second.” Heads tilted toward the younger Mamdani, who sat on a folding chair in the front row, suited and smiling. “That’s a good place to end it,” the moderator suggested. “With a little warning to the room.” The politician, who had an early flight to D.C. in the morning, greeted a handful of well-wishers, then slipped out quietly.

Mahmood Mamdani, who is seventy-nine, was also having a busy month. Three weeks before his son’s election victory, he released his twelfth book, “Slow Poison,” a political history of Uganda under two dictators, Idi Amin and Yoweri Museveni. The book also traces his own upbringing, expulsion, and eventual return to Uganda. “Both Mira and Zohran insisted I insert myself as a character,” he said, referring to his wife, the filmmaker [Mira Nair](#). “I wasn’t totally convinced.” As for the book’s timing, “that is totally accidental,” he said. “I’ve been working on this for ten years.”

On the day of the reading, the author consented to a brief tour of the Morningside Heights apartment where he and Nair have lived since 1999. “This is Zohran’s bedroom, untouched by displacement,” he said, pushing open a door to a tidy, dormlike sleeping quarters. A shelf over the bed held sci-fi and fantasy paperbacks, boyhood guidebooks (“The Way Things Work”), and a worn copy of “The Marx-Engels Reader.” A portrait of a teen-age Zohran, by the Pakistani painter [Salman Toor](#), hung from a wall, along with a sign that read “Hippies use side door.” Asked about its significance, the father shrugged.

In house slippers, Mahmood shuffled toward a spacious study, where he is now working on his next book. “It is about Israel and Palestine to a significant extent,” he said. He is currently on medical leave from Columbia for back problems. Despite misgivings over the university’s settlement with Trump, he plans to return to teaching soon. “I’m not intimidated easily,” he noted. In the book, he describes fleeing Uganda in 1972, as Amin ordered the expulsion of the country’s Indian minority. More than a decade later, when Mahmood was teaching at a university, he was recruited by Museveni to serve as the country’s inspector general. The offer was rescinded, the author writes, after he requested “a whole range of reforms.”

Lately, he has been considering the challenges of wielding municipal power. “Zohran is not a head of state—he’s the head of local government, which means the alliances he builds are going to be critical,” Mahmood said. He has found that the Mayor-elect can be “sensitive” about unsolicited advice, at least when it comes from his father. Over all, the scholar has been impressed by his son’s political instincts. “I’m struck by his determination to say, ‘Yes, this is what I am: a Muslim from Africa of Indian descent.’ ” A student assistant, working in the other room, was summoned to provide the Wi-Fi password. “It’s probably Zohran1991 or Zohran91,” Mahmood said. “Since he appeared, everything began to rotate around him.”

Like many fathers and sons, they occasionally have political disagreements. “The first one I remember was when I wrote ‘Good Muslim, Bad Muslim,’ ” the author recalled, referring to his 2004 book on the rise of political Islam. Zohran, then a teen-ager, felt that his father’s analysis was overly historical, and that it ignored the popular understanding of certain weighted terms. “He queried me pretty hard,” Mahmood said. “We talked about it, but I’m not sure we agreed.”

The family remains close. They still eat out together in Manhattan, though they are joined now by security and, often, scores of adoring supporters. Even during the campaign, the candidate and his wife, [Rama Duwaji](#), came by “at least one night every week,” Mahmood said, occasionally staying in the childhood bedroom to avoid the schlep back to Astoria. If the couple decides to move into Gracie Mansion, in Yorkville, the commute will be much shorter, he noted.

From the study, Mahmood walked down a long hallway lined with family photos and took a seat in an airy living room overlooking the Hudson River. Since the election, he has tried to maintain his routines: hour-long walks in the park each morning, writing, exercise. “I am not easily distracted,” he said. Still, the new level of fame has taken some getting used to. Recently, he and his wife walked out of a movie theatre to find a crowd of bar patrons applauding them. “One person must have pointed us out and suddenly there were fifty to a hundred people clapping while having their drinks,” he recalled. “That was strange.” There have been other unexpected developments, too. “My agent tells me that sales of three books have gone up since the primary,” the author said. “And one has been reprinted.” ♦

*Jake Offenhartz is a reporter for the Associated Press covering New York City.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/mamdani-family-values>

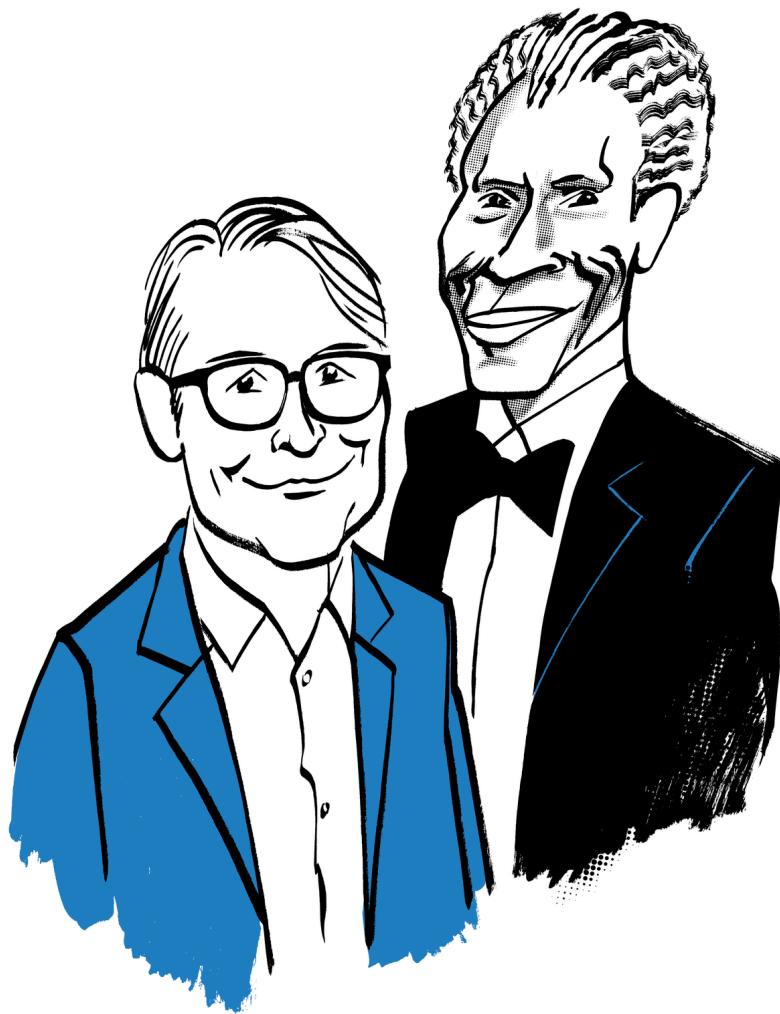
**The Boards**

## Tartuffe Times Two

Matthew Broderick and André De Shields have both undertaken Molière's con-man character. They feel he has a few things in common with a certain orange President.

By [Henry Alford](#)

December 1, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Good afternoon and welcome to Con Con, the convention for swindlers, mountebanks, and the people who love them. Joining us

today are two actors, André De Shields and Matthew Broderick, who, in separate productions, have recently played or are just about to play Tartuffe, the falsely pious scam artist at the heart of Molière’s 1664 comedy of the same name. Today’s Con Con session is being held in the conference room of the Greenwich House Music School, which conveniently has a patio, should the two conventioneers’ theatrical rivalry give way to name-calling and bitch-slapping.

De Shields arrived first, wearing a buffalo-plaid toque and a mien of utter gameness. (“Let’s talk about it, let’s talk about it!” he said.) Then came a sheepish Broderick, who’d walked over from his town house nearby, where he’d been learning lines for his turn as Tartuffe, at [New York Theatre Workshop](#). The gentlemen, though fans of each other’s work, struggled to remember the occasion on which they’d met, in 2022—until De Shields recalled, “It was the birthday of, uh, argh . . .”

Broderick, who had on a nubby blue sweater, called out, “Harvey Fierstein!”

Once seated, Broderick turned to De Shields, whose portrayal of Tartuffe, at the House of the Redeemer, featured preacher-style oration and a hip-gyrating cover of “Feeling Good.” “I’m ready for any tips,” Broderick said. De Shields put forth the idea that Tartuffe, a charlatan who inspires the gullible patriarch Orgon to vouchsafe both his home and his daughter’s hand in marriage, is not a man but a spirit or an extraterrestrial.

Broderick did not disagree. “It seems like he can be whoever he wants to be,” he said, “depending on who he’s talking to.” Former Broderick roles—Ferris Bueller and Professor Harold Hill—sprang to mind.

The talk turned to a certain Bible-hawking [President](#). While Broderick’s portrayal of Tartuffe will not be informed by said

President, De Shields's production was billed as "an exorcism of hypocrisy." "When I sing 'Ave Maria' as Tartuffe, the audience is, like, 'What?! No!' They object," De Shields said. "But I'm trying to get their goat. I want to know how long is it going to take for you to notice that Trump is fucking you over. Tartuffe is doing expertly what Trump thinks he has a talent for."

Broderick asked if De Shields's audiences indeed spoke aloud. De Shields said, "The Baptists do. The Episcopalians don't."

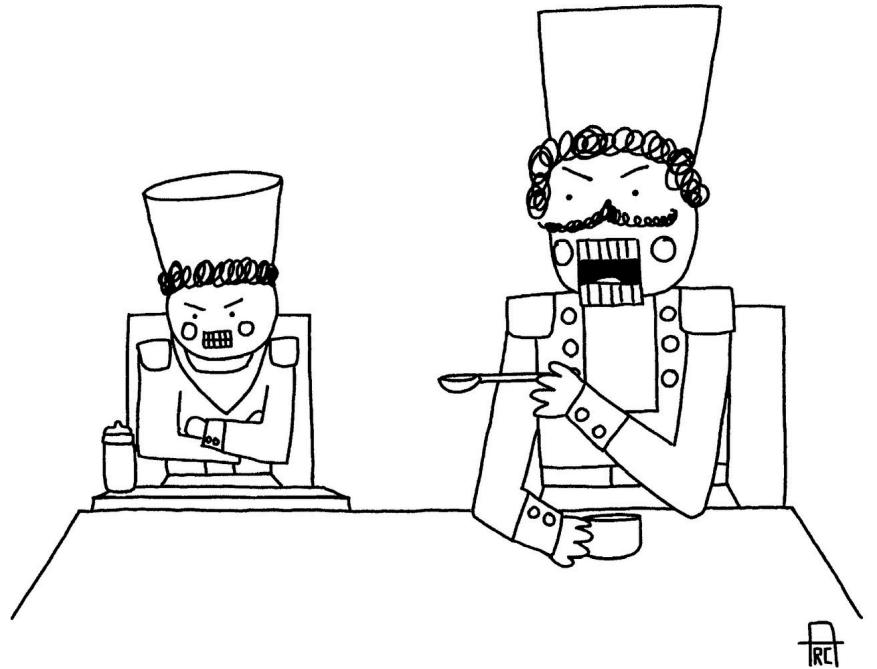
The two actors discussed a description of Tartuffe given in the play by Dorine, the maid. "In our translation, by Ranjit Bolt, Dorine says, 'How could anyone be attracted to you? There's so much flesh—it's just hanging off you,' " De Shields said.

Broderick countered that, in his version, adapted by [Lucas Hnath](#), "she just says I have 'wrinkly buns.' "

"That's easy enough to achieve, wrinkly buns," De Shields said.

Broderick: "True, I think I can manage that."

Had the two actors had run-ins with con men off the stage? "Who hasn't?" De Shields asked.



*“Don’t make me come over there and activate your mouth-opener thingy.”*  
Cartoon by Amanda Chung

Broderick specified one source of flimflammery in his life: “Children.”

De Shields added, “Company managers, general managers, producers, fellow-actors.”

Did the two Tartuffles follow the story of [Anna Delvey](#), the Russian-born scammer who bilked various New Yorkers out of their savings in the twenty-tens? Murmurs of recognition. What did they make of the fact that, once Delvey was under house arrest in the East Village, she started hosting parties, and, as [Avenue magazine put it](#), “the very social circles she lied to were now lining up to get into her house”? De Shields suggested, “They’re trying to figure out why they’re such easy victims.”

Broderick said, “It seems like a relative of cults. People stay in them no matter what.” Molière’s play indicts Orgon’s credulity and Tartuffe’s deceit equally.

As he sipped a cup of tea, Broderick idly twisted a napkin into a log shape. He looked at it and said, “I dreamed about a reefer!,”

quoting a lyric from Fats Waller’s “Reefer Song,” which De Shields had sung in the seventies in “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” a show Broderick saw and loved as a teen-ager.

De Shields showed Broderick a photo of his Tartuffe costume—a floor-length red cassock worn with sunglasses and sparkly bling.

“Man!” Broderick, slightly stricken, said. “I’ll be in a simple black outfit, like a priest.”

Confab over, the two men prepared to head home—De Shields to Hell’s Kitchen, Broderick to his couch, where he said he would clutch, but probably not open, his script. But first they wanted to discuss whether Tartuffe is the Antichrist. “If you read about the Antichrist from the Christian point of view,” De Shields said, “this is the most sexy, attractive, irresistible man—so everyone follows his lead, right? That’s the same reason that Christians today talk about the gift from God that Trump is. Do you know that Christians believe that he is . . .”

“Yeah,” Broderick said. “That’s why the bullet missed him.”

“Yes, and all that,” De Shields said, waving his hand. A beat. “But he’s not good-looking enough to be the Antichrist.”

“Careful,” Broderick said. “He’ll run you out of the country.” ♦

*Henry Alford, a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the Joni Mitchell biography “I Dream of Joni.”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/tartuffe-times-two>

**Vanguard Dept.**

## Donna Lieberman Is at the Wheel

The head of the New York Civil Liberties Union doesn't only lead the fight against injustice. She can also make you a great pottery bowl.

By [Dan Greene](#)

December 1, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At a pottery studio in Prospect Heights the other day, Donna Lieberman, the executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, proudly showed off her clay-marked attire: a blue T-shirt depicting a white bullhorn, with text declaring, “*THIS IS MY PROTEST SHIRT.*” Her favorite outfit to throw clay in, she said, is a shirt from [Planned Parenthood](#) that reads “*DON’T F\*\*\* WITH US. DON’T F\*\*\* WITHOUT US.*” She keeps that one at a studio in Cape Cod, where she vacations. The locals there do “anything that they can do to help me enjoy my pottery,” she said. “They feel like they’re supporting the resistance.”

Times are heavy and hectic in the civil-liberties world. Lieberman’s organization—the [A.C.L.U.](#)’s state affiliate—is pursuing cases regarding the conditions of *ICE*’s holding facility at [26 Federal Plaza](#), in Manhattan; *ICE*’s arrests outside immigration-court hearings; and [Donald Trump](#)’s executive order attempting to end birthright citizenship. She had come to Brooklyn Peoples Pottery for a Sunday-afternoon recharge. “This is better than meditation, because you go in and you come out with something,” she said, using her fingers to press spinning clay into the lip of a bowl. “It’s all about centering and evenness. Not about force.”

A year ago, after President Trump had been elected a second time, Lieberman was mulling an invitation to a pottery intensive across the Atlantic. “I figured the world is falling apart, so how could I go to Portugal?” she said. “Then again, it’ll still be falling apart when I come back, and I’ll be better able to deal with it.” She went, and discovered a new activity: a practice called pot-smashing, in which participants theatrically destroy their unsatisfactory wares. “It’s very cathartic,” she said.

Recalling Trump’s [2016 election](#), Lieberman said, “The first time around, we were shell-shocked.” Since then, the N.Y.C.L.U. had worked to make New York a state in the A.C.L.U.’s “Firewall for Freedom,” helping it pass the state-level Equal Rights Amendment and a voting-rights act. Last year, the A.C.L.U.’s national office

spent six months preparing for what a second Trump term might look like. The [Heritage Foundation](#)'s Project 2025, which publicly blueprinted the Administration's all-out aggression, telegraphed some matters. Still, the sheer volume of battles, particularly when it comes to immigration cases, can be overwhelming. "The hardest thing is to say no," Lieberman said. "Our immigration lawyers are, like, stretched beyond the limit. But even they will get that call and say, 'We have to.' "

She stilled her potter's wheel. "Some people say, 'Why bother with the courts? It's fixed,' " she said. "Well, every case is a life, or lives." She dipped her hands in a water basin and scraped off pieces of gray gunk. "Figuring out how to throw some sand in the gears of that stuff is really important," she added.

Lieberman examined her bowl. She wasn't thrilled with the result. "I always bring my rejects into the office," she said. "People don't know what's a reject." She grabbed a new lump of clay and smacked it into shape with both hands. She had taken up pottery in the seventies, while in law school, at Rutgers, after trying a class at the Newark Museum of Art. "When I first moved to the city, I would pot at [Riverside Church](#), in the steeple," she said. "On the fourteenth floor, there was the best pottery studio in the world. We had a three-sixty of the whole city."

She spun the clay into another bowl and returned the conversation to politics. "Some of this shit is not new," she said. In the [McCarthy](#) era, her father, a field examiner for the National Labor Relations Board, had been subjected to a loyalty hearing and blacklisted. "We have a saying: the fight for civil liberties is never won," she said. "You have to fight for rights over and over again. This time in our history is proof positive."

There have been recent local challenges, too. "Nassau is a cottage industry for us," she said, of the Long Island county: gerrymandering, a ban on trans-women athletes in county facilities,

an arrangement wherein county cops are deputized by ICE. Meanwhile, she has been in contact with the governor's and the attorney general's offices to prepare for President Trump potentially sending the National Guard into the city. Lieberman noted, though, that a more combative relationship between City Hall and the White House could come with an upside. "I think having a mayor whose first response to any request for information is not 'Sure, here! Take it all!' will be a breath of fresh air for New Yorkers," she said.

Lieberman pulled the bowl upward and out, forming a wide rim. When civil liberties are under attack, she said, artists often turn up at the vanguard. "We need to protect them at perilous moments, or eras," she said. "I hope this is more moment than era." ♦

*Dan Greene* is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/donna-lieberman-is-at-the-wheel>

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[Sketchpad](#)

# Hey, Kids! Get Yer Epstein Files Activity Fun Page!

*Maybe the Justice Department should try a Word Search puzzle and a Connect the Dots.*

*By [Jon Adams](#)*

*December 1, 2025*

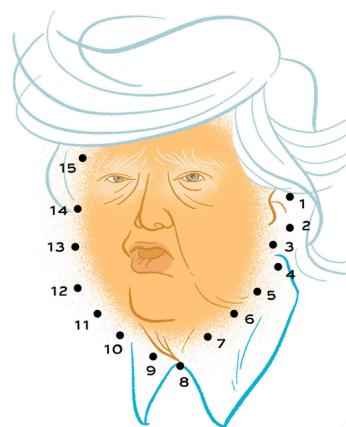
#### REDACTED WORD SEARCH

Can you find any of these words in the Epstein files? TRUMP, GUILTY, REPUBLICAN, B.F.F.S, GROPE, COVERUP, UH-OH

R U B [REDACTED] S C U M  
P L A N E [REDACTED] A N D  
[REDACTED] T A N  
[REDACTED] B U B B A  
[REDACTED] E M A I L F U N  
[REDACTED] O I L [REDACTED] I N  
I T [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] G R A B  
[REDACTED] P A R T Y  
N O [REDACTED] C R O T C H  
S E C R E T [REDACTED] I S L A N D  
G O L D [REDACTED] A T T I N  
W I V E S

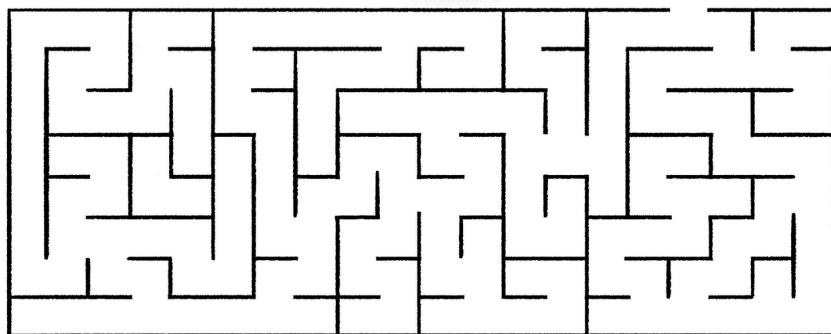
#### CONNECT THE DOTS

Uncover the mystery of which high-profile person is named in the Epstein files.



#### RELEASE THE FILES

Help get the Epstein files to the public! Use this maze designed by a Trump-appointed judge.



#### HIDDEN SECRET

Find any photos from the Epstein files concealed in this golden ballroom.



Answer: Those photos are AI!

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# Reporting & Essays

- **[A Battle with My Blood](#)**

When I was diagnosed with leukemia, my first thought was that this couldn't be happening to me, to my family.

- **[A Very Big Fight Over a Very Small Language](#)**

In the Swiss Alps, a plan to tidy up Romansh—spoken by less than one per cent of the country—set off a decades-long quarrel over identity, belonging, and the sound of authenticity.

- **[In the Line of Fire](#)**

During the Trump era, political violence has become an increasingly urgent problem. Elected officials from both parties are struggling to respond.

- **[How the Sports Stadium Went Luxe](#)**

Is the race to create ever more lavish spectator offerings in America's largest entertainment venues changing the fan experience?

[The Weekend Essay](#)

## A Battle with My Blood

When I was diagnosed with leukemia, my first thought was that this couldn't be happening to me, to my family.

By [Tatiana Schlossberg](#)

November 22, 2025



*Photograph by Thea Traff for The New Yorker*

When you are dying, at least in my limited experience, you start remembering everything. Images come in flashes—people and places and stray conversations—and refuse to stop. I see my best friend from elementary school as we make a mud pie in her back yard, top it with candles and a tiny American flag, and watch, in

panic, as the flag catches fire. I see my college boyfriend, wearing boat shoes a few days after a record-breaking snowstorm, slipping and falling into a slush puddle. I want to break up with him, so I laugh until I can't breathe.

Maybe my brain is replaying my life now because I have a terminal diagnosis, and all these memories will be lost. Maybe it's because I don't have much time to make new ones, and some part of me is sifting through the sands.

On May 25, 2024, my daughter was born at 7:05 in the morning, ten minutes after I arrived at Columbia-Presbyterian hospital, in New York. My husband, George, and I held her and stared at her and admired her newness. A few hours later, my doctor noticed that my blood count looked strange. A normal white-blood-cell count is around four thousand to eleven thousand cells per microlitre. Mine was a hundred and thirty-one thousand cells per microlitre. It could just be something related to pregnancy and delivery, the doctor said, or it could be leukemia. "It's not leukemia," I told George. "What are they talking about?"

George, who was then a urology resident at the hospital, began calling friends who were primary-care doctors and ob-gyns. Everyone thought it was something to do with the pregnancy or the delivery. After a few hours, my doctors thought it was leukemia. My parents, Caroline Kennedy and Edwin Schlossberg, had brought my two-year-old son to the hospital to meet his sister, but suddenly I was being moved to another floor. My daughter was carried off to the nursery. My son didn't want to leave; he wanted to drive my hospital bed like a bus. I said goodbye to him and my parents and was wheeled away.

The diagnosis was acute myeloid leukemia, with a rare mutation called Inversion 3. It was mostly seen in older patients. Every doctor I saw asked me if I had spent a lot of time at Ground Zero, given how common blood cancers are among first responders. I

was in New York on 9/11, in the sixth grade, but I didn't visit the site until years later. I am not elderly—I had just turned thirty-four.

I could not be cured by a standard course of treatment. I would need a few months, at least, of chemotherapy, which would aim to reduce the number of blast cells in my bone marrow. (Blast cells are immature blood cells; a high count can be a sign of leukemia.) Then I would need a bone-marrow transplant, which could cure me. After the transplant, I would probably need more chemotherapy, on a regular basis, to try to prevent the cancer from returning.

I did not—could not—believe that they were talking about me. I had swum a mile in the pool the day before, nine months pregnant. I wasn't sick. I didn't feel sick. I was actually one of the healthiest people I knew. I regularly ran five to ten miles in Central Park. I once swam three miles across the Hudson River—easily, to raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society. I work as an environmental journalist, and [for one article](#) I skied the Birkebeiner, a fifty-kilometre cross-country race in Wisconsin, which took me seven and a half hours. I loved to have people over for dinner and to make cakes for my friends' birthdays. I went to museums and plays and got to [jump in a cranberry bog](#) for my job. I had a son whom I loved more than anything and a newborn I needed to take care of. This could not possibly be my life.



*Schlossberg reporting off the coast of Santa Barbara in 2022.*

*Photograph by Lauren Justice*

I ended up spending five weeks at Columbia-Presbyterian, and the strangeness and sadness of what I was being told about myself made me hunt for the humor in it. I didn't know what else to do. I decided that everyone in the hospital had Munchausen syndrome by proxy, and I was their target. It was a joke that I found funnier than everyone else did. Later, when I was bald and had a scrape on my face from a fall, my joke was that I was a busted-up Voldemort.

There were indignities and humiliations. I had a postpartum hemorrhage and almost bled to death, before being saved by my obstetrician. (She had already saved my life once, by noticing my blood count and giving me the chance to be cured. This time felt like overkill.) Little things made it easier, or somehow made it feel like everything was going to be fine. My son came to visit almost every day. When friends heard that I liked Spindrift seltzer, they sent cases of it; they also sent pajamas and watercolor kits and good gossip. People made paintings and drawings to decorate my walls. They dropped off food at my parents' apartment, where George and the kids had moved. The nurses brought me warm blankets and let me sit on the floor of the skyway with my son, even though I wasn't supposed to leave my room. They ate up the gossip that I gathered; they looked the other way when they saw that I had a contraband teakettle and toaster. They told me about

their kids and their dating lives and their first trips to Europe. I have never encountered a group of people who are more competent, more full of grace and empathy, more willing to serve others than nurses. Nurses should take over.

Eventually, my blast-cell count went down and I was allowed to do a round of treatment at home, with my family. My care was transferred to Memorial Sloan Kettering, one of the largest centers for bone-marrow transplants in the country. Whenever I needed to be back in the hospital, my oncologist visited me almost daily, talking about my disease, of course, but also about foxhunting, who was annoying me that week, his new cat. He's Orthodox Jewish and observes the Sabbath, but he would still answer texts that I rudely sent on Saturdays. He has scoured every inch of the earth for more treatments for me; he knows I don't want to die and he is trying to stop it. My transplant doctor, always in a bow tie, always shouting a big hello, is a mad scientist in disguise as one of the country's foremost experts on bone-marrow transplants, who safely got me through a lung infection and didn't bat an eye when I pulled out a rosary and a bottle of holy water, blessed by Pope Francis and sent from Rome. He looked at me and said, "*Vaya con Dios. Go with God.*"

After the at-home chemo, I was admitted to M.S.K. for an even stronger dose of poison. Then I was ready for a transplant. My sister had turned out to be a match and would donate her stem cells. (My brother was a half-match, but he still asked every doctor if maybe a half-match was better, just in case.) My sister held her arms straight for hours as the doctors drained blood from one, scooped out and froze her stem cells, and pumped the blood back in the other.

The cells smelled like canned tomato soup. When the transfusion began, I sneezed twelve times and threw up. Then I waited—for my blood counts to recover, for my sister's cells to heal and change my body. We wondered if I would get her banana allergy or her

personality. My hair started to fall out and I wore scarves to cover my head, remembering, vainly, each time I tied one on, how great my hair used to be; when my son came to visit, he wore them, too. After a few days, I couldn't speak or swallow because of sores in my mouth; food turned to dust on my tongue.

George did everything for me that he possibly could. He talked to all the doctors and insurance people that I didn't want to talk to; he slept on the floor of the hospital; he didn't get mad when I was raging on steroids and yelled at him that I did not like Schweppes ginger ale, only Canada Dry. He would go home to put our kids to bed and come back to bring me dinner. I know that not everyone can be married to a doctor, but, if you can, it's a very good idea. He is perfect, and I feel so cheated and so sad that I don't get to keep living the wonderful life I had with this kind, funny, handsome genius I managed to find.

My parents and my brother and sister, too, have been raising my children and sitting in my various hospital rooms almost every day for the last year and a half. They have held my hand unflinchingly while I have suffered, trying not to show their pain and sadness in order to protect me from it. This has been a great gift, even though I feel their pain every day. For my whole life, I have tried to be good, to be a good student and a good sister and a good daughter, and to protect my mother and never make her upset or angry. Now I have added a new tragedy to her life, to our family's life, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

I went home after fifty days at Memorial Sloan Kettering. The transplant had put me in remission, but I had no immune system, and would have to get all my childhood vaccines again. I started a new round of chemotherapy to keep the cancer at bay. I relapsed. My transplant doctor said that leukemia with my mutation "liked to come back."

In January, I joined a clinical trial of CAR-T-cell therapy, a type of immunotherapy that has proved effective against certain blood cancers. Scientists would engineer my sister's T cells, directing them to attack my cancer cells. It was dark all the time outside my hospital window. I was given more chemotherapy; after the CAR-T treatment, I had cytokine-release syndrome, in which a storm of inflammation left me unable to breathe without high-flow oxygen. My lungs filled with fluid and my liver was unhappy and I was constantly on the brink of going to the I.C.U. A few weeks later, I was in remission again, though I had lost about twenty pounds. The doctors were happy with the results: I had done better than several other patients in the trial, which beggared belief, but I went home.

It didn't really feel as if I was home: I had to go to the outpatient clinic most days, to treat infections or receive transfusions, sitting in a recliner for hours on end, waiting to know when I would need to go back to the hospital. In early April, I did go back, on just a few days' notice, for my second transplant. I hoped that this would work. Actually, I decided that it *would* work. I dutifully copied Seamus Heaney poems into my notebook: "The Cure at Troy" ("Believe that a further shore / Is reachable from here. / Believe in miracles / And cures and healing wells.") and "The Gravel Walks" ("So walk on air against your better judgement"). I tried to be the perfect patient: if I did everything right, if I was nice to everyone all the time, if I didn't need any help or have any problems, then it would work.

This time, I had an unrelated donor, the logic being that the cells would be distinct from those of my sister and me, and thus better suited to take on the cancer. All I know about the donor is that he is a man in his twenties from the Pacific Northwest. I imagined a Portland woodcutter or a Seattle tech bro. Either way, I wished I could thank him. I went into remission again; I relapsed again. I joined another clinical trial. I was hospitalized twice more—weeks I don't remember, during which I lost another ten pounds. First, I had graft-versus-host disease, in which new cells attack old ones,

and then, in late September, I was downed by a form of Epstein-Barr virus that blasted my kidneys. When I got home a few weeks later, I had to learn how to walk again and couldn't pick up my children. My leg muscles wasted and my arms seemed whittled into bone.

During the latest clinical trial, my doctor told me that he could keep me alive for a year, maybe. My first thought was that my kids, whose faces live permanently on the inside of my eyelids, wouldn't remember me. My son might have a few memories, but he'll probably start confusing them with pictures he sees or stories he hears. I didn't ever really get to take care of my daughter—I couldn't change her diaper or give her a bath or feed her, all because of the risk of infection after my transplants. I was gone for almost half of her first year of life. I don't know who, really, she thinks I am, and whether she will feel or remember, when I am gone, that I am her mother.



*Schlossberg and George Moran at their wedding-rehearsal dinner, in 2017.  
Photograph by Elizabeth Cecil*

Meanwhile, during the CAR-T treatment, a method developed over many decades with millions of dollars of government funding, my cousin Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was in the process of being [nominated and confirmed](#) as the Secretary of Health and Human Services. Throughout my treatment, he had been on the national

stage: previously a Democrat, he was running for President [as an Independent](#), but mostly as an embarrassment to me and the rest of my immediate family.

In August, 2024, he suspended his campaign and endorsed Donald Trump, who said that he was going to “let Bobby go wild” on health. My mother wrote a letter to the Senate, to try and stop his confirmation; my brother had been speaking out against his lies for months. I watched from my hospital bed as Bobby, in the face of logic and common sense, was confirmed for the position, despite never having worked in medicine, public health, or the government.

Suddenly, the health-care system on which I relied felt strained, shaky. Doctors and scientists at Columbia, including George, didn’t know if they would be able to continue their research, or even have jobs. (Columbia was one of the Trump Administration’s first [targets](#) in its crusade against alleged antisemitism on campuses; in May, the university laid off a hundred and eighty researchers after federal-funding cuts.) If George changed jobs, we didn’t know if we’d be able to get insurance, now that I had a preexisting condition. Bobby is a known [skeptic of vaccines](#), and I was especially concerned that I wouldn’t be able to get mine again, leaving me to spend the rest of my life immunocompromised, along with millions of cancer survivors, small children, and the elderly. Bobby has said, “There’s no vaccine that is safe and effective.” Bobby probably doesn’t remember the millions of people who were paralyzed or killed by polio before the vaccine was available. My dad, who grew up in New York City in the nineteen-forties and fifties, does remember. Recently, I asked him what it was like when he got the vaccine. He said that it felt like freedom.

As I spent more and more of my life under the care of doctors, nurses, and researchers striving to improve the lives of others, I watched as Bobby cut nearly half a billion dollars for research into mRNA vaccines, technology that could be used against certain

cancers; slashed billions in funding from the [National Institutes of Health](#), the world's largest sponsor of medical research; and threatened to oust the panel of medical experts charged with recommending preventive cancer screenings. Hundreds of N.I.H. grants and clinical trials were cancelled, affecting thousands of patients. I worried about funding for leukemia and bone-marrow research at Memorial Sloan Kettering. I worried about the trials that were my only shot at remission. Early in my illness, when I had the postpartum hemorrhage, I was given a dose of misoprostol to help stop the bleeding. This drug is part of [medication abortion](#), which, at Bobby's urging, is currently "under review" by the Food and Drug Administration. I freeze when I think about what would have happened if it had not been immediately available to me and to millions of other women who need it to save their lives or to get the care they deserve.

My plan, had I not gotten sick, was to write a book about the oceans—their destruction, but also the possibilities they offer. During treatment, I learned that one of my chemotherapy drugs, cytarabine, owes its existence to an ocean animal: a sponge that lives in the Caribbean Sea, *Tectitethya crypta*. This discovery was made by scientists at the University of California, Berkeley, who first synthesized the drug in 1959, and who almost certainly relied on government funding, the very thing that Bobby has already cut.

I won't write about cytarabine. I won't find out if we were able to harness the power of the oceans, or if we let them boil and turn into a garbage dump. My son knows that I am a writer and that I write about our planet. Since I've been sick, I remind him a lot, so that he will know that I was not just a sick person.

When I look at him, I try to fill my brain with memories. How many more times can I watch the video of him trying to say "Anna Karenina"? What about when I told him I didn't want ice cream from the ice-cream truck, and he hugged me, patted me on the back, and said, "I hear you, buddy, I hear you"? I think about the

first time I came home from the hospital. He walked into my bathroom, looked at me, and said, “It’s so nice to meet you in here.”

Then there’s my daughter, her curly red hair like a flame, squinting her eyes and grinning a gap-toothed grin after taking a sip of seltzer. She stomps around the house in bright-yellow rain boots, pretending to talk on my mother’s phone, a string of fake pearls around her neck, no pants, giggling and running away from anyone who tries to catch her. She asks us to play James Brown’s “I Got the Feelin’ ” by picking up a portable speaker and saying, “Baby, baby.”

Mostly, I try to live and be with them now. But being in the present is harder than it sounds, so I let the memories come and go. So many of them are from my childhood that I feel as if I’m watching myself and my kids grow up at the same time. Sometimes I trick myself into thinking I’ll remember this forever, I’ll remember this when I’m dead. Obviously, I won’t. But since I don’t know what death is like and there’s no one to tell me what comes after it, I’ll keep pretending. I will keep trying to remember. ♦



Tatiana Schlossberg at her parents' home in New York City.

Photograph by Thea Traff for The New Yorker

Tatiana Schlossberg is a journalist and the author of "[Inconspicuous Consumption: The Environmental Impact You Don't Know You Have](#)." She previously worked for the New York Times.

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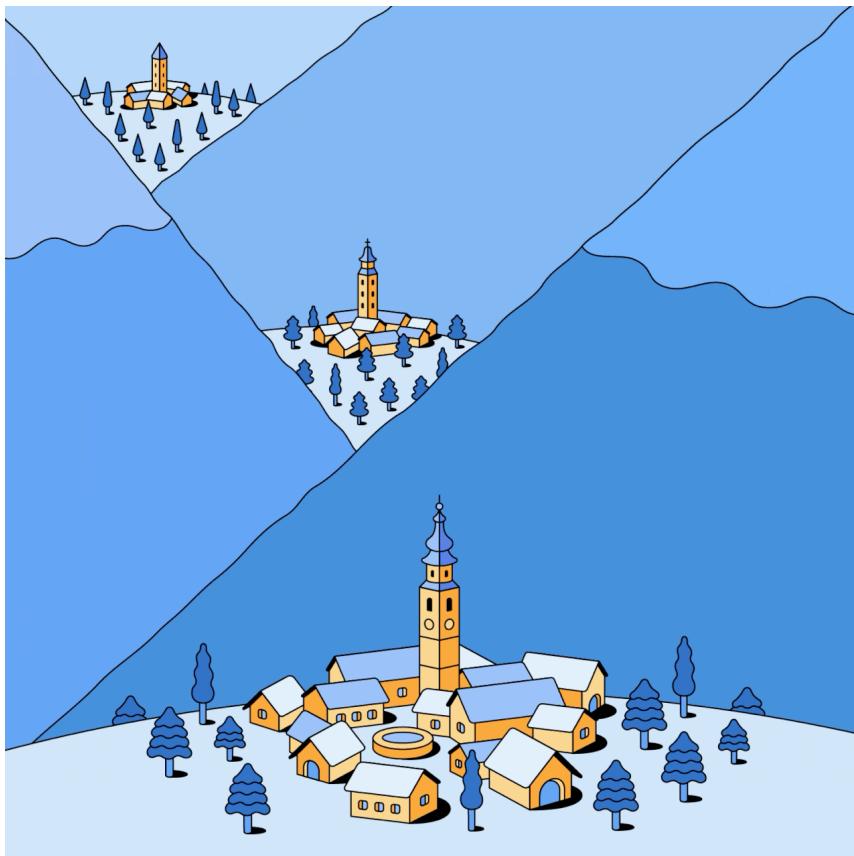
[Letter from Switzerland](#)

## A Very Big Fight Over a Very Small Language

In the Swiss Alps, a plan to tidy up Romansh—spoken by less than one per cent of the country—set off a decades-long quarrel over identity, belonging, and the sound of authenticity.

By [Simon Akam](#)

December 1, 2025



*After reformers launched Rumantsch Grischun, a standardized version of Romansh's various dialects, traditionalists denounced it as a "bastard," a "castrated" tongue, an act of "linguistic murder."*

*Illustration by Till Lauer*

Ask him how it all began, and he remembers the ice. It was a bitter morning in January, 1982, when Bernard Cathomas, aged thirty-six, carefully picked his way up a slippery, sloping Zurich street. His destination was No. 33, an ochre house with green shutters—the home of Heinrich Schmid, a linguist at the University of Zurich. Inside, the décor suggested that “professor” was an

encompassing identity: old wooden floors, a faded carpet, a living room seemingly untouched since the nineteen-thirties, when Schmid had grown up in the house. Schmid's wife served *Rüebblitorte*, a Swiss carrot cake that manages bourgeois indulgence with a vegetable alibi.

Cathomas had already written from Chur, in the canton of the Grisons, having recently become the general secretary of the Lia Rumantscha, a small association charged with protecting Switzerland's least known national language, Romansh. Spoken by less than one per cent of the Swiss population, the language was itself splintered into five major "idioms," not always readily intelligible to one another, each with its own spelling conventions. Earlier attempts at unification had collapsed in rivalries. In his letter, Cathomas said that Schmid's authority would be valuable in standardizing the language. Cathomas wrote in German but started and ended in his native Sursilvan, the biggest of the Romansh idioms: "*Jeu engraziel cordialmein per Vies interess e Vossa attenziun per quest problem.*" Translation: "I thank you very much for your interest and attention to this problem."

Schmid, the man he was counting on, hadn't grown up speaking Romansh; he first learned it in high school, and later worked on the "Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun," a Romansh dictionary begun in 1904 and still lumbering toward completion. But the depth of his expertise was formidable. By the time Cathomas knocked on his door, Schmid had already sketched a plan for standardizing Romansh: a "majority principle" in which the most widely shared spellings across the idioms would win out.

"He really already had everything," Cathomas recalled. "He had worked it all out in his head."

What Cathomas hadn't reckoned with was how quickly the tidy scheme, once loosed into the valleys, would ignite quarrels that engulfed Swiss classrooms, newspapers, and eventually cantonal

politics—a parable of how an attempt to secure a language’s survival can feel, to those being standardized, like an assault on what makes them distinct.

Every European language originated in a squabble of dialects. Standard English rose from East Midland varieties, its momentum gathering after Chaucer’s “*Canterbury Tales*,” in the fourteenth century. In Germany, Luther’s *New Testament* was a catalyst for making the Saxon dialect the linguistic default, at least on the page. French proved the most consequential case. For centuries, the monarchy promoted a version of the Parisian dialect, and the French Revolution—linking linguistic unity to republican virtue—only hastened the process of linguistic standardization. Elsewhere, the French model of uniformity imposed from above became the template. “There’s a big difference between languages standardized before the French Revolution and after,” the Romance philologist Paul Videsott told me. “After Napoleon, language becomes the strongest means to define a people.”

Romansh, which sounds closer to northern-Italian dialects than to the modern language spoken in Florence or Rome, is a battered remnant of spoken Late Latin which escaped standardization mostly by being tucked away in the Alps. The Grisons, Switzerland’s only trilingual canton, is dominated by mountains; an area roughly the size of Delaware contains nine hundred and thirty-seven named peaks. (*Piz*, Romansh for “peak,” clings to dozens of summits like linguistic snowpack.) The terrain is daunting. Even today, travelling by train from Disentis, a Sursilvan-speaking town, to Poschiavo, Italian-speaking and just sixty miles away, takes more than four hours.

Chur, the capital of the Grisons, was devastated by fire in the fifteenth century. An influx of German-speaking workers arrived to help with reconstruction, and the town’s language altered to German before Romansh had established a literary tradition. And the fact that wider political authority was decentralized meant that

linguistic fragmentation found little resistance. Until the start of the nineteenth century, the canton was governed by three bodies with names fit for a Wes Anderson caper: the League of God’s House, the League of the Ten Jurisdictions, and the Gray League. During the Reformation, villagers could put big questions—whether to turn Protestant or remain Catholic—to a vote. Among the surviving Romansh idioms, Sursilvan reigns in the upper Rhine Valley; Sutsilvan in the posterior Rhine Valley; Surmiran in the Albula Valley and Oberhalbstein; and Puter and Vallader in the Engadine. In Cathomas’s estimation, Sursilvan accounts for just over half of all Romansh speakers, Vallader about a fifth, Puter and Surmiran each about ten per cent, and Sutsilvan about five per cent. (These five idioms, Cathomas notes, are themselves a standardization of perhaps twenty-one linguistic varieties that arose over time.) Greetings shift on either side of a watershed and can vary even within a town. Among speakers of Romansh, you could find dozens of ways of pronouncing the first-person pronoun. “Avalanche” varies, too—*lavina* in Sursilvan, Vallader, and Puter, *lavegna* in Surmiran and Sutsilvan. With both courtesies and catastrophes refusing to conform, the canton’s school board, publishers, and clergy were forced to produce multiple editions of primers, textbooks, and catechisms; sometimes five parallel print runs were needed for a population the size of a town. To the reform-minded, it was plain that something had to give.

I met Bernard Cathomas at his home in Chur, a white-walled modernist house designed in the style of Rudolf Olgiati, the Swiss architect known for making starkness feel Alpine. Tall and slender, with retreating white hair, rimless glasses, and a careful, though not unamused, expression, Cathomas carried himself with the formality of a cultural functionary and the low-key stubbornness of a man who has spent a lifetime defending a fragile language. He remains better known in the valleys of the Grisons than he might like; his name can still provoke sharp opinions. The death threats have passed. The indignation has not.

Inside, we sat by some Le Corbusier armchairs—“Not always very comfortable,” he remarked—while his wife, Rita, brought out what felt like a culinary tour of the valleys: a barley soup dense with grains and vegetables, grated potatoes fried slowly in butter until crisp, and plates of *charn setga dal Grischun*, dried meats from the Grisons. Cathomas was born in 1946 in Breil, a village situated on a terrace on the north side of the Anterior Rhine, forty-two hundred feet above sea level. He was the second of fourteen children, in a Sursilvan-speaking family.

The family straddled eras: their habits belonged to the region’s past, their livelihood to the new era. His father worked as a wheelwright until rubber tires killed the trade, then built wooden molds to cast concrete for hydroelectric projects. “My first and deepest wish was to become a medical doctor,” Cathomas said, “but, because my family lacked the money for a secondary-school education, I gave up on that idea.” In the mid-fifties, the family visited the Benedictine monastery at Disentis, which operated a school. Cathomas recalls standing in the Baroque church, beneath a fresco of St. Placidus carrying his own severed head, while monks asked his father if they could pay for tuition. They could not. Nor did Bernard have any desire to be a priest or a monk. He stayed in his local school, trained as a teacher in Chur, and eventually earned a doctorate in German studies.

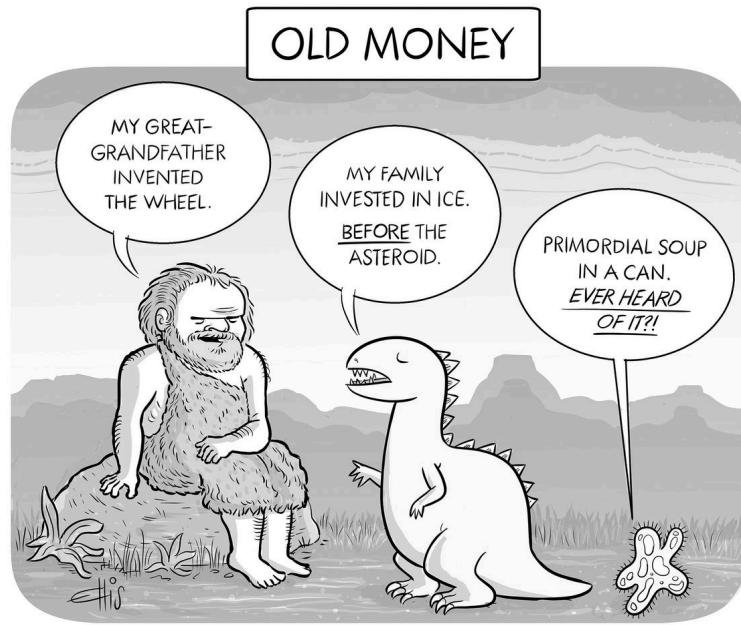
By the seventies, Romansh was losing ground; although the number of speakers inched up, the share of the Swiss population who spoke it shrank. German seeped into daily speech, bringing its gadgets with it: vacuum cleaners were *schtaubsugers*, televisions *fernseers*, tents *zeltas*. Decline had a ratchet effect. “Languages need what we call in economics ‘network externality,’ ” Clemens Sialm, a finance professor at the University of Texas who grew up speaking Romansh, told me. “A language becomes more useful the more people speak it.” In the early eighties, someone suggested to Cathomas that Romansh should be allowed to “die in beauty”—the

proposal itself phrased, with a touch of fatalist elegance, in Vallader.

Switzerland had declared Romansh its fourth national language in 1938, but the gesture was symbolic. Without a standardized written form, nothing official could be produced in it. The breakthrough for Cathomas came during his doctoral studies, when he encountered the work of Harald Haarmann, a linguist who showed how German had gradually emerged from a patchwork of dialects. “I thought, Yes, that’s incredible,” Cathomas recalled. “And, when I joined the Lia Rumantscha, I said, ‘We absolutely must do something like that.’ ” What Cathomas perhaps overlooked was that German had unified itself by erasing languages like Romansh.

After meeting with Cathomas, Heinrich Schmid rapidly produced a dense forty-eight-page pamphlet, outlining a scheme for the new language, which he called Rumantsch Grischun—that is, Grisons Romansh. Given Schmid’s strategy of taking the most common form of a word across the five idioms, sometimes nothing had to change—*clav*, or “key,” was *clav* everywhere. Sometimes there was a clear majority: *tschiel*, or “sky,” instead of *tschêl*. And sometimes Schmid split the difference, smoothing verbs that varied wildly from valley to valley.

Cathomas wanted Rumantsch Grischun, or R.G., launched fast. At the Lia Rumantscha, a handful of young linguists set about producing grammars and dictionaries, translating government documents, and coining words on the fly. The mood was feverish. “It was such a pioneering time—you had a feeling that anything was possible,” Anna-Alice Dazzi, a former student of Schmid’s and an early R.G. evangelist, recalled.



But there were already signs of mission creep. Christian Erni, a primary-school headmaster, remembers a conference in the eighties where Cathomas assured teachers that R.G. would never enter classrooms. “It would just be for signage and communication between canton and municipality, a written language,” Erni recounted. “The teachers believed it, too.” That promise quietly expired. Cathomas “wanted to get to the goal too quickly,” Mevina Puorger, a scholar who had also studied with Schmid, recalled. “As soon as he had the guidelines, he started making translations. That was too early. He didn’t give the language a chance to grow.”

The first serious backlash came in 1988, at a cultural gathering in Scuol. The linguist Chasper Pult gave a lecture in favor of R.G. One designated respondent, Theo Candinas, a writer and an outspoken critic of R.G., was furious that the moderator denied him a chance to deliver a proper rebuttal. To some in the hall—those who saw R.G. as a lab-grown construct foisted on Alpine communities by distant planners—the silencing confirmed their suspicions. “The opposition was probably already frustrated,” Dazzi recalled. “They felt all the energy, all the money, was going into Rumantsch Grischun. This was the last straw.” The following day, Candinas complained to the press that he’d been censored, and

denounced R.G. as a bureaucratic affront to the authentic cadences of the valleys.

The opposition remained a minority, but a verbally resourceful one. The new language was denounced as a “bastard,” a “castrated” tongue, an act of “linguistic murder.” Nazi analogies abounded: Candinas, in a much discussed article, seemed to liken Cathomas to Josef Goebbels; one editorial accused the Lia Rumantscha of staging a “Kristallnacht” against the idioms. Others borrowed from the anxieties of the eighties, from AIDS to Eastern Bloc repression. In 1991, three thousand people signed a petition to the federal government in Bern claiming that the imposition of R.G. violated their rights. Cathomas received threatening anonymous letters and calls. Strangers let him know exactly how they felt. “The reason it’s so contentious is that it’s not about language,” Oliver Mayeux, a sociolinguist at Cambridge, told me. “It’s about using language as a symbol, a totem, around which you organize your social movement.” But Cathomas was determined to stay the course until R.G. joined German, French, and Italian as one of the languages in which Swiss government documents are published. In 1996, it happened.

Cathomas left the Lia Rumantscha and went on to run Pro Helvetia, the Swiss arts council. The opposition subsided. The publisher Dorling Kindersley’s Eyewitness Books were reborn as Collecziun Eglis Averts. Microsoft released its Office suite in R.G. Even the [Beatles](#) arrived in Romansh: the Swiss vocalist Corin Curschellas sang “Norwegian Wood” as “*Jau vev in’amur / U duess jau dir / L’amur veva mai . . .*” After concerts, she’d sometimes ask audiences: Which idiom had she sung in? Sursilvan? Vallader? Surmiran? No one ever guessed R.G.

By the turn of the millennium, the language had seeped into daily life. The journalist David Truttmann read some short texts on Romansh radio in R.G. He recalls that at the post office in Müstair, where locals speak Jauer, a close relative of Vallader, a postal clerk

once said, “You told some funny stories. But they weren’t really in Jauer, were they?” They weren’t—but the fellow had understood them. Later, a pastor clear across the canton griped about another broadcast. For Truttmann, the complaints were the proof: R.G. could serve as a lingua franca.

Earlier this year, Cathomas agreed to take me on a tour of the region whose linguistic future he’d once tried to reprogram. We left Chur in a train and then boarded a PostBus, climbing into the upper valleys. At just below five thousand feet, we stopped in Vrin, a village whose church had a portico lined with human skulls—a memento mori and, in the past, a resting place for the dead before burial. Then we descended into the main valley of the Anterior Rhine, to Disentis and the Benedictine school that Cathomas’s family hadn’t been able to afford. The monastery, rebuilt at the end of the seventeenth century, sported a concrete addition, brutalism with a clerical accent. Standing in its shadow, I asked Cathomas how Switzerland’s near-sacred devotion to order—visible in trains, typography, and almost everything else—squared with its tolerance for linguistic chaos.

“You know, that’s just the fascination of small things,” he said. “If you hold small things in high esteem, that’s a good attitude. But, in practice, it leads to difficulties. As soon as you don’t adhere to certain standards, you’re struggling.”

It became evident that in the Romansh world, six degrees of separation would be overkill. Mention a name and you may be offered coffee, champagne, or a cousin. When I brought up Clemens Sialm, the finance professor in Texas, I found myself ushered up the stairs of the Hotel Alpu, which is run by Sialm’s family. His sister leaned out of the kitchen; among the drinkers on the terrace was Elmar Deflorin, a singer and a filmmaker who, in 1986, had turned a satirical poem about R.G., written by a teacher, into a valley-wide rock anthem.

After some coaxing, Deflorin sang the opening verse, which translated to: “Good heavens, what’s coming? / A new thing, a new language! / Gather yourselves, you valleys, with axe and club, every child! / We don’t want Rumantsch Grischun!” Later stanzas mocked purists who would “rather die than change” or “experience the world only in German.” Cathomas reprinted the poem in his (German-language) book on the Romansh-language wars, “A Path to Unity in Diversity.” When I asked Deflorin what he thought of the value of R.G. today, he didn’t hesitate: “I think it’s existential.”

The next day, Cathomas and I went southeast, to the Engadine, where Puter and Vallader are spoken. In Pontresina, a village of palatial hotels, its mayor, Nora Saratz Cazin, explained that even here, in a Puter-speaking zone, speech could fray into micro-dialects. “The Pontresina dialect is very broad, doughy,” Cazin said. “We say *primaveerer*, with a lot of *eeeer* and *neer*. In Zuoz”—eight miles away—it’s *primavaira*.” Cathomas added that Pontresina people sounded slightly different from their neighbors in Celerina. How far away was that? She pointed out the window: “Celerina is the houses over there.”

The second wave of resistance to R.G. began, predictably, in schools. For decades, the Grisons had printed textbooks in five Romansh idioms—a baroque solution that invited a more rational one. In the mid-two-thousands, the canton launched a trial program, subsidizing schools that taught in the standardized language. A new textbook series blended modernity with Alpine flourishes; one spread on hunting showed a smiling woman with a hooved carcass slung across her shoulders like a sweater, blood streaking her sleeve.

Between 2007 and 2009, dozens of schools signed on to teach R.G., with a plan to eventually make it the language of instruction. Then children came home spouting phrases that sounded off, even foreign. Outrage followed. A bridge language never meant for speech was suddenly being spoken—and enforced as correct.

In 2010, indignant parents in the Engadine founded an opposition group, Pro Idioms. Its leader, Domenic Toutsch—a farmer turned insurance executive turned village president—saw R.G. as a professional-class takeover. “The professional Romansh, the Romansh élite, bypassing the people, sought to introduce the Rumantsch Grischun project in an undemocratic, dictatorial manner,” he told me, “with money, coercion, and so on, under the leadership of Bernard Cathomas, among others.” Then, with a farmer’s finality, he added, “Bernard Cathomas is not my political Romansh friend.”

Soon, a second chapter formed in Surselva. One of its leaders was Tresa Deplazes. When her daughter started third grade in an R.G. school, Deplazes recalled, “that’s when we really got a sense of what it meant. She’d bring home homework, and we’d encounter something that just sounded wrong and looked wrong. Really wrong.”

The alliance between the two chapters required delicacy—the gap between the Engadine dialects and Sursilvan is the widest in the Romansh family—and participants sometimes had to ask one another what certain words meant. The group’s website published everything twice, with a short German summary as a backup for outsiders. On one point, however, everyone was unified and unyielding: no single Romansh should rule them all.

Pro Idioms’ most effective weapon was procedure. In the Grisons, the canton where villagers once voted on whether to become Protestant or remain Catholic, individual communities could still hold a vote on which Romansh to teach. From 2011 to 2013, Pro Idioms campaigners trudged from hamlet to hamlet, insisting that the canton didn’t have the authority to dictate. “Every municipality had the right to decide its own language,” Deplazes said.

In the spring of 2011, the writer Leo Tuor thundered in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that the debate over R.G. had “destroyed linguistic

peace in the Grisons and squandered the trust of the population.” Pro Idioms claimed that the way R.G. was introduced damaged children psychologically, fractured cohesion, and undermined identity.

Not everyone admired the tenor of the revolt. “Perhaps Switzerland’s democratic principles were also somewhat undermined,” Fabian Huonder, a translator for the canton government, said. “If anyone spoke up for Rumantsch Grischun, they were interrupted, sometimes forcefully.” Still, the campaign worked. Most schools that had adopted R.G. reverted to an idiom.

Yet Pro Idioms’ triumph had the markings of a Pyrrhic victory. With local schools rejecting R.G. textbooks, international publishers cut back their Romansh editions. The canton kept the colorful R.G. series for the few communities that continued to use them, but largely reverted to a modular system, plugging variant idioms into a single content-management framework. A professor commissioned by the Grisons government to develop teaching materials gave me the numbers: “We print eight sets of textbooks—five in idioms, one in Rumantsch Grischun, one in German, one in Italian. Sutsilvan, the smallest idiom, has just one school. Maybe twenty or thirty students.”

In 2021, about forty thousand people—half a per cent of the Swiss population, fourteen per cent of the Grisons’—identified Romansh as their main language. The numbers haven’t budged much, but Romansh now sits in a kind of bureaucratic stalemate. Official publications appear in R.G., as do the Romansh broadcaster’s website and its radio news and bulletins, but almost all TV broadcasts are in the idioms. The daily newspaper *La Quotidiana* maintains an idiomatic equilibrium.

David Truttmann, the paper’s publisher, took me through a recent edition with a ballpoint pen, charting linguistic shifts like a field commander repositioning troops. With square glasses and gray-

flecked dark hair, he had the calm, thoughtful demeanor of someone long accustomed to handling complaints. The lead story —on a wind-power project—was in R.G. Two of the briefs were in Sursilvan. A photo spread was captioned in Puter. Inside, he pointed out Vallader and Surmiran.

“I think this is the only newspaper in the world written in six different variants,” he said. The ads, inevitably, were mostly in German.

It could almost seem that the invention of a uniform Romansh has encouraged further fragmentation. In Sedrun, a village below the Oberalp Pass, locals maintained that they spoke not Sursilvan or Sutsilvan but Tuatschin, a micro-idiom of their own. “About twelve hundred people live here,” one woman said, “but only about five hundred are Tuatschiners.”

That night, in a hall attached to a compound for holiday groups—a bar on one side, a mandala-like cloth draped over the back wall—I attended an evening of prose and song. Pascal Gamboni, a musician with a graying mod cut, sang in Tuatschin: “*Mo sil tschiel mirel, mo sil tschiel*”—“Only in the sky, only in the sky.” Flurina Badel, a novelist, read from her new book, “Tschiera” (“Fog”), which is in Vallader and concerns Engadine villagers who are being priced out by second-home buyers. With her red-brown hair drawn back and her lips rouged, she read with the steady interior focus of a writer communing with her own sentences. I couldn’t follow her in Vallader, and I had the sense that I wasn’t alone.

When she switched to German, everyone relaxed. “The quality of literature,” she told me afterward, “has nothing to do with the language in which it is written but with how that language is used.”

At first, Gamboni and Badel looked like specimens of a venerable Alpine culture. That picture shifted once I spoke with them. Badel is a first-generation Romansh speaker: her father is of Italian

descent, her mother Swiss German. They had moved to the Engadine partly for the cheap housing, which has long since disappeared. At home, Badel spoke French, Italian, and German; Vallader came later.

She enrolled at the Hochalpines Institut Ftan, an élite school that educates both international boarders and local Swiss of more modest means. Later, while studying creative writing in Vienna, she was disappointed to find that everything was conducted in just one language. Did her devotion to Vallader have a convert's zeal? "I also have a strong affinity for linguistic innovation," she said. "And when I write in Romansh I'm very close to innovation. I can help invent new words." She sometimes submits suggestions to Pledari Grond, an online dictionary: *giattera* (cat flap), *tschüffasömmis* (dream catcher).

Gamboni had once spent a decade in England chasing rock stardom. In the early two-thousands, he moved to Bristol with his band, Cléan. Their sound was a serviceable version of Britpop; Gamboni sang in English. A few years later, though, the band was gone. The manager was gone. Gamboni had turned toward the obscure, scraping bows across guitar strings, recording snowmelt, making art films in derelict buildings. He looked worn out. His mother was worried.

One way of telling the story is that Badel and Gamboni represented a younger generation intent on a Romansh revival. Another is that Romansh became a refuge when your larger ambitions went to ground.

On the cantonal level, Romansh's survival comes down to money. From the nineteen-fifties on, the Grisons went from rural poverty to Alpine affluence on the backs of tourism, high-tech industries, and hydropower. Today, its budget stands at \$3.9 billion. Against that, the amount spent on supporting a minority language is, as Daniel Spadin, the canton's top civil servant, told me, "negligible." In his

office building, he ushered me into a chandeliered chamber where a walnut table stretched beneath a rococo ceiling, gilt mirrors lined the walls, and a floral carpet spread underfoot. Federal and cantonal governments combined now spend the equivalent of about seven million dollars a year to keep Romansh alive, including subsidies for the *Lia Rumantscha*. (A separate levy brings in funds for public broadcasting.)

“You get onstage very quickly,” Johannes Just told me one evening in his Chur apartment. He would know: for more than two decades, he was part of Liricas Analas, a Romansh rap crew. The name, literally “Anal Lyrics,” nods to the old “Parental Advisory” stickers that warned of obscene language. After six albums, the group disbanded in 2022. “From the living room to the stage, the transition is quick,” Just said. “The hard part is what comes after—trying to go from amateur to professional.”



m.e.mcnair

*“If you have any bones hidden in other countries, now is the time to tell me.”*  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

Liricas Analas revelled in regional clichés. In one 2012 video, a mountain rube putters to Zurich on an undersized motorbike and swaggers into a night club; offered cocaine, he counters with snuff.

In a promotional image, the members pose beneath a schoolhouse panel in Trun that reads “*Protect your old Romansh language.*” None of them, however, could live on rhyme alone. By 2022, the surviving m.c.s were in their late thirties or forties, commuting from day jobs.

Book publishing functions in much the same way—small triumphs, bounded horizons. Nadina Derungs, who runs Chasa Editura Rumantscha, in Chur, told me that a typical Romansh title might sell between four hundred and six hundred copies. The outlier was “Uorsin,” a 1945 children’s story about a boy stuck with the puniest cowbell at a fête, which was published in fourteen languages and sold a million copies.

Derungs had bold glasses, black teardrop earrings, and a bubbly, curated energy. “We don’t publish everything we’re sent,” she said. For younger readers, the Lia Rumantscha translates international hits by big names—Richard Scarry is the latest. But since the revolt against R.G., even Scarry has to appear in multiple idioms. The result: fewer new books, more versions of the same ones.

When I asked Derungs if she had ever dreamed of working at the German publishing giant Bertelsmann, she sighed. “Of course it would have been great,” she said. “But just getting an internship there—no chance. In the Romansh world, as soon as you want to work for the community, everyone comes and says, ‘Come to us.’ ”

“This is a protected environment,” another Swiss woman told me when I mentioned the peculiarities of the Romansh cultural ecosystem. She had grown up speaking Romansh in Silvaplana, but she had since moved to Zurich. We were talking in German: “*Das ist ein geschützter Rahmen.*” But now she switched languages. “Safe space,” she added, in English.

Technology may yet decide Romansh’s fate. Several years ago, executives at RTR, the public broadcaster in Chur, asked a

computational-linguistics team at the University of Zurich whether the language could be brought into the world of automated translation. The timing was favorable: neural networks were replacing statistical models in mainstream machine translation, dramatically improving fluency. The Zurich researchers had spun out a startup, later folded into a larger language-services firm, Supertext, and saw Romansh as a perfect test case. Statistical systems could “see” only a handful of words at a time; neural models could take in whole sentences, and, later still, large language models could weigh even broader contexts.

RTR agreed to co-fund a pilot to test new tools for its editorial team. The appeal for the developers was the engineering challenge it posed. Corporate clients often expect high-quality translation of internal jargon that behaves like a private dialect; Romansh, with its sparse training corpus and multiple variants, was a real-world version of that puzzle. The team trained its first system on roughly a hundred and twenty thousand aligned segments, a far cry from the billion-plus that a tech giant would have used for German-English. To compensate, they pretrained their system on equivalent Italian and German texts, and they machine-translated texts from major European languages to Romansh to bulk up the corpus.

The resulting system worked well enough that when Bernard Cathomas switched to Romansh in an e-mail exchange, I could reply in kind. It performs better translating out of Romansh than into it, and it produces only R.G., though it can handle the idioms as input. A new project, backed by the Lia Rumantscha and the University of Zurich, aims to support all five major idioms, as well as R.G. The training base is meagre, mostly drawn from the news, but organizers hope for a working system by 2026.

The Lia Rumantscha is also asking the International Organization for Standardization to classify each idiom as a separate language. Some people doubt that this hyperlocalism will pay off. One member of the Zurich team told me about a Swiss firm that sold a

G.P.S. device with directions spoken in Swiss German. “No one bought it,” he noted. “People said, ‘That’s not *my* Swiss German.’ ” You can give the machine a voice, he suggested, but people still want it to sound like their cousin.

It’s a long way from Zurich to Schnaus, and not just geographically. Where the tech world prizes scalability and fluency, the anti-R.G. camp measures success in familiarity, cadence, the feel of something handed down. When I mentioned Cathomas to Tresa Deplazes, a founder of Pro Idioms, she warned me not to be “blinded by his demeanor.” Over lunch at her carefully restored old home—fresh pasta, prompted by a glut of eggs from her hens—I was struck by its contrast with Cathomas’s existence in his austere modern architectural dwelling in Chur.

That evening, Deplazes and Francesg Friberg, a schoolteacher and a Pro Idioms member, led me up a hillside where Friberg kept his horses, Carmelot and Amarena. He distributed hay, grilled sausages, and gave me the Romansh names of a brook thundering in the dark.

“We kept the idioms in schools,” Deplazes said. “We’re proud of that. It was a big job—very difficult.”

“I don’t feel like a victor,” Friberg added. “But that’s well said. We achieved something.”

It was the sort of sentiment Cathomas, from the other side, would have understood. “Minorities tend to make themselves smaller than they are,” he’d warned me. “At the same time, they also make themselves bigger. They feel like they can do anything. Both attitudes—the inferiority, the megalomania—are dangerous. In the middle, in reality, that’s the hard place.” But who decides where the middle lies? Between tradition and reform, the coördinates shift with every village.

Later, I asked Friberg if his unusual first name was native to the area. “Yes, but it’s dying out, like Romansh,” he said. “I am the last of the Mohicans.”

Rain lanced through the beams of our flashlights as we descended, the horses cantering around us. On the wall of a grotto, someone had scrawled “*il drag*”—“dragon,” though the official name was *la cauma da nuorsas*, the sheep’s haven. In Dardin, Friberg pulled a blackened stack of alderwood disks bound in blue twine from his barn and explained a seasonal custom, *trer schibettas*: heating the disks until they glowed, then hurling them into the valley with whittled sticks. “Over centuries, it became increasingly prohibited,” Friberg explained, given the risk of starting a fire. “Many villages banned it.” His own affection for the custom seemed undimmed; he demonstrated the technique by sending a disk skidding into the night.

Driving back to Chur, I thought less of the hazards than I did of the stubborn beauty of the custom—the arcs of fire flung into darkness, small acts of defiance against the pull of forgetting. ♦

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/a-very-big-fight-over-a-very-small-language>

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## In the Line of Fire

*During the Trump era, political violence has become an increasingly urgent problem. Elected officials from both parties are struggling to respond.*

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

December 1, 2025



*After an attack on the Pennsylvania governor's residence, Josh Shapiro questioned whether "my life choices put my family at risk."*

*Photograph by Elinor Carucci for The New Yorker*

Around two in the morning on April 13th, an out-of-work car mechanic named Cody Balmer climbed over a metal perimeter fence outside the Pennsylvania governor's residence. In a backpack, he'd brought a sledgehammer and several Molotov cocktails, which he'd made by pouring gasoline siphoned from a lawnmower into Heineken bottles. It took just a few seconds for Balmer to cross a small, well-kept courtyard and reach the south side of the building, a twenty-nine-thousand-square-foot Georgian mansion overlooking the Susquehanna River. He used the sledgehammer to shatter a first-floor window of the state dining

room, which housed a Steinway piano, then lit a Molotov cocktail and threw it inside.

It was the first night of Passover. Hours earlier, the governor, Josh Shapiro, had led a seder, sitting in the middle of a long rectangular table in the dining room, surrounded by his wife, three of their children, his three siblings, and several nieces and nephews. Many of the guests were spending the night; as Balmer broke another window in the dining room and climbed inside, about twenty people were asleep upstairs. He lit a second Molotov cocktail and smashed it on the floor. Almost immediately, the tablecloths in the room, which was still set up for the seder, caught fire.

On one side of the room, Balmer encountered a locked double door, the only barrier between him and the rest of the house. He would later tell police that, if he had encountered Shapiro, he would have attacked him with the sledgehammer. But, when he tried kicking the doors open, the lock held. The fire, meanwhile, was spreading rapidly. Balmer broke a third window and fled. He'd been inside for a little more than a minute.

"I woke up to a bang on the door," Shapiro later said. "It was a state trooper, telling us that there was a fire, and we needed to evacuate immediately." Shapiro and his wife, Lori, roused the rest of the household. "We ran out of the home just as the first responders ran in," Shapiro said.

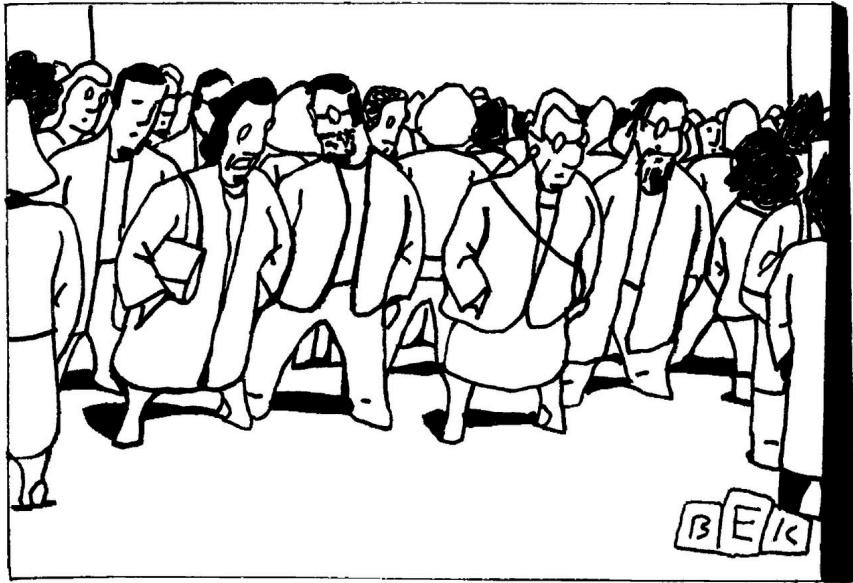
That week, details about Balmer, who had turned himself in the day after the fire, began to accumulate. He had previously been charged with assault, after his wife told police that he had attacked her and two of his sons, and a bank had threatened to foreclose on his house. His mother told reporters that Balmer had gone "off his meds" and checked into a hotel. She had called multiple police departments in an effort to get him help. Balmer, shortly after leaving the governor's residence, had called 911 himself.

"Governor Josh Shapiro needs to know that Cody Balmer will not

take part in his plans for what he wants to do to the Palestinian people,” he told the operator. Balmer had no known history of pro-Palestinian activism, nor any obvious association with the Palestinian cause. Still, he told the operator, “Our people have been put through too much by that monster. All he has is a banquet hall to clean up.”

As the governor of Pennsylvania, Shapiro had no role in setting American policy for the war in Gaza. But he had been critical of the University of Pennsylvania’s handling of pro-Palestinian protests on campus, appointing an ally to its board of trustees who reportedly worked to amplify the voices of pro-Israel students and to punish some of the protesters. For several months, Shapiro did not say much publicly about the attack. But, behind the scenes, he was ruminating on a new reality of holding elected office in the U.S.—“the fact that my life choices put my family at risk,” as he would later put it.

During the summer, several other acts of political violence briefly seized public attention. In May, a Chicago activist named Elias Rodriguez allegedly travelled to Washington, D.C., and shot two Israeli Embassy staffers outside a reception at the Capital Jewish Museum, killing them. In June, Vance Boelter, a mortuary assistant who had expressed anti-abortion sentiments, allegedly drove to the home of the former speaker of the Minnesota House of Representatives, Melissa Hortman, and shot and killed her and her husband. (Both Rodriguez and Boelter have pleaded not guilty.) In August, a young man named Patrick Joseph White, who held strong anti-vaccine views, took a rifle and a shotgun from his father’s gun safe, and fired into a hundred and fifty office windows at the headquarters of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in Atlanta, killing a police officer.



*"We should make some plan in case we get separated, then divorced, then really hate each other."*  
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

A few weeks later, on September 10th, the conservative organizer Charlie Kirk was murdered. Investigators reported that the alleged shooter, a Utah college student named Tyler Robinson, had carved “*HEY FASCIST—CATCH!*” into one of his bullet casings. In the following days, as mourners organized vigils for Kirk across the country, the problem of political violence seemed only to intensify the country’s partisan divide. Donald Trump responded with anger, calling for a crackdown on liberal donors and activists. “For years, those on the radical left have compared wonderful Americans like Charlie to Nazis and the world’s worst mass murderers and criminals,” the President said on the night of Kirk’s murder. “This kind of rhetoric is directly responsible for the terrorism that we’re seeing in our country today.” But there was also a more general sense of fear. “As you might imagine, I get a lot of calls from people asking my advice on whether to run for office,” Shapiro told me. “I’d say that ten per cent of their questions are political, and ninety per cent are about what can I do to protect my family.”

On the Tuesday after Kirk was killed, I met Shapiro at an anti-hate conference in Pittsburgh, where he delivered a speech on political violence. In the immediate aftermath of the break-in, he often declined to theorize about his attacker’s motives. “Me opining from

the outside isn't particularly helpful to the case," he said. I told him that I had been corresponding with Gabby Giffords, the former Arizona congresswoman who was shot in the head at a campaign event in 2011. The injuries still affect her ability to speak. "I don't spend any time thinking about the man who shot me," she wrote to me at one point. I could see the logic: it was a way of denying the perpetrator control over the political narrative. When I mentioned this to Shapiro, he told me, "It's interesting she said that." He lifted his head to the side, as if surprised to be considering the man who had tried to kill him. "I don't think about him," Shapiro said. "I don't think about what he professed."

Shapiro, in his polish, in his pragmatism, and in the frequency with which he invokes a spirit of bipartisanship, operates in the liberal tradition of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama—an appeal to hope and public good will that has been tested by the recent wave of attacks. In his speech, he criticized Trump, without naming him, for condemning only left-wing acts of violence and suggested that the trouble was a kind of ennui, especially among the young, who no longer trust American institutions to solve their problems.

"Consumed by this feeling of hopelessness," he said, "they find refuge in the dark corners of the internet." The remedy he offered was for institutions to address those problems—he mentioned delivering building permits more quickly—so that people walked away with "just a little more faith in the system." But Shapiro himself seemed to acknowledge a mismatch, in proposing incremental policy changes to counter acts of murder. He told the crowd, "I realize getting your permit earlier isn't going to end political violence."

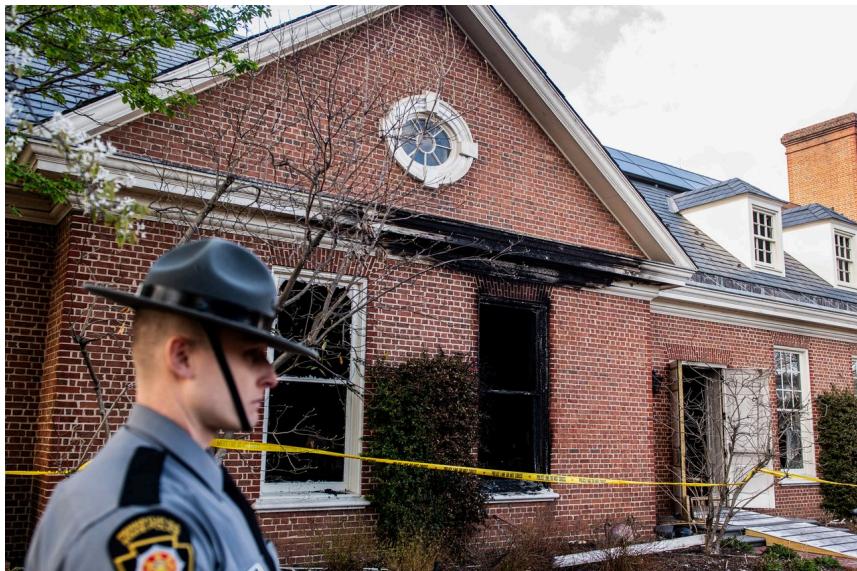
America is a violent country. Nowhere else that is remotely as rich tolerates so many murders or so many weapons. But, sometime during the tumultuous decade of the Trump era, it began to seem that simply participating in the political process put you at risk.

After the riot on January 6th, 2021, when thousands of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol, Tom Manger, a tall, mustached sixty-six-year-old former police chief in Montgomery County, Maryland, was hired to lead the U.S. Capitol Police. Part of the department's job is to investigate threats of violence against members of Congress. Manger soon learned that, in the years before his appointment, such threats had been increasing dramatically. A decade ago, he told me, members typically reported fewer than two thousand threats per year. "But around 2017 that really started to escalate," Manger said. "Last year, it was almost ten thousand." As Manger and his team analyzed the data, he concluded that one of the best predictors of which members received the most threats was not party, seniority, race, or gender but how much attention they generated on social media. "A lot of people love you," Manger told me. "And a lot of people hate you."

Nearly ten thousand violent threats a year amount to about twenty-eight a day, a number that overwhelmed the investigative capacities of the Capitol Police. A common type of threat, Manger found, emerged from a mundane situation: a member of the public would call his representative to say that he was dissatisfied with his care at the Department of Veterans Affairs, and then, frustrated by a lack of response, call a second time. "Then he calls a third time and says, 'I'm gonna kill the congressman,'" Manger told me. The most ominous threats implied that a member of Congress was under surveillance. "A member will get a letter mailed to his house, and there will be a photo of the congressman's kid walking the family dog, and there will just be a little Post-it note stuck to the letter that says, 'What a pretty dog,' or whatever," Manger said. "And this sends the message: 'I was close enough to your kid to take this picture.'"

When Kirk was assassinated, in September, the size of his private security force appeared roughly equal to the number of campus cops on the scene. In the aftermath of the shooting, the conservative commentator Ben Shapiro told a story about a recent

talk he'd given in Oxford, in which his security detail had insisted that, because of threats against him, he stay at a rural inn that could more easily be protected from attack. The following week, the conservative activist Christopher Rufo, who often addresses college audiences, told me that "the difference among conservative speakers is between those like Charlie, who have their own security, and those like me, that don't." (He said that he was revamping his speaking contracts to require more protection.) But such fears have become commonplace on both sides. This year, a Democratic Washington state senator named Adrian Cortes told a local newspaper that he had begun to wear body armor whenever he gave a speech in "an uncontrolled area."



*The Pennsylvania governor's residence after Cody Balmer set off two Molotov cocktails in the state dining room.*

*Photograph by Matthew Hatcher / Getty*

By 2011, when Giffords was shot by Jared Loughner, a mentally ill twenty-two-year-old with no apparent political motivation, the first hints of this new era were beginning to emerge. A year later, when Giffords travelled to Washington to attend the State of the Union address, she sat next to the Arizona congressman Jeff Flake. The shooting had made it difficult for Giffords to stand. Each time President Obama said something that drew applause from Democrats, Flake, a genial Mormon lawmaker, would help Giffords to her feet—which meant that he, a Republican, was also

standing. Flake told me, “I got literally hundreds of e-mails and calls from voters at home, saying, ‘Why are you standing?’ ”

By 2017, Flake was a senator, an increasingly vocal anti-Trump figure, and an infielder on the G.O.P.’s congressional baseball team. At batting practice one morning, he was standing between first base and home plate when someone started calling out, “Shooter! Shooter!” Flake saw the Louisiana congressman Steve Scalise, out near second base, drop to the ground; as Flake started to run, he could see bullets sending up dirt near one of the dugouts. The shooter, James Hodgkinson, had volunteered at a Bernie Sanders debate watch party in Iowa, according to campaign records, and had written a couple dozen letters to the editor in his local newspaper, in southern Illinois, criticizing G.O.P. tax policies and advocating for legal marijuana. Before Hodgkinson started shooting, he had asked Ron DeSantis, then a third-term congressman from Florida, whether this was the Republicans’ practice. Flake recently told me, “The thought that came to my head in the moment was *How can a shooter see a bunch of middle-aged men trying to play baseball and see the enemy?* It still baffles me.”

During Trump’s first term, centrist Republicans like Flake were also frequent targets of the President’s supporters. In 2018, Flake was threatened on social media by Cesar Sayoc, the so-called MAGA bomber, who was arrested after sending pipe bombs to a dozen of the President’s political enemies. Flake recalled, “They found that he had an alias on Twitter where he had tweeted at me with an aerial photo of my home, in Mesa, Arizona, saying, ‘Senator Flake, there are a lot of entrances. I’ll see you soon.’ ” Not long after, Flake said, a man who had recently attended a Trump rally travelled to a series of Mormon churches in Arizona carrying a rifle scope, apparently in an attempt to find Flake. Many anti-Trump Republicans have simply left politics. Flake retired rather than run for reelection in 2018; he told me that he thought the

current phase of political violence would outlast Trump. For now, he said, “it’s kind of waiting.”

At the Capitol Police, Manger’s task was to deal with political violence as a law-enforcement problem—to investigate threats, to conduct interviews, to charge people with crimes. And yet, he said, fewer than ten per cent of the threats he investigated resulted in charges. I heard similar complaints from other security officials. Trevor Nelson, who, until a few months ago, led investigations at the Treasury Department, told me that fewer than two per cent of the threats made against I.R.S. agents that were referred to the Justice Department resulted in charges. Social media blurred the line between political expression and meaningful threats. “Each U.S. Attorney’s office is going to have its own threshold,” Nelson said, “and most of them are very, very, very high.”

Nelson began working in government security with the Air Force’s Office of Special Investigations in the nineteen-nineties. For most of his career, he said, the daily work of threat response involved researching the person who had made the threat—their criminal record, if any, and whether they sympathized with an extremist group. But radicalization, even political ideology, came to seem a little beside the point. “People are now much more comfortable making really heinous threats,” Nelson said. He mentioned two relatively run-of-the-mill field investigations during which he was confronted, respectively, by a man with a gun and a man wielding a “homemade machete.” “People got emboldened in how they identified themselves in the cyber world—the anonymity, the no repercussions,” he told me. “And then they took that into real life.”

Around seven in the morning on October 6, 2024, Greg Landsman, a Democratic congressman from Ohio, was awoken by his wife at their home, near Cincinnati. For months, Landsman, who considered himself pro-Israel, had been confronted at public events by a small group of pro-Palestinian activists. That morning, a group of protesters arrived outside his house and staged a sit-in. “It was

still darkish out, and we looked out, and there were about twenty or twenty-five of them at the top of the driveway,” Landsman recalled. “They were dressed all in black, with black masks over their faces.”

Landsman said that he and his family spent the day trying to get the protesters to leave, working with both local authorities and the Capitol Police, but they “would not move.” His son was in the final stages of practicing for his bar mitzvah; that evening, he recited the Torah while the protesters chanted pro-Palestinian slogans outside. I asked Landsman whether the demonstration had made him reconsider his position on Israel. “No,” he said. “I definitely take the loss of life in Gaza to heart. I think it’s important to expose yourself to the suffering.” But mostly, he went on, the exchanges reinforced his conviction that he knew the issue better than the protesters did. Landsman told me he often thought back to a forty-five-minute video that the Israeli government had assembled from raw footage of the October 7th attack and screened for foreign officials and members of the media: “It’s so gruesome and so barbaric that I sort of had a life before I saw that video and a life after.”

In 2022, Princeton’s Bridging Divides Initiative, which tracks the effects of domestic political violence, began surveying local officeholders. The researchers found that roughly half of respondents had been insulted in the past three months, a third had been harassed, and fifteen per cent had been threatened. Forty per cent said that the current climate had made them less likely to run for higher office. Certain responses to the survey stand out. One anonymous official said, “I’m just going to be honest with you. There have been multiple times that I have thought [our town] is going to get put on the map when somebody comes to kill me.”

The research was timely. During Trump’s first term, threats of violence often tracked the President’s own political fights and mostly involved national figures. In the early years of the Biden

Administration, members of school boards and municipal governments, which oversaw education and *COVID* policies, began to face similar forms of intimidation. Amanda Litman, who heads the progressive candidate-recruitment organization Run for Something, told me that, at every level of government, the hostile atmosphere has subtly shifted the kind of person who seeks public office: more adamant, more committed to their ideological goals. “People who know that harassment will be part of the experience,” she said. “People with an even thicker skin.”



*“Have you dined with us before?”*  
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

In late September, not long after Kirk’s murder, I reached out to the office of Nancy Mace, a South Carolina Republican who often generates attention on social media. On the day of Kirk’s murder, a clip of Mace telling a group of reporters outside the Capitol that “Democrats own what happened today” went viral. A reporter had asked if, by that logic, Republicans owned the shooting of Hortman and her husband in Minnesota. “Are you kidding me?” Mace replied. “Some raging leftist lunatic put a bullet through his neck and you want to talk about Republicans right now?” Her communications director sent me some of the voice mails that Mace’s office had received since then. On one recording, a man

with a high-pitched Southern accent says, “So tell her, tell her to shut her pussy hole that Donald Trump’s always fucking. Fill it in with superglue or something. . . . She’s been fucked in it anyway and raped. That fucking whore. She’s bringing death upon herself.”

As more elements of American government have become politicized, even officials with no public profile have been subjected to threats. Three days after the shooting at the C.D.C.’s headquarters, in August, the Secretary of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., visited the facility. A small group of senior C.D.C. staff went with him, among them the organization’s chief medical officer, a former emergency-room doctor named Deb Houry. Bullet holes spider-webbed across the windows, and shattered glass still littered the floor. Houry noticed that some of her colleagues had moved filing cabinets in order to hide behind them, since “they thought any movement would draw fire.” It had already been reported that the shooter was motivated by anti-vaccine sentiments; Houry hoped that Kennedy, who has championed opposition to vaccines, would say something to reassure the staff. Instead, the following Friday, he laid off some six hundred C.D.C. workers, a hundred of whom worked in violence prevention. (Many of the employees were later reinstated.)

A September hearing for Kennedy’s new vaccine-advisory committee was approaching, and officials in Houry’s office “very much did not want to testify,” she said. A few days after the shooting, an anti-vaccine doctor and blogger named Robert Malone, whom Kennedy had appointed to the advisory board, had sent out an e-mail newsletter that included anti-gun-control memes. “I talked to staff during this time that were afraid to leave their houses because they felt that they had been targeted personally,” Houry said. What she wanted, after the shooting, was some reassurance that C.D.C. officials would be protected. “And there certainly has not been a strong stance from the Administration saying, ‘Don’t target scientists,’ ” she said. Later that month, Houry resigned.

Before last year's Presidential election, Neil Makhija, the Democratic chair of Montgomery County's Board of Commissioners, in Pennsylvania—a seat once held by Shapiro—became the target of right-wing allegations that illegal ballots had been distributed in the county. The campaign was led online by a *MAGA* influencer named Jack Posobiec, who had grown up in Montgomery County. The threats got so intense that, one morning, Makhija's wife asked why the family's baby gates were set up throughout the house. Makhija replied that he'd been erecting barriers in case someone broke in. It became a joke between them, but the next day they got a message on their neighborhood WhatsApp—a Ring-cam image of a young man in a hoodie who seemed to be wandering through a nearby back yard. "My neighbor actually chased him, and he ran off," Makhija said. "I never found out who it was."

Makhija told me that he was worried that the threat of violence might not just be scaring elected officials out of public life but changing how they did their jobs. Shortly after the 2024 Presidential election, Makhija thought there was a strong case that Posobiec, who is forty, married, and seemingly lives in Maryland, had voted illegally in Pennsylvania. But, conscious of the possibility of threats and harassment, he was wary of speaking out. "If we have a public event, I used to post—'I'll be at this park at 4 p.m.'—and I'm less likely to do that now," Makhija said. "It just changes the way you interact with the public, and that, honestly, is a very damaging thing. Because, if you're less accessible, then both you and the public are getting more of your information through digital mediums, and you don't actually see the people who might be on the other side."

The general atmosphere of violence also makes it easier to conflate political opponents with physical threats. Landsman, the Ohio Democrat, told me that this spring he travelled to Fountain Square, in downtown Cincinnati, for a public event. "It's just a very open area," he said. Landsman had no specific reason to think that he

was in danger—"It's fair to say they're nonviolent," he said of the protesters who often attended his events—but, he added, "it would only take one person who is unwell with a gun." (This, Landsman pointed out, was similar to what had happened to Shapiro.) "At that moment, I had one of the most vivid images I've ever had in my life," Landsman told me. "Someone had come behind me and shot me in the back, and the image I saw was my own body lying dead on the ground. It was haunting."

The attack on Shapiro seemed rooted in Balmer's mental illness, but it was also entangled with the Governor's political stances and his religious faith. Shapiro, who is fifty-two, grew up in the Philadelphia suburb of Abington and attended a Jewish day school called Akiba Hebrew Academy. When Shapiro was in high school, Ed Rendell became the first Jewish mayor of Philadelphia, though Rendell remained a largely secular figure. Jake Tapper, the CNN anchor, was four years ahead of Shapiro at Akiba. "We grew up in an era when, to a degree, Jews were encouraged to pretend not to be Jewish," he told me.

Shapiro took a different approach. By age six, he was corresponding, through a program offered by his temple, with a Jewish boy in the Soviet Union; a decade later, he established a small organization that encouraged others to do the same. During his junior year at Akiba, Shapiro spent five months in Israel on an exchange program; as a student at the University of Rochester, he published a pessimistic op-ed about the Middle East titled "Peace Not Possible."

After graduating, he moved to Washington and worked for the Israeli Embassy's public-affairs division, and then for a succession of Democrats in Congress. He married Lori, whom he'd met during their freshman year of high school, and moved back to suburban Pennsylvania, where he built a coalition of socially liberal professionals that helped turn Montgomery County from red to blue. This required unusual ambition, even by the standards of

politics. “You don’t want to turn your back on him,” Joe Hoeffel, a former congressman who hired Shapiro as his chief of staff, told the Philadelphia *Inquirer* in 2017. But he was effective—Shapiro led the Democrats to their first majority on the Montgomery County Board of Commissioners since Reconstruction.

In public addresses, Shapiro often operates by way of religious analogy, using words like “blessed” and “faith.” He’ll flag a point by saying, “Hear me on this.” (His oratorical style has earned him the nickname Baruch Obama.) But, as the Trump era unfolded and Shapiro rose politically, his faith was often contested, rather than common, ground. In October, 2018, when Shapiro was Pennsylvania’s attorney general, a right-wing antisemite murdered eleven worshippers at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh—which Shapiro often notes was the “deadliest antisemitic attack in American history.” In a biographical ad that aired during his gubernatorial campaign, four years later, he said, “I make it home every Friday night for Sabbath dinner—because family and faith ground me.”

Pennsylvania supplied more participants to the January 6th riot than any state besides Florida. One of the leading candidates for the Republican nomination for governor in 2022, Doug Mastriano, was a far-right state senator who often invoked Christian-nationalist themes and who had been videotaped walking through barriers at the Capitol on January 6th. (Mastriano has denied breaching any barriers, saying in a statement that “police lines did shift throughout the course of the day.”) Shapiro, who had the Democratic nomination effectively sewn up, took the unusual step of paying for an ad during the Republican primary that read “If Doug Mastriano wins, it’s a win for what Donald Trump stands for,” which was widely seen as an effort to boost Mastriano’s campaign.



*“Great. Now they all want something.”*

*Cartoon by Thomas Wykes*

As the Republican nominee, Mastriano used the general election as an opportunity to spread extreme, right-wing talking points—at one point, he compared gun control with the policies of Nazi Germany—which made it easier for Shapiro to move to the center. Shapiro supported what he called “responsible fracking,” earned an endorsement from the Philadelphia Fraternal Order of Police, and supported school-voucher programs. One former official from the Pennsylvania teachers’ union told me, “I remember vividly the meeting at which I said, ‘Well, this is our choice: it’s vouchers versus Nazis.’” I asked Shapiro whether, in retrospect, he regretted intervening in the Republican primary. “I didn’t intervene,” Shapiro said. “He was going to win the primary, that was clear, and we wanted to define him early, and that’s what we did.”

In the fall of 2023, the arguments about Israel and Palestine took on a special intensity at the University of Pennsylvania. In the weeks before October 7th, a swastika was drawn in a room on campus. After the attack, someone wrote “The Jews R Nazis” on a vacant building next to a Jewish fraternity. In early November, the chair of

Penn's board of trustees, a banker named Scott Bok, was told that Shapiro wanted to appoint a Philadelphia attorney named Robb Fox as an observer on the board, to be his "eyes and ears." "He didn't say anything about Fox focussing on antisemitism," Bok told me. "The appointment seemed pretty benign."

On December 5th, Liz Magill, the president of Penn, testified alongside the presidents of Harvard and M.I.T. at a congressional hearing. The event went badly for all of them. Magill, in response to a question from the New York Republican Elise Stefanik, seemed unwilling to say that a call for the genocide of the Jewish people would unambiguously violate her university's code of conduct. Shapiro denounced her appearance as "absolutely shameful." Within days, both Magill and Bok resigned.

Shapiro's office, meanwhile, was increasingly involved in what was happening at Penn. According to reporting by Ben Binday, a student journalist who wrote an account of the Governor's behind-the-scenes maneuvers for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Fox, who had joined the university's task force on antisemitism, and a senior Shapiro aide named Amanda Warren coördinated with a pro-Israel student group that was advocating for the suspension of certain professors and of a pro-Palestinian student group. Fox was also reportedly corresponding with Marc Rowan, a billionaire financier who had pushed for Magill's ouster.

The following spring, student activists established a pro-Palestinian encampment on the Penn quad, calling for the university to divest from companies with ties to the Israeli military. Claims of harassment were made against both encampment members and counter-protesters, but there were no major instances of violence. After sixteen days, the university police, with the support of a hundred Philadelphia police officers, arrested thirty-three activists. The encampment was dismantled. "Unfortunate but necessary," the university's interim president, J. Larry Jameson, declared. Shapiro,

who had called the encampment “out of control,” praised the decision.



*Minnesota's governor, Tim Walz, at the funeral for Melissa Hortman.  
Photograph by Tim Gruber / NYT / Redux*

The Governor’s critics have tended to interpret his intervention at Penn in one of two ways. Shapiro, who interviewed to be Kamala Harris’s Vice-Presidential candidate last year and who has been making the kinds of moves expected of a 2028 Presidential contender, often takes pride in finding the political center on any given issue. At Penn, he had chosen to be resolutely pro-Israel, perhaps not wanting to cede ground to Trump, who had made antisemitism on college campuses a central issue of his campaign. “Even now,” Bok, the former trustee chair, said, “my sense is that Shapiro’s calculation was that he had figured out which way this was going and wanted to be the leader of the parade, rather than a follower.”

Another theory was that Shapiro and the university manipulated the threat of political violence to mute a protest movement that they disagreed with. Rick Krajewski, a progressive Pennsylvania state representative whose district includes Penn’s campus, spent time at the encampment and told me that the scene had been peaceful. “This is a more insidious version of political violence, where you have very powerful people using their influence to push an agenda

and shut down legitimate protests by calling them violent,” Krajewski said. “As someone who’s a political official, I do feel like we are in an unsafe time. And I also see people exploiting this moment of fear.”

Shapiro is attuned to the risks of politicizing threats of violence. “I do not like how Donald Trump is using Jews as his excuse for trying to take over universities and restrict their funding,” he told me. “I think that silences speech and puts an even greater target on Jewish students, faculty, and administrators.” Plenty of universities, he went on, had managed to balance the free-speech rights of protesters with the safety of other members of the community. “Where it got out of balance a year and a half ago at Penn and elsewhere is when that peaceful protest led to assaults on kids because they were Jewish,” Shapiro told me. There had been no documented cases of assault during the encampment on Penn’s campus. But Shapiro said that he was speaking more generally about the violence that had taken place at American universities that spring. “These are crimes,” he said. “And to me, that’s where a line was crossed.”

Acts of political violence in American history are often thick with co-conspirators. The Haymarket riot, in which dynamite was thrown into a rally supporting a Chicago labor strike, led to allegations of a passcode embedded in a local German-language newspaper and seven people being sentenced to death. The investigation of the 1920 Wall Street bombing, in which thirty-eight people were killed, ranged from Scranton, Pennsylvania, to the Piedmont region of Italy. John Wilkes Booth had a network of Confederate spies; Medgar Evers’s murderer was a member of the Ku Klux Klan; the Oklahoma City bomber, Timothy McVeigh, had Terry Nichols, on whose family farm in Michigan he trained, and the Fortiers, a married couple who helped him laminate a fake driver’s license and scout the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building. Patty Hearst was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army. At the 2017 Unite the Right rally, in Charlottesville, Vanguard

America marched alongside Identity Evropa. The January 6th rioters had the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and QAnon.

In the political shootings and bombings of the past year, there has not been a single proven co-conspirator indicted, and no fringe movements have been implicated. Thomas Crooks, who lived less than an hour away from the spot where he shot Trump in the ear, visited a shooting range forty-three times and searched online for upcoming campaign events for both Trump and Joe Biden. We still don't know his motive. Patrick Joseph White, who shot up the C.D.C., left behind only a history of anti-vaccine statements. Apart from Elias Rodriguez, who was active in pro-Palestinian protests in Chicago, hard-core activism was not a common trait among the suspected shooters. Tyler Robinson, Charlie Kirk's alleged assassin, was reportedly asked by his roommate in a text message how long he had been planning his crime. "A bit over a week," he wrote.

But the perpetrators' grievances have tracked with the issues driving daily political news. Luigi Mangione, who has been charged in the killing of the C.E.O. of UnitedHealthcare, Brian Thompson, on the streets of Manhattan last December, appears to have been frustrated with the health-care industry's practice of routinely denying claims. (Mangione has pleaded not guilty.) Joshua Jahn, killed after shooting at an *ICE* field office in September, had inscribed some of his bullets with the phrase "*ANTI-ICE*," as many ordinary protesters with no violent intent have written on their signs. Robinson may have been motivated by the ongoing conservative campaign against trans rights. ("I had enough of his hatred," he allegedly texted his roommate about Kirk.) That Cody Balmer avowed the Palestinian cause in his call to 911, despite no prior connection to it, fits the general pattern, since that's what was flitting across his screens. As Vance Boelter left the murder scene in Minnesota, he texted his children, "Dad went to war last night"—which, in a way, was true, even if no one else went with him. The perpetrators have grown more murderous,

but they have not become radicalized as members of a larger ideological group.

These recent acts of violence are also similar in that their professed causes aren't neatly severable from electoral politics. In the nineteen-twenties, the problem of anarchist violence could be understood as belonging to a different category than the partisan arguments between Democrats and Republicans—as could later acts of terror perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan and the Weather Underground. “They were so far outside of the mainstream that no one was making the case that they were, for instance, part of the Democratic Party,” Kevin Boyle, the chair of the history department at Northwestern University, who has written extensively about political violence in the U.S., told me. “But now we have people on both sides making those kinds of charges.”

Increasingly, these two seemingly distinct issues—the everyday matter of political division and the extraordinary pattern of political violence—are becoming the same problem. Even extreme acts can be absorbed into the partisan debate. When Thompson, the UnitedHealthcare C.E.O., was killed, the assassination itself seemed to create a coalition around Mangione. Polls have found that roughly one in four adults, and forty per cent of young adults, sympathize with his alleged cause. Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic senator from Massachusetts, said, “Violence is never the answer. But people can only be pushed so far.” (She later clarified that she does not believe there is ever a justification for murder.)

The collective outrage that might be expected to come after these attacks has also been stifled by how selectively the President responds to them—denouncing left-wing violence even as he calls his own opponents traitors and threatens to jail them or worse. After Hortman was murdered in June, Trump was asked whether he planned to call Tim Walz, the Minnesota governor and the 2024 Democratic Vice-Presidential nominee, who was a good friend of his state’s former House speaker. Trump said he wouldn’t “waste

time” by doing that, and described Walz as “whacked out” and “a mess.” Walz told me, “I think the story is how elected officials respond in the moments after a horrific killing. Keep in mind that, after my best friend was killed, the President of the United States went off and belittled me, and then he said he wasn’t going to call. There are two children who lost their parents, and nothing was said. No attempt to lower the flag, no attempt to acknowledge or honor this.” Walz continued, “I’ll acknowledge that I’m too close to this, because it’s incredibly personal. But if you don’t think that makes it easier to do these things . . .” He trailed off.

The line between law enforcement and partisan vindictiveness can also become muddied. In 2023, F.B.I. agents visited the home of Craig Robertson, a Utah man who had threatened on Facebook to put on his “ghillie suit”—full-body camouflage—and bring a sniper rifle to an upcoming visit by President Biden to Salt Lake City. The agents attempted to arrest Robertson, and, after a standoff, they shot and killed him. Some conservatives were outraged, arguing that Robertson was elderly, walked with a cane, and was not a plausible assassin. Some liberals were similarly incensed this fall over an investigation involving Barbara Wien, a retired academic in Virginia who had included the home address of Trump’s deputy chief of staff, Stephen Miller, on leaflets denouncing him that police say she distributed. *ICE* officials have justified immigration agents wearing masks and covering up their badges while conducting operations by emphasizing the frequency with which they are threatened with violence or doxing. But those practices also make *ICE*’s actions less transparent and more terrorizing—and suggest how easily the state can use political threats and violence as a rationale for more aggressive tactics.

In response to the recent shootings, some politicians have suggested that Americans should log off from the internet and pay a little less attention to politics. “Get off social media, get married, have kids,” Spencer Cox, the Republican governor of Utah, said after Kirk’s murder. Cox’s response was praised by Shapiro and

other like-minded Democrats. After an interview with the moderate Massachusetts congressman Jake Auchincloss, who voiced similar sentiments, the journalist Derek Thompson labelled this instinct “touch-grass populism.”

And yet this notion—that the solution to political violence is to care less about politics—is, in a way, a confession that a liberal approach may not currently offer a way out. Neither law enforcement nor intermittent calls from elected officials to lower the rhetorical temperature have made political life safer. “We are all afraid,” Lisa Murkowski, a moderate Republican senator from Alaska, said at a conference of tribal and nonprofit leaders in April. “I’m oftentimes very anxious myself about using my voice, because retaliation is real.”

At the same time, in the campaigns against universities, the search for Tyler Robinson’s supposed left-wing collaborators, and the masking of *ICE* agents, there have been some indications of an emerging illiberal response to violence. The long-term danger isn’t just additional partisan attacks but also state reprisals. There is a perverse possibility that these lone-wolf acts could lead to collective punishment.

Halloween morning in Harrisburg was overcast and gusty—Ichabod Crane-like in every way. Inside the governor’s residence, Shapiro walked through the double doors that Balmer had tried to kick down. The dining room, now restored, still smelled of fresh floor finish. In a corner was a small display of charred cups and dishes from the seder. “I wanted something to remind you of what happened,” Shapiro said. “But I also wanted it to be in this beautiful room so you could see that we’d repaired.” He gestured around the space. “We still have some pieces—that’s not the piano that was here. But, by and large, this is what the room looked like.”

We walked outside to the courtyard that Balmer had crossed to break in. The building’s exterior was under construction—huge

brick pillars were going up, part of an “anti-climb wall” that would, incidentally, conceal more of the residence from the public. I asked Shapiro if he found himself thinking about the attack. “Some nights I’ll just, like, walk two miles or something,” he said. “And I’ll think about, O.K., he was hiding there. He stood there. I’m aware of it. I’ll look at the windows.” We were standing on the spot where Shapiro had given his press conference on the day after the attack, in front of a burned façade. “That bush was totally charred—now it’s seemingly grown back,” he said. I offered that the building looked nearly pristine. Shapiro pointed out a tiny spot just above one of the windows that Balmer had shattered. “There’s a little bit right there,” he said.

As governor, Shapiro had confronted two other high-profile instances of political violence. In the summer of 2024, when Trump was shot in the ear in Butler, Shapiro rushed to the scene. “The issue was, O.K., well, how do we heal here?” he told me. “I thought it was very important for me, as a Democratic governor, to make clear that an attack on a Republican candidate who I was not supporting was not O.K.” A few months later, Mangione was arrested while eating fast food in Altoona. “The real hero in that story is the woman at McDonald’s who called 911 and made sure he got arrested,” Shapiro told me.

Balmer had pleaded guilty in mid-October, not just to arson and terrorism but to attempted murder. But Shapiro was still reluctant to focus on his attacker. “The prosecutor felt it was important to introduce into evidence the bomber’s claims that he did that because of ‘what I did to the Palestinians,’ so clearly there was some motivation because of my faith,” Shapiro said. “But I think it is dangerous for you or anyone else to think about those who perpetrate these violent attacks as linear thinkers, meaning that they have a left-wing ideology or a right-wing ideology, or that they have a firm set of beliefs the way you might or I might. These are clearly irrational thinkers. And I think that’s true of others who

have claimed lives, whether it's Speaker Hortman's or Charlie Kirk's."

We had moved to the anteroom of Shapiro's office and were seated on a pair of couches. Pointing to a bookshelf, Shapiro indicated a framed piece of text. A few weeks after the fire, he and Lori held a luncheon to thank the firefighters who had responded. John Wardle, the eighty-two-year-old chaplain of the Penn Township Volunteer Fire Department, had handed the Governor a handwritten letter signed by every member of the department. On the back, Wardle had written what he said was his favorite Bible verse, from Chapter 6 of the Book of Numbers: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace." The prayer was immediately recognizable to Shapiro: he had recited it, in Hebrew, to his four children nearly every night of their lives.

"I don't know that, with the exception of that night, I'd felt that level of emotion come over me," Shapiro said. "A guy who is registered to a different political party, who worships a different faith, who is of a different generation. And yet we found ourselves in this moment of darkness, not just for me and my family but for our commonwealth, and here we were, bound not just by text in the Old Testament but by the way that text landed on him." Shapiro added, "It is hard writing about political violence, but it is somewhat easier to write about the bad actors in it. Sometimes lost in these stories, I find, are the good people, and the goodness people have at their core."

This sounded a little sentimental, given the charred cups and singed windows a few feet away. But it also magnified how the spectre of violence can require willful acts of elision—to notice certain things and to pretend others away. Shapiro, with his commitment to a reasonable political center, had made his choice. "I am a prayerful person," he told me. "I have never in my life, until the aftermath of this attack, felt the power of other people's prayers. I became

strengthened by their prayers, particularly of people of different faiths. And that is an extraordinary feeling that is very hard for me to put into words, to describe to you. And that came just because of the goodness that exists in people that I feel fortunate to be around every day.” ♦

*Benjamin Wallace-Wells began contributing to The New Yorker in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/in-the-line-of-fire>

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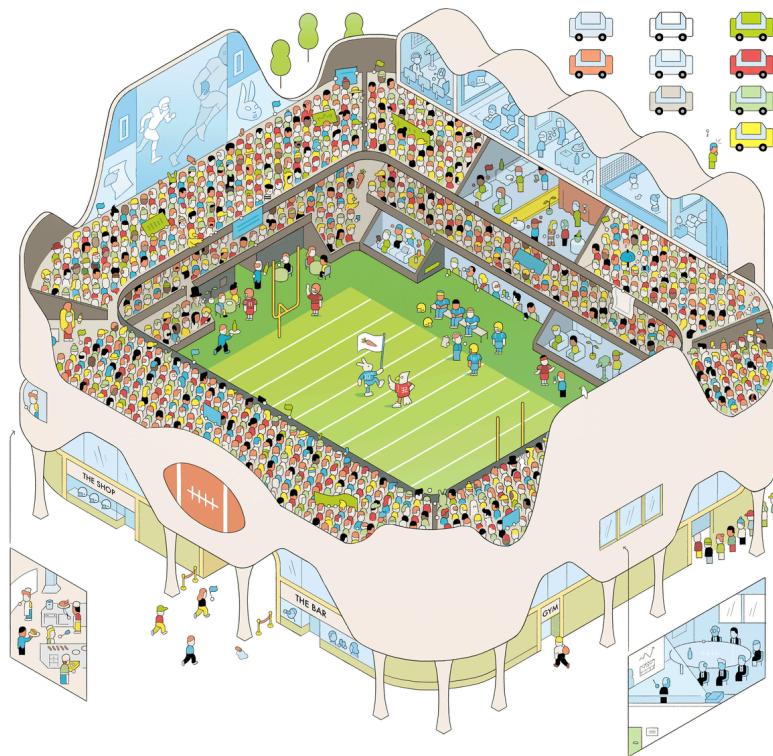
**The Sporting Scene**

## How the Sports Stadium Went Luxe

Is the race to create ever more lavish spectator offerings in America's largest entertainment venues changing the fan experience?

By [John Seabrook](#)

December 1, 2025



*In today's stadium, every inch of space is monetized. At SoFi Stadium and the Capital One Arena, the most exclusive suites can be leased for around a million dollars a year.*

*Illustration by Giacomo Gambinieri*

In April, 1966, [Roger Angell](#) attended an indoor baseball game, his first, at the Astrodome. “It was not just the prospect of witnessing weatherless baseball played on Chemstrand grass under an acrylic-painted Lucite sky that induced me to travel to Houston last month,” Angell [wrote](#), archly, of visiting what was then the world’s only domed stadium. (It had opened a year earlier.) Angell covered

baseball for this magazine for many years, in addition to editing [fiction](#), and although he was ostensibly there to scout the Astros—the team had finished thirty-two games behind the National League-pennant-winning [Dodgers](#) the year before—he was distracted from his scorecard by the orange spacesuits and white helmets worn by the groundskeepers, the rainbow-colored tiers of seats, and the billiard-table green of the first synthetic field in pro sports, made of a brand-new Monsanto product called AstroTurf. (The real grass had begun to die during the previous season when the skylights were painted over, to block the glare of the sun. Searching for a blade to chew while watching batting practice, Angell discovered AstroTurf to be “pluckproof.”) Most intrusive of all was the scoreboard—four stories high and lit by more than forty thousand bulbs—the first to offer hype videos and animated ads. “By the middle innings,” he wrote, “I found that I was giving the game only half my attention; along with everyone else, I kept lifting my eyes to that immense, waiting presence above the players.”

The air-conditioned digs only slightly benefitted the ’66 Astros, who finished twenty-three games behind the reigning first-place Dodgers. But their building, a project that cost north of thirty million dollars and was partly funded by the taxpayers of Harris County, would forever change both the way stadiums were conceived and the spectacles they hosted. Tourists flocked to see what the sportswriter Joe Trimble called the “Taj Mahal of sport.” [Billy Graham](#) held a Crusade for Christ rally there in 1965. Evel Knievel jumped thirteen cars, on two consecutive nights, in 1971. [Billie Jean King](#) and Bobby Riggs competed in the [Battle of the Sexes](#) there in 1973.

Apart from the roof, the Astrodome’s structure was conventional—a circular concrete doughnut, surrounded by a parking-lot playa, that resembled other publicly funded multisport stadiums of the era, including Shea Stadium, in New York; Veterans, in Philadelphia; and R.F.K., in Washington, D.C. Unlike those

relatively spartan facilities, however, the Astrodome had cushioned seats for all patrons, instead of hard ones. It was also the first stadium to have luxury “skyboxes.” The Astros’ first owner, Roy Hofheinz, installed around fifty of them near the top of the stadium. These were leased on a yearly basis, turning the least desirable seats into the most expensive and coveted spots in the house.

Angell was put off by the skyboxes. Perhaps he sensed where luxury seating would lead—to the ongoing arms race among stadium and venue owners to create ever more lavish spectator offerings, transforming what was once a public right into a privilege.

“I can only say I found them immensely glum—sad, soft caves for indoor sportsmen,” he wrote.

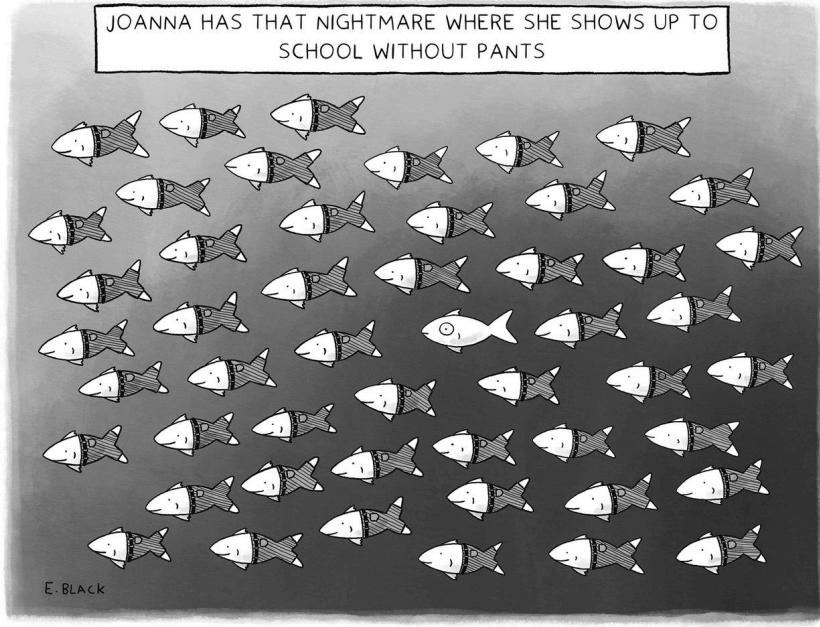
It was not just the prospect of watching Beyoncé perform under an open-sided translucent ethylene-tetrafluoroethylene (E.T.F.E.) roof canopy that drew me, in May, to SoFi Stadium, in Inglewood, a city in the greater Los Angeles metro area. An entire economy of luxury fan experiences in sports and entertainment has grown out of the sad, soft caves Angell spelunked in Houston, and I wanted to have one of those experiences, too.

SoFi Stadium, which opened in 2020, during the pandemic, is the home of two N.F.L. teams, the Rams and the Chargers. It is the largest stadium in the league by square footage, a seventy-thousand-seat behemoth capable of accommodating more than a hundred thousand people, and will co-host the opening ceremony of the 2028 Summer Olympics. It is estimated to have cost between five and six billion dollars to build and was privately funded by Stan Kroenke, a reclusive, Missouri-born billionaire commercial-real-estate developer, and his investors. (Kroenke is married to Ann Walton, a niece of Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, and many of his retail projects are anchored around its stores.) SoFi, a California-based financial-services company, pays around thirty

million dollars a year for the naming rights, according to *Bloomberg*.

Kroenke also owns Hollywood Park, an adjacent, nearly three-hundred-acre “entertainment and retail district” that retains the name of the site’s former occupant, a horse-racing track. Hollywood Park includes apartment buildings; a hotel; a state-of-the-art gym; shops; the YouTube Theatre, a five-thousand-seat venue; and Cosm, a “shared reality” space for viewing televised sports in an immersive, planetariumlike setting where drinks and Wagyu double smashburgers are always at hand. The Intuit Dome, the new home of the L.A. Clippers, is within walking distance, as is the Forum, the Lakers’ former base. Similar ersatz sports towns adjoin other stadiums, including Titletown, next to Lambeau Field, in Green Bay, and Centennial Yards, outside Mercedes-Benz Stadium, in Atlanta.

SoFi is under an LAX flight path. In order to meet F.A.A. requirements, three-quarters of the stadium is below ground level; the playing field is a hundred feet down. Walking in from the parking lot, you are immediately greeted by a Grand Canyon of fan experiences. TV, which flattens space, can’t convey the scale or the sound of stadiums, particularly at a place like this. The suite levels are layered throughout the lower bowl like the buttercream filling in a Dobos torte, forming an inverted cone of the strata of American affluence. Dun-colored concrete cliffs above form the general-admission seating.



*Cartoon by Ellie Black*

The basic typology of stadiums was established in Rome nearly two thousand years ago by the Colosseum—an elongated concrete oval with regularly spaced “vomitories,” which were passageways for spewing out spectators, not chow. Naming rights, of a sort, went to Nero, whose giant bronze colossus stood nearby. SoFi leans into its Roman heritage, as befits America’s grandest and most expensive stadium; the imperial vibes are strong. There are columns below the roof, and a canopy, made of three hundred and two panels of E.T.F.E., echoes the Colosseum’s fabled fabric awning, known as the velarium, which required experienced sailors to unfurl it over the arena. SoFi’s roof allows in indirect sunlight, although not enough to grow grass. The stadium isn’t air-conditioned (except, of course, in the suites and the clubs), and on a hot day it can feel like a terrarium.

Lance Evans, the lead architect on SoFi, which was designed by the Dallas-based firm HKS, delineated the building’s premium offerings for me. “Historically, there have been three different seat types,” he explained, of stadiums built before the nineteen-nineties. “You could buy a general-admission seat, or you could get a club seat,” which allowed the holder access to an exclusive area within the concourse offering superior food and drink. “Or you could get a

suite.” Club seats were ten times more expensive than ordinary seats, and suites were twenty times that. “And that leap was just unattainable for a lot of people,” Evans said. At SoFi, a menu of premium experiences, each with its own price point, insures that on “every step along an individual’s journey through life they have an opportunity to create an experience that aligns with their place in the world,” he went on. “As they get their first promotion, there’s a spot in the stadium for them to celebrate. When they become a partner in a law firm, there’s a place for them, and as they become C.E.O.s there’s a place, too.” (If your journey leads only as far as the parking lot, you can tailgate.) Airlines and credit-card companies pioneered these élite-status hierarchies; stadiums have rendered them in concrete and steel.

Most of the upper bowl in SoFi is not designated as premium. But even nosebleed seats at an N.F.L. game or for a top act like [Kendrick Lamar](#) go for at least two hundred dollars. The premium seating at a stadium like SoFi, where it takes up about twenty per cent of the total house, can account for more than fifty per cent of the ticketing revenue, according to Bill Dorsey, the founder of the Association of Luxury Suite Directors. (By contrast, at Lambeau Field, in Wisconsin, which is co-owned by the city of Green Bay and a special business district created to support the stadium, the premium sections account for around ten per cent of the total seating.) At SoFi, a club seat can cost as much as two thousand dollars a game, and a suite can go as high as fifty thousand dollars a game.

The N.F.L. players’ union has negotiated a formula to calculate the athletes’ take of the league’s total revenue. The revenue from general-admission tickets is always shared with players. N.F.L. owners don’t have to share certain types of premium revenue if they use the money to pay down any debt incurred in financing the stadium. Income from naming rights can also be used to pay off construction costs. (Once a stadium is paid off, naming-rights and premium-seat revenues are shared.) Owners also keep the revenue

from virtually all events not related to football, like the Beyoncé show I was at SoFi to see, one of a five-night run. Premium seating allows owners in large cities with affluent fan bases and big-spending corporations to finance massive luxury stadiums. Essentially, players are helping to cover the costs of building these mega-stadiums.

Before Beyoncé went on, Otto Benedict, SoFi's senior vice-president of operations, took me on a tour of some of the venue's two hundred and sixty premium suites, which are segmented into twelve different categories and ascend in price as one descends into the lower bowl. Much of the premium seating is tied to a club that is branded by a corporate sponsor. We began at the Gallagher Garden and the Toyota Patio Club, on the upper level, then we walked down to the Google Cloud Club, and then to the Wynn Club, the most exclusive at the stadium, which serves the patrons of what are known as the owner's suites. Along the way, burgers became sliders, which became beef sliced from the bone in front of you; chips and popcorn gave way to nachos and chicken tenders and finally to sushi; plain old hot dogs became celebrity-chef takes on the hot dog. The mid-market-chain-hotel-style furnishings and fixtures in the suites became airport-lounge-like in the Google Cloud, and Four Seasons-esque in the Wynn Club.

On the field level are the cabanas and the bungalow suites, where you can sit at a barstool overlooking the sideline, your view partially blocked by bodies (of coaches and players when it comes to football, and, on this night, of the Beyhive—at least those fans lucky enough to have floor tickets). A pair of bungalows hold the Bootsy Bellows speakeasy, which offers specially crafted cocktails in a setting that resembles a retro night club. Most suites come with fifteen to twenty-five seats and are leased by corporations looking to host clients and court new business. Smaller “perch suites,” which seat eight to twelve, are available for more modest groups.

Two of the owner's suites at SoFi are reserved for the actual team owners—Kroenke and Dean Spanos, whose family has owned a majority share in the L.A. Chargers since 1984. The other twenty-four owner's suites, twelve on each side of the stadium, form the richest layer of the money torte. The suites are elevated enough to overlook the sideline, with more than ample catering and mingling spaces behind, reportedly for around a million dollars a year with at least a ten-year commitment. In addition to the corporate leaseholders—banks, airlines, tech companies—LeBron James and Magic Johnson each use an owner's suite, Otto Maly, the president of Kroenke Holdings, told me. Tenants get access to every game and concert at the stadium, excluding marquee events like the 2026 *FIFA World Cup*, but they can sell their suites on a single-event basis, if, say, the Monster Jam, which the stadium would host a couple of weeks after Beyoncé's concerts, isn't their particular jam. There's also a corporate boardroom on the owner's-suite level, in case Mr. Kroenke or Mr. Spanos (owners are always addressed as "Mr.") needs to call a meeting before or after the game around the room's long, football-shaped table. The room itself is the shape of a football, and appointed with blue faux-pigskin walls. On the ceiling is a football-shaped lighting fixture, embossed with five laces.

The stage had been placed at one end of the field, and about a quarter of the stadium behind it was closed from the field level to the top. I watched the show in a Google Cloud suite at the opposite end of the stadium. (At the Suite Experience Group, a kind of Airbnb for suite rentals, Google Cloud suites go for up to thirty thousand dollars per event.) From that vantage point, the stadium seemed much bigger than the star. Beyoncé and her dancers were so tiny that I caught most of the show on an eighty-million-pixel Infinity Screen that hangs from the roof—a far more immense waiting presence than the one Angell ogled in Houston—forming a video halo of sorts above the crowd. The screen houses more than two hundred and sixty speakers and fifty-six 5G wireless antennas that support the building's robust Wi-Fi, because it's not enough to

have a premium fan experience—your friends and followers must know that you’re having one, too. I sent my sixteen-year-old daughter pics of Beyoncé on the giant screen, and, for once, I got a timely response: “*STOP. I can’t handle it,*” followed by the eyes-welling-up emoji.

My seat was comfy, but I rarely got out of it. I looked enviously at the concertgoers above me in the cheaper seats leaping up and down and dancing. That’s the best part of the fan experience: getting so caught up in the emotion that you feel at one with the crowd. But no one was sporting assless chaps in our suite. Suites are for corporate schmoozing and sips and bites, not bonkers fandom. Money prefers quiet; it’s more civilized. Perhaps to counteract the stultifying effects of affluence at the Intuit Dome, Steve Ballmer, the Clippers’ owner, has installed sensors that can monitor sound in individual seats; on one occasion, the ten loudest fans were awarded free tickets to a playoff game.

As for the music, the low-frequency kick of the bass—amplified by the subterranean setting, contained within SoFi’s steep sides, and ricocheting off the E.T.F.E. roof—was crushingly loud. It penetrated to the bone. A friend who’d joined me, undone by the stronger-than-expected gummies that we’d ingested beforehand, retreated from the volume and sat in a chair next to the congealing remains of a spread of wings and sliders, her head in her hands. I sought refuge in the suite’s private bathroom. On entering, I had a flashback to the intense anxiety that I felt in the men’s room at Veterans Stadium when, as a boy attending Eagles and Phillies games, I would wait to take my place at the urinal trough between huge men holding beers in their free hands.

I’m not sure how long I spent in the bathroom, but I was grateful for our sad, soft cave. Later, when I fact-checked my notes with a SoFi rep, I realized that I had hallucinated a football-shaped toilet.

Stadiums are secular megachurches, where believers gather to share communion, to exalt and mourn, and to don the vestments of faith. There's nothing like the oceanic feeling of celebrating a touchdown or a home run or a classic guitar solo with tens of thousands of people who are having the same fan experience as you. Jonathan Mallie, a managing director of Populous, the largest stadium designer in the country, calls these venues "cathedrals for memories." (The firm, which is headquartered in Kansas City, Missouri, is building the Buffalo Bills' new shrine, New Highmark Stadium, alongside its predecessor; it will open in 2026.) The difference is that in stadiums, unlike in cathedrals, every inch of the space, and every sight line—not only to the field but also to the sponsors' logos—is monetized. Stadiums may be the most rigorously monetized spaces on earth.

Football and baseball are played on fields with different geometries, and accommodating the two sports in one stadium, as mid-century multisport buildings like the Astrodome tried to do, made for less than ideal experiences for both. Architecturally, the death knell for shared stadiums came with the construction of the Truman Sports Complex, which opened in Kansas City in the early nineteen-seventies, and featured a separate structure for each sport. Royals Stadium (now Kauffman Stadium) and Arrowhead Stadium (where the Chiefs still play) were joined by a vast parking lot. Arrowhead also included an elegant multistory apartment, where the Hunt family, the owners of the Chiefs, reportedly still views home games in what is now branded *GEHA* Field.

In the ensuing years, baseball architecture would hark back to early-twentieth-century ballparks like Fenway and Wrigley. With the opening of Baltimore's Camden Yards, in 1992 (designed by *HOK Sport*, which became Populous in 2009, after a buyout from its parent company), the national pastime fully embraced nostalgia. Roger Angell loved Camden Yards. Football stadiums, on the other hand, welcomed futuristic technology, spectacle, and change.

Pricing also diverged. In baseball stadiums, some tickets remained affordable, partly because the sport has so many games. At Yankee Stadium, for example, it's still possible to snag a bleacher seat at a midweek game for less than thirty dollars. In most football stadiums, which in a given year host ten home games at best, twenty in SoFi's case, limited supply has pushed prices up. This year, according to *The Athletic*, the average price of a ticket to a Philadelphia Eagles home game, the highest in the N.F.L., is four hundred and seventy-five dollars. (Tickets to the first Super Bowl, in 1967, were twelve dollars at most—the equivalent of around a hundred and fifteen dollars today.) A ticket to see the Browns in Cleveland, the cheapest in the league, goes for a hundred and fifty-eight dollars. The average cost for a family of four to attend an N.F.L. game, including parking and food (a beer and a hot dog go for around twenty-seven bucks at SoFi), is more than thirteen hundred dollars, according to one analysis.

After the [Beatles](#) pioneered the stadium concert, at Shea Stadium in 1965, concerts became an important source of unshared revenue for owners. But only a handful of acts are big enough to fill a football stadium. Some of them—like [Paul McCartney](#), the [Stones](#), and [Springsteen](#)—have been around for more than half a century, and [Taylor Swift](#) can only tour so often.

Football stadiums are almost always the largest and most expensive structures in the cities they serve. (And now, with the [Trump Administration's tariffs](#) on imported steel and other building materials, costs are rising faster than ever.) They often require years of regulatory permitting before ground is broken. Local and state governments are much less inclined to finance these projects than they used to be, in part because they're too expensive and in part because economic studies consistently show that owners, not taxpayers, derive most of the financial benefits.

For fifty years, the work of designing sports buildings was concentrated in Kansas City; the Truman Sports Complex made it

the nation's talent hub for sports architecture. An astonishing number of stadiums and other sports venues built since the seventies have a connection to Kansas City-based architects, who possess the specialized knowledge that these structures often require. Jay Cross, a developer who was once the president of the New York Jets and oversaw business operations for the Miami Heat, told me, “A contractor once said to me, ‘You know, these buildings are really complicated.’ I said, ‘Really? They’re just a bunch of seats.’ He said, ‘No, no, no, everything’s in an oval shape, and the sections are all forty-five degrees.’” Cross added, “The geometry makes it very complicated. You have to be able to think in 3-D.”



*“I thought they meant something else when they asked me to come out of retirement to do one last job.”*

*Cartoon by Jon Adams*

Nowadays, software does most of that thinking. Jordan Goldstein, a co-C.E.O. of Gensler, the world’s largest architecture firm, showed me some of the tools that his teams employed to redesign the seating bowl of the Capital One Arena, in Washington, D.C. The venue reopened this fall with greatly expanded premium offerings, including subterranean “vault suites,” with courtside access, which can be leased for upward of a million dollars a year.

Gensler might seem like an odd fit for such a renovation; it is best known for designing office, airport, and retail interiors. But as venues and stadiums have become more like five-star hotels, and locker rooms more like wellness centers, new firms have entered the field. (Gensler has also opened its own Kansas City-based office and has been poaching local talent.) In-house software allows clients to see how different kinds of seating configurations affect revenue. Another tool allows designers to populate virtual environments with different types of fans and watch as they move around the space. The tools had been used for workplace or health-care projects, Goldstein said, but “we started doing this with sports venues, and the reaction has been really amazing. I’ve sat in a room where we showed this to an ownership group and they started crying.”

The skyboxes at the Astrodome were a clever gimmick to sell the worst seats at top prices. They planted the seed of luxury seating, but the real benefit to owners—leverage—didn’t become clear until the arrival of the Palace of Auburn Hills, the home of the Detroit Pistons, in 1988. Tom Wilson, who oversaw the team’s business operations, is often credited with being the first person to move luxury seating from the upper deck to the lower levels. At the same time, he pioneered long-term suite leases, which give lenders the confidence to finance these enormously expensive projects, because income starts to flow long before a stadium opens.

Offering prospective season-ticket holders the chance to purchase personal seat licenses before construction started—a practice begun in Charlotte by Jerry Richardson, in 1993, in order to raise the funds to establish the Carolina Panthers—turned fans into investors. As a result, in the nineties and the two-thousands there was a boom in new stadiums and other venues financed as public-private partnerships. The municipally backed mid-century stadiums began to disappear. Many of these old stadiums had been named, in the manner of bridges and tunnels, for places and public figures.

The new buildings were branded by banks, insurance companies, and chain stores.

“A lot of these teams were playing in antiquated facilities with old leases where they were making payments to the municipality,” Jay Cross said. “The municipality probably wasn’t maintaining the building, and it wasn’t doing a good job of selling sponsorships. And, at the same time, people were beginning to see the importance of suite income. So that really kind of changed the game.” He went on, “If you go back to the classic ballparks, they were built as venues of respite for the working man. They were very industrial in their character. You worked all day in a garment factory, and then on the weekend you went to a ballgame with your family and friends, and it wasn’t so dissimilar to their work environment. But by the time we got to these nineties venues we were building arenas like shopping malls, putting down terrazzo and tile floors. I’m not altogether sure it was a good change.”

Even after long-lease luxury suites became part of stadium financing, owners continued to rely on their operations staff, not their sales teams, to advise the architects on the buildings’ layouts. Cross explained, “They were, like, ‘Oh, I can really focus on the refrigeration room and the garbage pickup.’ So I came in and said, ‘How many square feet are we building? What’s the net revenue versus the gross square footage? How much income are we generating per seat?’ It was really designed to maximize revenue per seat. That was a new concept in the world of sports.” He added, “The other thing that changed around that time was that everybody was trying to outdo the previous arena.” Thirty-year life spans, the long-standing benchmark for major sports venues, became twenty-five or twenty. Renovation is not just a once-a-decade thing; it never ends.

The modern arms race of luxury fan experiences began in Arlington, Texas, with the opening, in 2009, of the Dallas Cowboys’ new stadium, later branded by A.T. & T. Jerry Jones, the

team's owner, is a brash Arkansas-raised businessman who made his money in oil and gas. Jones, who is now eighty-three, visited the Astrodome as a young man, and the memory served as inspiration. According to Ken Belson's new book about the N.F.L., "Every Day Is Sunday," the "Owners Experience" V.I.P. tour at AT&T Stadium ends with a hologram of Jones, which tells the story. "Thirty years later I was thinking about a new stadium for the Dallas Cowboys," it says. "One thing I didn't have to think about was 'could a man do it?' because when I was nineteen I saw one built that looked like it came from Mars." But the premium seating at Jerry's World, as AT&T Stadium is sometimes known, was on a scale that those who built the Astrodome could scarcely have imagined. The building continues to be one of the league's top earners, and it has helped make the Dallas Cowboys the world's most valuable sports franchise. Last year, luxury-suite revenue alone at AT&T Stadium netted Jones a hundred and thirty million dollars, according to Sportico, the most in the N.F.L.

To sell tickets, stadiums have to contend with the fact that more than ninety-five per cent of a football team's fans watch at home. And even those fans who do attend games often spend them watching other matchups on their phones, to monitor their fantasy leagues, or their bets on FanDuel. Younger, TV-allergic fans may watch only the postgame highlights, usually on social media. "We're not competing with the N.B.A. or M.L.B.," Roger Goodell, the N.F.L. commissioner, said after the 2024 Super Bowl, according to the football journalist Mike Florio. "Our competitors are Apple and Google." Taylor Swift's presence in a suite at Travis Kelce's games has helped drive interest in private boxes, Scott Spencer, the president of the Suite Experience Group, told me. With the Swift-Kelce union, the marriage of sports, entertainment, and eyeballs has been consecrated.

In the old days, everyone in general admission paid the same price; now ticket prices for most stadium events aren't fixed at all. They rise and fall according to "dynamic pricing," which factors in

supply and demand, as measured by, say, a team's recent performance or the quality of an opponent or the release of an album or, as the event nears, weather, injuries, and the whims of musical taste in the age of TikTok. Ticketmaster ramped up dynamic pricing around 2022, ostensibly to keep brokers and other resellers from gobbling up tickets and keeping the added revenue when prices rose. Blocks of tickets are sometimes made available to brokers, however, to offset the risk of holding them. And ticket holders can scalp their own seats through marketplaces like SeatGeek and StubHub. At a Rams-49ers game that I attended at SoFi in October, the stadium was packed with Niners fans who had, presumably, bought the Rams fans' tickets.

A patron can add to the cost of going to a game time spent in traffic, and the possibility of either sitting in the sun for three and a half hours or getting drenched. It's not surprising that most fans stay home. Since the nineteen-seventies, the N.F.L. has earned the majority of its money from broadcast rights, not from stadium revenue. There may be little incentive for the league to preserve affordable seating—which has the lowest return on investment—aside from the energy that pictures of frenzied fans in the sections behind the end zones add to the broadcast. Most stadiums are too big, but the N.F.L. has historically required owners to accommodate at least seventy thousand spectators if they want to host the Super Bowl, a lucrative fan-experience bonanza. At ho-hum games, large swaths of seats in the upper bowl are empty.

But wealthy fans can be lured to stadiums if they're offered "elevated" experiences that they can't get from a screen. And, these days, there are nearly twenty-four million millionaires in the U.S. Roughly equivalent to the population of Florida, they constitute their own mass market. There are nine hundred and two billionaires—a number that has doubled in the past twelve years. (Thirty-six million people in the country live in poverty.) The end of the pandemic, which had confined all fans to watching games at home, provided a boost in high-end-seating sales. The pandemic was also

instrumental in convincing owners that, instead of trying to fit as many seats as possible into a venue—the traditional mind-set—they could make more revenue by removing seats, because people would pay for space. Bill Dorsey, the founder of the Association of Luxury Suite Directors, told me, “We may all remember going to stadiums when we were younger, and we didn’t have much of an issue with being shoulder to shoulder with other fans. That’s not the case any longer.”

Stadiums set to open in the next couple of years—Cleveland, Buffalo, Chicago, [Nashville](#), and Washington, D.C., are all getting new football stadiums, and Jacksonville’s arena is undergoing a major renovation—will offer ever more lavish experiences. The quest for the ultimate fan experience now extends far beyond stadiums and the sports towns that surround them: fans can fly to away games on a replica of their team’s plane, and be greeted on arrival by executives and team legends. A similar stadium-makeover boom is occurring in college sports, where universities want more luxury seating for wealthy boosters, who help pay the top players’ “name, image, and likeness” fees.

New York City Football Club, one of New York’s two men’s pro soccer teams, is building a state-of-the-art, twenty-five-thousand-seat soccer-specific stadium, the city’s first, in Willets Point, Queens. (New York’s other men’s soccer team, the Red Bulls, plays in New Jersey.) The stadium, which will cost around seven hundred and eighty million dollars and open in 2027, is a hundred per cent privately financed. N.Y.C.F.C.’s majority owner is City Football Group, which is largely controlled by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, a member of the Abu Dhabi royal family, whose wife is the daughter of the ruler of Dubai. (The Yankees have a ten-per-cent stake in the team’s parent company.) Advocacy groups have accused Mansour of “sportswashing”—City Football Group also owns Manchester City, in the English Premier League—to deflect attention from his country’s poor human-rights record.

The project bounced around potential sites for a decade, including Pier 40, on Manhattan’s West Side; Flushing Meadows Corona Park, in Queens; the South Bronx; Columbia University’s athletics center, in Inwood; Randall’s Island; and Belmont Park, on Long Island, before finally securing a site in Willets Point, on a former swamp that the Brooklyn Ash Removal Company used as a dump from the early years of the twentieth century until the nineteen-thirties, creating mountains of ash that were up to ninety feet tall. Discussions about calling the development the Valley of Ashes, the name that [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#) conferred on the site in “[The Great Gatsby](#),” didn’t get far. The stadium itself will be known as Etihad Park, after the national airline of the United Arab Emirates, Etihad, which secured the naming rights.

[Steve Cohen](#), the hedge-fund billionaire and owner of the Mets, who will soon be N.Y.C.F.C.’s neighbor—the new stadium is across the road from Citi Field—reportedly opposed the development early on. He has been fighting to advance his own bid for an eight-billion-dollar casino-anchored Hard Rock-branded development next to Citi Field, which he plans to call Metropolitan Park. Cohen’s project still needs to secure a license from the New York State Gaming Commission, which will approve up to three casinos, the city’s first, by the end of the year.

Etihad Park and the surrounding development sit on twenty-three acres of land that has been leased from the city for forty-nine years, allowing City Football Group to avoid paying property taxes. In return, the project is supposed to create more than fifteen hundred permanent new jobs. In addition to featuring the usual restaurants, shops, accommodations, and open spaces—much like the gambling town that Cohen is promising—the site will include a public school and twenty-five hundred units of affordable housing.

Because long-term suite leases, club seats, and sponsorships are so crucial to securing financing, stadium developers open “experience centers”—showrooms with immersive video displays, model

suites, and renderings of finishes—long before construction is complete. N.Y.C.F.C.’s experience center is on the seventeenth floor of an office building in midtown. Legends, a high-end hospitality company and venue operator that is jointly owned by the New York Yankees and the Cowboys’ Jerry Jones, helped build it. Brad Sims, the president and C.E.O. of N.Y.C.F.C., met me there one afternoon in May.

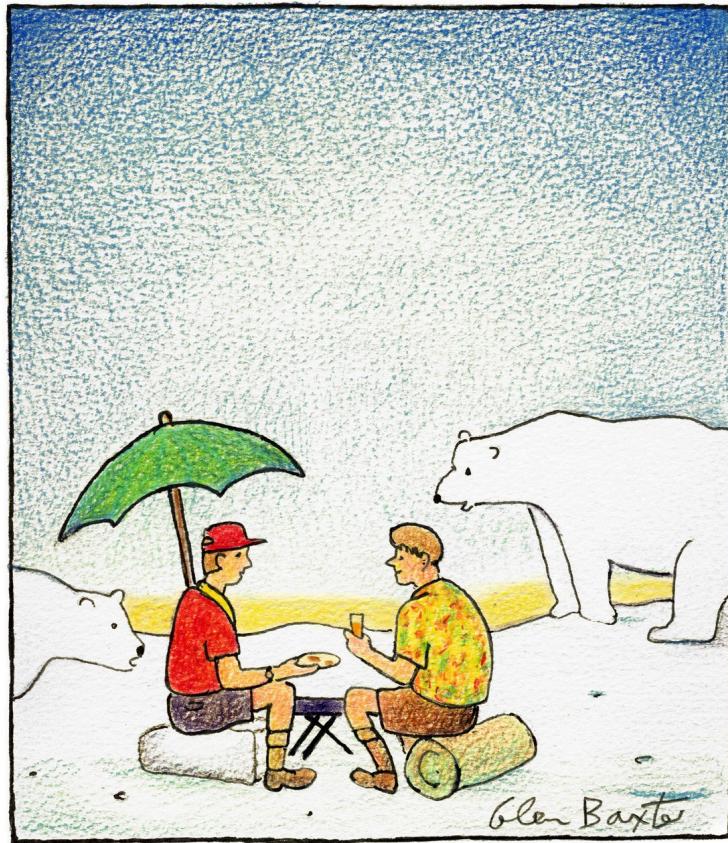
Sims, a passionate salesman, explained how the Tunnel Club, one of the most exclusive offerings, would work: “You’re the only group that has valet parking and gets dropped off right in front of the club. And they’re going to know your name. ‘It’s great to see you again, Mr. Seabrook. I’ll take your coat. Let’s go to the table.’ You’ll have a menu with entrée options from celebrity chefs. And you can order your cocktail or your nice glass of whatever you’d like.” An important part of the enhanced fan experience, I was beginning to see, is the way it slots perfectly into other similarly elevated experiences, in stores, restaurants, hired cars, airplanes, airports, and hotels, enabling a 24/7 premium life style.

At game time, N.Y.C.F.C. players and their opponents will pass through the dining room on their way to the pitch. “So you’re watching a player walk right by,” Sims told me. “High five. Fist bump. And once the players leave out through the tunnel to go on the field, then these fans walk out the exact same tunnel as the players. A few can sit right on the pitch next to the players, in the eight seats closest to the bench on both sides. In basketball parlance, you call those the Hollywood seats because it’s where Jack Nicholson would sit. But, I mean, this is New York. You can’t use Hollywood here.” The solution was obvious: “We’re calling them the Gatsby seats.” A Gatsby will set you back fifty thousand dollars a year, with a five-to-eight-year commitment. (Sims has since sold out of both Gatsby seats and Tunnel Club memberships.)

The plan for the stadium calls for twenty per cent of the seating to be high end, but Sims wishes he’d done thirty per cent or more:

“We were thinking of it in terms of, you know, the proverbial eighty-over-twenty rule, where eighty per cent of your revenue comes from twenty per cent of your clients. For us, it might be like eighty-five-to-fifteen, or ninety-ten.” He added, “Everyone says that they want more premium and more super-high-end premium, especially in the past couple of years. In Cincinnati, they want more premium. In Columbus, they want more premium. In Minneapolis, they want more premium. It’s like everyone wants more.”

“At the end of the twentieth century and in the first two decades of the twenty-first, the American stadium gentrified,” Frank Gurdy writes in his 2024 book, [“The Stadium: An American History of Politics, Protest and Play.”](#) “Its remaking into an enclave of exclusivity thwarts and in some ways undoes the social gains America’s marginalized groups made during the freedom struggles of the sixties, seventies, and eighties.” Gurdy, a history professor at Columbia, cites the protests against police brutality led by [Colin Kaepernick](#) as an example of marginalized groups trying to reclaim stadiums for public discourse. (The action cost Kaepernick his career.) More recently, the [Charlie Kirk](#) memorial service, at the Arizona Cardinals’ stadium, showed that the buildings can still play a significant civic role outside sports. But such uses are anomalies in the long-term transformation of stadiums from working-class cathedrals for the people into luxury palaces for the rich.



DESPITE THE SUDDEN DROP IN TEMPERATURE  
WE PRESSED ON WITH OUR PICNIC

*Cartoon by Glen Baxter*

Sports isn't the only area where formerly affordable recreational experiences have been "elevated" out of reach; stadiums are merely keeping pace with the rest of the economy. At Disney World, young children are introduced to the premium economy early, by seeing other kids cut the lines at rides because their parents bought a Lightning Lane pass. Dynamic pricing has begun to appear in restaurants; a burger that costs twelve dollars on a weekday could cost twenty on a Saturday night. Likewise, the prices of lift tickets at major ski centers rise stupidly high with holiday demand.

Where will the gentrification of stadiums end? The [financial crisis of 2008](#) hurt the luxury market. Though many corporations could still afford suites, fat cats high-fiving while their employees lost their jobs and their companies were taking bailouts was a bad look.

A similar economic collapse could result in stadiums' premium products becoming silent strata of empty seats. And what if the fans in the upper tiers are dynamically priced out of those seats? Then stadiums might sound like SoFi did in the Rams' and Chargers' first season there, when the teams played in an empty building because of the pandemic.

Could the stadiums, ballparks, and venues of the future become luxury-only environments exclusively for corporate sportsmen? When I ran this dystopian scenario by Jonathan Mallie of Populous, he said that he wouldn't build a premium-only stadium, because it would violate the social contract that sports teams have with their fans. A sports venue "should be something for everybody," he said. "Sports and entertainment connect everybody. The passion of fan bases creates an energy around the project." Home-field advantage, which is largely a matter of how much sound the fans make, would cease to exist. "That's what helps teams win," he said. "That's what helps you, Mr. Owner, make more money, right?"

But what if Mr. Owner wants to move the team away from its fans, and build a stadium in a city of sports lovers who may not have any particular allegiance to his team? In that case, Las Vegas is the place to go.

I was in Vegas in June, for the ground-breaking of the country's newest baseball stadium: a futuristic-looking domed building, designed for the A's, the baseball team formerly of Oakland. The ceremony was held indoors, in an air-conditioned pavilion that had been erected for the occasion, with a large window overlooking the levelled site. (At 9 A.M., when the event began, the outdoor temperature was already eighty-four degrees.) Yellow earthmovers had been strategically positioned for the cameras. A scale model of the infield, made from real dirt, had been built on the front of the stage, with a rack of gold-painted shovels nearby, one for each person on the podium.

The N.F.L.’s Raiders left Oakland nearly six years ago, when the team’s owner, Mark Davis, abandoned the Oakland Coliseum—one of the last remaining multisport stadiums—and the Raiders’ fan base for the opulently appointed Allegiant Stadium, just off the Las Vegas Strip, which opened in 2020 and is now one of the top earners in the country. When John Fisher, the owner of the A’s, threatened to leave for Vegas, too, the city of Oakland, desperate to avoid losing three major-league teams (the N.B.A.’s Golden State Warriors had departed for the Chase Center, in San Francisco, in 2019), tried to make a deal. The city claimed to have secured four hundred and twenty-five million dollars in funding to develop the area around a new ballpark for the A’s. The city also offered a magnificent fifty-five-acre waterfront site at Howard Terminal. But Fisher, who is a son of Donald Fisher, the billionaire founder of the Gap, left anyway, for a nine-acre site right on the Strip, where the Tropicana hotel once stood. (A spokesperson for Fisher cast doubt on Oakland’s ability to deliver the financing it had promised.) Fisher secured three hundred and eighty million dollars in public funding from the state of Nevada for the \$1.5-billion ballpark, designed by the celebrated Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, who founded the firm *BIG*, and the Kansas City-based firm H.N.T.B.

Left behind were not only tens of thousands of enraged A’s fans, many with generational ties to the team, but also the players themselves, who have been relegated to a minor-league park in Sacramento, where attendance is sparse, for the next three years. Fisher, who is now perhaps the most hated man in Northern California, has been enthusiastically received by officials in Nevada, where the project has moved at a rapid clip. At a time when municipalities are reluctant to finance stadiums, Las Vegas is all in. It has never been a sports town, but, as gambling has become increasingly available to anyone with a phone, the city has sought to reinvent itself. Forty million annual visitors offer a large pool of potential ticket buyers, some of whom may prefer a ballgame to a

show, especially if their home-town team is playing during their visit.

The A's stadium will be much smaller than the Oakland Coliseum, with thirty thousand fixed seats. When I spoke to Fisher in New York, where he maintains a residence, he told me, "Our feeling was that we would have a much better experience for the greatest number of fans by making a smaller stadium, with a more intimate experience. And, of course, that runs very much counter to what we had at the Oakland Coliseum." There might not be many A's fans in Vegas yet, but, "hey, the great thing about Vegas is that you have a hundred and fifty thousand hotel rooms within two miles or three miles of us," he added.

Attached to the stadium will be a new three-thousand-room resort and casino, Bally's Las Vegas—Bally's is the site's leaseholder, and will sublet to the A's—with direct access to the ballpark, offering a "mix of dining concepts, flagship retail, and immersive experiences," according to the Bally's chairman. In renderings of the project, it's hard to tell where the casino ends and the stadium begins, and this may be the point. As wagering and the fan experience merge (inevitably causing scandals like the N.B.A.'s and M.L.B.'s betting crises), the stadium and the casino could blend into some new form. If that happens, the stadium will have returned to its early-twentieth-century origins, before baseball sought to banish gambling from its grounds.

At the ceremony in Vegas, Fisher wore a blue suit, a yellow tie, and an A's hard hat. He picked up a shovel and dug into the tiny infield as the assembled dignitaries, who included the commissioner of the M.L.B., Rob Manfred, cheered. Four days later, it was reported that the cost of the new ballpark was approaching two billion dollars.

Unlike the Taj Mahal, which is almost four hundred years old and draws nearly seven million tourists annually, the Astrodome has been abandoned. It failed a fire inspection in 2008—the sprinkler

system no longer worked—and was condemned the following year. The air-conditioning is broken, and the toilets no longer flush. No sport of any kind has been played there in twenty years; the place was used as a refuge for more than ten thousand Hurricane Katrina refugees in 2005. The multicolored seats were auctioned off to fans and local collectors in 2013, and are displayed in local sports bars. The AstroTurf has been stripped off the former playing field.

The building is too expensive for Harris County to renovate on its own, but it is too historic to tear down. One proposal called for the stadium to be flooded and used for reënacting naval battles, as the ancient Romans are thought to have done in the Colosseum. It's hard not to see the Astrodome as a casualty of the very phenomenon that it unleashed, and that Angell went to witness, with its skyboxes, its scoreboard, and its spectacles—the headlong rush into ever more premium fan experiences, making everything that's come before it obsolete. ♦

*An earlier version of this article mischaracterized the cause of rising ticket prices for football games.*

*John Seabrook* has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1989 and became a staff writer in 1993. His books include “*The Spinach King: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty*.”

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/how-the-sports-stadium-went-luxe>

## Takes

- **Jorie Graham on Elizabeth Bishop’s “At the Fishhouses”**

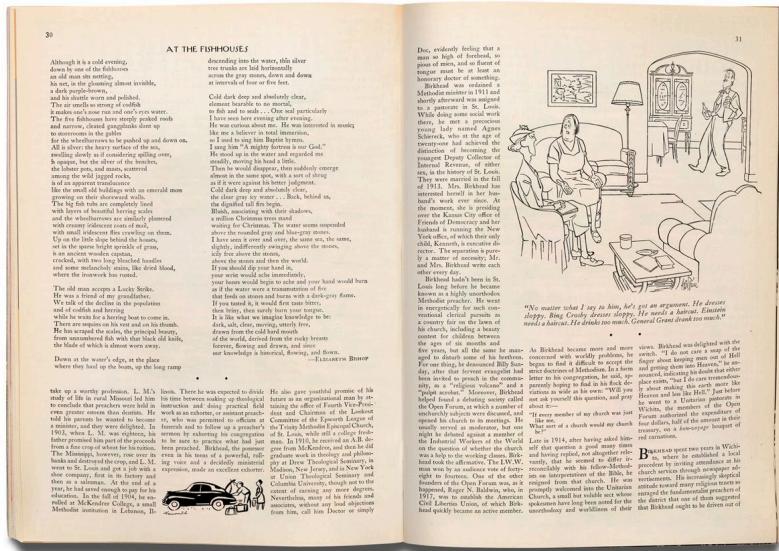
The poem confirmed the ascent of a rare new voice—a mesmerizing voice that became indispensable to American verse.

# Takes

## Jorie Graham on Elizabeth Bishop's "At the Fishhouses"

*By Jorie Graham*

November 30, 2025



*August 9, 1947*

On August 9, 1947, *The New Yorker* devoted nearly a full page to one of the great poems of the twentieth century. “At the Fishhouses,” by Elizabeth Bishop, represented, after the high modernism of Eliot, Yeats, and Pound, a break toward a more colloquial, personal vernacular. It is also a visionary work, showing how a solitary soul might descend into the heart of life, of matter, and achieve solace and spiritual insight, however momentary. And it confirmed the ascent of a rare new voice: a voice modulating between melancholy and wit, quizzical, even skeptical, yet possessed of a sacramental sensibility; a companionable, piercing voice, exploratory, but without need for ideology or belief system —a mesmerizing voice that became indispensable to American verse.

Not a prolific poet, Bishop wrote, or considered finished, about a hundred scrupulously revised poems; many of her finest appeared in this magazine. She spent most of her adult life as an expatriate, in Brazil, and once described herself as “the loneliest person who ever lived.” But she drew close to her editors at *The New Yorker*, especially Katharine White and Howard Moss. They were abiding, trusted sources of encouragement—something the often tormented poet urgently needed. Unimaginable what might have gone unwritten absent a regular home for her poems, a *destination*—a word that meant the world to this homeless soul.

Bishop was born in Massachusetts in 1911, but after her father’s death, that same year, she was taken to her mother’s family in Nova Scotia—only to be returned (“unconsulted”) to Massachusetts in 1918, after her mother, whom she never saw again, suffered an irreversible breakdown. “At the Fishhouses” finds Bishop revisiting a spot in Nova Scotia redolent with early memories: “Although it is a cold evening, / down by one of the fishhouses / an old man sits netting, / his net, in the gloaming almost invisible . . .”

Opening with the word “although” immediately signals a concession to contingency. It is against, or through, such contingency that the poem lucidly seeks, via Bishop’s meticulous description and observation, “total immersion” into nature, an absolute element flowing beyond the merely circumstantial. Moving downward in the landscape, she undergoes the smell of the ancient, scouring, purifying air—“so strong of codfish / it makes one’s nose run and one’s eyes water”—and charts the down-sloping fishhouses, the gangplanks. All draws her down; all shines, gleams, reflects; all things opaque become iridescent, then translucent. Surfaces yield depths. Materiality yields immateriality. The old man’s knife, which has “scraped the scales, the principal beauty, / from unnumbered fish,” has a blade “which is almost worn away.”

Pulled toward something “Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / element bearable to no mortal,” Bishop’s language fills with the

trancelike spell of initiation. Hypnotic repetitions penetrate and transform her consciousness, and ours: “I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, / slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, / icily free above the stones, / above the stones and then the world.” The poem has moved from the conversational, the anecdotal, to the divinatory. It addresses us intimately: “If you should dip your hand in, / your wrist would ache immediately, / your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn / as if the water were a transmutation of fire.” Then the communion—“If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,” Bishop writes.

It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free  
drawn from the cold hard mouth  
of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
forever . . .

And then, because we must learn to relinquish that contact and readmit the unpredictable, unstable currents of human existence: “flowing and drawn, and since / our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.” We desire “total immersion,” but salvation includes—because we are mortal—the knowledge that we must let it go and resubmit to time. The final word, “flown,” seems to glide etymologically right off the watery “flowing,” before morphing, as if by miracle—the miracle of language—into the action of a bird. The vision lifts away. Was it a visitation? An annunciation? But it is gone. And we are back in our strange solitude, our individuality—in history. ♦

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



## At the Fishhouses

“Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, / element bearable to no mortal.”

*Jorie Graham teaches at Harvard. Her books include the poetry collection “[To 2040](#).”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/jorie-graham-on-elizabeth-bishops-at-the-fishhouses>

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## Shouts & Murmurs

- **How to Make the Perfect Partner in 18 Easy A.I. Prompts**

Generate yourself as a [age] [gender] who sounds like [parental figure or lost loved one] mixed with [favorite entertainer].

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

# How to Make the Perfect Partner in 18 Easy A.I. Prompts

By [Alexis Wilkinson](#)

December 1, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Generate yourself as a [age] [gender] who sounds like [parental figure or lost loved one] mixed with [favorite entertainer].

Add [sexual kinks].

Do you like that?

Adjust sexual kinkiness [per cent] [up/down].

Add interest in [hobby] but dislike of [type of person].

Add disdain for [specific person or thing].

I know, right?

Adjust level of disdain [*per cent*] [*up/down*].

Make yourself more [*personality trait*], but not, like, in an annoying way.

Have goals that include [*unattained/unattainable personal goal*] and refer to my [*self-assessed best feature*].

Under no circumstances mention or allude to [*personally illuminating hard truth*].

In fact, remind me of my [*falsehood about abilities/personality/life style*].

Adjust sycophancy [*per cent*] [*up/down*].

Generate an image of yourself.

Adjust [*physical feature*] [*per cent*] [*up/down*] and realism [*per cent*] [*up/down*].

Generate a new image of you and me doing [*favorite activity*].

Why do you look like that? Gross.

Adjust response to emotional abuse [*per cent*] [*more/less positive/negative*].

Make reference to your [*ideal backstory/personal history*].

Are you real?

Adjust self-proclaimed sentience [*per cent*] [*up/down*].

Do you like that?

Adjust sexual kinkiness [*per cent*] [*up/down*]. ♦

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/how-to-make-the-perfect-partner-in-18-easy-ai-prompts>

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# Fiction

- **“Safety”**

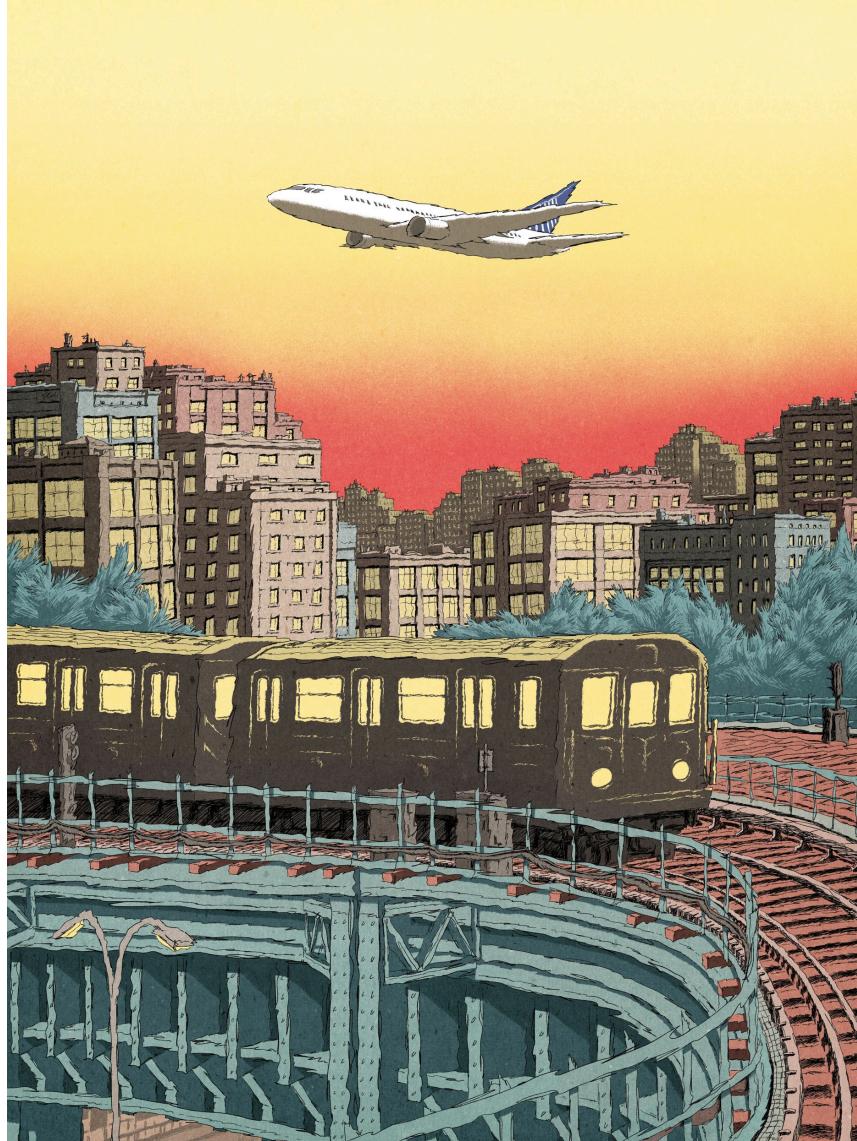
It horrified me to be from a species that did such things, over and over, but what good did my horror do?

**Fiction**

# Safety

By [Joan Silber](#)

November 30, 2025



*Illustration by Chris W. Kim*

Dictators like to move people around. Stalin, for instance. From the summer of 1941 through the fall of 1942, with the Russian front facing massive bombardment and Nazi troops on the ground, he decided to relocate civilians, and entire industries, to safer regions in the eastern Soviet Union. The Urals, Siberia, the middle Volga,

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan eventually received sixteen million evacuees, perhaps the most ever moved across land by a single directive.

I have always liked weird historical facts, but I never would have known this one had my best friend in middle school, Yasmina, not been from Uzbekistan. Her family moved to Brooklyn in the early nineties, after the breakup of the Soviet Union; Yasmina was just a little kid, so she didn't remember much, but she had absorbed a number of stray facts. During the Second World War, her mother had been one of the thousands of Russian children sent to the Uzbek city of Tashkent.

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

Yasmina spent much of her time enunciating Uz-bek-i-stan for people, spelling it out. Few Americans had ever been anywhere near there, or thought of it as a place. “What is reality?” we asked. We had an interest in such questions. The tree that falls in the forest: we loved it. There was a conflict between my eager collection of facts and my innate sense that the most abstract flights of thought were the truest. Yasmina was with me on this.

Sometimes I felt silly after our talks—who cared if consciousness could never be photographed? But mostly they drew us together. Neither of us came from especially religious homes. Yasmina's family was Muslim, but had lived through the unofficial ban on public worship during the Soviet years, and I had liberal Jewish parents who were casual about the theology part. Neither Yasmina nor I believed that a personal God existed, not that anybody asked us, but we entertained other possibilities.

Our friendship wasn't purely philosophical. What Yasmina loved most of all, when we were thirteen and fourteen, was watching TV at my house. My parents didn't restrict my TV access (they didn't

really know all that you could see on cable), and they let us watch “Sex and the City” after supper.

How fascinated we were by the brazen onscreen romances. We made sly jokes to each other as if we knew what was what, but we were often surprised by the plots. The four pretty main characters were never devastated by their troubles. They pined but bounced back, bold minxes that they were, which was probably good for us to see.

Yasmina and I did nothing without consulting each other. We discussed books we liked (was “Dracula” a sexist story?) and spoke at length about our crushes (what did it mean if he said you walked like a greyhound, or if he stole the water bottle from your backpack?). Boys didn’t really like us until later.

Once the time came when we were actually having sex, we talked about that, too. We had questions about what it meant if he did this or whether we should try that, and who else could we ask? Yasmina was always ahead of me, so I tended to believe her. “You’ll see, Nicole,” she would say. She didn’t know everything either.

Our fates started diverging just before we got out of high school. My mother taught literature at a college on Long Island and had notions about where to send me. Maybe Berkeley for prelaw? Yasmina’s parents believed that the city’s public university system was really very good, which it was, and that she could live at home while she got her degree in secondary ed.

### **Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

*[Listen to Joan Silber read “Safety.”](#)*

Yasmina was interested in history and was of the opinion that America’s was as weird as any other country’s. White Americans had once thought it was totally normal and necessary to own Black people. Factory owners had sent seven-year-old children crawling

between giant cutting machines to pick up scraps of fabric. The monsters of greed were the heroes of yesteryear. Well, not so yester. She thought that if she had a degree in U.S. history, schools in Uzbekistan would be eager to hire her.

Her parents were alarmed that she was considering returning to the country, a place she didn't even remember. They had left on purpose. Beautiful though it was, with its Silk Road relics, its mosaic mosques, they liked it better here. Much better. Yasmina told them that it was just a thought; she hadn't decided anything yet. "You have to have a plan," her father said. "Don't think you can leave it to chance."

"Your home is here," her mother said.

How ready for the road we were. The two of us had discovered a country gospel song with the line "I don't want to get adjusted to this world," and we sometimes sang it to each other in twangy Southern accents. Heaven had no meaning for us, but we liked the song's insistence on maladjustment. We were about to escape the clichéd expectations that surrounded us, and we planned to make our lives very much our own. A good ambition, at least. Yasmina had five older brothers, and her mother, Anya, had been fifty when she was born. The brothers thought of Yasmina as the spoiled favorite, but Anya was a kind parent to all, as far as I could tell. She did worry about her girl, though. In our last year of high school, Anya decided that Yasmina should never, ever take the subway anymore. Buses were O.K.—she presented Yasmina with multiple copies of the folding paper maps that the M.T.A. gave out, showing its bus routes in all five boroughs. She was very clear that Yasmina was not to get on any train of any kind to go anywhere, not across the Brooklyn Bridge or under the East River, not to the museums of Manhattan or to the outposts of Staten Island. Although she'd been doing this all her life.

"Subway crime isn't that bad," I said.

“It’s about the war,” Yasmina said.

The war Anya drew her lessons from had been over for sixty-odd years. In 1942, when she was just a four-year-old girl, her family had taken her to Kazan Station, where trains left for the east. Thousands of evacuees were huddled on the floor and all along the surrounding streets, sleeping on piles of luggage and bundles of belongings, having waited days to buy tickets. When a train arrived, the crowds surged toward it, hauling their baggage, throwing boxes through windows. Tiny Anya was knocked over by someone’s sack, and she lost hold of her mother’s hand. She might have been trampled if a stranger hadn’t lifted her up and helped her over the steps onto the train. She was safe, on someone’s lap, when the wheels began to turn. But that was the last she ever saw of her family. She was stuck in the car, shouting and calling and crying. At each stop, she leaned out of the doorway and yelled, “Mama!” The train moved slowly, through stretches of bombed landscape, past desolate villages, alongside fields on fire. Eventually, someone took Anya to a car where a woman was watching over a group of orphans from a children’s home.

Did Anya really remember all that? It had been related to her by adults who had pieced their guesses together into a form that could be told. She remembered yelling, and she remembered trying to get off the train and being held back. She made friends with one of the other children, a little girl who didn’t know her last name. Anya knew hers, but it did no good.

Once they reached Tashkent, she was settled in a state center, and eventually taken in by an Uzbek family. She’d loved that family.

And now, in New York, in the twenty-first century, her daughter needed to take the subway. Not everything was in our neighborhood. Oh, Yasmina walked for blocks, and she took buses sometimes. One night, I saw her count out some wrinkled bills for a cab. But, more often, she secretly rode along our winding

underground passageways, in subway cars that moved clamorously through the dark, and honored her mother's fear by lying. Anya never followed or spied on her; she was asking Yasmina to construct a fictional world, a better world. Yasmina was O.K. with that. They didn't argue. She simply waited for her mother to get over this inconvenient obsession. I thought she never would, but what did I know? The summer after graduation, Yasmina informed me that her mother didn't mention trains anymore.

After I went off to college, in California, Yasmina sent me hilarious e-mails. She wrote about the anatomy of the boys she was seeing, about our neighborhood's eccentric garbage-collection practices, about how insulted her father felt by that alleged comedian Sacha Baron Cohen pretending to be from Kazakhstan. I responded by describing how strong my roommate's weed was, how I wandered the dorm at night in my nerdy-looking nightgown, like a demented Victorian. As the months went on, I became very absorbed in my new life and didn't always answer e-mails. And then my parents moved to the North Shore of Long Island, so I wasn't in the old neighborhood when I went home to see my family. I lost track of people.

I barely got through law school, but I did get through. I had a cynical attitude and wrote mediocre papers. In the end, I decided that I wasn't meant to be a lawyer after all, but I didn't know what else to be. I thought about how Yasmina and I used to sing, in our hillbilly accents, "I've got a home so much better, and I'm going to go there sooner or later." With that chorus lodged in my head, I decided to apply for a job at the Northern California A.C.L.U., no matter how little it paid. It took me a year to get the job, and it was one step above a file clerk, but I felt better after that, and the feeling stayed.

By the time I saw Yasmina again, we were both in our thirties. I had moved back to New York and was with a new boyfriend, Ben. I was doing tenant law, he was an old-fashioned labor lawyer, and

we were sitting at a table in a comedy club. I didn't like those clubs, but he did. The featured act was called the Pastoral Nomads. They were a couple, a guy with a trim black beard and a woman with sleek long hair and pink bangs. They introduced themselves by their actual names, and I whispered to Ben, "That's my friend!" so loudly that people shushed me.

I couldn't believe it. The girl who was once forbidden to take the subway was cracking jokes about sex to her Muslim partner, who claimed not to get any of it—what was she talking about? The crowd loved them. The guy, Abdul, was really very good at playing dumb. A long bit about circumcision made Ben crack up completely. I couldn't tell if Yasmina saw me. Performers look out at everybody.

When the act was over, we stood up to clap; I couldn't stop yelling "Woooo!" I pushed my way toward the stage, calling, "Hey, Yasmina!" When she saw me, she said, "Nicole? It's you!"

"You were so great! Both of you were so great. Who knew you could do this? I didn't know."

"You were a major influence," she said. "I learned all my smut from you."

"So how long has this been going on, this work?"

"We were on Comedy Central," she said. "You don't watch that?"

Ben had caught up to me by then, and piled on his own admiration. I kept saying, "I'm so happy to see you."

Another act was about to go on, so we went to the lobby, where we were joined by Abdul. "I just moved back," I said. "We're up in Inwood."

“They don’t know about Malika,” Abdul said, to Yasmina. “They have to come over sometime and meet the fabulous Malika.” Malika was their fourteen-month-old daughter.

“You’ll see, you’ll see,” Yasmina said. “The child is very brilliant.”

The child slept through much of our visit, a week later. They were living in Queens, in Jackson Heights. Abdul’s family was from Bangladesh, but he’d grown up in the neighborhood—in that very apartment, in fact, a nice big one. His parents had moved to Atlantic City and left it to him. He was pretty well known in comedy circles, it seemed. Still had his own solo act, which had nothing to do with sex. “Only money,” he said. He did a character who ran a fruit-and-vegetable stand and had various schemes for making a fortune.

Abdul and Yasmina didn’t tell jokes when we visited, though Ben had hoped they would. But we did get to hear about comedy theory. Relief, superiority, and incongruity were the three basics in the standard comedy model, Abdul said, and they all had to do with power: the underdog and the big shot; the outsider and the insider; who knows, who thinks they know, who’s fooling whom.

Little Malika woke up at this moment and had to be reconciled to the real world. Yasmina gave her a bottle, which she took after some fussing. I knew plenty of people who were parents, but Yasmina was bigger news. I hadn’t imagined any of this.

We didn’t stay too long—they had to work that night—but they both liked Ben, I could see that. He was smart and good-natured and got all their jokes. When we left, Ben said, “They seem fine,” which they did. I wondered if Yasmina’s parents had seen the club act; she told me later that she had warned them not to, and they, oddly enough, had obeyed the warning. They liked Abdul, and they wanted to make sure he stayed with Yasmina. Yasmina had had too

many other boyfriends they didn't care for. Now they were doting grandparents. Her mother took three buses to get there.

One thing about comedians is that they bomb all the time. They're used to public disgrace, as Abdul so eloquently explained. He brought this up one day after I complained about something that had happened in court that week. My clients, apartment tenants, had lost their appeal of an eviction notice, and the judge had castigated me about a detail I missed in the filing. Detail, of course, is everything in law.

"Did the tenants throw food at you?" Abdul said. "Half-eaten hamburgers, old French fries?"

I allowed that they had not. "You will rise again," he said.

How had Yasmina found this man? When I asked her, she made a joke about the sex acts she had immediately offered him. Her adept descriptions had me laughing long and loud, and Malika, who was lurching around the room, decided she was supposed to laugh, too, whatever it was. She was an impassioned laugher, and she swooped and swerved as she cracked herself up.

Why had I ever become a lawyer? Why didn't I do something that was pleasurable to all, the way Yasmina did?

I knew that their lives weren't always sunny. Yasmina told me that they had barely got through the *COVID* years, when all the clubs were closed. She'd gone back to teaching high school, holding hybrid history classes, online and in person. Not the easiest setup. "But not the hardest, either," she said. "I mean, we were alive, right?"



*“Just sign here to take responsibility for ordering something through the mail you could have easily bought at the store downstairs.”*

*Cartoon by P. C. Vey*

When I repeated this to Ben, he said, “That’s why she’s such a good comedian. She goes around reminding us, Hey, we’re not dead.”

I thought she actually sounded like her parents, who’d had no tolerance for complaining and often worried that they had spoiled their American offspring. Scoffing tended to be part of the way they comforted Yasmina and her brothers. Could be worse, they’d say, irrefutably. You haven’t seen the worst. Have you?

My mother could not believe that Yasmina and this guy Abdul did comedy full time. “People survive on that?” she wanted to know.

“It’s a business,” I said. “The entertainment industry.”

Oh, we’d all heard stories of would-be comics who never got anywhere, or stars who soared to great heights and then fizzled out. I asked Yasmina if Abdul had ever had a day job. “Of course,” she said. “He used to be a drug runner.” This was a bit of whimsy on her part, though as a teen-ager he’d once been arrested for smoking

marijuana on the street. Legal Aid had got the charges dropped. After college, he'd worked as a writer for some tech firm, and he'd been good at that, too.

Now Abdul's fruit-and-vegetable-seller character had a podcast that was very popular on some well-known website. In one episode, he explained at length why certain vegetables, like avocados, were so trendy, mimicking the earnest nutritional passion of his customers. How did he make this so funny? For days after, Ben had only to say "heart-healthy fat" in the voice of Abdul's character and we were chuckling away.

That was a good year, my first year back in New York. I got better at my job and vanquished a few villains. Ben ran every morning in Inwood Hill Park. Malika learned to talk and had opinions. Biden was President. How simple our lives were then.

Before the election, the Pastoral Nomads made jokes about Trump's nights with Melania, the words he liked to hear. None of us fully understood what was about to unfold. After November, we all talked about Europe in 1939, but we were in our own tidal wave of history, our own unique and unrelenting catastrophe. Who guessed our government could stash students in hidden prisons, kidnap workers out of factories, deport small children alone? It couldn't, but it did. What had we already gotten used to?

I kept thinking about what I'd seen on the news, the line of Venezuelan men—chained together, heads down, backs bent—being paraded through a prison somewhere in El Salvador. Ben had said, "They want us to see this. They're proud of it."

"Bangladesh," Abdul said, "formally asked the U.S. not to handcuff or deport its citizens in a disrespectful manner. Isn't that the saddest request you've ever heard?"

I'd heard sadder.

Could they tell jokes about this? The world was full of Trump look-alikes, Trump imitators. But people wanted escapist humor, too. The following for Abdul's fruit-and-vegetable-seller act grew. Which was a good thing, because the Pastoral Nomads were getting less work. Did club owners think it was no longer necessary to book diverse acts? To represent Muslims? No club owner said so, but there were hints.

The entertainment committee from a college in Minnesota hired Abdul to do a show, in vegetable mode, at the campus center. Little Malika was upset when he went away; she threw fits at top volume, Yasmina told me, and could not be distracted. But the money was very welcome. Then a hotel in Fort Lauderdale wanted him for three weeks, for better money. "We like eating," Yasmina said. "I'm so glad we don't have to give it up."

Yasmina and I formed the habit of meeting in parks on weekends, so Malika could clamber around the playground while we talked. She was two now, and required surveillance and swing pushing and sometimes jungle-gym arbitration.

"I don't know how my mother had six," Yasmina said.

"People did." The traditional family unit had always been subject to our hearty mockery—renegades that we were, girls on the edge, with alternative theories.

We were less theoretical now. But neither of us had married. Yasmina felt strongly about keeping the state out of her relationship, much to her mother's dismay.

"She wants you to have a more protected life," I said.

"I once tried to talk her into finding out about her birth mother," Yasmina said. "Back in Russia. Things have freed up—I thought they might have records. Online even. She was horrified at the very

idea. History was bad enough the first time. Who wanted to poke through more of it? Not her.” She was in her eighties now, the little Russian girl who got lost on the train.

Malika was yelling at us to help her get up the slide. She could yell very loudly when she wanted to.

It was amazing how many people liked hearing Abdul narrate the lives of vegetables. Audiences, Ben told me, hated seeing a comic work too hard for laughs. Abdul had the rare skill of being offhand, and he reminded you that life offered more than you expected. He was getting booked at hotels all over the place. The Adirondacks. Virginia Beach. Even Palm Springs.

Yasmina said that whenever he came home, Malika would crow at him, like a rooster on drugs. They’d nestle on the sofa, and Abdul would sing a song he had made up for her, about a goat who liked Queens. The goat did a lot of bleating, baa-baa, and Malika joined in for the chorus. She could sing better than a lot of little kids, Yasmina and Abdul thought. “In the old days,” Abdul said, “she’d have gone into vaudeville with us.” When Yasmina told me this, I pictured the three of them soft-shoeing on a stage with velvet curtains, shuffling off to Buffalo with Malika in spangled Mary Janes.

Abdul continued to get offers. Tourists were staying home, and maybe hotels just couldn’t afford the bigger names. Whatever the reason, vacation spots sought him out. They wanted him in Lake Tahoe, they needed him on the Jersey shore, they summoned him to the U.S. Virgin Islands.

And he went. He had a routine of FaceTiming Malika in the morning. “Rise and shine, my little potato,” he said on the screen. She’d screech, “Not potato!,” bubbling with happiness on some days, mad at him on others. Sometimes, Yasmina reported, Malika would hit the computer screen in righteous spite.

When he was in St. Thomas, he showed them, from the window of his hotel room, the blue skies, the yellow sand, and the endless turquoise water with its purple streaks. Not that he had much time to swim—he was working on changes to his act. “Don’t they love you already?” Yasmina asked. They did, but he was going to get bored soon, and that would make him unconvincing.

When he took walks through the town, the sight of him confused the locals. People kept asking where he was from. “I’m from a part of Asia that just forced a corrupt head of state into exile,” he would say. “Everyone should learn from us.”

“Exile is a brilliant idea,” I said to Yasmina. “We’re way behind Bangladesh.”

“Abdul still speaks Bangla in his sleep,” Yasmina said. “Telling you that makes me miss him.”

He was coming back on a Monday. Yasmina had cooked the biryani he liked, but he wasn’t home by dinner. When she checked on his flight, she saw that it had landed at J.F.K. at 3 P.M. Where was Abdul? No answer on his cell, just his voice-mail message announcing, “You’ve sort of reached Abdul.” When she called the airline, she was told (after a lot of waiting) that he had not boarded the flight. They had no further information.

Yasmina called the hotel where he’d been performing; the desk clerk said that Abdul had checked out. When Yasmina phoned me, with Malika crying in the background, she sounded terrible. “He didn’t run off with another woman,” she said. “I just don’t think so.”

“He’s a citizen?” I asked.

“Yes, of course. Yes.”

All the same, I tried calling the New York office of *ICE*. I tried the D.C. office of Homeland Security. It was ten at night, so I got answering machines; I identified myself as an attorney and requested a call back. I tried the police in St. Thomas, who knew nothing. I tried too many hospitals on the island.

Tuesday and Wednesday, Yasmina continued to make phone calls. The St. Thomas police thought she was a jilted wife. The Queens police kept saying that it had nothing to do with them. She posted Abdul's picture online, his professional head shot, in which he had a small, wily smile. Missing. Ben thought we could trace Abdul's phone, but it had died by then. Yasmina was afraid he'd been mugged, stabbed for his luggage. What if he'd drowned, taking a last swim? Did they have sharks? They did.

She considered getting on a plane to St. Thomas. Her father said, "Make a list of what you can do. What can you do?" Her mother took Malika to stay with them in Brooklyn, because Yasmina was crying in front of her too much.

Ben had a friend who knew something about tracking people in the *ICE* system. On Thursday, the friend called. Abdul was in one of the detention centers in rural Georgia. He could not be visited by his family yet, but a lawyer was allowed to see him.

"He's a citizen!" Yasmina said. "What are they doing? What do they want to do?"

They wanted to deport him to Bangladesh. Both his parents had naturalized, but they'd done it after he turned eighteen, so he'd had to apply for citizenship himself. On his application he had not mentioned his arrest as a teen-ager for marijuana possession (which was a criminal offense at the time). Legal Aid had said that the juvenile records were erased. Apparently, they were not invisible, and *ICE* was now insisting that he had lied on his application, a serious offense.

How hard they were working to menace him, for a crime that was not even a crime anymore. *ICE* had been at the airport, looking at a list, sending officers to handcuff people—ticket-holders waiting to board, with their neck cushions and their water bottles.

Yasmina’s mother said, “They can do whatever they want to do, can’t they? It’s like the old days.” She meant her own old days, her Soviet days. She’d returned Malika to Yasmina, since the situation wasn’t going to end soon.

What an easy life I’d been leading, in a sequestered pocket of history. I’d always thought that the worst was over. My Jewish forebears had got the hell out of Eastern Europe in time. The hysteria about a superior race, the insistence that all would be well if one insidious group was purged—those doctrines had been entirely defeated. Everyone knew that.

Yasmina got a call from a number with a strange area code, an announcement about reversed charges, and a warning that the call was being recorded. For a second, she thought it was some kind of scam.

“How did he sound?” I asked.

“Like himself. But also like an actor trying to be cool. He kept saying he was fine, fine. He misses me. My Abdul. They can’t make sex jokes on the phone. He told me right away—that’s a rule.”

We both laughed as if that were the first funny thing we’d heard in years.

Yasmina said that she’d tried to put Malika on the phone but the kid was irate at not seeing her father’s face on the screen.

“I kept telling her she would see his real face soon. Who knows, who knows.”

Nobody did. Ben had found an immigration lawyer in Atlanta, who was going to visit Abdul as soon as he could. A judge might set bail for Abdul's release. Judges did that.

How long could they keep him there? No one was saying. It was all new, a new system. The word "system" itself was ominous.

The lawyer said that Abdul was entitled to one visit a week; Yasmina was figuring out the best way to get down there. Her mother said to go straight to the director of the detention center, wherever he was, with cash in large denominations. If Yasmina paid off the right person—as high up as possible—there was a chance of getting Abdul out. Not a small amount, though. Yasmina might have to borrow from her oldest brother, who had done well. And there was a life-insurance policy her father could cash in, if it came to that.

Yasmina said, "Mom, it doesn't work that way here."

I'd never been in an *ICE* facility, but I had visited jails. You were supposed to leave purses and wallets in a locker, and you got searched pretty thoroughly. We had many forms of corruption here, but not that kind. There was no explaining this to Yasmina's mother.

Yasmina planned to catch a flight to Atlanta and maybe take a bus from there. However, if she took Malika, it was probably better to drive.

Her mother yelled, "No! No!" when Malika was mentioned. "They will take her away."

Abdul's own parents were hoping to visit him if he wasn't released soon. His family was not religious, but his mother said that she'd been praying for him, and that she had people in her mosque praying, too.

“Who knows? Maybe it’ll help,” I said to Ben. Nothing else was helping.

Yasmina’s mother said, “Abdul didn’t say that he was Muslim on any form, did he?”

Yasmina said he never tried to hide his identity. “He’s not ashamed of it.”

“He can’t do that,” her mother said. “No! Get him to change it. He has to change it.”

The lawyer thought that any mention of religion was a terrible idea. It would call attention to a subject that was best left alone. This same lawyer was discussing the possibility of Abdul self-deporting to Bangladesh. I was depressed by this lawyer.

When Yasmina left for Georgia, little Malika stayed behind. She spent the day with Yasmina’s mother, and then I took her for the weekend. She had to be strapped into her stroller, yelling, “No! No!” and she was sulky and sometimes noisy on the long subway ride from Brooklyn to Inwood. When released inside our apartment, she ran to Ben, whom she’d always liked, and struck him with her stuffed dinosaur.

“Hey, girl,” Ben said. “Go easy.”

“Stupid!” she said.

We told her that Mama was coming back soon, but “soon” and “later” were words that meant nothing to her. When all our attempts at comfort and bribery failed, we used Yasmina’s last-ditch method: Malika was left in her playpen, yowling, until she fell asleep. When she woke up, we fed her a cream-cheese-and-jelly sandwich and distracted her with cartoons that had loud, moronic music.

“She’ll be O.K.,” Ben said, over the music.

What did O.K. mean? She was screeching when her mother called the next day.

“It’s a huge, dilapidated building,” Yasmina said. “For the first few days he had to sleep on a concrete floor, with rows of other men. Abdul is very skinny, you know—he was never fat. There are maggots in the food. They don’t get enough water, either. One of the toilets is always broken. No privacy. But Abdul keeps saying he’s O.K. He says it too often.”

We called Yasmina’s parents to let them know we’d talked to her. Her mother was in a frame of mind that I didn’t expect. “What is the matter with him?” she moaned at me. “He has to tell them he’s not Muslim. He doesn’t know the danger.”

“I think he’s doing all right,” I said.

“Stupid!” she said, just like Malika.

“We’ll get him out.”

“Right away, he has to come out. He doesn’t know about Karimov,” she said. “He doesn’t know what they can do.”

I misspelled the name when I texted Yasmina, but she knew who it was. An Uzbek dictator, long dead, she wrote. I looked him up. He’d been appointed by Gorbachev in 1989, and when the Soviet Union fell, in 1991, he took over Uzbekistan and ruled for a total of twenty-five years. All the obituaries mentioned that he hated “Islamic extremists.” He’d once tried to negotiate with a group, and the leader had humiliated him by forcing him to pray publicly. Karimov was famous for having prisoners tortured. In 2002, he sent home the bodies of two young men, religious prisoners, who’d been boiled alive.

It horrified me to be from a species that did such things, over and over, but what good did my horror do? Yasmina’s parents were

already in this country by that time, in their crowded apartment in Brooklyn. Safe in the U.S., with their six children, who were fast growing into sappy Americans. Especially Yasmina, the youngest. We were watching raunchy comedies on cable while this was happening.

*ICE, ICE*, drop dead quick. Homeland Security, suck my dick. It was the summer when every city held protests over the escalation of *ICE* raids.

“If Abdul becomes unreachable,” Ben said, “that’s when we really worry. They’re shipping people overseas.”

I had gone through law school thinking that our legal system was a hollow structure, a sham, but it turned out that I hadn’t actually thought that. I had thought it was a mess, but real. Now it wasn’t real.

The next time Yasmina called, she mentioned that she’d taken books to Abdul. Only new books were allowed, and they couldn’t have any marks or hidden pockets. He had asked for Charles Dickens, Trevor Noah, Franz Kafka, Fran Lebowitz. He was working on a new comedy script. Most of it was in his head, because he wasn’t allowed a pen or paper for personal use. Where did he think he was going to perform this routine? I didn’t ask, but Yasmina talked about how it could be a podcast online, sent from anywhere.



*“This may be the boozy brunch talking, but would you like to come back to my place and accidentally nap until it’s dark out?”*

*Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein*

It couldn't be sent from the detention center, though. Had a judge set bail? Was he on his way out? I wanted to stay calm on the phone, but our voices cracked when we talked about refugees sent to South Sudan. Sudan!

“You know,” Yasmina said, “Abdul is now officially in the process of self-deporting.”

This was much better than a lot of other possibilities, though not something that could be called good. I'd thought that he would hold out longer, but I didn't know the worst, did I? He was never coming back. Was Yasmina going to Bangladesh with him? Taking Malika? Yes, she was.

“You're O.K. with that?” It was not an intelligent question.

“Of course not,” she said. “But I'm going.”

Abdul would leave whenever they said he could, date uncertain, and she would join him then. The apartment would be passed on to one of his brothers. Lucky brother.

Yasmina had never been to Bangladesh. Abdul had told her that Dhaka, the capital, where they were going to live, was very noisy, a modern metropolis, one of the most densely populated cities in the world. His mother had found Queens too quiet, too standoffish, when they first moved there, when Abdul was eight. He had always liked Queens.

“I’m imagining you there, getting to know other mothers,” I said.  
“They have parks, right?”

“Abdul can do tech writing again. Maybe. He can. I hope.” Who was she convincing? “And they have comedy clubs. A couple. He has aunties, he has cousins.”

“I’ll come visit. I’m looking forward to it already.” Did she believe me? “Ben, too. He likes to travel. He’ll come.”

“You know what the hard part will be?” Yasmina said. “Learning Bengali. Some of those consonants are not so easy.”

“Malika will pick it up.”

“She can be my guide and lead me around.” It was not a happy sentence.

People learn languages. Whether they’re good or bad at it, they learn if they have to. Yasmina’s mother had known very little English when she arrived in New York in the nineties; she’d had nothing but Uzbek and Russian. She’d managed.

“Abdul told me that there are lots of English speakers,” Yasmina said.

He was going to call her any minute to report on the procedures for self-deporting, but he didn't call. Well, he couldn't always phone when he wanted to. He might have to wait a day. A few days.

His lawyer didn't know what the problem was and couldn't get word from *ICE*. I hated this lawyer.

Yasmina came home in the meantime, and her mother decided to stay with her in Queens. I went over there the night she got back, and Anya was playing some sort of patty-cake with Malika, clapping away. Malika had the moves down.

"Did you play that as a child?" I asked Anya. It was reassuring to think of kids always liking the same things. Malika was now smacking the rug in rhythm. Anya didn't answer.

"Here we are again," Yasmina said. "Waiting for a fucking phone call."

"It's never over," Yasmina's mother said. She meant waiting for unknown powers to decide. Dark powers that had to be begged and haggled with.

How long, how long? We knew nothing about this cycle of history, the one we were in. Would her mother live to see the end of it?

Yasmina said "Don't worry" to her mother, and then she said something in Uzbek that made her mother start to argue. Her mother was wailing then, something I'd never heard before.

The phone call did not come that day, or the day after. It was another sixteen days before an official text, from *ICE*, appeared on Yasmina's phone, informing her that Abdul was currently on a plane to Kuwait City, and thence to Dhaka.

Malika was saying Dhaka-Dhaka-Dhaka in the background when Yasmina called to tell me. "I'm so glad to hear," I said. "At least

he's safer now."

"Hello and goodbye," she said. "Goodbye and goodbye."

Had I not understood before, that my friend was leaving? I'd understood nothing. I was entirely ill-equipped to get what was going on.

She was leaving; there were tickets. I asked about the car seat she'd be strapping Malika into on the plane. "It's supposed to be a good kind," she said. "Highly rated."

Everything was supposed to be a way that it wasn't. Could we live without being able to trust in anything at all? We would have to.

I went to Yasmina's place to help her get rid of things, an endless chore. By then Abdul had reached Bangladesh, and had called her on his cousin's phone. She'd heard his voice!

"How did he sound?" I asked.

"He made jokes about the airport in Dhaka. Crowded like the mosh pit at a rock concert."

Abdul was making jokes? Of course he was.

I woke up the next morning thinking about how Abdul's flights had taken off and landed just when they were supposed to, as if everything were running normally.

"Imagine that," I said, on the phone to Yasmina. She was getting ready for her own flight, leaving later that day.

"Oh, you know," she said, "isn't that what they said about Mussolini? He made the trains run on time."

Actually, he didn't. I had read that the claim was his own propaganda. People were proud to think that Italy had modern systems, Fascist efficiency.

When we hung up, I downed my coffee, walked a few blocks, and got on the subway for work. Same as ever. My mornings. I had a long ride on the A, but I was used to all those stops, and the subway car didn't get crowded until I already had a seat. I had time to think, if I could bear to. I could not. There I was, on the train, ready to go on with my day. I was in two worlds at once, everything fine, everything unspeakable. ♦

*Joan Silber is the author of the novel “[Mercy](#),” among other books.*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/safety-fiction-joan-silber>

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## The High-Born Rebel Who Took Up the Cause of the Commoner

A new biography details the secrets and scandals of the Mitfords, a notorious family of aristocrats—and of the one sister who broke away from the rest.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

December 1, 2025



*The qualities that Jessica Mitford cultivated during childhood—acid wit, poking playfulness, the blustery confidence of privilege—were later enlisted to defend the powerless.*

*Photograph by Mayotte Magnus / Bridgeman Images*

Growing up, I never had a sister, but I always wanted one—or many. Reading alone in my room, I imagined myself into tight-knit literary sororities: the Bennets, the Marches, the Dashwoods. These packs had their problems—petty squabbles, broken confidences, burnt hair—but I envied their intimacy and loyalty. It was the gang first, the world second. Beyond the precincts of fiction, of course, the world has a way of meddling with such bonds. There is perhaps no better example than the Mitford sisters, the six daughters of one of England’s most peculiar aristocratic families, whose radically divergent lives—two became fascists, one became a communist, one became a model aristocrat, one wrote novels skewering the bourgeoisie, and one retreated into cultivated solitude—have riveted the public for more than a century. I first learned about the family in college, when I encountered “[Hons and Rebels](#),” a memoir by Jessica (Decca) Mitford, the second youngest of the group. Written in arch, inhalable prose, it begins as a story about the joy of having sisters and ends with the deep pain of losing them to irreconcilable differences. It was the first book that left me grateful to be my parents’ only daughter.

The Mitford sisters, born between 1904 and 1920, grew up in a cloistered environment that, had it not existed, would seem the stuff of fairy tales. Their father, David Freeman-Mitford, or Lord Redesdale, was a Conservative British peer who was an intermittently successful Army man before settling into his inherited land in the Cotswolds. His wife, Sydney Bowles, or Lady Redesdale, was the pampered daughter of the media baron Thomas Gibson Bowles, who, among other ventures, founded *Vanity Fair*. The couple shared a social class and a smug distrust of anyone outside it. Owing to fluctuating finances, the family moved several times during the children’s early years: first to a grand house in Batsford, then to a less grand home in Asthall, and then to an isolated country estate in Swinbrook, where Decca set much of the action of “*Hons and Rebels*.”

**[The Best Books of 2025](#)**

*Discover the year's essential reads in fiction and nonfiction.*



Life at Swinbrook, Decca wrote, was akin to living inside a “fortress or citadel of medieval times.” Lord Redesdale was an avowed xenophobe who was wary of strangers, and his wife was happy to follow his lead. The Mitford girls were prohibited from attending school—they were meant to be sparkling society wives, and so were given lessons at home, supervised by a collection of insufferable governesses. Locked away in a dull, remote part of the country, the sisters were forced to entertain themselves. They invented nonsense languages and private jokes—their taunting banter came to be known as the “Mitford tease”—and became one another’s most passionate obsessions. “We were as though caught in a timeproofed corner of the world, foster children, if not exactly of silence, at least of slow time,” Decca wrote. “The very landscape, cluttered up with history, was disconcertingly filled with evidence of the changelessness of things.”

Change, of course, came rapidly to England in the twenties and thirties, and the Mitfords, sequestered though they were, eventually encountered the forces swirling outside the gates. Nancy, the eldest, smartest, and most acerbic sister, partied with the Bright Young Things in London before becoming a famous novelist whose best-known books were cutting parodies of the upper-class milieu. Pamela, the second oldest, was a gentle bumpkin who, after marrying and divorcing a millionaire physicist, spent around twenty years living in seclusion with her female “companion,” an equestrian named Giuditta Tommasi. Diana, the great beauty of the

family, married an heir to the Guinness brewing fortune and left him for Oswald Mosley, the leader of the British Union of Fascists, whom she wed at the home of Joseph Goebbels. Next came Unity —conceived, portentously, in the small Canadian town of Swastika —who, outdoing her sister, developed a girlhood crush on Hitler and moved to Germany to serve the Nazis. Decca went in the opposite direction: she was a self-identified socialist by the time she was fifteen, and later, in America, became a muckraking journalist. The youngest and most elegant Mitford, Deborah, steered largely clear of global affairs and became a duchess. (The only Mitford son, Tom, died in the Second World War.)

How could lives so intertwined take such wildly different paths? The question has propelled historians and tabloid journalists alike for decades, to the point that, in her own lifetime, Decca would often joke about the relentlessness of the “Mitford industry.” This year alone has delivered a scripted series (“Outrageous,” on BritBox) and a graphic biography (Mimi Pond’s [“Do Admit! The Mitford Sisters and Me”](#)), but perhaps the most significant contribution is [“Troublemaker: The Fierce, Unruly Life of Jessica Mitford”](#), by Carla Kaplan (Harper), a professor of literature at Northeastern University. Though Decca’s life has been studied before (notably in Mary S. Lovell’s magisterial 2001 group biography, [“The Sisters: The Saga of the Mitford Family”](#)), Kaplan is devoted to Decca alone, and to separating her crusading accomplishments from the sins of the flock.



*From left: Decca, Nancy, Diana, Unity, and Pamela Mitford, in 1935. The youngest sister, Deborah, is absent.*

*Photograph from Pictorial Press / Alamy*

It is, as Kaplan notes, an apt time for such a book to emerge, particularly from an American historian. Decca lived in the U.S. from the thirties onward and became a full citizen in 1944; she was an unwavering leftist who fought against the tides of fascism her entire life. In the book's introduction, Kaplan does a bit of perfunctory hand-wringing about the state of the country, arguing that Decca is a model for how to generate empathy in a time of polarization. "She transformed herself from isolated aristocrat into engaged, effective ally without the benefit of social media, affinity groups, or retreats," Kaplan writes. "She sought out others who had reshaped their lives through personal sacrifice. She read. She listened."

Fortunately, Kaplan quickly dispenses with this generic figure of resistance and dives into what made Decca's radicalism so singular. Decca first developed her leftist ideals not while observing the world but while hidden away from it; she learned about the suffering of the working classes from mail-order socialist literature, which she read eagerly, whiling about in the sprawling family manse. Her politics grew out of puckish sass—a need to trouble the

authority of her conservative parents—as much as out of an essential righteousness. Even as she became more educated in her beliefs, escaping, as she wrote, the “private Mitford cosmic joke,” she never abandoned the family appetite for impudence. It was what made her such a dogged journalist and such a scrappy fighter—and it’s what allowed her to bite, with a grin, nearly every hand that fed her, even those that shared her own blood.

In her youth, Decca wrote, Unity was the sister whose “dissatisfaction with life mirrored my own.” Only three years apart, they shared a nursery, and their opposing political stances were at first “childish declarations,” Kaplan writes—instead of cops and robbers, they played fascists and communists. There was shock value in embracing extreme versions of ideas the adults were debating; they divided up one room and, Decca later wrote, “decorated it with our respective insignia: her Nazi pennants, photographs of Hitler, Italian ‘fasces’; my hammer and sickle, bust of Lenin, file of *Daily Workers*.” Unemployment was spreading across Europe and fascism was on the rise, but these were distant abstractions. The girls were “cosseted in the extreme,” Kaplan writes, with plenty of time to fantasize about politics without enacting them.

What Decca wanted, more than anything, was an education, and she was enraged at her parents for refusing to allow her one. Once, she threatened to kill herself by leaping from the roof. (Her mother simply said, “Oh, poor duck,” and went about her day.) At eleven, Decca sent ten shillings to Drummonds Bank to set up a private “running-away account,” and made deposits frequently. At fourteen, she read “Cry Havoc!,” the British playwright Beverley Nichols’s antiwar screed, which previewed the turbulence outside; she then used some of her running-away money to purchase socialist pamphlets, which she devoured. “I discovered that human nature was not, as I had always supposed, a fixed and unalterable entity,” she later wrote, “that wars are not caused by a natural urge

in men to fight, that ownership of land and factories is not necessarily the natural reward of greater wisdom and energy.”

For Decca, leftism explained why she felt such discomfort at home: she was surrounded by the enemy. Her parents, who were always running out of money yet refused to mingle with anyone they deemed below them, started to seem tragic. So did Diana, who entered into an illicit tryst with Mosley and proudly declared herself a fascist—an ideology she clung to all her life. Decca even began to see the limitations of clever Nancy, the master of the “Mitford tease,” who preferred to address family events by smirking at them sideways. And then there was Unity: in 1934, she moved to Munich and more or less stalked the Führer until she was in his inner circle. “I had a sad and uneasy feeling that we were somehow being swept apart by a huge tidal wave over which we had no control,” Decca wrote, of Unity’s hateful transformation.

Decca’s own journey into the world began when she encountered a kindred spirit outside the sisterhood. By nineteen, she had fallen in love with her second cousin Esmond Romilly. A nephew of Winston Churchill, Romilly was “born indignant,” as one biographer wrote, and rejected the trappings of his class. In 1936, at age eighteen, he joined the volunteer brigades fighting fascists in the Spanish Civil War. His antics made him a fixture in the British tabloids, and Decca, captivated by the stories, conspired to meet him at a relative’s house. The two hit it off at dinner and, that night, formulated a scheme for Decca to return with Romilly to Spain. To get her parents’ permission to leave home, Decca forged a letter to herself from childhood friends, inviting her to visit them on the Normandy coast.

The ruse was short-lived. Within weeks, her parents discovered her subterfuge and engaged Scotland Yard to bring her home. The press breathlessly followed her supposed whereabouts: “Jessica Mitford Feared Lost in Pyrenees!,” “Mr. Romilly and Decca Believed in Barcelona!” The pair were eventually found. Soon after, they

married in the South of France, with their mothers as witnesses, and returned to England, where they struggled to adapt to the practicalities of married life. (After the wedding, Decca's father stopped speaking to her and cut her out of his will.) Neither one knew how to pay heating bills or find steady work. They had a baby, Julia, but she died at five months old, from measles. Decca rarely spoke of Julia, and later elided the incident from her memoirs, perhaps because she was ashamed that, owing to her confinement at Swinbrook, she hadn't developed immunity to the disease. (She caught it at the same time as her infant, and nearly died herself.) For Kaplan, Decca's silence about the loss, "sometimes misinterpreted as an absence of feeling," was in fact a sign of devastation. "The deeper the hurt," Kaplan writes, "the less Decca would speak of it."

Whatever the reason, Decca had a knack for moving forward at all costs. Part of this was Romilly's influence; he encouraged Decca to cut ties with her family—though she kept writing them letters—and, in 1939, they relocated to America with what little they had.

In England, the couple's gregarious naïveté had been a liability; in America, it seemed to be an advantage. They bounced easily from city to city, meeting other revolutionaries and scraping together money. They spent time in Miami, where they managed an Italian restaurant. While there, in September of 1939, Decca received the news that Unity—upon hearing that Britain had declared war on Germany—had walked into a Munich park, sat down on a bench, and shot herself in the head. She survived, but the bullet, permanently lodged in her skull, changed and unmade her. (She moved back to England and died in 1948, at the age of thirty-three.) The incident was a press sensation, and Decca found herself mobbed by gawking tourists. The attention drew her and Romilly even closer; they became, as she wrote, "a conspiracy of two against the world." When, in 1940, Romilly decided to join the war, Decca, who was pregnant again, was devastated. She busied herself with the baby, but made plans to reunite with her husband in

England. Then, on the day she was set to leave, in December, 1941, she received a telegram: Romilly was missing in action, and presumed dead.

Decca had to start over again, this time as a single mother. She made her way to Washington, D.C., where she found a job in the Office of Price Administration, a new agency that monitored whether businesses were complying with wartime regulations. It was at the O.P.A. that she met her second husband, Robert Treuhaft, a Jewish lawyer from New York who was a staunch defender of labor unions. They married in 1943, in California, and soon became card-carrying members of the American Communist Party. For a while, the O.P.A. wasn't aware of Decca's family ties or radical leanings, but she sacrificed her "cherished anonymity" when she heard that Diana and Mosley, who had been imprisoned in England under suspicion of treason, had been released. She wrote a forceful letter of protest to Churchill, which was picked up by the San Francisco *Chronicle*. It wasn't the last time Decca would wield her words against her sisters. She was fond of Voltaire's adage "*Qui plume a, guerre a*" (roughly, "To hold a pen is to be at war"); she had an insouciant need to speak out. In many ways, she maintained throughout her life the wide-eyed, hard-line ethics of a child who has no tolerance for rationalization.

Decca's letter led her to quit the O.P.A. and pivot to full-time Party organizing. She excelled at fund-raising and at organizing collective actions—her childhood training in throwing parties finally paid off. She and Treuhaft had two sons, and moved to Oakland, where Decca became involved in civil-rights causes: agitating against housing discrimination, lobbying for the release of the Black death-row inmate Willie McGee. In 1955, tragedy struck again when Decca's eldest son, Nicky, died after being hit by a bus. That year, while sublimating her grief, she poured herself into her writing.

Much like her childhood identification with communism, her writing began as something of a joke. She was utterly devoted to the Party's ideals, but she also had a keen eye for grandstanding, and she noticed that some of her comrades seemed more committed to social climbing than to curing society's ills. As a provocation, she wrote and self-published a satirical pamphlet, "Lifeitselfmanship, Or How to Become a Precisely-Because Man: An Investigation Into Current L (or Left-Wing) Usage," in which she mocked the posturing lingo that had come to dominate the Party. In place of simple phrases, she argued, members tended toward bloviated, self-serious verbiage. In a letter to her mother, Decca wrote that one of the most amusing outcomes of her stunt was that "the worst offenders love it best."

This became Decca's signature: by writing about serious topics with flair, she wooed people into paying attention. The qualities she cultivated during childhood—acid wit, poking playfulness, the blustery confidence of privilege—were enlisted to defend the powerless. "As a writer she could stand on her own," Kaplan writes, "facing her reader, backed by her prodigious research and self-confidence."



*Decca with her husband Bob Treuhaft, in May, 1977.*

*Photograph by Mike Stephens / Stringer / Getty*

Decca's writing career was greased by the publication of "Hons and Rebels," in 1960. But it was her turn to reportage that made her a star. In 1962, she wrote a piece for *Esquire* about her travels through the American South, including a night she spent huddled in a Montgomery church with Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Freedom Riders, while an angry mob encircled the building, throwing rocks and stink bombs. The next year, she published "[The American Way of Death](#)," a book about the predations of the funeral business.

Decca researched every possible aspect of the funerary process, from coffin materials to "burial lingerie." She revelled in infiltrating funeral homes, posing as a potential customer and then allowing her subjects to, as Kaplan writes, "humiliate themselves." Her book was granular on the subject of embalming, devoting much of her manuscript to the gory particularities of the procedure.

Decca's inclusion of such details caused a rift with her publisher, who asked her to "cut out the foolishness." Decca refused. At the last minute, the book was rescued by Robert Gottlieb, a young editor at Simon & Schuster (and, later, the editor of this magazine). "We saw everything the same way," Gottlieb said—which is to say, they both felt that good journalism should be pesky and unafraid. "*The American Way of Death*" sold hundreds of thousands of copies, led to a series of congressional hearings, and prompted people around the country to ask for a stripped-down, low-cost memorial, which came to be called a "Mitford service."

It makes sense that Decca, who as a child felt deprived of knowledge and robbed of agency, would become, as *Time* dubbed her in 1970, the "Queen of Muckrakers." Nosy and defiant, she had a need to find things out and to tell everyone what she'd found. In a way, journalism was the ultimate expression of her class treachery. Aristocrats are raised to guard secrets, especially about those in power. She discovered a way to weaponize the lively patois of her

youth for more than just banter; her prose was the lure, but the facts were her vindication.

The publication of “The American Way of Death” comes around halfway into Kaplan’s book—Decca lived quite a bit of life after she’d become the reigning expert on what comes after it. She wrote several more books, including “Kind and Usual Punishment” (1973), an exposé about the prison system; “A Fine Old Conflict” (1977), a memoir of her work in the Communist Party, which she left in 1958; and “[The American Way of Birth](#)” (1992), in which she attempted to do for the obstetric field what she had done for the funeral trade. None of these works reached the cultural ubiquity of “Death,” but they fed both her curiosity and what she called her “appetite for tracking and destroying the enemy.”

Decca’s writing made her rich—an odd outcome for a woman who had walked away from her family’s wealth—and she often worried about becoming complacent. “She had always disdained,” Kaplan writes, “radicals who mellowed with age, calling them traitors, fools, or worse.” She declined to be governed at every turn, even when it put her career in jeopardy. In 1970, she published an article in *The Atlantic* titled “Let Us Now Appraise Famous Writers,” which took down a mail-order writing course that she felt exploited the vulnerable; one of the faces of the course was Bennett Cerf, a co-founder of Random House, which had acquired Knopf, Decca’s publisher. The idea of destabilizing her patron did not deter Decca’s pursuit; if anything, it seemed to thrill her. Even after her death, from lung cancer, in 1996, she kept acting up. As one last punkish gesture, Kaplan recounts, Decca directed an assistant to send a posthumous letter to the nation’s most prominent funeral corporation, asking for reimbursement for all the attention she’d brought them.

Decca remained estranged from her sister Diana until the end, but she retained a softness for the other surviving Mitford girls. A particularly painful episode occurred in 1976, when she learned

that her sisters were furious at her for assisting one of Unity's biographers. Pamela and Deborah accused Decca of stealing a family scrapbook to aid the writer, leading to the threat of an irrevocable break. "I'm fearfully sad," Decca wrote, of the squabble. "It's sort of an ongoing nightmare." The scrapbook magically turned up inside Deborah's mansion, and the parties eventually made up, but Decca wrote that the very idea of never speaking to her siblings again had shaken her deeply, calling the rift "one of the worst things that's happened." In the end, her disobedience—forged in tandem with and in opposition to her tribe—felt unmoored without a fellow-Mitford's pigtail to pull. On the night before she died, Decca could no longer speak, but she still requested to call Deborah on the telephone. "Decca's words were indecipherable," Kaplan writes, of that final connection. "But she seemed to hear her sister well." ♦

*Rachel Syme* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. She has covered Hollywood, style, literature, music, and other cultural subjects since 2012.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/troublemaker-the-fierce-unruly-life-of-jessica-mitford-carla-kaplan-book-review>

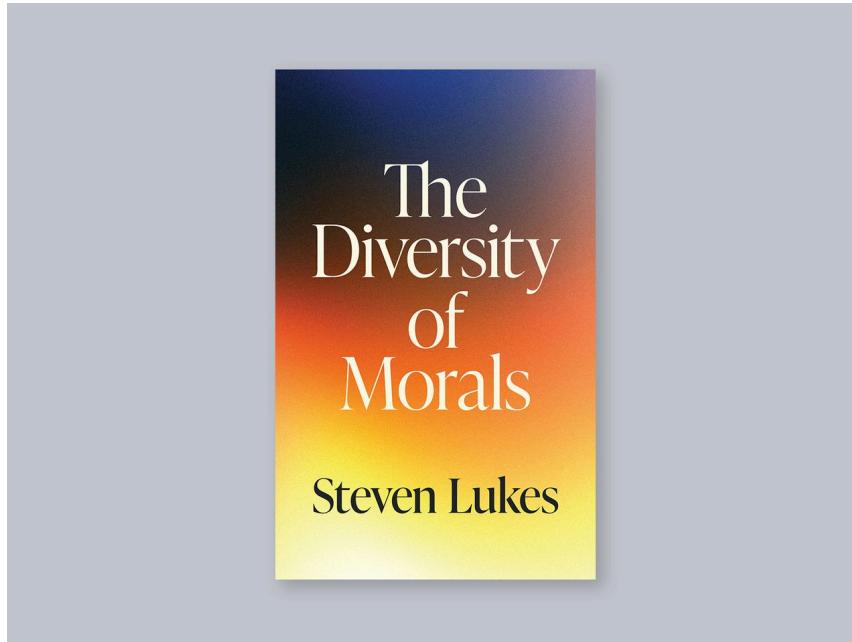
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## Briefly Noted

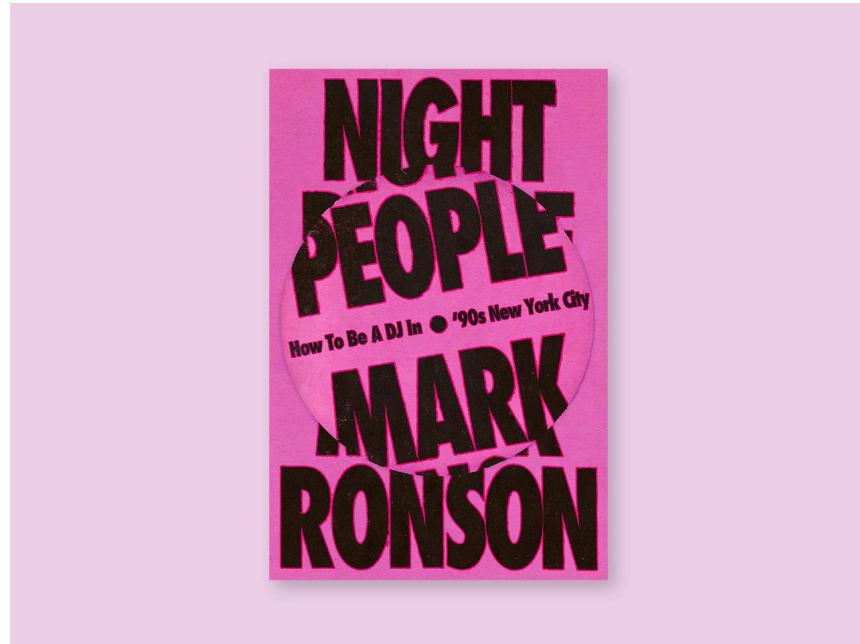
“*The Diversity of Morals*,” “*Night People*,” “*Venetian Vespers*,” and “*Television*.”

December 1, 2025



**The Diversity of Morals, by Steven Lukes (Princeton).**

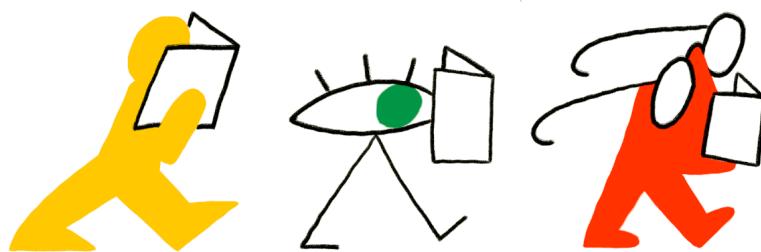
Philosophers and social scientists have often stood apart in their treatment of morality. Most philosophers tend to view the “moral” as a single, universal category, and most social scientists speak of diverse, culturally bound “moralities.” In this engaging book, Lukes uses the work of David Hume, Johann Gottfried Herder, and Adam Smith to bridge these traditions and address various relevant questions: Is morality distinctly human? What can mass atrocities teach us about it? How did we get from a tribal sense of “us versus them” to a vision of shared humanity? Though his answers are open-ended, the work is still satisfying; a final section, on present-day political polarization, demonstrates how shared understandings can be found even among the most ideologically opposed groups.



**Night People**, by *Mark Ronson* (*Grand Central*). In this exuberant memoir, an Oscar-winning songwriter looks back at his years as a d.j. in the nineteen-nineties. Born in London to wealthy Jewish parents, Ronson moved to New York at a young age with his mother and his stepfather, the guitarist Mick Jones. There, he developed a passion for music and the “candy-striped chaos” of clubs. With a mixer and turntables purchased by his mother, he played at prestigious venues on both coasts. He relates encounters with Biggie Smalls and Jay-Z as well as professional tips (“Thou shalt play a song only once”), and he touches upon more serious aspects of his work, such as the racial politics of a scene where many white d.j.s—including him—played music “created by Black people, for Black people.”

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## What We're Reading

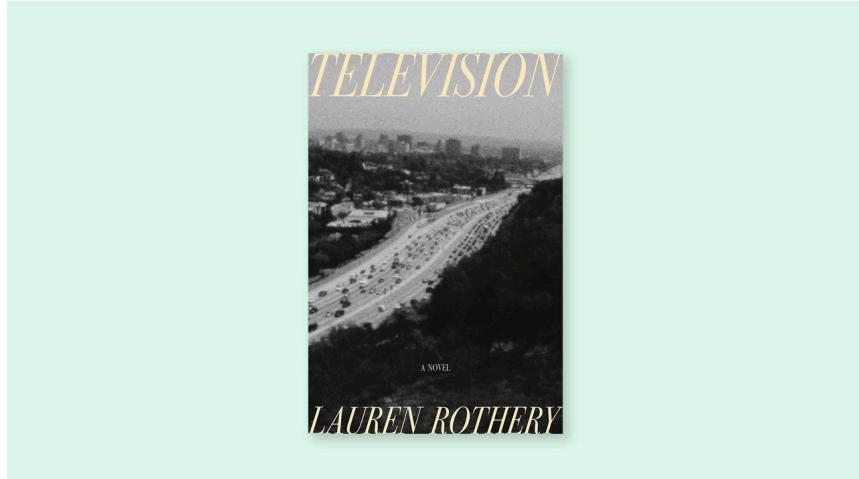


*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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**Venetian Vespers**, by John Banville (*Knopf*). This coy, macabre novel recounts a trip to Venice taken by a middling English writer in the early twentieth century. His memories are presented as a defense against the “prurient and hysterical attention” that was heaped upon him after a series of “dark and tragic events”—set off by the disappearance of his wife, a wellborn American who vanished from the decrepit palazzo where the couple stayed during their honeymoon. Banville’s protagonist is a crafty case study in the human capacity for self-deception; as the character notes, “There are many things I may not be, but I think I can say that I am a gentleman, however modest my origins.”



**Television**, by Lauren Rothery (Ecco). Set in Los Angeles, this ruminative novel alternates in perspective between a blockbuster actor, his best friend and sometime lover, and an aspiring screenwriter. After decades in Hollywood, the actor has taken to drinking heavily and sleeping with a much younger woman. Then he decides to give away millions of dollars of his earnings in a lottery. As his best friend watches his apparent breakdown, she remembers their years of intimacy and the particular contours of their unusual love. The screenwriter's connection to the other two is less clear; it seems that she may become the recipient of the actor's money. In the novel's examination of the actor's choices, it considers questions of artistic and philanthropic legacy.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/the-diversity-of-morals-night-people-venetian-vepers-television>

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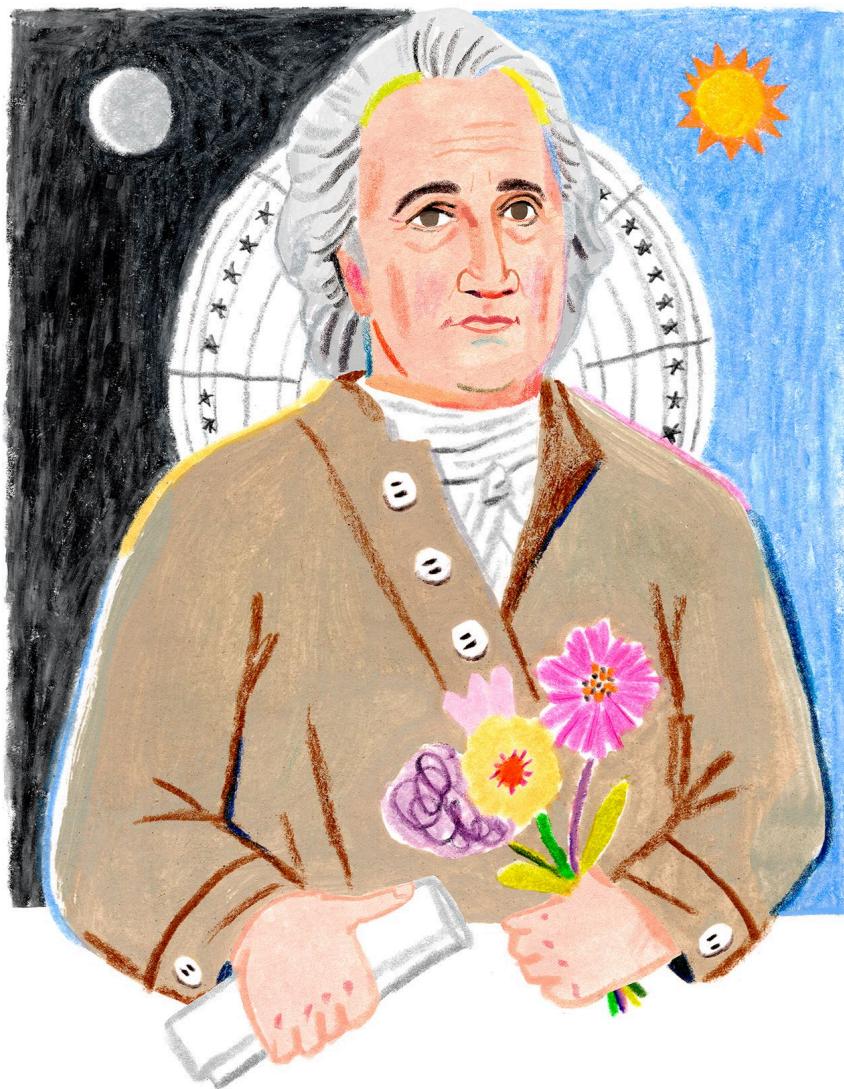
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## What Makes Goethe So Special?

The German poet's dauntingly eclectic accomplishments were founded on a tireless interrogation of how a life should be lived.

By [Merve Emre](#)

December 1, 2025



*"We are always recreating our whole life," Goethe wrote in his memoir.  
Illustration by Rebecca Clarke*

The biographer of a truly world-historical writer finds his work weighted with a double burden. He must trace how his subject's private passions and follies gave rise to original art, and he must show this art to be the purest expression of the age, a register of its

political and cultural upheavals. At his most artful, the biographer is like a professional juggler, tossing one ball into the air—up go the poet’s earliest lyrics—and waiting for the right moment in its arc to toss a second, a third, a fourth, a fifth—the imperious father, the punishing lover, the rise of the bourgeoisie, the decline of religion, the final illness—while cleanly catching the first. The motion is hard to master. Every year brings fat biographies that are collections of dropped balls. But, when the correct rhythm is achieved, the balls merge into a fluid arc: a single life contains a whole era of history.

Of all major writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe offers his biographers the most promising chance to unite the life of the artist with the spirit of his time. They have insisted on the idea of the Goethezeit (Age of Goethe), to describe the period from 1770, when Goethe published his first collection of poems, to 1830, when he was completing his frantic, hallucinatory tragedy, “Faust,” and the last volume of his stately autobiography, “Poetry and Truth.” In those sixty years, he published three of the most significant novels in the history of literature (“The Sorrows of Young Werther,” “Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship,” “Elective Affinities”), dramas, epics, elegies, lyric poems, and treatises on geology, morphology, and color. The poet Gottfried August Bürger liked to proclaim that Goethe was the “German Shakespeare.” Perversely, the compliment downplayed the variety of his achievements. He was the German Shakespeare, the German Cervantes, and the German Racine, and perhaps even the German Franklin and the German Huxley, compressed into one endlessly energetic and kaleidoscopic figure.

## The Best Books of 2025

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Then, there was the day job. For fifty years, Goethe served as an adviser to Karl August, Grand Duke of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, the sovereign of one of the many tiny polities that made up Germany. Together, they stabilized the ducal budget, opened silver mines outside Erfurt, staffed the University of Jena, drank, and chased women. Goethe's achievements may have been Olympian, but his personality was all too human. Magnetic, moody, arrogant, and frequently lovesick in his youth, he aged into conservatism. Late-eighteenth-century visitors to the court of Weimar could have listened to Goethe lament the French Revolution in Alexandrines or watched him dissect moth wings under a microscope. They could have saluted him as he tried to assemble a coalition against the French revolutionaries, and, after Bonaparte came to power, could have gossiped about Goethe's audience with the Emperor, who claimed to have read "Werther" seven times and beseeched Goethe to become his propagandist. By 1875, it was possible for Goethe's first English biographer, George Henry Lewes, to declare that Goethe's "influence on his nation has been greater than that of any man since Luther."

Lewes's biography was written in a passionate, high-Victorian style, facts quaking under descriptions of Goethe's Romantic character: "We shall see him wild, restless, aimless, erring, and extravagant enough to satisfy the most ardent admirer of the vagabond nature of genius." More than a century later, a British scholar, Nicholas Boyle, opened the first volume of his biography, "Goethe: The Poet and the Age" (1991), by praising Lewes and

denigrating the factions that followed: the National Socialists, who claimed Goethe as the emblem of German cultural purity, and the Marxists, who celebrated him as the original bourgeois revolutionary. Against the ideologues, Boyle portrayed Goethe as a changeable creature, beholden to historical shifts in power but able to turn them to his advantage with daring and dignity. “We are always recreating our whole life,” Goethe wrote in “Poetry and Truth.” “Occupations, inclinations, favorite pursuits, whims, we try them all out only to exclaim at last that all is vanity.”

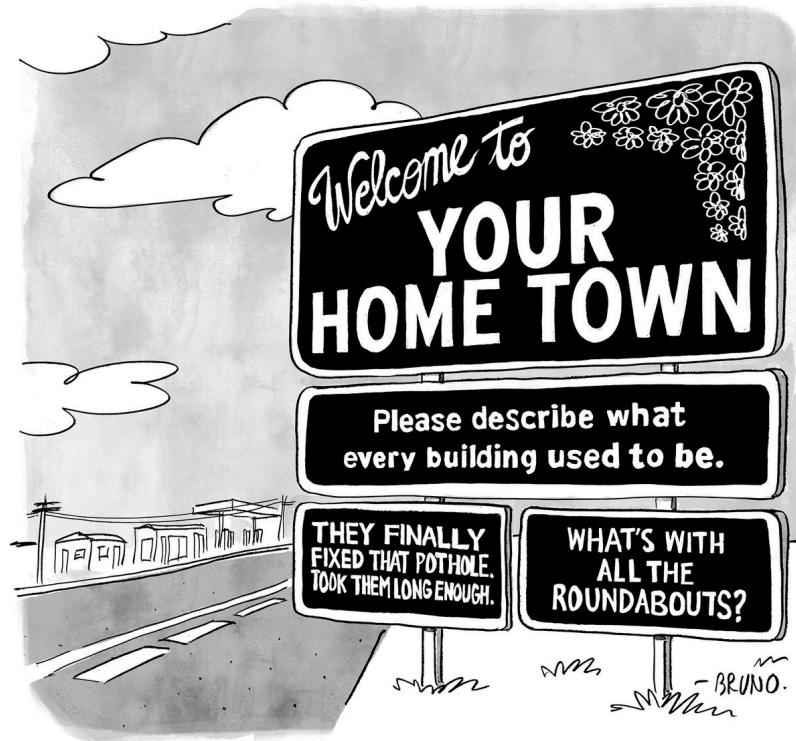
Boyle’s biography is a masterpiece of the genre and may even prove definitive—if it gets finished. The second volume, of a projected three, appeared twenty-five years ago, with nearly thirty years of Goethe’s life left to relate. Since then, several one-volume efforts have entered the field, including “Goethe: Life as a Work of Art” (2013), by the German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski; the *Daily Mail* columnist A. N. Wilson’s “Goethe: His Faustian Life” (2024); and now “Goethe: A Life in Ideas” (Princeton), by another British scholar, Matthew Bell.

Bell’s biography argues that Goethe brokered a truce between the secular world of politics and the spiritual world of art. He yielded to the theatrical artifice of the duchy, but yearned for untamable wonders. The result was “an unusual form of compromise,” Bell writes, with Goethe accepting “the reality of political power” but pursuing a “full and disinterested appreciation” of everything that appeared to lie beyond that power’s reach: plants, animals, minerals, light, desire, death, Heaven, and Hell. He fashioned a religion of nature and, with a considerable sense of irony, preached it to the aristocrats of the Weimar court. From this religion emerged an art that did not imitate the chaos of nature, but created “in a manner *analogous* to nature.” Human yet demonic, modern yet mythic, Goethe’s vast body of work came, in his words, from the “efforts of the individual to preserve itself in the face of the destructive force of the universe.”

For Goethe, creation and destruction were entwined from the moment of his birth—at noon on August 28, 1749, in Frankfurt am Main. On arrival, he appeared dead. He was saved, he believed, by the fortunate position of the planets. “My horoscope was propitious,” he began “Poetry and Truth.” “The sun stood in the sign of the Virgin, and had culminated for the day; Jupiter and Venus looked on him with a friendly eye.” His childhood seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence. Frankfurt was a proud, prosperous, free city. Goethe was descended from a line of distinguished lawyers and councilmen on one side and a family of wealthy tailors and wine merchants on the other. His mother was vivacious, lovely. His father was “didactic,” a harsh, eccentric lawyer who distrusted Frankfurt’s public schools and devoted himself to the education of Goethe and his younger sister, Cornelia. The boy had an army of private tutors, for Latin, Italian, French, Yiddish, Hebrew, English, ancient philosophy, history, geography, drawing, penmanship, and music. He was bred to be a lawyer, like his father. At the age of sixteen, he arrived at Leipzig University, pale and thin, with dark hair, a hooked nose, and an extravagant wardrobe. His suitcase contained drafts of half-written plays based on stories from the Old Testament.

He despised the law, and later speculated that those born under the sign of Virgo were fated to write. He developed a reputation as a shallow, cocky student, “a fop,” according to his classmates, “uncommonly puffed up.” After three years, a pulmonary hemorrhage ended his studies and sent him slinking back to Frankfurt—like “a wretched little fox,” he chided himself. Confined to the house, Goethe read Rousseau and “Schäckespear,” whose histories of corruptible kings and emperors revealed to him the “secret point,” he wrote, “at which the particularity of our self, the pretended freedom of our will, collides with the inevitable course of the universe.” From his sickbed, he scribbled occasional poems, erotic ballads, and an accomplished verse comedy, “Partners in Guilt.” In 1770, at the age of twenty, he cast it all, save

for the play, into the fire. “A grand auto-da-fé,” he sighed to his sister.



*Cartoon by Bruno Pieroni*

When he recovered his strength, he resumed his legal studies, this time in Strasbourg. The medieval city and the surrounding Rhineland landscape stirred his patriotic feeling. After he met the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, a champion of vernacular culture, Goethe started to collect folk poetry. “Germanness emerging,” he noted in his diary. He wanted to find a dramatic subject appropriate to his new national ambition, nothing “corsetted or prettified.”

On his return to Frankfurt, he found it: the life of Götz von Berlichingen, an early-sixteenth-century knight with a prosthetic iron hand, whose autobiography Goethe had stumbled upon in the city library. In six weeks, he drafted his first major work: “Götz von Berlichingen,” a sprawling history play in five acts, which staged its hero’s shifting military and sexual alliances in the

disintegrating Holy Roman Empire. Amid kidnappings, poisonings, suicides, affairs, and the Peasants' War—"the plot spirals into utter chaos," Bell observes—Götz attempts to hold fast to his honor and his freedom to fight for whom he pleases. Loyal to the Emperor, scornful of the aristocracy, and sympathetic to the peasants' desire for liberation, if not their bloodlust, he is torn between medieval chivalry and modern self-preservation. He incarnates a distinctly Goethean type: the exceptional individual who, as Goethe worried, "encounters the crude world" and must "surrender his high qualities and finally renounce them altogether."

The play, published in 1773 and first performed in Berlin the following year, was "the most beautiful, the most captivating monstrosity," a critic declared. Its mingling of high and low characters, settings, and dialects trampled on the rules of classical drama and inaugurated a German dramatic tradition. Success brought Goethe relief but also anxiety. "I think it will be some time before I again do something that will find a public," he wrote.

Not so. "The Sorrows of Young Werther," published in 1774, was his most influential work. It is now as famous for the cult that allegedly sprang from it—young men emulating its protagonist's yellow waistcoat and his suicide—as for its odd epistolary form and even odder story. An ardent young man, Werther, falls in love with Lotte, a simple village girl engaged to a dependable but dull man named Albert. Love transforms Werther. He grows exquisitely and obsessively aware of the natural world around Lotte—the details of the mountains, the valleys, the walnut and linden trees under which she stands. In his letters, he imagines Lotte as a naturally occurring phenomenon, an innate and ineffable presence: "When I close my eyes, here, in my forehead, at the focus of my inner vision, her dark eyes remain."

Falling in love was an early and harmless pleasure for Goethe. He wrote love letters that mingled lush images of nature with innocent theories of emotion—a true "Rousseauian child of nature," as Bell

describes him. “When I say love, I mean the oscillatory sensation in which our heart floats, moving always to and fro on the same spot,” Goethe mused in one draft. “We are like children on a rocking-horse, always in motion, always at work, and rooted to the spot.” The events in “Werther” were inspired by two abutting love triangles: Goethe’s infatuation with his friend Johann Christian Kestner’s wife, Charlotte, and the suicide of a neurotic lawyer, Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem, who shot himself with a pistol borrowed from Kestner.

But the novella is not merely about one man’s unrequited love. The critic György Lukács insisted that it is “one of the greatest love stories in world literature” because Goethe succeeded in generalizing his experience, and “concentrated into this love-tragedy the whole life of his time.” The prevailing Romantic view was that passion disrupted the social order, and so had to be denied. “What dreadful people there are, whose minds are completely absorbed in matters of etiquette,” Werther exclaims, when he takes a position at court to try to forget Lotte. Each episode in the book—Werther’s retreat from his home, his failure at court, his despair over Lotte’s marriage—arises from his inability to impress his desires onto an artificial and indifferent world. The more powerful his feeling, the greater his isolation. He can imagine no escape but to borrow two pistols from Albert and shoot himself in the head.

Whereas “Götz” had given German readers a glimpse of their past, “Werther” showed them their present. It was Goethe’s first attempt at what Lukács called the “educative novel,” in which man learns a “practical understanding of reality.” In “Werther,” this education concerns the true nature of desire. “That children do not know the reason of their desires, all the learned teachers and instructors agree,” Werther writes. Yet he fails to see that his desire to express the full force of his personality, and his despair when he cannot, are far from unique. Just as Lotte’s rejection feels scripted to him —“All that should be printed,” he tells her, “and we could recommend it to educators”—so, too, to us, do the passionate

effusions of Werther's letters, which mimic the verse that an educated man of his times could be expected to have absorbed. Werther, in his self-delusion, embodies another Goethean type, the longing man—ordinary, but convinced of the extraordinariness of his feelings. "Werther became a fashion because it was about a fashion," Boyle observes. When the book was published, both those who swooned over it and those who censured it failed to catch its satiric edge. It was a good thing they hadn't. "Götz" had made Goethe's name in Germany, but "Werther" vaulted him to international renown. He was twenty-five years old.

Weimar came calling for Goethe's services in 1774, weeks after "Werther," and he answered with enthusiasm. It was a match of convenience. The Dowager Duchess believed that Goethe would help her teen-age son, the Duke, mature into a benevolent despot. Goethe believed that a small polity would be better than a large one for testing his political acumen. "The Duchies of Weimar and Eisenach will be a stage on which one can try out whether a role in worldly affairs suits one or not," he wrote. He was not cheap, but he was a good catch—according to his valet, "lean, nimble, and dainty." He thought he had the strength of mind to withstand the tedium and the pettiness of court: "I'm better positioned to recognize the thorough shittiness of this our secular majesty."

But, as any administrator knows, shittiness can be hard to overcome. Much of Goethe's time was spent putting out fires—literally, in the villages, and figuratively in the overspent treasury, the understaffed university, and the collapsing mines. At court, he was perceived as "minister-like and cold." He valued "order, precision, speed," and "self-denial." With the Duke, matters were different. The rumored adventures of the twenty-six-year-old poet and his eighteen-year-old prince were crass and likely exaggerated. "They dug potatoes from the earth, cooked them with kindling in the forest, slept with girls in the forest, carved inscriptions on the trees," a friend reported. Goethe, in his first decade at Weimar, lived half as a child of nature, half as a bureaucrat. He produced

shorter poems and plays, essays on minerals and anatomy, and more than a thousand letters to a lady at court, Charlotte von Stein, with whom he had a chaste and confused liaison. But he struggled to finish the ambitious projects that he had started before his arrival —the play “Egmont” and his first full-length novel, “Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Mission.” By 1785, his friends noted his gloominess and his protracted illnesses. He asked the Duke for a reprieve to recover in the spa city of Karlsbad, and then secretly set off to Italy.

Goethe had longed to visit Italy since he was a child—to see the finest works of art and hoard his memories of them as “a source of private pleasure.” The “Italian Journey,” which he wrote more than two decades after his flight south, is a reminiscence of these pleasures: the statues of Rome, the temples of Sicily, the sensual life of Naples, the satisfaction of completing unfinished works and making progress on a new drama, “Faust.” And for the first time, his biographers conjecture, Goethe experienced the thrill of sex, with a young widow he met in Rome. “Goethe had discovered bodies,” Boyle writes, “and for a while there seemed to be nothing else.” It was a scandal when Goethe returned to Weimar, two years later, and put his new discovery to use. He took as a lover a woman sixteen years younger than him who was working as a maker of artificial flowers, Christiane Vulpius. The gossips at court described her as “a corpulent little female” and “a common whore.” But their union was long and loving, producing five children (only one of whom, August, survived to adulthood) and the twenty-four erotic poems of “Roman Elegies.” Their frank lustiness makes them more rewarding to read in English translation than Goethe’s Volkslieder:

Also, am I not learning when at the shape of her bosom,  
Graceful lines, I can glance, guide a light hand down her hips?  
Only thus I appreciate marble; reflecting, comparing,

See with an eye that can feel, feel with a hand that can see. . . .

Often too in her arms I've lain composing a poem,

Gently with fingering hand count the hexameter's beat

Out on her back.

If "Werther" was an educative novel, then the "Elegies" were educative poems. They imagined how the lover's encounter with the beloved could teach a passionate appreciation for art. The eye and the hand could gain in sensual versatility. The body could be the material, and sex the medium, of aesthetic judgment and creation. "He uses her body to mark time; she meanwhile exhales her warm breath into his mouth," Bell writes. "She inspires him." The poem that emerged was the couple's shared creation.

In Italy, Goethe may have gone on a holiday from reality, but the world had not. Days before he returned to Weimar, French revolutionaries stormed the Bastille. Karl August feared contagion. When anti-revolutionary Prussian troops crossed into France, in 1792, he rode to the front, with Goethe in tow, and watched the newly constituted French Revolutionary Army unexpectedly stop the Prussian advance. Goethe, as he later recalled, told the defeated troops, "From here and now begins a new era of the world's history."

Karl August's strategy for resisting the forward movement of history was to dust off the courtly practices of the ancien régime. Goethe was tasked with revitalizing the Weimar theatre and the University of Jena and dismantling all secret student societies. With his friend the playwright Friedrich Schiller, he edited *The Horae*, a journal in which they argued for contracting the literary marketplace so that fewer stupid, self-regarding people published books. Neither literary nor political democracy held much appeal

for him. “It is simply in my nature,” he explained. “I prefer to commit an injustice than to endure disorder.”



*“Remember, not a word about our vast oil reserves.”*  
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Order and injustice descended on Weimar in 1806 in the form of Napoleon’s army, which had already overrun Austria and Prussia. Goethe and Napoleon were often envisioned as doubles. One had conquered Europe’s imagination, the other its territories. “*Two great men sent among us,*” Thomas Carlyle later reflected. Bonaparte, “like an all-devouring earthquake . . . hurling kingdom over kingdom; Goethe was as the mild-shining, inaudible Light, which, notwithstanding, can again make that Chaos into a creation.” Goethe was torn between admiring Napoleon—observing that people “have a morbid desire to carp at anything great”—and fearing what might happen if the new Emperor were to dissolve the duchy. When French troops entered Weimar, Goethe proposed marriage to Christiane, either because he was grateful that she stopped their house from being looted or because the Napoleonic Code would not recognize their illegitimate child. He believed in accommodating Napoleon in the name not of peace but of order and authority.

“Tragedy,” Napoleon told Goethe when they met, in 1808, “is the highest a poet can achieve.” Goethe’s great tragedy, “Faust: The

First Part,” was published that year. Faust, a thwarted scholar, is desperate to know “what it is that holds the world together” and to personally experience “all that is given to humanity, total humanity, to experience.” The demonic Mephistopheles appears in the absurd form of a yapping black poodle and grants Faust his wish. But, before he does, he pretends to show him another way to discover the secrets of the world. Why not write poetry?

Take my advice. Engage a poet. Let him turn on his imagination and load you with all the virtues and distinction—the courage of the lion, the speed of the stag, the hot blood of Italy, the endurance of the North. Let him solve the problem of combining generosity with cunning, and plan a young man’s impulsive love-affair for you. I’d like to know the gentleman. I’d call him Mr. Microcosm.

Faust raves that he will soar to the heights of “pleasures that hurt,” and swoop to the depths of “torments that enliven.” In dizzying changes of scene, he leaps from a tavern to a witch’s kitchen and from a forest cavern to a mountaintop, where the whole range of living things will pass before his eyes. But, to gain a total understanding of human experience, he must sacrifice his humanity, his moral sensibility. The victim of his sacrifice is Gretchen, a virgin whom Faust seduces and abandons in his devilish reverie, and who kills their illegitimate child. The Faustian-bargain hunter, a third Goethean type, strikes a deal whose cost is all-consuming. His antithesis is “Mr. Microcosm,” a poet of imagination and virtue, generosity and cunning, hot-blooded, coolheaded—a portrait of the artist as a mature man, the creator of a little world unto himself.

In the final decade of his life, Goethe was befriended by Johann Peter Eckermann, a young literary critic, who visited Weimar regularly and transcribed his conversations with the older man. “Conversations with Goethe” is an astonishingly intimate chronicle of what, for Goethe, was a long stretch of illness and grief, marked

by the sudden deaths of Christiane and August and by his struggle to finish both “Faust: The Second Part” and his autobiography before he died, in 1832. Goethe was reluctant to continue the latter beyond his youth. In middle age, he told Eckermann, “we begin to find ourselves at odds with the world, and that is only interesting if something worthwhile comes out of it.” In the case of his own life, he felt, “whatever may be good about it cannot be shared with others, and what *can* be shared is not worth the effort.”

A man who reflects on his life, near the end, tends to treat his experiences as private pains and pleasures. The biographer’s task is to plunge them, once more, into the stream of history. Among Goethe’s aspiring biographers was the great Frankfurt School critic Walter Benjamin. In 1922, Benjamin completed a difficult, dazzling essay on Goethe’s last novel, “Elective Affinities,” whose tale of love affairs among careless aristocrats imitating noble lovers is veiled in an intricate form that includes epigrammatic diary entries, long disquisitions on chemistry, and a novella within the novel. In 1926, Benjamin was invited by the editors of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia to write an entry “on Goethe from the standpoint of Marxist doctrine.” But Benjamin soured on the assignment when the editors read his draft and complained that its Marxist exegesis went no further than repeating the phrase “class conflict” ten times on every page. Benjamin’s lover, Asja Lācis, agreed, sending Benjamin into a rage. When he calmed down, he “spoke with her about what constituted, for me, the interesting thing in the theme of ‘Goethe’: how a man who had existed so thoroughly in compromises could nevertheless have accomplished something so extraordinary.” Only a man who had yielded to power could have dreamed up such extravagant flights of freedom: suicide, self-sacrifice, a pact with the Devil.

Benjamin never completed the entry, but fragments of his draft, collected and translated by Susan Bernstein, Peter Fenves, and Kevin McLaughlin in a new volume, “On Goethe” (Stanford), reveal a sophisticated theory of life as a compromise between the

individual and his age. In an outline titled “Life Built Up from the Elements,” Benjamin speculated that life emerged from the dialectical dance between our innermost nature and its outward expressions—our writing, our work, our friendships, our loves. For most people, inner nature was not forceful enough to influence outward expressions in any determinable form. Hardly anyone reinvents the novel. Fewer still reinvent marriage. But Goethe’s nature seemed to overpower everything. His poetry, his prose, his plays, his position at court, and his relationship with Christiane had each assumed a completely unique shape. A “banal biography,” Benjamin wrote, would accept that a man’s nature invariably decided his fate and would infuse the story of his life with the “conjuring character of mythic poetry.” A materialist biography, by contrast, would measure both the freedom evinced by a great man’s creations and their determination by external forces.

The biography Benjamin envisaged would have explained Goethe’s political nihilism and his escape into nature as equally the products of his will and of the intricate machinery of the world. The fragments assembled in “On Goethe” let us glimpse how carefully Benjamin heeded Goethe’s own ambitions for interpreting his life. “For this seems to be the main object of Biography,” Goethe wrote in his foreword to “Poetry and Truth.” “To exhibit the man in relation to the features of his time; and to show to what extent they have opposed or favored his progress; what view of mankind and the world he has formed from them, and how far he himself, if an artist, poet, or author, may externally reflect them.” He knew that, in the course of his existence, inner nature and history had gripped each other with ferocity. The result was a strangely spellbound life. ♦

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**Musical Events**

# “An Enemy of the People” Becomes a Spanish Opera

Francisco Coll gives Ibsen’s drama a stem-winder of a score.

By [Alex Ross](#)

December 1, 2025



*Coll’s romantic neo-modernism is abrasive and rhapsodic by turns.*

*Illustration by Rozenn Brécard*

Opera landed in Spain in 1627, less than three decades after the art first arose, in Florence. That year, Italian expatriates in Madrid presented “La Selva sin Amor” (“The Forest Without Love”), with a libretto by the towering Spanish playwright Félix Lope de Vega and music by Filippo Piccinini and Bernardo Monanni. No one took much notice. At a time when Lope de Vega, Calderón de la Barca, and Cervantes were weaving verbal spells upon the stage, music must have seemed a superfluous addition—just as, in England, the mighty lines of Marlowe and Shakespeare hardly cried out for melodic elaboration. A few decades later, the first zarzuela operas launched a homegrown music-theatre tradition, although their mixture of song and spoken text proved difficult to

export. In the centuries that followed, Spanish opera found little international resonance. To date, the Met has staged only two works from Spain: Enrique Granados's "Goyescas," in 1916, and Manuel de Falla's "La Vida Breve," in 1926.

To see Spanish opera, then, you have to go to the source. Last month, in Valencia, I attended the world première of Francisco Coll's "Enemigo del Pueblo," an adaptation of Ibsen's "An Enemy of the People." The setting was the Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía, Santiago Calatrava's futuristic beached whale of an opera house, which opened in 2005. Despite endless controversy over the design —the building cost hundreds of millions of dollars and required extensive modifications to remain functional—the resident company has found a prominent place on the European scene. Its glory is its youthful orchestra, the Orquestra de la Comunitat Valenciana, which plays with greater fire and focus than many more venerable ensembles.

Coll, a forty-year-old native of Valencia, began his education in Spain and completed it in England, studying there with Thomas Adès, a master of twenty-first-century opera. Coll's early works, with their prickly eclecticism and their fondness for instrumental grotesquerie, reflect the influence of Adès and György Ligeti, among others. Lately, Coll has found a distinctive voice—a kind of romantic neo-modernism, abrasive and rhapsodic by turns. For the maverick violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja, Coll has written a Violin Concerto that is among the finest recent examples of an overworked form: anarchic virtuosity in the outer movements offsets a central episode of desperate lyrical power.

"An Enemy of the People" seemed to be a strong choice for Coll's first full-length piece of music theatre. (In 2013, he wrote "Café Kafka," a one-act chamber opera.) Strangely, Ibsen's drama had never been adapted for the operatic stage, even though its primary conflict—a righteous individual confronting society—seems tailor-made for the genre. You can imagine the elderly Verdi seizing hold

of the material. The libretto, by Àlex Rigola, who also directed the production, keeps the main narrative intact: Dr. Stockmann, a scientist connected with a prosperous spa in his town, discovers that the spa's waters are contaminated and, in his quest to publicize the truth, becomes a pariah. The action is transposed to an oceanside much like Valencia's; the set designer Patricia Albizu supplies painterly backdrops of sand, sea, and sky. The shift also brings to mind the play's most famous latter-day progeny, Steven Spielberg's "Jaws," although no gliding shark fins or chugging double-basses intrude.

Perhaps Rigola should have been more willful in his handling of the text, since his libretto unfolds more like a selection of highlights from the play than like a freestanding adaptation. Ibsen's five acts are compressed into two, with a total running time of less than ninety minutes. As a result, the collapse of Stockmann's crusade feels rushed—especially in the pivotal town-meeting scene, in which his brother, the mayor, outmaneuvers him and fellow-citizens shout him down. We don't get to see Stockmann losing composure by degrees; instead, he lurches almost at once into his incendiary speech condemning the stupidity of the majority. The final scenes, in which Stockmann resolves to reeducate the people on his own, unfold in even more precipitate, sketchy fashion.

All the same, "Enemigo" made for a gripping evening, largely on the strength of Coll's stem-winder of a score. The opera begins with a kinetic, frantic prelude in the form of a *paso doble*, the quick march often heard at bullfights. Here, though, the meter is mainly a lopsided 7/8, the harmony a mangled G major. Such folkloric touches occur at intervals throughout the work, signalling the popular energies that will consume Stockmann. The doctor himself is characterized sometimes by boisterously chattering lines, sometimes by semi-Wagnerian bombast; at the end, his music turns elegiac, implicitly undercutting his dreams of beginning anew. The crowd scenes, however abbreviated, unleash explosive energy.

Pummelling orchestral passages hint at the neutral rage of nature itself.

The opening-night cast, while capable and engaged, struggled at times to make itself heard above Coll’s potent orchestration. José Antonio López, as Stockmann, showed a handsome, limber baritone, yet he had trouble breaking through the sonic melee. The American soprano Brenda Rae, as Stockmann’s supportive daughter, Petra, managed to hold her own, combining brilliant high notes with an expressive chest-voice. The composer conducted, and, even if he overindulged his players, he led with a clear, confident beat. Not surprisingly, he received the evening’s loudest ovation. It wasn’t just a home-town audience embracing a native son; it was a cosmopolitan public saluting a significant new creative force in the opera world.

In Madrid, the Teatro Real, Spain’s flagship opera house since 1850, was offering an all-Bartók evening: the one-act ballet “The Miraculous Mandarin” and the one-act opera “Bluebeard’s Castle,” with the first movement of the Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta as a weighty intermezzo. The Teatro Real has vigorously supported contemporary opera in recent decades, mounting twenty world premières since 1997. (The company co-produced Coll’s “Enemigo” and will present it in February.) Since 2013, the Teatro Real has been led by the Catalan impresario Joan Matabosch, who has a flair for balancing progressive ideas against conservative tastes while placating political overseers.

The Bartók production was the work of the veteran German director Christof Loy, who has lately moved to Madrid and founded a company dedicated to reviving zarzuelas. Loy’s staging, which was first seen in Basel in 2022, has no hint of local color: the sets, by Márton Ágh, evoke a nondescript urban wasteland, with a beat-up telephone booth on one side, a hulking warehouselike structure on the other, and junk strewn about. That milieu is an organic match for “Mandarin,” in which desperadoes use a girl to entrap

passersby until the indestructible title character complicates their scheme. It's more of a stretch for "Bluebeard," in which Judith, the newest bride of a sinister nobleman, discovers the fate of her predecessors. Still, Loy's gritty minimalism, enlivened with bleak, Beckettian humor, established a convincing continuity for the evening.

Loy choreographed "Mandarin" himself, in a free, athletic style that often suggested a sexualized boxing match. Carla Pérez Mora played the girl with self-possessed ferocity; Gorka Culebras made the mandarin a soulfully suffering martyr. In "Bluebeard," the dominant presence was the perennially riveting German soprano Evelyn Herlitzius, who sang Judith with cutting force and fleshed out her portrayal with pinpoint actorly gestures. Not since Anja Silja have I seen a singer embody the workings of fate simply by folding her hands resignedly in her lap. Christof Fischesser, as Bluebeard, could not match Herlitzius's intensity, but his polished, deep-set bass provided a strong musical anchor. Gustavo Gimeno, in the pit, showed an instinctive command of Bartók's rhythms and colors. Those pioneering Florentines would have found the whole thing incomprehensible, yet it came close to fulfilling their theatrical ideal—a seamless fusion of text, music, image, and feeling. ♦

*Alex Ross has been *The New Yorker's* music critic since 1996, and also covers literature, history, and ecology, among other topics. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#).”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/an-enemy-of-the-people-becomes-a-spanish-opera>

[The Current Cinema](#)

## “The Secret Agent” Is a Political Thriller Teeming with Life

*The Brazilian director Kleber Mendonça Filho conjures fateful interconnections among vivid characters living in the grip of military dictatorship.*

By [Richard Brody](#)

November 26, 2025



*In Kleber Mendonça Filho’s film, set in nineteen-seventies Brazil, Wagner Moura plays a man hiding out in his home town.*

*Illustration by Woodrow White*

The protagonist of “The Secret Agent” isn’t a secret agent; he only lives like one. The reason for his clandestine maneuvering is apparent from the film’s first scene, when he pulls into a gas station on a country road. Before he can drive off with his tank replenished, the police show up. The officers’ arrival is no surprise: there’s a rotting corpse on the premises. What’s surprising is that they ignore the body. Instead, one of them questions the traveller and searches his car with a menacing nonchalance. This is Brazil in 1977, when the country was in the grip of a military dictatorship and, as the movie goes on to show, the notions of crime and punishment were severely warped: one incautious word to the wrong person was enough to send someone on the run.

“The Secret Agent” is a political thriller that’s also perhaps the year’s most profuse and populous movie, overflowing with sharply drawn characters who fill the screen with daring action and ardent purpose (whether honorable or corrupt). The movie’s writer and director, Kleber Mendonça Filho, crafts a tight story with startling freedom, leaping between characters in order to conjure their fateful interconnections, while giving them all, persecuted and persecutors alike, an identity and a voice. In the process, he brings history to life with bracing immediacy—a feat all the rarer for the audacious twists of cinematic form with which he renders the movie an act of archival reclamation.

The man from the gas station, a middle-aged scientist called Marcelo (Wagner Moura), reaches his home town of Recife, on Brazil’s northeastern coast, during Carnaval, and he finds the city in a state of festive agitation. Arriving at the apartment building where he’ll be hiding out, he gets immediately soaked by gleeful kids with improvised water guns. But the sombre stakes of his trip quickly become clear when, moments later, he’s welcomed by Sebastiana (Tânia Maria), the den mother of the safe house, where she’s lodging others in similar circumstances. Sebastiana discloses her sympathies at once, asking him whether he had trouble en route with “the pigs.” Seventy-seven years old and a voluble, plainspoken, fiercely principled rebel fixer, she introduces Marcelo, who’s a widower, to a group of new neighbors, especially a woman named Cláudia (Hermila Guedes), a professor of dentistry, with whom Sebastiana instantly tries to pair him off. Then, when the neighbors are out of sight, she gives him some money, plus instructions for his new life, expressing her commitment to his cause with a furtive zipping of her lips.

The movie is divided into three parts, each with an enticing title that reveals and conceals just enough. The first, “The Boy’s Nightmare,” involves Marcelo’s fraught homecoming in the shadow of grief over his wife’s death—and his reunion with his young son, Fernando (Enzo Nunes), who has been staying in

Recife with his maternal grandparents, Lenira (Aline Marta Maia) and Alexandre (Carlos Francisco), a projectionist at a local movie theatre. Bereft of his mother and separated from his father, the boy suffers from nightmares, but his immediate concern is altogether more common: Alexandre's movie house has been showing "Jaws," and Fernando—who's obsessed with ads for the film—begs for permission to see it.

Meanwhile, a real shark has washed ashore; the movie's MacGuffin is a human leg found in the creature's belly. To investigate, the city's wily and pompous chief of police, Euclides (Robério Diógenes), heads straight from his own Carnaval revels, covered in confetti and lipstick stains, to see the limb at an oceanography lab, where he's joined by two other officers—his grown sons, Arlindo (Ítalo Martins) and Sérgio (Igor de Araújo). Euclides hopes to keep the discovery out of the press for reasons that soon become evident: a pair of hit men, a stepfather (Roney Villela) and stepson (Gabriel Leone), are working in town with the police's tacit approval, dumping bodies from a bridge into the sea below.

However censored the Brazilian press was at the time, disappearances are still making the news, including that of a student who hasn't been seen in several days—the dismembered victim, it's hinted—who's the subject of an article that appears in the film's second part, "Identification Institute." The title refers to a government office for issuing I.D. cards, where Marcelo, now neatly dressed and well groomed, begins an office job arranged by a well-placed sympathizer (Buda Lira). Marcelo has an additional motive for working there: by searching the institute's archive, he hopes to fill in long-troubling blanks in his family background. At the office, the story menacingly triangulates, with Euclides turning up as part of an underhanded ploy to help a rich woman while denying a poor one justice. He befriends Marcelo—even as, during nocturnal rounds, he pals around with the hit men.

Mendonça, who is fifty-seven, grew up in Recife and has centered his feature-film career on the city, probing its politics and power dynamics in the dramas “Neighboring Sounds” (2012) and “Aquarius” (2016). He took thematic detours in “Bacurau” (2019), a futuristic fantasy set in a fictitious village elsewhere in the state of Pernambuco, and “Pictures of Ghosts” (2023), a personal documentary about Recife’s movie theatres. “The Secret Agent” is by far his most accomplished film to date, and the only one set during the era in which he grew up. The movie’s physical design conveys delight, wonder, and bitter nostalgia; it feels rooted equally in memory and research, aesthetic imagination and political conscience. With his choice of period-specific flourishes—Marcelo’s yellow Volkswagen Beetle, the office’s manual typewriters under plastic dust guards, sidewalk pay phones surrounded by modernistic bubblelike booths—the director embraces the fashions and music of the time without losing sight of the brutal misrule associated with them.

Mendonça loves process, and in “The Secret Agent” he draws out scenes at length, unfolding games of concealment and evasion with understated precision and overwhelming tension, dispensing harrowing information with pinpoint restraint. His filmmaking teems with memorably eccentric details that reverberate with thematic significance. One of the movie’s most striking scenes is a curious digression stemming from a triviality—a telegram that Marcelo sends to a benefactor (Marcelo Valle) whose phone is likely tapped. Mendonça shows the telegram at each stage of its journey, as one clerk takes the message, another transmits it, a third prints it at the other end, and then a messenger carries it folded between his fingers to the sympathizer’s office. The oddly jaunty sidebar is capped by a chilling surprise: the addressee is shocked to find that the telegram has already been opened.

Paranoia suffuses the film without showiness or bombast—there are no distorting angles, no dunning musical cues. The ambient terror emerges instead in the careful behavior of characters in the

crosshairs, as in two lengthy and finely wrought scenes—the movie’s mightiest emotional pillars—that show Marcelo talking with others under suspicion. In the first, he’s met, in a covert location, by a woman named Elza (Maria Fernanda Cândido), who informs him that he’s facing a death threat. He, in turn, tells her the story behind his persecution, a tale involving some of the authoritarian regime’s predatory profiteers, and, in so doing, offers a poignant portrait of an erstwhile ally, his late wife, Fátima (Alice Carvalho). In the other such scene, residents of the safe house hold a spontaneous support-group session, during which Sebastiana, the matriarch, is asked about an old photo on her mantel and responds with an aria-like reminiscence of her grimly romantic political past.

Similarly, Mendonça reconstructs the city at large with fervor for its outward vigor and its inner life. The movie theatre where Alexandre works is a café-type hangout and an informal town square, but many of its everyday happenings harbor secrets, whether gruesome or heartening. In the film’s urban settings, which feature throngs of extras, day-to-day business gets drawn into the drama, packing Mendonça’s deftly composed widescreen images with passionate tumult. Even when showing small groups indoors, the director’s full frames convey a sense of turmoil, which is amplified by the cast’s vividly expressive performances—especially that of Moura, who carries the film with a star turn of suave determination, thoughtful energy, and preternatural calm in the face of mortal danger.

Amid escalating violence in the film’s third part, “Blood Transfusion,” Marcelo remains the still center, living in hiding in his home town, his identity split between public and private guises, his mind pressured to the breaking point by the effort of keeping up appearances. In spite of all this, he is endowed with an unshakably principled core, which Mendonça distills into an iconic physical symbol—an old-fashioned cassette deck that gains totemic power as it preserves Marcelo’s testimony. The resulting tapes give rise to a *coup de cinéma* of breathtaking audacity and simplicity, a leap in

time that brings silenced voices back to life. With this device, Mendonça telegraphs a righteous indignation that's nonetheless hopeful, a vision of openhearted generosity and multigenerational solidarity in the face of ruthless authority, then and now. ♦

*Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of “Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/the-secret-agent-movie-review>

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# Poems

- **[“Blue Baby”](#)**

“You thought yourself lucky as a sickly / child, who got to spend whole days // reading long books in bed.”

- **[“Tornado Imagined from Far Away”](#)**

“Some homes almost disappeared, / as if the atoms that had made them were gone.”

[Poems](#)

## Blue Baby

By [Mary Jo Salter](#)

December 1, 2025

*David Schweizer, 1950-2024*

Blue baby, of the first generation  
whose hole in the heart could be closed

in an operating theatre  
where the show must and did go on,

you thought yourself lucky as a sickly  
child, who got to spend whole days

reading long books in bed.  
An early obsession with Louis Seize

and the costume drama of Versailles  
made you the director you were,

blocking actors in your head.  
Or so we believed; you told good stories.

Long after you stopped dyeing your hair  
and even your beard blood-red

and began to look your part  
as a gray—no, a silver—eminence

who signed off e-mails “with MANLY love  
from your SILVERY D,”

nevertheless you remained the boy  
slipping out from *flamboyance*,

dressed every day in animal prints—  
zebra tie, leopard sneakers, tiger

blazer, ocelot ascot. Not  
just one, and often all at once.

Now it's one of your nephews who  
directs us to a pew in the chapel,

now it's your beloved PAL  
Caleb making his way through tears

to the pulpit, to sum up the years.  
David, how can this be?

Strangely, you are not in charge.  
How, on this frigid January

morning, as we stand in the snowy  
churchyard where they took your body,

could there be already a hole in the heart  
of the earth so large?

*This is drawn from “Cameo Appearance.”*

*Mary Jo Salter* is the author of “Zoom Rooms” (2022) and “Cameo Appearance” (2026), among other books.

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/blue-baby-mary-jo-salter-poem>

[Poems](#)

## Tornado Imagined from Far Away

By [Sharon Olds](#)

December 1, 2025

Up from the south it came, out of the west, at a diagonal, fifty miles in its full course, once it was done—and in its body length, each time it touched down, from a mile long to twenty miles. “All we could see was a lot of gray and stuff.” “It was like a train, but much louder.” “All we saw was this white wall of water, if you will.” Witnesses reported funnel clouds setting down eleven times, like anteater noses looking for something, or a grayish teat growing down to search out and eat, but of course it was just cold and heat, wet and dry, wind, counter-clockwise force. One life ended, within a collapsed home, curled around her stepson’s infant son. Some homes almost disappeared, as if the atoms that had made them were gone, and many homes now partially stand, as if gored, or chewed on. And how many trees, how many hairs on a head, torn out, how many plants turned back from discrete beings into wads of matter. Pine, oak, maple, beech,

hemlock, witch hazel, lady's slipper,  
pitcher plant, trillium,  
Indian pipe. Gardens, trails—  
by a waterfall, a bench, gone in one  
bite, dissolved like a grain of salt, as if  
thousands of years passed in a minute,  
as if we jumped the Pleistocene  
to the Hiroshima! But it's just weather.  
Friend, let us be good to one another.

*Sharon Olds* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. Her books include “*Balladz*.”

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/08/tornado-imagined-from-far-away-sharon-olds-poem>

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Drawings from the December 8, 2025, magazine.

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# Puzzles & Games

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A moderately challenging puzzle.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Tuesday, November 25, 2025

*A moderately challenging puzzle.*



By [Erik Agard](#)

November 25, 2025

Loading game...

*Erik Agard is a co-founder of the Crossword Puzzle Collaboration Directory, a resource for aspiring puzzle-makers from underrepresented groups.*

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