

PRICE \$8.99

DEC. 9, 2024

THE NEW YORKER



The New Yorker Magazine

[December 9, 2024]

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

Goings On

- **Hilton Als on Understanding Difference in “Alok”**

Also: A fresh “Elf” on Broadway, Michael Shannon and Tilda Swinton navigate “The End,” the French hip-hop dance of Bintou Dembélé, and more.

- **Scene and Substance at New York’s Newest Hot Spot**

By Helen Rosner | Bridges, a chic new restaurant from a former Estela chef, offers indulgence through restraint, with eye-opening results.

[Goings On](#)

Hilton Als on Understanding Difference in “Alok”

Also: A fresh “Elf” on Broadway, Michael Shannon and Tilda Swinton navigate “The End,” the French hip-hop dance of Bintou Dembélé, and more.

November 29, 2024

Hilton Als

Staff writer

There are a lot of ghosts in the exhibition “**Dueñas de la Noche: Trans Lives and Dreams in 1980s Caracas**” (through Jan. 25), at the Institute for Studies on Latin American Art, in Tribeca: trans people who you know couldn’t make it because of AIDS, and because of the cruelty that is visited upon trans people in what remains a Catholic city. But the integrity you see in “**Trans**,” a 1982 documentary by the filmmakers Manuel Herreros de Lemos and Mateo Manaure Arilla, which is the centerpiece of this important show, is bittersweet—the women it follows have made their own community out of an emotional need, for sure, but also out of necessity: in their world, health care, if it existed at all, was dicey, and violence was no stranger. The black-and-white production photographs that document the women at work—primarily as sex workers—and after, are poignant, and add a lot to a view into a shadowy world where the fierce determination to be oneself was often met with resistance. But this did nothing to diminish these women and their hope and their beautiful internalized glamour.



Alok Vaid-Menon.

Photograph courtesy Egg Pictures / Not All Films / Tough Lover

More than forty years separates “Trans” and “**ALOK**,” the director Alex Hedison’s sensitive and heartfelt portrait of Alok Vaid-Menon, a nonbinary author, poet, and comedian, which is currently streaming as part of NewFest36’s virtual encore series (through Dec. 25). Sitting under a cloud of brightly colored hair, Alok speaks not only from the experience of being caught in a world not of their making but about how to make one’s own world. And to see Alok’s friends and fans join them in the grand experience of freedom is liberating. To listen to Alok and see them alternate good cheer, seriousness, and welcoming spirit is to remember what the trans community lost during the early years of their marginalization, and what we can gain by getting to know folks like Alok—an understanding of how difference is different only if you think it is.

This understanding comes in the form of music on “**Transa: Selects**,” a fabulous new album that features queer artists reinterpreting Prince, a long piece by André 3000, and songs by Sam Smith and other luminaries. The vocalist Sade breaks your heart wide open with her song “Young Lion,” about her son, Izaak. In it, Sade apologizes for not knowing what Izaak went through in order to be himself. But then the regret turns to the joy of acceptance, and its light: “So close your eyes,” Izaak’s mother

sings slowly, deliberately. “Arms open wide / And feel the light / Arms open wide.”



About Town

Off Broadway

The hepcat stylings of Ethan Lipton and his jazz combo give Lipton’s meticulously funny, often wise **“We Are Your Robots”** (a co-production of Theatre for a New Audience and Rattlestick Theatre, directed by Leigh Silverman) a delightful throwback air. Lipton exactly titrates condescension and concern as the front man for a robot quartet performing to a humanity that mistrusts its own machines. He floats between patter about complex ideas (panpsychism, the structures of experience) and surprisingly tender lyrics. “What do you want, my human friends?” he sings, and the show thinks about it for eighty minutes. The singer’s grandfather, a Roomba, crashes the gig, but Lipton, patient as ever, boosts the old guy offstage, lifting him, gingerly, like a man moving a turtle out of traffic.—*Helen Shaw (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; through Dec. 8.)*

Goth Rock

The music that the singer-songwriter **Chelsea Wolfe** makes sounds more than a little haunted, though not always in the same ways. Her 2010 album, “The Grime and the Glow,” began an ongoing exploration of the uncanny, in an interplay between noise and harmony that has carried her from the sludge of doom metal to the melancholy of acoustic folk. Even at their heaviest, her songs are possessed by a weightlessness, elevated by an elegant, ethereal

voice that echoes out like a clarion call. Written through a journey to sobriety, Wolfe's newest album, "She Reaches Out . . .," once again finds the gothic artist where she is most captivating: a dark, liminal space in search of light.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*First Unitarian Congregational Society; Dec. 6.*)

Dance



Michel Onomo in a piece by Bintou Dembélé.

Photograph by Christophe Raynaud de Lage

Five years ago, **Bintou Dembélé** became the first Black woman to choreograph for the Paris Opera. The achievement brought her a new level of recognition, but she has been a leading figure in French hip-hop dance for decades. For her New York début, Dembélé brings a project in two parts to close out L’Alliance’s Crossing the Line festival. “Palabre/s en mode marron” is an afternoon symposium gathering Francophone thinkers and artists to discuss what Dembélé calls “maroon thinking,” a notion derived from enslaved people who escaped to form their own maroon communities. “Rite de passage // solo II” is a fifty-minute embodiment of some of those ideas by the virtuosic dancer Michel Onomo.—*[Brian Seibert](#) (Performance Space New York; Dec. 6-7.)*

Classical

Baroque music is inexplicably well suited for the holiday season: perhaps it’s the twinkle of a harpsichord or the pious overtones, bolstered by the inescapable magic of Handel’s “Messiah.” Whatever the reason may be, the **Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center** always feels right on time with its annual Baroque Festival. This year’s opening performance touts six Bach concertos, starting with the Italian Concerto for keyboard and ending with the two-violin Concerto in D Minor. Subsequent concerts celebrate a four-thousand-and-two-hundred-pipe organ—featuring pieces transcribed by Bach, and an actual holiday carol—and the lionized Brandenburg Concertos.—*[Jane Bua](#) (Alice Tully Hall; Dec. 6-17.)*

Broadway



Kai Edgar and Grey Henson in “Elf.”

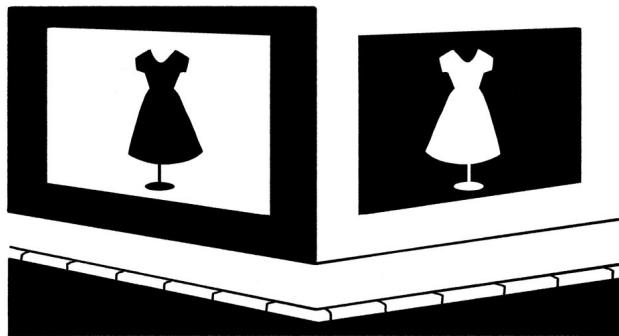
Photograph by Evan Zimmerman / MurphyMade

“**Elf**,” the holiday tale of Buddy, a man-child raised by Santa’s helpers in the North Pole who leaves for New York City to find his dad, is a gift that keeps on giving. Originally a 2003 movie starring Will Ferrell, its goofy sweetness and refrain of spreading Christmas cheer by “singing loud for all to hear” seemed ready-made for musical theatre. Sure enough, in 2010, it came to Broadway, where it now appears for the third time. Miraculously, this revival exudes freshness, from Grey Henson’s spirited performance as a wide-eyed Buddy to Liam Steel’s playful choreography, which turns tinsel into jump ropes. The book and score have the crackle and glow of a fire in the hearth. All together, it’s enough to make you believe in the magic of Christmas, or at least of commercialism.—*Dan Stahl* (*Marquis; through Jan. 4.*)

Movies

“**The End**” is a post-apocalyptic musical centered on a rich family who have holed up in a lavish, art-filled complex built deep underground, while the rest of humanity faces extinction. The wealthy couple, a former oil-company C.E.O. (Michael Shannon) and ballet dancer (Tilda Swinton), has three helpers (Tim

McInnerny, Bronagh Gallagher, and Lennie James) and a grown son (George MacKay), who was born in the shelter and knows nothing of friendship or romance—until a climate refugee (Moses Ingram) finds her way in. As the director, Joshua Oppenheimer, emphasizes the household's compromises and self-delusions (reinforced by the songs and dances) to justify its comforts as the world burns, Oppenheimer seemingly accuses his viewers, too. But the high-styled movie, with its apolitical and history-free abstraction, comes off as just another luxurious shrug.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In limited release starting Dec. 6.*)



On and Off the Avenue

[Rachel Syme](#) on the latest in chic gift wrap.

Gift wrapping is, perhaps, one of the world's most ephemeral art forms. It seems like folly to put any effort into it, knowing that all your hard work will soon be eviscerated by grubby, eager hands. And yet, what is the holiday spirit if not overexertion without the expectation of any lasting reward? Gift wrap has become quite stylish in recent years; I'm a big fan of the whimsical holiday paper offerings at **Aspen & Arlo** (this year's prints, which cost \$38.99 for a fifteen-foot roll, include corgis frolicking in the snow, a bustling winter scene on Fifth Avenue, and ballet-dancing Santas), and of the retro sixties-inspired wrap from **Mod Lounge Paper Company**. (I plan to cover all my gifts this season in their double-sided signature paper featuring [palm fronds and pink Martini glasses](#); \$5.50 for one sheet.) In terms of trimmings, you should

feel free to splurge a bit—ribbons are perpetually reusable, both as house and hair adornments, and they can inject some real verve into your wrapping game. The ribbons at the home-goods store **Terrain** are well-known in professional notions circles for being particularly luxurious (and, it should be noted, not at all cheap; one roll of their [velvet floral ribbon](#), which has a delightfully shabby-chic Victorian vibe, costs \$54). The Farrisilk ribbons from **Joycie Lane Designs** are also quite striking; I've been coveting a roll of their new [silver-sequin ribbon](#) (\$29) for weeks. Lastly, this has been a big year for pearl embellishments—they seem to be everywhere, from hair clips to denim jackets—so why not head over to **The Jolly Christmas Shop** Web site to buy ten yards of their [ivory wired ribbon bordered with hundreds of little pearls](#) (\$109)? You will earn at least a few lingering oohs and aahs before the ripping begins.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Elif Batuman on being “butthurt”](#)
 - [A Leonard Cohen classic](#)
 - [Marlowe Granados’s advice column](#)
-

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/hilton-als-on-understanding-difference-in-alok>

[The Food Scene](#)

Scene and Substance at New York's Newest Hot Spot

Bridges, a chic new restaurant from a former Estela chef, offers indulgence through restraint, with eye-opening results.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

November 10, 2024



The cooking at Bridges is a gastronomic version of quiet luxury, as in a composed hors d'œuvre that the menu self-effacingly calls “cured tuna with mushrooms.”

Photographs by Morgan Levy for The New Yorker

The walls in the dining room at Bridges are gray, but not the boring, enervating shade of a cubicle or a dentist's office. They're a satiny underwater gray that shimmers like sharkskin, sometimes warming into a beigy gold, and sometimes reflecting slashes of light and color refracted through the rows of glass brick that frame the entrance to the dining room from the bar area in front. With white tablecloths, black-leather banquets, and accents of chrome and dark wood, the space has a nineteen-eighties mood, in the “American Psycho” and “Wall Street” sense of the era—business as an aesthetic, business as a form of pleasure. That's not to say this is a place for a work dinner, unless maybe you're having an affair with a co-worker. The kitchen at Bridges, which opened in September, is run by Sam Lawrence, who was previously the

culinary director of Mattos Hospitality, the impeccably stylish restaurant group that includes [Estela](#) and Altro Paradiso. In a few short months, Bridges has already established itself as this season's restaurant for the thinking cool person, its dining room populated by the downtown beau monde, the hip and the intriguing and the obscurely famous.

When Estela opened, in 2013, it established a new visual language for plating that the restaurant critic Bill Addison once dubbed [New Romanticism](#)—a sort of structured minimalism that evokes the wildness of the natural world, with a hefty dose of human intermediation and control. At Bridges, Lawrence cooks in an adjacent mode that we might call the gastronomic version of quiet luxury; his opulent food, plated austere, is the dinner-plate equivalent of a cashmere ball cap or a vicuña coat. It is rich, rich, rich, all of it, though the flavors tend toward subtlety rather than brute force, with everything on the menu seemingly kissed by smoke and silk. Oysters, petite but deep-cupped, are lightly grilled; they're served, in their still-warm shells, with the briny tongues of meat dressed voluptuously in brown butter and a vinegary whisper of capers. A sleek, saffron-yellow sea-urchin custard is a bed for a quartz-pink quenelle of finely minced sweet shrimp, overlaid with orange petals of uni. There's a velvety duck breast with a cigar of palest-green savoy cabbage that's been cooked until it's as soft and rich as pure butter. A Comté tart, perhaps the most haute, most buzzed-about quiche the city has ever seen, is decorated with tiny, perfect chanterelles which seem to imply that the wedge of cheesy custard and pastry is freshly sourced from a grassy patch in some primeval forest, where it perhaps served as some sort of modernist fairy daybed. A restaurant of lesser aesthetic rigor might have played up the forest vibes with a scattering of edible moss or soil; Lawrence makes it all about the object, which seems airlifted from the glen and placed within the vitrine-like frame of the dinner table.

Bridges is situated in Chinatown, in the former home of Hop Shing, a restaurant that served affordable, no-frills Guangdong-style dim

sum from 1973 until it shuttered during the early months of the pandemic. In 2023, when Lawrence and his business partners took over the space, there was some [controversy](#) regarding their application for a liquor license, with neighborhood residents opposed to a new business opening under non-Chinese management. There's a too-easy metaphor to read into the succession of tenants: the timeworn and workaday replaced by the shiny and exclusive, cheap giving way to pricey, a place by and for an immigrant community replaced by a vaguely European hot spot. But by the time Bridges signed its lease the space had been sitting empty for years, and Lawrence's kitchen, at least, seems interested in recognizing the history into which it has inserted itself. A dish of smoked-eel dumplings in a deep bronze consommé, the tender meat held inside chewy, near-translucent wrappers, evokes the saline slipperiness of wonton soup. That heap of minced shrimp atop the uni custard has the sesame-and-scallion scent of *har gow*. A tequila sour, one of the bar's excellent cocktails, is textbook tart and bright but with an unexpected finishing note of sesame that softens the citrus edge and makes you sit up and take notice.

I had several such eye-opening moments in the course of my meals at Bridges. One came when my table was presented with a dish that the menu self-effacingly calls "cured tuna with mushrooms." It turned out to be a composed hors d'œuvre of dates, fudgy and sweet, piled with successive layers of black trumpet mushroom; thin-sliced cured onion; and two kinds of cured tuna, supple loin and melting belly. The presentation was so stark and attention-grabbing—six roseate almost-rectangles on a plate—that the conversation at our table snapped into silence. Then a bite—the faceted sweetness and savoriness, the tender squish of it all—shocked us into shouts of delight. And I absolutely cannot stop thinking about a dish of four segments of leg from what must have been a truly enormous crab, which had been cooked just to the edge of firmness over an open grill, so that the crustacean's sweet flesh absorbed the faintest trace of smoke. They were served nearly

unadorned, with barely pickled daikon sliced paper-thin and ribboned onto a metal skewer, plus a bowl of a creamy béarnaise made with salted plum. Complex but not fussy, intelligent without sacrificing deliciousness, the dish embodies the ideal of indulgence through restraint. That level of grace made it even more disappointing to encounter those few dishes that felt discordant: a too-busy pork entrée paired bits of fatty neck and oddly gristly loin against an overwhelmingly offal-tasting sauce; a ghostly skirt of turbot splashed with Pernod was scattered with barely steamed cockles whose violent astringency seemed imported from an entirely different restaurant.

Helen, Help Me!

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

Like so many reservations these days, Bridges can be a tough one to land, not least because there always seems to be some chic new fashion collab or downtown film screening celebrating itself by renting the whole place out for the night. But the bar area up front is reserved for walk-ins, with a row of high stools along the counter and a few tables for small groups. The mood is slightly different there, more rakish, less refined, but with its own considerable charms, among them the pleasure of getting to watch the show inside the dining room unfold. The building Bridges occupies is slightly trapezoidal, with walls that narrow inward toward the back of the space. The effect, from the bar, is a bit like the forced perspective of a theatrical stage, the glass-brick wall framing the action like a proscenium. The fancy-people crowd—the woman slinking by in a Chopova Lowena midi skirt, the man air-kissing table to table in white-on-white wide-leg denim—will move on, in time, to the next impossibly in-demand restaurant, to play out the same see-and-be-seen against new scenery. But the eel dumplings, and the grill-perfumed crab, and that Comté tart, fairy mushrooms and all, will, for now, blessedly remain. ♦



Helen Rosner, a staff writer, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, *The Food Scene*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-food-scene/bridges-scene-and-substance-at-new-yorks-newest-hot-spot>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

The Talk of the Town

- **[Stopping the Press](#)**

By David Remnick | After spending years painting the media as the “enemy of the people,” Donald Trump is ready to intensify his battle against the journalists who cover him.

- **[R.F.K., Jr., Wants to Eliminate Fluoridated Water. He Used to Bottle and Sell It](#)**

By Charles Bethea | Donald Trump’s nominee to lead H.H.S. once started a bottled-water line, Keeper Springs. What was in it?

- **[John C. Reilly’s Lovelorn Alter Ego](#)**

By Michael Schulman | Figuring that he can fall back on vaudeville if his film career dries up, the actor has devised a new act, “Mister Romantic.”

- **[On the Block: Where Jerry Lewis and Buddy Hackett Once Schwitzed](#)**

By Bruce Handy | The tummlers have moved on, but the distinctive Friars Club building, in midtown, is going to the highest bidder.

- **[Speaking Irish with Kneecap](#)**

By Robert Sullivan | The rap trio from Béal Feirste, whose eponymous bio-pic won the NEXT Audience Award at Sundance, discover the joys of the Northeast Regional on their U.S. tour.

[Comment](#)

Stopping the Press

After spending years painting the media as the “enemy of the people,” Donald Trump is ready to intensify his battle against the journalists who cover him.

By [David Remnick](#)

November 30, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Charles Dickens, a journalist of such Victorian energies that he managed to write some fiction on the side, was a keen observer of human vanities. Of a minor figure in “Our Mutual Friend,” he wrote, “Mr. Podsnap was well to do, and stood very high in Mr. Podsnap’s opinion.” In our time, journalists have been made to

realize that they are widely viewed as Podsnaps: privileged peacocks, stubbornly unreflective, “happily acquainted” with their “own merit and importance.” Reliable outfits such as the Pew Research Center report that the news media, which, in the middle of the twentieth century, was among the most highly regarded institutions in public life, now dwells in a dank basement of distrust, alongside the members of the United States Congress.

And yet there is a difference between criticism and demonization. Donald Trump has spent years painting the press as the “enemy of the people,” though he is hardly the first modern President to do so. “Never forget, the press is the enemy,” Richard Nixon told Henry Kissinger, in the thick of the Watergate scandal. “Write that on a blackboard one hundred times.” Charles Colson, one of Nixon’s lieutenants, compiled an “enemies list,” which included the names of several dozen editors and reporters. (Richard Rovere, this magazine’s Washington correspondent at the time, made the cut.) The government tapped journalists’ telephones; two of Nixon’s Watergate henchmen, G. Gordon Liddy and E. Howard Hunt, discussed plans to assassinate the syndicated columnist Jack Anderson.

Trump bears at least as much resentment toward reporters as Nixon did, but his psychology is arguably more complicated, because he was initially a creation of the media. In the nineteen-eighties, as a real-estate hustler, he repeatedly called in to the tabloids about his exploits, real or imagined. He was the Donny Appleseed of the *New York Post*, tirelessly planting items in the soil of Page Six. More recently, Trump’s obsession with the Murdoch press, particularly Fox News, has grown so deep that he is attempting to fill crucial roles in his Administration with Fox hosts and commentators.

Trump is keenly aware that the ecology of the press has changed radically since Nixon’s day. Local papers have thinned or vanished entirely. The Old Guard outlets are struggling for audiences,

subscribers, and ad revenue. So, while Trump finds refuge and amplification in friendly ports—Fox News, Newsmax, Joe Rogan’s podcast, Elon Musk’s X—he has increasingly made plain his intent on doing battle with the rest from a position of strength. He often threatens violence and humiliation. Two years ago, at a rally held months after Politico published a draft of Justice Samuel Alito’s opinion overturning Roe v. Wade, Trump suggested a way to smoke out the source of the leak: “The reporter goes to jail. When the reporter learns that he’s going to be married in two days to a certain prisoner that’s extremely strong, tough, and mean, he will say, he or she, ‘I think I’m going to give you the information. Here’s the leaker, get me the hell out of here.’”

In his first term, Trump was so agitated about his coverage on CNN that he reportedly pushed the Department of Justice to block A.T. & T.’s acquisition of the network’s owner at the time, Time Warner. (The Justice Department denied any White House intervention, and eventually the deal went through.) Trump also is said to have urged the doubling of shipping rates for companies such as Amazon, a move that would have been onerous for Jeff Bezos, whose newspaper, the *Washington Post*, had the irritating habit of committing journalism critical of the Administration.

Media lawyers now fear that Trump will ramp up the deployment of subpoenas, specious lawsuits, court orders, and search warrants to seize reporters’ notes, devices, and source materials. They are gravely concerned that reporters and media institutions will be punished for leaking government secrets. The current Justice Department guidelines mandating extra procedural measures for subpoenas directed at journalists are just that: guidelines. They are likely to be shredded. Nearly every state provides journalists with at least a qualified privilege to withhold the identity of confidential sources, but there is no federal privilege, and Trump has opposed a bipartisan congressional bill that would create one, the so-called *PRESS* Act. “*REPUBLICANS MUST KILL THIS BILL!*” he posted on Truth Social.

Retribution is in the air. “We’re going to come after the people in the media who lied about American citizens, who helped Joe Biden rig Presidential elections,” Kash Patel, a leading MAGA soldier, said on Steve Bannon’s podcast. “Whether it’s criminally or civilly, we’ll figure that out.” Trump’s lawyers have already threatened or taken legal action against the *Times*, the Washington Post, CBS, ABC, Penguin Random House, and others.

The Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, meanwhile, calls for ending federal funding to NPR and PBS. It insists that there is “no legal entitlement” for the press to have access to the White House “campus.” Although Trump disavowed Project 2025 during his campaign, he has selected one of its authors, Brendan Carr, who is also an ideological ally of Elon Musk, to head the Federal Communications Commission.

A longer-range worry is that the Supreme Court may weaken or even overturn the 1964 landmark decision *New York Times v. Sullivan*. *Sullivan* limits the ability of public officials to sue journalists for defamation, finding that the Constitution guarantees that, at a minimum, journalists can write freely and critically about public officials, as long as they don’t publish statements that they know to be false, or probably so. Nixon regarded *Sullivan* as “virtually a license to lie.” Trump shares the sentiment. The legal protections established between *Sullivan* and Watergate have been eroding in recent years, and two sitting Justices, Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch, have been public about their eagerness to revisit the decision. The Court might decline to take a *Sullivan*-related case and simply let stand a state court’s or a federal district court’s limitation of it, resulting in a de-facto patchwork of local standards for press freedoms.

All these threats and potential actions are hardly the stuff of legal arcana or the frenzied obsessions of self-involved Podsnapians journalists. They are the arsenal of a would-be autocrat who seeks

to intimidate his critics, protect himself from scrutiny, and go on wearing away at the liberal democratic order. ♦



David Remnick has been the editor of The New Yorker since 1998 and a staff writer since 1992. He is the author of seven books; the most recent is “[Holding the Note](#),” a collection of his profiles of musicians.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/stopping-the-press>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Precious Bodily Fluids](#)

R.F.K., Jr., Wants to Eliminate Fluoridated Water. He Used to Bottle and Sell It

Donald Trump's nominee to lead H.H.S. once started a bottled-water line, Keeper Springs. What was in it?

By [Charles Bethea](#)

December 2, 2024

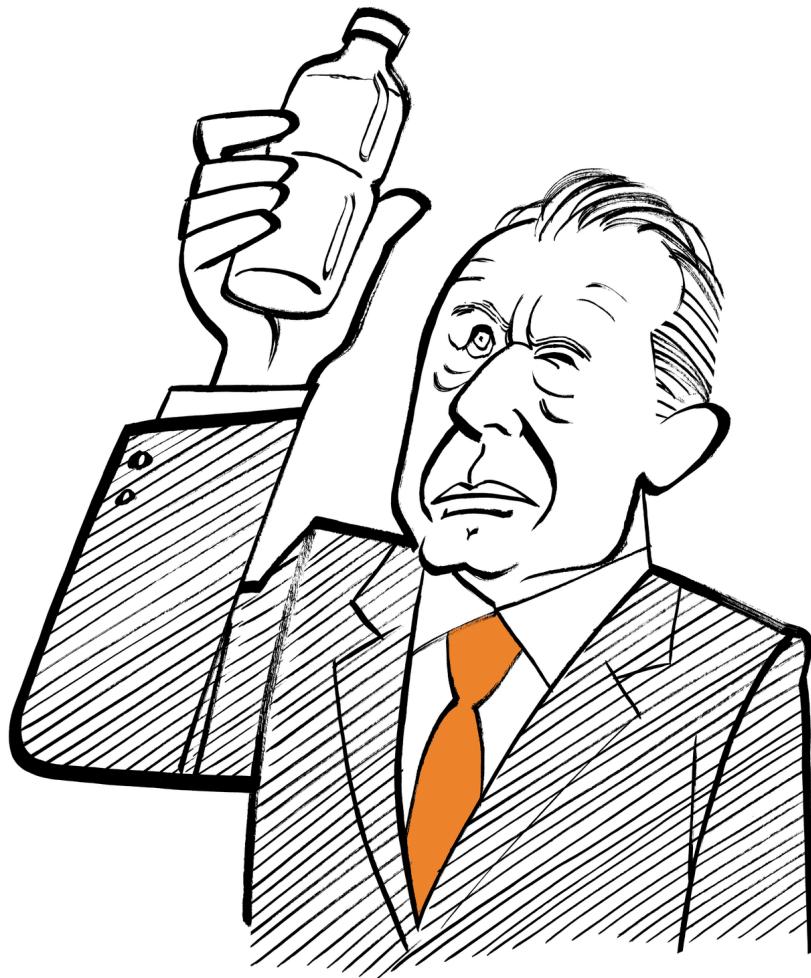


Illustration by João Fazenda

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., was skiing in upstate New York when it occurred to him: if a ski area can sell its own branded bottled water, why can't an environmental organization do the same? It was the late nineties. Kennedy had recently helped form the Waterkeeper Alliance, a network of environmental groups dedicated to cleaning up polluted waterways. In 1999, to support this work, he co-founded Keeper Springs bottled water. Michael (Aquadoc) Campana, who was a professor of hydrogeology and water-resources management at Oregon State University, later wrote a blog post entitled "Waterkeeper Alliance's Bottled Water Boondoggle," in which he compared Kennedy's funding method to "a church running a brothel to make money to support its mission." Campana listed the negatives: "Plastic bottles. Expense. Transportation costs and GHG emissions. Undermining support for public water supply systems. And so on." The *Times* called Kennedy's plan "seemingly incongruous." *New York* magazine asked, "So, he's selling the water in order to save it?"

But Kennedy persevered. Keeper Springs showed up on supermarket shelves alongside Evian. Its bottles were made from up to fifty per cent recycled PET plastic. A Tiffany designer came up with a red, white, and blue label featuring a mountain lake. The Manhattan ad agency DeVito/Verdi did a marketing campaign. "After just one sip, you've done more for the environment than most politicians," an early ad read. "To 532 endangered species it's holy water," another went. A third ad imagined the East River in the year 2026—the distant future at the time—with, as the *Times* noted, "New York's skyline serving as a panoramic backdrop" while "a beautiful woman swims in azure water" alongside dolphins.

Sounds nice. But sales were sluggish. "We lost money," Chris Bartle, Kennedy's law-school roommate at U.Va. and a Keeper Springs co-founder, has said. In 2006, the company reportedly sold a hundred thousand cases, but demand ran dry and Waterkeepers grew weary. "They were skeptical of the packaging," Bartle

explained recently. “No one believed we were gonna succeed, and PET recycling was just a joke,” he added. “It was a heroic effort, but Bobby and I just couldn’t bridge that gap.” Around 2013, Keeper Springs hung up its dipper.

Like Arrowhead, Poland Springs, and Zephyrhills, Keeper Springs had used Nestlé as a bottler and a distributor. Among Nestlé’s water sources was a mountain spring in California’s San Bernardino National Forest, where, according to regulators, the company had allegedly been exceeding its annual permitted allotment by more than fifty-four million gallons. In layman’s terms: more than a million bathtubs too many. It seemed like the kind of corporate abuse of a natural resource that Kennedy would have gone after in his eco-lawyering days. But he’d moved on to other things.

Since the nineteen-forties, fluoride has been added to America’s drinking-water supply, in an effort to fortify the citizenry’s teeth and bones. The John Birch Society deemed this practice a communist plot—an idea echoed by Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper in Stanley Kubrick’s “Dr. Strangelove”—but scientists say otherwise. In 2015, the C.D.C. called community water fluoridation “one of the ten greatest public health achievements” of the twentieth century. Kennedy disagrees, though not on anti-Marxist grounds. He has described fluoride as “an industrial waste associated with arthritis, bone fractures, bone cancer, IQ loss, neurodevelopmental disorders, and thyroid disease.” In early November, shortly before Donald Trump tapped him as the head of the Department of Health and Human Services, Kennedy spoke to NBC. “I think fluoride is on its way out,” he said. “I think the faster that it goes out, the better.” It could begin to go out on January 20th, he added, but he failed to recommend fluoride-free toothpastes for this brave new world.

As for any dusty bottles of Keeper Springs lying around: sip carefully. According to a 2009 chemical analysis, there was fluoride in Kennedy’s bottled water. Each serving of Keeper

Springs, this analysis determined, contained up to 1.3 milligrams of the mineral per litre. That's a higher concentration than is found in most tap water. Bartle laughed when a caller recently pointed this out. "That's hilarious," he said. "I didn't know that." Bartle called back a short time later. His wife had jogged his memory. "For a while, we had a source in upstate New York where the water was naturally fluoridated," he said. "These two Iranian guys owned it. It was a pretty neat scenario, but we didn't stay with them for long." In any case, he added, Kennedy didn't seem to have an issue with fluoride back then. "I never heard it mentioned." ♦



Charles Bethea, a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2008. He covers crime, politics, food, local media, and the American South.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/rfk-jr-wants-to-eliminate-fluoridated-water-he-used-to-bottle-and-sell-it>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Vaudeville Dept.](#)

John C. Reilly's Lovelorn Alter Ego

Figuring that he can fall back on vaudeville if his film career dries up, the actor has devised a new act, "Mister Romantic."

By [Michael Schulman](#)

December 2, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

“I’d always wanted to do a show where I came out of a box,” the actor John C. Reilly said the other day. For fifteen years, he kept a steamer trunk in storage, just in case. “Then I thought, I’m never going to do that show. I should get rid of that trunk—it takes up all this space. I got rid of the trunk, and a week later I was, like, No, I

am going to do it! I have to find another trunk! So I measured myself and looked on eBay, and within two days I had another trunk, and I spray-painted this stencil on it that says ‘Mister Romantic.’”

Mister Romantic is Reilly’s alter ego, a crooner in coattails who serenades audiences (“What’ll I Do,” “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”) on a quest for everlasting love. For the past two years, Reilly has been sporadically performing the character in a roaming, semi-improvised solo act, in under-the-radar engagements in Los Angeles and elsewhere; he did his first show two days after wrapping the HBO series “Winning Time.” “I realized, if actors can’t make money on residuals anymore, what’s my long-term plan?” he said, grinning. “When the going gets tough, the tough go to vaudeville!”

Reilly was in a room at the Chelsea Hotel, sipping boba tea. He was in town to promote a Disney stop-motion short, “An Almost Christmas Story,” inspired by an owl that was found in the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree in 2020; Reilly plays a balladeer. Meanwhile, he’d arranged for Mister Romantic to make an appearance at the hotel, partly in the hope of drumming up an Off Broadway run. “I was nervous about coming here after the election last week,” he said. “But then I remembered why I started doing Mister Romantic in the first place—our world was becoming kind of coarse, the way we’re treating each other. You see these reality shows, where people are always despicable. If we’re going to get out of the jam we’re in, the world needs more empathy.”

As he fretted, a crease formed between the top of his nose and his Cro-Magnon brow. Mister Romantic grew out of “Mister Cellophane,” his number from the movie “Chicago.” He described the new show: “Essentially, this band comes into the theatre, and a steamer trunk is delivered onto the stage. Impossibly, I come out of the trunk and say, ‘Hello, my name’s Mister Romantic. I don’t know what happened before. All I know is that I have to stay in that

box. When I come out of the box, I have to put on a show. And I don't have to go back into the box if I can find one person who will love me—*forever*.' Then I do these very romantic songs about love and unrequited love and love that never was, and I talk to people. I fail every night, and I have to go back into the box. But what I say at the end of the show is 'Well, even though I couldn't get a single one of you to love me forever, what I've realized is I love all of you. And that's something!' And I get back in the box and get shoved offstage."

Reilly wore a three-piece Glen-plaid suit, which was not his costume but just what he'd put on that day. ("At some point in my life, I decided, You're an eccentric person, so you should dress however you want.") Mister Romantic wears a tuxedo and a black bowler, like "someone who's been in mothballs for a hundred years," he said. Back home, Reilly has some fifty hats. He also collects amateur clown paintings. He learned clowning at his church youth group, in Chicago. At drama school, he planned to apply to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Clown College, in Florida, which promised a circus contract, but an acting teacher warned that he'd be shovelling elephant dung. He stayed in Chicago and wound up in a Steppenwolf production of "The Grapes of Wrath," kicking off a prolific career as a character actor with a specialty in guileless dopes. Like Mister Romantic, he still struggles with feeling lovable. "I don't look like your average bear," he said.

Hours later, a few dozen invited guests crammed into the hotel's velvety piano room. Mister Romantic emerged to the sounds of a cornet-bell combo, holding a microphone shaped like a rose. He wore a tie looped like a bow tie, his hair fluffed to Larry-from-the-Stooges proportions. "I'm so happy to be out of that box!" he said. He stumbled over the spectators and flirted with a woman named Margaret, to whom he sang "La Vie en Rose." "May I show you my heart?" he asked, pulling a drawing of a heart from his jacket. "Margaret, do you think you could love me—*forever*?"

“I don’t think it’s going to work out,” she replied.

“I appreciate your honesty,” he said, glum but undaunted. A few rejections later, Mister Romantic looked out and asked, “How’s your week been?” Groans. “At least you’re not living in a box.” ♦



Michael Schulman, a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2006. He is the author of “*Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat, and Tears*” and “*Her Again: Becoming Meryl Streep*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/john-c-reillys-lovelorn-alter-ego>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Borscht Belt Dept.](#)

On the Block: Where Jerry Lewis and Buddy Hackett Once Schvitzed

The tumblers have moved on, but the distinctive Friars Club building, in midtown, is going to the highest bidder.

By [Bruce Handy](#)

December 2, 2024

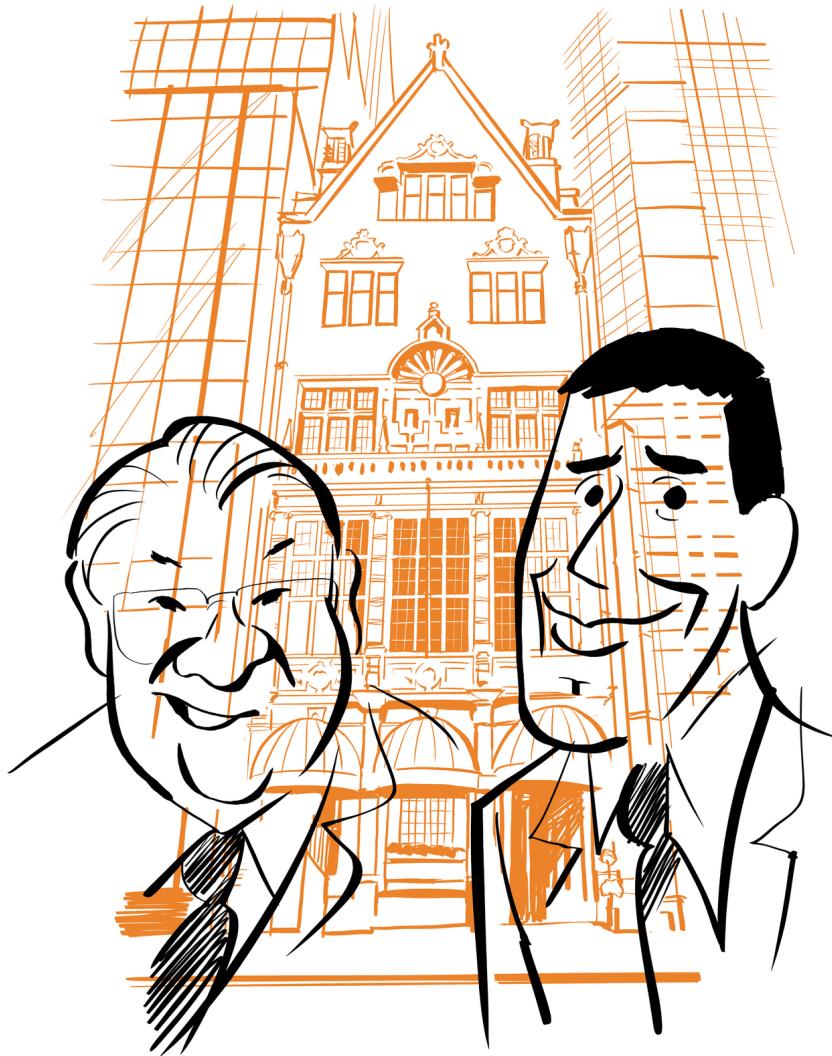


Illustration by João Fazenda

It was a drizzly November morning: perfect weather for picking over a carcass. The remains in question were the Jerry Lewis

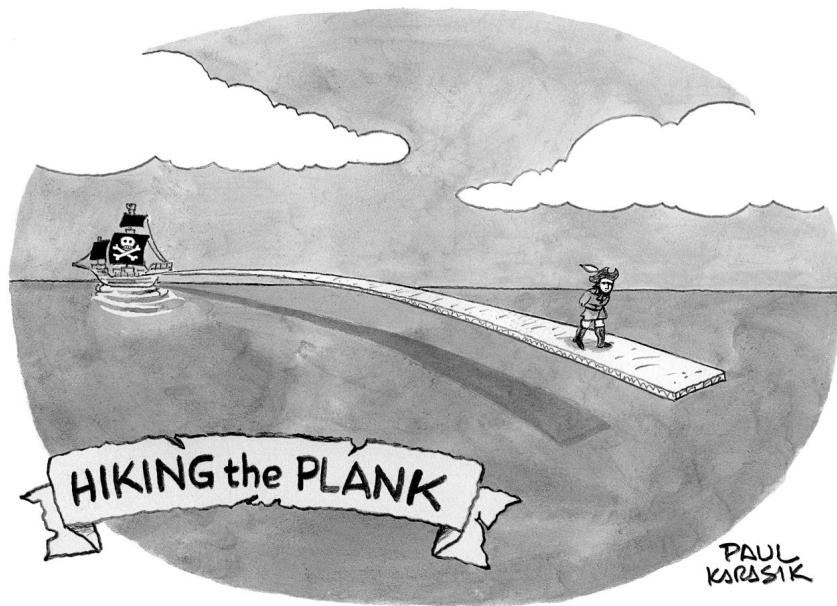
Monastery, as the Friars Club’s home on East Fifty-fifth Street is formally known. But with the club having defaulted, last year, on what was originally a thirteen-million-dollar mortgage, the six-story town house had gone into foreclosure and was now up for auction. A cluster of real-estate professionals and hospitality-industry types had gathered out front for a tour.

The Friars, founded, in 1904, as a club for press agents and performers, eventually gained fame for its large membership of comedians, among them Milton Berle, Buddy Hackett, Sheeky Greene, and, more recently, Gilbert Gottfried and Jimmy Fallon; Lucille Ball and Phyllis Diller were among the first female members, admitted in 1988. If nothing else, the club will forever have a place in show-business history as the originator of the celebrity roast. But recent decades have seen its membership rolls dwindle amid varying degrees of mismanagement. In 2019, a former executive director pleaded guilty to filing false tax returns. In 2020, a burst pipe flooded much of the Monastery, forcing it to close its doors—“Shut tighter than a Kardashian butt-lift,” as Cindy Adams put it in the *Post*. The club reopened in 2021, but lost its trademark that same year, got ensnared in labor disputes, and shuttered, seemingly for good, in the spring of 2023, after the default. Adding insult to injury, the lender claimed in court papers that the Monastery was in a sorry state, citing trash, evidence of vermin, and containers full of “unidentifiable liquid waste.”

Among the people on the sidewalk was Asher Alcobi, a broker who was representing a hedge-fund owner interested in converting the club into a headquarters. Alcobi, himself a former Friar, scoffed at rumors that a rich comedian had put together a consortium to buy the club and restore it to its former glory. “A guy like that could buy a car for two million dollars and not blink,” Alcobi said, “but ask him for a hundred thousand dollars? Forget it.”

He was joined by a colleague, the ninety-six-year-old Bernie Tedlis, who has been a Friar since 1969. “I was on the board of

governors with Alan King,” he said. He was introduced to the club by a friend from kindergarten. He never forgot the time a Friar showed him a card trick that began the usual way, with Tedlis picking a card and sliding it back into the deck. The member then threw the cards against a wall. “They splattered everywhere,” Tedlis recalled. “But mine stuck to the wall. I said, ‘Whoa, I got to join this place!’ ”



Cartoon by Paul Karasik

It was time to go inside. The Monastery had been tidied up: no garbage, no unidentifiable liquid waste. On the sixth floor, in the Buddy Howe/Sal Greco Health Club, a haphazard pile of towels at least looked clean. In a kitchen off the Barbra Streisand Room, dishes were stacked on shelves, alongside a sign that read “Do not stack on this shelf! Broken!” and a binder from Victory Pest Solutions (motto: “Protecting brands and reputations”). Some candlesticks in a pantry with Chuck Barris’s name on the door appeared undisturbed. A picture of the late Richard Lewis stared back at anyone using the urinals in the basement men’s room.

The “tour” was more of an open house, with groups of people roaming around. Up in the health club, Tedlis remembered the time the songwriter Irving Caesar serenaded him in the steam room with

his hit “Tea for Two.” Tedlis added, “The rule at the club was no matter how you felt when you walked in, you felt better when you walked out.”

Nominally in charge was Mickey Salzman, a vice-president at Northgate Real Estate Group, the company holding the auction. Friendly but harried as he tried to maintain order, Salzman said that potential bidders fell into “five different buckets,” depending on what they might use the property for: private club, restaurant, boutique hotel, “single-flagship retail,” and, most intriguing, embassy or consulate. (Perhaps Freedonia’s?) Salzman didn’t say whether the auction had a floor price, but two comparable properties on the Upper East Side are each priced at above fifty million dollars. The Monastery’s German Renaissance exterior is landmarked, but the interior, with its wood panelling, plaster ceilings, stained glass, and other Gothic details, is not. While some appraisers delighted in these touches, a man with renovation experience cautioned, “It’s wonderful, but you have to see what’s behind the curtain. How’s the wiring? Is there mold? You don’t know how much asbestos is there.” Renovating the Monastery, he guessed, might cost twice as much as gutting it.

“It’s heartbreaking, but comedians aren’t typically good businesspeople,” someone remarked back in the lobby. It was time to leave; the bones had been fully inspected. ♦

Bruce Handy is a contributing editor at Vanity Fair and an author of children’s books including “The Book from Far Away.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/on-the-block-where-jerry-lewis-and-buddy-hackett-once-schvitzed>

[The Musical Life](#)

Speaking Irish with Kneecap

The rap trio from Béal Feirste, whose eponymous bio-pic won the NEXT Audience Award at Sundance, discover the joys of the Northeast Regional on their U.S. tour.

By [Robert Sullivan](#)

December 2, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

The members of the Irish-language hip-hop group Kneecap, Liam Óg Ó Hannaidd, Naoise Ó Cairealláin, and JJ Ó Dochartaigh—stage names Mo Chara, Mógláí Bap, and DJ Próvaí—jumped out of an Uber at 30th Street Station in Philadelphia the other day. After glancing at the train schedule, the three Northern Ireland residents raided a Pret a Manger, conferring with each other in Irish. (“If you can’t understand what we’re saying, that’s because we’re speaking Irish,” Ó Cairealláin had told a crowd in Philly the night before.) They wrestled their giant suitcases down escalators to their track. Opening the food, Ó Hannaidd posed a question to his mates: “*An bhfuil ubh ag teastáil ó aon duine?*,” or “Does anybody want an egg?”

It wasn’t Kneecap’s first trip to America; that was at the outbreak of *COVID*, in 2020, when their gig was cancelled and they got stranded in Boston. This time, they were touring after “Kneecap,” their eponymous bio-pic, won the NEXT Audience Award at Sundance, the first Irish-language film ever to play there. The trio subsequently appeared on “The Tonight Show,” and this summer Ireland submitted their film for an Oscar, in the international-feature category. On the Northeast Regional to Moynihan Station, they squeezed into two seats facing one another, knees bumping. “This is incredible,” Ó Cairealláin said.

“Very intimate,” Ó Hannaidd added. “This would be illegal at home.”

The “Kneecap” movie, in which the rappers play themselves, depicts the rise of the group, whose members become part of a civil-rights campaign to make Irish a legal language in Northern Ireland. The film blends fact and fiction, though some of the most unbelievable parts are true. Ó Dochartaigh really was teaching Irish-language classes at a Catholic school when a video on social media inspired an investigation. (“A masked member moons the camera with ‘Brits Out’ across his buttocks,” a nuns’ report noted.)

“I used a Sharpie, yeah,” Ó Dochartaigh recalled.

Also true: their music was banned on public radio because of its drug references, a criticism that conservative Northern Irish papers still raise and that the band sees as a distraction from the fact that their generation, the so-called Ceasefire Babies, born since the Good Friday Agreement, are living through a well-documented mental-health crisis: the suicide rate in Northern Ireland has doubled since 1998. “Belfast is a very medicated place,” Ó Hannaidd said. “To deal with it would mean the British government would have to consider what the problems are—”

“In a different way,” Ó Cairealláin said.

“It’s the post-colonial stress disorder,” Ó Dochartaigh said.

It is *not* true, on the other hand, that Ó Hannaidd, upon being arrested for drug use, refused to speak to the authorities without an Irish-speaking translator. In fact, the detained Irish speaker was a friend of Ó Hannaidd’s. But all three Kneecap members have been involved in the Irish-language-rights movement that, in 2022, resulted in the British Parliament making Irish a legal language in Northern Ireland. In the film, Ó Cairealláin’s father, played by Michael Fassbinder, is an I.R.A. soldier in hiding; in real life, the elder Ó Cairealláin is a language-revival star. He helped found *Lá* —the first Irish-language daily newspaper in Belfast—as well as the Irish cultural center An Chultúrlann and Raidió Fáilte, which broadcasts the elder Ó Cairealláin’s weekly Elvis Presley show. “Yeah, so all the bits in between the songs—that’s all in Irish, and it’s very funny,” Ó Dochartaigh said.

On the train, the three talked about visiting America. “There was a girl in San Francisco, and she knew all the words to what we were singing,” Ó Cairealláin said, “but when we spoke to her in Irish she didn’t know what we were saying.” They cancelled a trip to Austin last spring, in protest of weapons manufacturers that were

sponsoring SXSW, but drove a Land Rover painted to resemble a Northern Irish police van to Utah for Sundance, to the chagrin of the Park City police. “They told us to get out of town,” Ó Hannaidh said.

Near the Meadowlands, the views of swamps recalled “The Sopranos”—“He’s a big fan,” Ó Dochartaigh said, of Ó Cairealláin—as well as Manchán Magan, an Irish-language activist featured on “Drug Dealin Pagans,” a track on their new album. Magan is the author of “Thirty-Two Words for Field,” a book about the Irish language and landscape. “If you lose the language of a place, you lose everything that goes with that,” Ó Dochartaigh said. “Belfast is Béal Feirste. It means ‘the mouth of the River Farset,’ so it tells ye the geography of the area.”

The train descended into the Hudson River tunnels, and the musicians reached for their luggage. “Basically, we’re just trying to give the diaspora something besides leprechauns to think about,” Ó Dochartaigh said. ♦

Robert Sullivan is the author of books including “[Double Exposure](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/speaking-irish-with-kneecap>

Reporting & Essays

- **[The Philosopher L. A. Paul Wants Us to Think About Our Selves](#)**

By Alice Gregory | To whom should we have allegiance—the version of ourself making choices, or the version of ourself who will be affected by them?

- **[Converting to Judaism in the Wake of October 7th](#)**

By Jeannie Suk Gersen | For decades, I maintained a status quo of living like a Jew without being one. When I finally pursued conversion, I discovered that I was part of a larger movement born of crisis.

- **[Javier Milei Wages War on Argentina's Government](#)**

By Jon Lee Anderson | The President, a libertarian economist given to outrageous provocations, wants to remake the nation. Can it survive his shock-therapy approach?

- **[The New Business of Breakups](#)**

By Jennifer Wilson | After getting dumped (by text), a writer investigates the feverish boom in heartbreak apps, breakup coaches, and get-over-him getaways.

[Profiles](#)

The Philosopher L. A. Paul Wants Us to Think About Our Selves

To whom should we have allegiance—the version of ourself making choices, or the version of ourself who will be affected by them?

By [Alice Gregory](#)

December 2, 2024



“I have a slightly campy side,” Paul, a professor of philosophy at Yale and the author of “Transformative Experience,” said.

Photograph by Jordan Tiberio for The New Yorker

The Sonoran Desert, which covers much of the southwestern United States, is a vast expanse of arid earth where cartoonish entities—roadrunners, tumbleweeds, telephone-pole-tall succulents—make occasional appearances. It was in this iconic, Looney Tunes landscape that dozens of philosophers gathered in the winter of 2022 at a three-thousand-acre dude ranch on the outskirts of Tucson, Arizona, as if inhabiting a thought experiment of their own design. Between archery practice and lassoing lessons, they met in an adobe structure, where there was talk of “inconsistency relations” and “the concept of entailment.” “How does ‘probably’ work?” was unanimously agreed to be one of the more polarizing questions a person could ask.

They were there to attend the Ranch Metaphysics Workshop, an annual conference conceived of nearly twenty years ago by Laurie Paul, a professor of philosophy at Yale University. Paul is the author of “Transformative Experience,” a widely read philosophical investigation of personal change which has been translated into French, Japanese, and Arabic, with German and Mandarin translations in the works. Paul, whose work won the 2020 Lebowitz Prize for philosophical achievement, had selected the ranch for its small dining hall, which she hoped might foster intimate conversation. She wanted the event to combine the rigorous discussion of more typical academic conferences with, as she put it to me, “being kind of nice.” It was an attempt, if only for a few days a year, to socially engineer some of the bullying out of a field infamous for an intellectual aggression so intense that reducing an interlocutor to tears was long considered a mark of successful debate.

“You’re just doing stuff together, and it’s completely separate from the kind of in-your-head activity that philosophy is,” Ned Hall, a philosopher at Harvard University who helped Paul with the workshop’s early iterations, told me. “You’re riding horses! And no one’s any good at it!” Equestrian sport: the great equalizer. (The setting was also an inside joke of sorts about the celebrated

philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine, who was known for a minimalist world view that he once described as being similar to a “taste for desert landscapes.”)

“I have a slightly campy side,” Paul, whose strong, symmetrical features made her choice to dress like John Wayne appear elegant rather than foolish, told me. She gestured behind her to a fire pit. Around it were a dozen or so people, many of whom, at Paul’s urging, were also decked out in Western wear. Among them was Ram Neta, a philosopher at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who’d been happy to put on a plaid shirt but had drawn the line, earlier in the day, at a cowboy hat—Paul’s own—which she had playfully placed atop his head prior to his lecture. “Sorry, I can’t do this,” he told the audience, before removing the hat and asking—with the aid of an equation scribbled on a whiteboard—“What are opinions?”

Beyond the ranch loomed a hill where, that morning, José Luis Bermúdez, a philosopher from Texas A. & M. University, had given an outdoor lecture featuring allusions to Shakespeare, Erving Goffman, and an alternate-reality Mycenaean king he called Agamemnon-minus. Getting to the top of the hill had taken about an hour on horseback, and, with the exception of a philosopher from U.C.L.A., who spent the ride explaining black holes to a ranch hand, most of the riders had trotted quietly in single file.

Paul’s work pushes back against a powerful trend in philosophy, which, as it’s practiced today, can at times look more like science than literature. For the past century, one of the field’s aims has been to eradicate vagueness and the inconsistencies that arise when we speak and write—to make language more closely resemble arithmetic. The approach, taken up in Vienna in the nineteen-twenties and thirties and eventually exported to America, augmented speculative, descriptive, and semireligious inquiries with formulas and sprawling mathematical proofs. This relentless, sometimes neurotic-seeming pursuit of clarity has had the ironic

effect of rendering much of contemporary philosophy nearly indecipherable to outsiders.

At the ranch, as philosophers herded cattle and drank tequila, Paul and I took a walk through a scrubby expanse. The heels of her black cowboy boots, stepping across the soil, created a dust cloud that obscured her feet. Paul explained that, in her field, first-person experience—“squishiness,” as she put it—typically goes undiscussed. She, however, thought that it could be handled precisely and rigorously, in the same fashion that her colleagues might talk through how many grains of sand constitute a heap. Paul believes that her discipline’s tools can, as she says, “give us a kind of wisdom, and meaning to living,” but she is determined that they not obscure the questions to which they are applied. We are meant to admire statues, after all, not the chisels with which they are carved.

“I just feel that experience has a kind of value,” Paul said hesitantly, as if she believed herself to be saying something controversial. Philosophy tends to attract people who, she said, “like being detached from ordinary life.” A shadow cast by a century-old saguaro cactus flashed across her face. “Whereas I’m totally puzzled and fascinated and disturbed by ordinary life, and I have been since, like, middle school.” It had been about ten years since Paul first asked her colleagues—in a discipline that takes for granted the question of what it might be like to be a bat—to consider what it might be like to be a parent.

“Transformative Experience,” published, like all her writing, under the name L. A. Paul, and released by Oxford University Press in 2014, was her attempt to examine, in roughly two hundred pages, the special types of situations that change not only what we know but also who we are. These transformative experiences provide new knowledge that previously would have been inaccessible to us, and with that knowledge our preferences, values, and self-conception are fundamentally altered. A religious conversion might be an

example of a transformative experience. So might losing a limb or taking LSD or going to war. But it was having a child that gave Paul the idea for the book, and, indeed, having a child became its central, if not always explicit, theme.

The book grew out of a working paper, ultimately titled “What You Can’t Expect When You’re Expecting,” that Paul had first presented at a talk two years earlier. In it, she argued that the conventional tools of decision-making do not work when choosing whether to have a child. The “natural approach”—reflecting on what it would be like, appealing to the testimony of other people—was, she argued, insufficient. And no analogous experience (babysitting a niece, say) could ever get you anything but a faulty approximation of the real one. The question of whether to have a child was, for Paul, a sort of riddle that illuminated the limits of rationality. She explored the question through the framework of normative decision theory, whose premise is that we ought to act to maximize expected value, whatever it might be—personal happiness, say, or annual company profits, or a population’s average life expectancy. (The idea’s most elegant encapsulation is Pascal’s wager, which makes the utilitarian case for believing in God: “If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing.”) But such logic, Paul argues, fails in the face of a transformative experience. Choosing to undergo such an experience, on the occasions when choice is even possible, requires us to violate who we take our current self to be. To whom should we have allegiance—the version of ourself making choices, or the version of ourself affected by those choices?

Paul had been living in Canberra, Australia, on a research fellowship at the Australian National University when she had her first child, in January, 2004. Her due date had been in December—summer there—and she spent the last, very hot few weeks of her pregnancy shuffling around the campus at night, often with her husband, the Irish sociologist Kieran Healy. Paul was reading the books she was supposed to be reading to prepare, but she felt

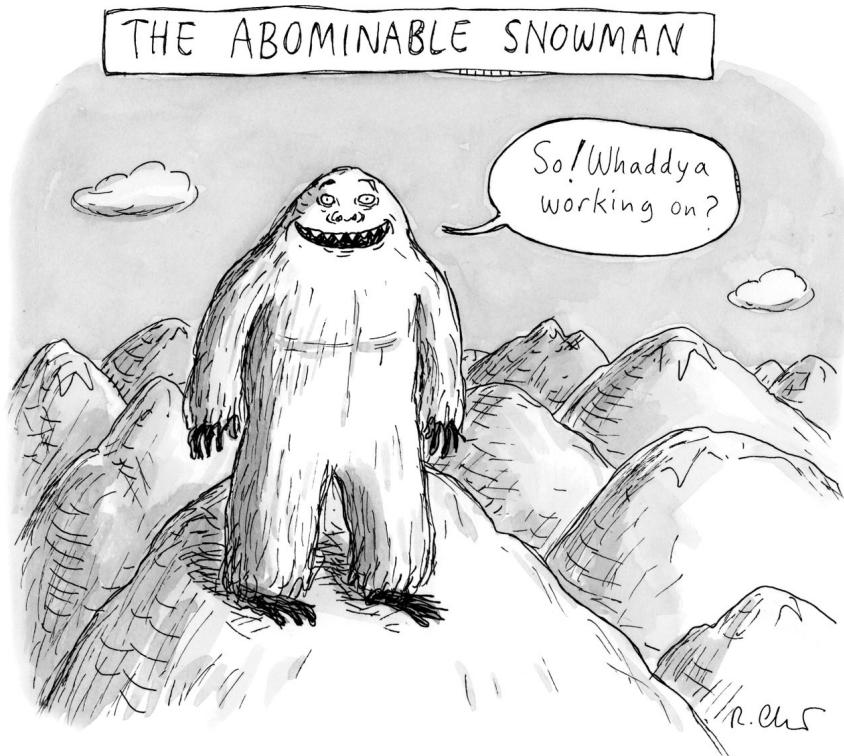
alienated by their “cheery assessments” of what pregnancy was like, and she had the impression that, if anything, the books were lulling her into a false sense of control. Once, she became so frustrated that she hurled one of the volumes across the room. A week passed, and then another. When she finally went into labor, a nurse at the hospital asked if she had brought a mirror. Did she want one, to watch the birth as it happened? “I was, like, ‘Um, O.K., sure,’ ” Paul recalled. “But, before, I had been thinking to myself, No, I’m really not interested in seeing a lot of blood.”

Paul said that she had felt like “a medieval machine, a giant wheel cranking and slowly pulling giant heavy doors open.” She was overwhelmed, unable to comprehend what was going to happen. When she had imagined the scene, it had always been in the third person. Now she *was* that person. “And they just fundamentally conflict,” Paul said. “They’re not the same perspective, and there’s no way for them to come together.” But looking at herself in the mirror giving birth “made the incoherent coherent,” she said. “It broke all the regular ways I previously knew how to make sense of myself.” (Paul has consistently maintained that physically bearing one’s own child, as opposed to adopting one, is not a prerequisite for the epistemic changes that she identifies as most important.)

By the time Paul gave the lecture, in 2012, she was forty-six and had two children in elementary school. “It was pretty amazing to me that philosophers were not talking about this,” she recalled. But a righteous sense that her peers were failing to address the experience of having a child did not quell her anxiety about being the one to do so. “This is going to ruin my career,” Paul remembers thinking. “It’s all going to be over, because here I am talking about *babies*.”

But the opposite happened. When a draft of the paper appeared online, in 2013, it was met with extensive coverage, both on academic blogs and on the Web sites of mainstream publications, including this one. In an NPR piece, the psychologist Tania

Lombrozo called the paper an “elegant fusion of real life with real philosophy.” There were critiques: some philosophers quibbled with the specifics of Paul’s decision modelling, others with the solipsism of focussing so much on the expectant parent rather than on the child or the world writ large. But the general response was an enthusiastic desire for Paul to expand her argument. The paper was published in a special issue of *Res Philosophica*, a prominent philosophy quarterly, accompanied by thirteen other papers replying to it.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

“Transformative Experience” came out a year later. Like Paul herself, its style is approachable and friendly. The epigraph is a quotation from A. A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh series, and its extended opening thought experiment involves vampires. As is true of most works of academic philosophy, the book can feel repetitive. (Paul considers the repetition necessary and has compared it to examining a cut gemstone—holding it up to the light and turning it slowly to see every all-but-identical facet.) Yet, given the subject matter, the repetition is more poetic than redundant. “For many big life choices, we only learn what we need to know after we’ve done

it, and we change ourselves in the process of doing it,” she writes. Paul argues for revelation. She contends that we should make our choices with humility—on the basis of “whether we want to discover who we’ll become.”

Transformative experience now has its own entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. It has been the subject of a modern-dance performance, an Italian art fair, a multiauthored volume put out by Oxford University Press, and, this past spring, a conference at Yale, featuring prominent academics from across disciplines, including the psychologist Paul Bloom, the cognitive scientist Molly Crockett, and the philosopher Agnes Callard. The conference “revealed her place in the field, intellectually,” Callard told me. The notion of transformative experience was an “enduring paradigm shift.”

Not everyone is convinced of Paul’s argument. Elizabeth Barnes, a philosopher at the University of Virginia, told me that the idea of privileging “the mom version of me” over the version “who is considering bringing her into being” makes her uncomfortable. “I think it’s totally rational to preserve your current values!” Barnes said. The British philosopher Richard Pettigrew wrote a rejoinder of a book in which he argued for a complicated system of value ratings that could be averaged together, resulting in a kind of democratic vote between selves. Many questioned how to articulate what, exactly, might count as a transformative experience: for the idea to have value, the classification would have to be quite narrow. But how narrow, and who decides?

Even those who disagree with Paul’s approach tend to admire, however grudgingly, its cleverness. “It was very canny,” Christopher Meacham, a philosopher at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, told me of Paul’s choice to frame the dilemma through decision theory. “It was good branding, good marketing,” he added, insisting that he did “not mean that in a derogatory way at all.” Most parents, he said, are not “close-

reading the happiness studies or throwing up the charts, but we *do* ask ourselves, ‘When can we afford to do this? How will having a child change the trajectory of our careers?’ ” Still, Meacham said that he was not “super convinced” about Paul’s formulation.

“If you just summarize Laurie’s conclusion, there is a flatness to it,” Callard told me. “But that’s *all* philosophy. I mean, what does Descartes conclude? That the external world exists! But on the way there he also came up with a bunch of good arguments for why it maybe didn’t.”

Like Paul’s original article, “Transformative Experience” received significant attention in the mainstream press. In the *Times*, David Brooks devoted a column to it, calling Paul’s formulation of the dilemma “ingenious.” The book made Paul one of a handful of contemporary philosophers whose work is familiar to people outside academia.

Sometime around 2018, I became one of those people. And when I approached Paul about the possibility of a profile, it was in the spirit of self-help. I was thirty-one and obsessed with whether or not I should have a child. The question felt huge and opaque—like one that neither data nor anecdote could solve. I thought about it all the time, though “thinking” is probably too precise a verb. It was more like a constant buzz, scoring the background of daily life in a tone that registered somewhere between urgency and tedium. The bad parts were easy to picture: less sleep, less time, less money. The awesome parts—expelling a new person out of my own body, say—were, quite literally, inconceivable. The dilemma felt impossible, as if I were attempting to convert dollars into the currency of a country that didn’t yet exist.

It did not help that every week it seemed that some gifted writer published a book or an anguished piece of first-person writing about the psychological perils of procreation. Having a baby was *brutal*. It was *annihilating*. Its effects were both devastatingly

material and mystically vague. These memoirs—sometimes they were essays or “novels”—were collectively spoken of as a new genre of literature, representing an urgent corrective to the rosy, delusional portrayal of motherhood that had apparently come before, of which neither I nor anyone I knew could think of a single serious example. I read these books as I would gossip magazines at the grocery store: quickly and with a frantic, dismissive pleasure.

I found Paul’s work, meanwhile, to be therapeutic. It provided exactly the sort of comfort I always sought in moments of anguish: not a solution or advice, or even a description, but the validation that, yes, the problem really was as major and intractable as I thought. I liked (of course I liked) that her academic concerns about the subject were oriented not around climate change or orphans but around, for all intents and purposes, *me*. There was some solace in the knowledge that here was a person trying—as philosophers do, at their best—to lend intellectual credibility to what might otherwise remain private emotional intuitions. The fact that I was unfamiliar with the formal logic that undergirded Paul’s work seemed irrelevant.

When we met for the first time, in 2018, it was in Paul’s wood-panelled office at Yale, and she indulged my naïve, nontechnical curiosity about her work. I recounted to her my conversations with other people about the issue. “It’s always more interesting to do something than not to do it,” one friend had argued. “It’s the best way to stop thinking about yourself all the time,” a friend’s mother had said, with a little edge. The chance to fall in love with someone I’d never met—an argument I occasionally made to myself—was appealing, I told Paul, as was the idea, in the words of one nonreligious friend, of “finally knowing what your soul is for.” Paul, who had once described such ruminations as “an interesting exercise in imaginative fiction,” was gentle in her response.

She reiterated what she had written in her book: the testimony of other people should be regarded with wariness. This struck me as

self-evidently correct. I obviously could not trust the guidance of people who did not have children (they didn't have children), but neither could I trust the guidance of people who did have children (they had children!). I rattled off all the other circumstantial reasons that my friends' thoughts on the matter should have no bearing on my own: one had parents who lived nearby; another wasn't interested in having a career; a few were extremely wealthy; two lived in *Berlin*. Why would I listen to them? I left Paul's office embarrassed to have come to her with such commonplace concerns, but also reassured by her affirmation that, yes, I was right to be troubled by them.

Paul dates the origin of her intellectual life to her adolescence, which she spent enduring, as she has said, "the extremely boring suburbs of Chicago" and reading "*The Lord of the Rings*." Paul, the eldest of three children, described herself as "the second most unpopular person in school." (This was less an attempt at humor than a quantitative analysis: Paul still recalls the name—and the enthusiasms—of the most unpopular person.) Puzzled by her low rank in the social hierarchy, Paul thought, I need to analyze this. Why was she being made fun of? What was she doing wrong?

By the end of this examination, Paul had changed nearly everything about herself: her hair, her clothes, her gait, her gestures. She stopped trying to talk to her peers about Tolkien and joined the badminton team. It was a success. "I constructed a response that ultimately worked," she told me. Paul made friends. Soon, she was dating a baseball player.

Paul recounted this gut renovation of her personality and appearance without shame. This was not a story about someone who had forsaken her true self to please others. This was a story about someone who had identified an obstacle and, through dogged accounting, surmounted it. Paul has come to think of this period as the beginning of her decades-long attempt to decipher life as it is lived, not as it is schematized by contemporary philosophy.

But the tools that Paul needed to do such work were not yet at her disposal. She attended Antioch College, a small liberal-arts school in rural Ohio known for its radical politics, lack of grades, and chronic underfunding. At Antioch, philosophy “seemed to consist of meditation exercises,” as Paul once put it, recalling a fellow-student making a photo mobile for his senior thesis. She majored in chemistry and biology, and planned to be a doctor. But, during an admissions interview at Harvard Medical School, she changed her mind. She remembers looking out at the imposing edifice of Widener Library and having an almost aesthetic epiphany: she wanted to be part of an intellectual community like the one she saw in front of her, and medical school did not belong in that vision. Paul went home and withdrew all her applications.

Paul eventually enrolled in a Master of Arts program at Antioch University in which students designed their own academic course of study. While deciding on a direction, she got a job doing airport pickups and drop-offs for professors who had speaking engagements at Antioch. One day, she was sent to retrieve Quentin Smith, then a philosopher at Purdue University. That drive resulted in a reading assignment (Heidegger’s “Being and Time”), a pronouncement (“You are a philosopher”), and a directive (“Study with me”). Paul attended Smith’s talk at Antioch—though she has no memory of it—and they exchanged contact information.

But she still couldn’t figure out her academic path. Her father, a health-insurance executive, and her mother, a nurse, were disappointed that she was not pursuing medicine, and Paul decided that until she knew what she wanted to study—and could explain it convincingly—it was better to tell them as little as possible. She studied German in Berlin and then Buddhist philosophy at a monastery in India, but left frustrated with a teacher’s insistence on the need for faith. She returned to Antioch, where Smith had been appointed a visiting professor, and entered into an intellectual apprenticeship with him.

Smith was considered strange. He stared at the stars for hours on end, and was rumored to have dug a hole at the beach and attempted to live in it. Paul was uncertain how much of Smith's personality was a performance and how much was real. He was interested in the origins of the universe and whether there was a God—"Not questions I was interested in," Paul said—but they both agreed that the significance of experience had been neglected by contemporary philosophy, or what little Paul knew of it.

Smith suggested that Paul read widely and reach out to philosophers whose work intrigued her. Perhaps, he said, they would agree to correspond with her for a modest sum. A letter-writing campaign resulted in a sort of pedagogical supervision-by-mail with three of them. Paul offered each a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar personal check and asked if they would reply to letters about their work, as well as comment on a paper of her own. They agreed to correspond with her, she now suspects, "not quite knowing what they were signing up for." Every two weeks for many months, Paul mailed at least twenty typewritten pages to each philosopher, attempting to dissect their arguments one by one. They responded to all of Paul's letters. By the end of the experiment, Paul felt surer of herself. She wrote a paper about the philosophy of time—"Truth Conditions of Tensed Sentence Types"—and used that, along with letters of recommendation from her epistolary tutors, to apply to twenty graduate programs, which she chose based on which had the lowest acceptance rates. She got into all but two and decided on Princeton, which was the most prestigious and home to David Lewis and Saul Kripke, two of the most famous working philosophers at the time. Paul arrived in 1993, having heard of hardly anyone in the department.

"I was overconfident," Paul recalled. "I had a background in natural science, these letters of recommendation." But she felt "like an alien," she said. "I just did not fit in." Panicked, she began to audit undergraduate philosophy classes. "I did a version of what I did in middle school," she said, laughing. "I realized I needed to

learn how to do this work from the point of view of people in the field. I needed to learn, quickly, the jargon and assumptions and history.”

A black-and-white photograph taken at the time shows the members of the philosophy department seated on the steps of a Gothic-style building. Professors in blazers sit among students in blue jeans. Paul appears in the front row, arms crossed, with a shaved head, in dark, gauzy clothing. She is smiling, but barely. Multiple people I spoke with, including Paul, talked about the culture of Princeton’s philosophy department regretfully. It was “combative” and “hostile,” a place of “uncharitable posturing” and “blood sport.” Rumors swirled that the female graduate students were there only because of affirmative action. But the general antagonism, though especially intense at Princeton, was not unique to the university. Jonathan Schaffer, a philosopher at Rutgers and a friend of Paul’s from that time, characterized the discipline back then as “a conservative, shitty, male-dominated holdout.” Sexual harassment was rampant in the field. To insulate herself from it, Paul tried to make her dating life “very obvious” to everyone. “You just had to find yourself a protector,” she told me, “and sort of parade this person around.”

Of her time in graduate school, Paul said, “I learned at David’s knee.” David was David Lewis, a bearded Australophile and model-train enthusiast referred to affectionately by his colleagues as the “machine in the ghost.” He was known for making the radical argument that “possible” worlds are as real as our own, a theory that is credited with reinvigorating twentieth-century metaphysics.

In her fourth year, Paul sat in on a fall seminar that Lewis gave on causation. Lewis, she learned, had read her graduate-school application and liked her paper, and she went on to revise it with his help. It became one of seven papers that she published while in graduate school, an accomplishment made possible, Paul has said,

by the “devastating objections” that Lewis would leave for her in the margins of her drafts; she knew that there was no journal editor “who was going to say anything worse than what David had said to me.”

After Paul graduated, in 1999, she published two books about causation with her Princeton classmate Ned Hall and held a series of academic jobs. She got tenure at the University of Arizona in 2007. Five years later, in 2012, she attended a conference in Nottingham, England, where Jonathan Schaffer was delivering a keynote speech. The work Paul was doing at the time was “the sort of very dry and abstract stuff that nobody outside the discipline understands or cares about,” Schaffer said. But she was also playing around with the ideas that would coalesce in “Transformative Experience,” and when she spoke of the work in progress to Schaffer she referred to it as her “little project on the side.”

One morning, the two of them went for a run, during which Paul confided that she was professionally demoralized. “She felt like nobody was really citing her, nobody’s work was really engaging with hers, and she just felt so defeated,” Schaffer recalled. She told him that it was as if she were sending out messages in a bottle and having nothing come back. The image in Schaffer’s mind was more poignant: “It was like she was standing alone in a corner of a crowded room. Everyone saw her there, everyone thought well of her, but nobody was trying to talk to her.” He remembers their conversation so vividly because of its timing. “Here was someone who felt so excluded, so frustrated with her profession,” he said, “and within a year—it really was just a year—she became this celebrated figure. She really did not expect that kind of reception.”

Paul also did not expect that, in the years following the publication of “Transformative Experience,” she would undergo a series of other transformative experiences herself. In 2017, Paul, who was teaching at U.N.C.-Chapel Hill, moved out of the house where she

was living with her family and into a bungalow of her own nearby. The next year, Paul and her husband, who had been together for twenty-two years, divorced. Soon afterward, she moved to New Haven, where she had accepted a job at Yale.

Paul declined to discuss the exact reasons for the divorce, but she was open about its effects on her. She came to feel that divorce was just as dramatically transformative as having children. Paul compared marriage to a textile. Her identity had become so tightly woven together with her husband's that the individual stitches were no longer detectable. All she could see was the general design. She described their divorce as "ripping out the center of the pattern." Paul had assumed that, if she worked diligently, it would be possible to identify and salvage the threads that had originally been just her. But the threads, she found, were shredded.



"We need our majesty's decrees to read as fresh, funny, and conversational."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

"I had not realized just how many of the properties that I would have used to describe myself—that I would have thought of as essential to *me*—were, in fact, the result of my relationship," she said. If having a child had taught her things that she didn't know

about herself, Paul felt that, in divorce, she was reminded of things about herself that she had forgotten.

There were many more changes to come. She had to work out a complex custody arrangement with her ex-husband. She bought an apartment in New Haven, inside a converted church rumored to have been struck by lightning. There was a global pandemic, which she weathered in part in Thailand. Her father died, and she and a sibling had to place their mother in assisted living. She began dating again, and eventually got remarried—to a German lawyer and policy consultant with two children of his own. “I’ve had a lot going on” is how Paul put it to me.

Last summer, we met for lunch at a restaurant in downtown Manhattan. For the previous few weeks, I had been avoiding e-mails from Paul inviting me on a trip she was taking to England, where she and a handful of colleagues would walk through the Derbyshire countryside, following a pilgrimage trail, and discuss, per the proposed itinerary, “growth and transformation.” I had given a noncommittal response to her invitation and promised to get back to her with a more definitive one, though I never did.

The walking tour was scheduled for the first week of August. I would be thirty-eight weeks into a pregnancy that Paul was unaware of. I hadn’t seen her for months, and the idea of casually telling her over e-mail that I was pregnant, after years of deliberation, had seemed cowardly. It felt as though I owed her some sort of reasoned explanation. How, in the end, had I decided?

Mercifully, Paul, who was already seated in a banquette when I arrived at the restaurant, never asked me the question. She just laughed when she saw me. “Wow,” she joked. “You’re really committed to this!”

It had felt like a kind of experiment: How could I use Paul’s work to help me make the decision? But then, at some point, the

investigation evaporated. In the previous nine months, the decision about whether to have a child had come to seem far less interesting than what would happen to me once I did. I told Paul this, tentatively, as if I were apologizing or insulting the premise of her work.

Again, she just laughed. And then she reassured me: deciding had never been the interesting part to her, either. She, too, was more interested in the personal change than in the decision itself. “That I framed it all in terms of epistemology and decision theory—I did that purposefully,” she told me. Paul insisted that the approach was “not a trick” but that it was instrumental. “I knew that if I just talked about having a child—and the kind of emotional and also mental and psychological changes it wrought—no one would listen to me,” Paul said. “I’m pretty good at understanding how to make my colleagues listen to things they don’t want to hear.”

We parted ways. She wished me luck. I went home and made tomato sauce. Something went wrong, though, and no amount of salt or olive oil or sugar seemed to help. The idea of eating it filled me with a dull, bad feeling. The sauce could not have represented more than four dollars’ worth of ingredients, but instead of throwing it away I slopped it into a rinsed-out yogurt container. I imagined myself a few months into the future: sleep-deprived and covered in the vomit of someone I hadn’t yet met, I would be starving and flooded with gratitude for a hot meal, never mind that it was one that I myself had previously rejected. I scribbled “pasta sauce” on the lid and put the still warm container into the freezer.

Despite objecting to some of Paul’s arguments, Elizabeth Barnes, the University of Virginia philosopher, routinely assigns the first few chapters of “Transformative Experience” to her undergraduates. “Most of my students instinctively want to say that Paul is wrong,” she told me. “But in a room of twenty students they’ll give me seventeen different reasons why.” Many of them resist the premise that they need complete information about their

futures, or bristle at the notion that changing their minds one day renders rational, present-day thought impossible. This multiplicity of disagreements would occur, Barnes went on, if you stocked that same room with professional philosophers. “And that,” she said, “is the sign of a great argument.” Paul, she continued, “asked an amazing question. . . . You can get why the question is cool regardless of whether her way of answering it is amenable to the way your own mind happens to work. I think sometimes, as philosophers, we forget we need these kinds of questions. I think the field has lost some of that spark—or maybe just the ability to communicate it.”

This ability, which is really a kind of diplomacy, is evident in Paul’s teaching style. When I visited her at Yale, her blackboard-lined classroom was packed with students eager to hear her speak about “the paradoxes of time travel,” which was also the name of the course. While lecturing, she possesses the vigor of a beloved high-school teacher with a politician’s polish. She paces, she scribbles, she tells outlandish, second-person stories. “How do you distinguish between memory and anticipation?” Paul asked, as everyone furiously took notes. “Between remembering something and anticipating it?” She paused. “That should puzzle you.” She paused again. “It’s very weird.” Her theory of mind is well tuned for the eighteen-to-twenty-one-year-old demographic, and as she went over the syllabus, which would include not just philosophy papers but also sci-fi films (“*La Jetée*,” “*Primer*”) and a short story by Jorge Luis Borges, she warned the students not “to use the in-class essays to develop novel theories.” These essays, she said, “are not the right conditions for that.”

Her own work, however, is always being developed in novel ways. Transformative experience has been used to think through issues such as the decision to transition genders, the ethics of Alzheimer’s treatment and the legal enforceability of advanced medical directives, and the “unique challenges whistle-blowers face,” as one Dutch law professor recently put it. Not long ago, Paul was

invited to Chicago to give a lecture about her work and its possible implications for neuroscience, and more than seven thousand people showed up. In recent years, she has collaborated with cognitive scientists to work through the ways in which it might one day be possible to fully align the values held by artificial intelligence with our own. Paul has her doubts. “Machines don’t have experiences,” she told me. “It’s a fundamental problem!”

The success of “Transformative Experience” created an inevitable appetite for a follow-up, and in 2015 Paul signed a contract, with Farrar, Straus & Giroux, for her first nonacademic book. She imagined it, at the time, as a sort of reiteration of “Transformative Experience” for a more general audience. But the subsequent string of disruptions in her personal life made retrospection less appealing. Seven years later, during her trip to Derbyshire, Paul finally managed to articulate to herself what the new book would be about. While trudging along, somewhere near Bakewell, she realized that she was preoccupied by the notion that we all consist of multiple selves who cannot be counted on to agree with one another across time. What drew her to the predicament was, in part, how ubiquitous it is—not just in life and literature but also in such disciplines as economics and psychology. We make plans with people we don’t want to see. We confidently set aside three days to complete a task that historically has taken us fifteen. We recall with repulsion romantic encounters that we once eagerly pursued.

“The problem of other selves is just as deep and mysterious as the ‘problem of other minds,’ ” she told me, referring to a classic and ever-evolving philosophical conundrum about the unknowability of the consciousness of others. “We exploit our other selves. We act badly toward them. We rely on them. Sometimes we try to deceive them. There’s this whole network of relationships that we have with our other selves that are as involved and interesting and important and intimate as the relationships we have with other people.” The fundamentally uncrossable barrier between individuals exists within each of us, too.

My daughter is now fifteen months old. I read less now, and I clean up more. It takes me forever to respond to text messages, if I ever do. My intermittent longings for freedom, once satisfied only by weeks of far-flung solitude, are now sated by ten-minute walks around the block. My desire to remain alive is no longer abstract or automatic, and I cross the street with an amount of caution that is new. But what it feels like to be me is the same as ever. The majority of my thoughts have been replaced with thoughts of my daughter, and yet my mind feels completely unaltered. This durability has been the most relieving, most disappointing, most surprising aspect of having a child. The tomato sauce remains in the freezer. Having a child changed my life, not my self. It did not turn me into a person who would eat that.

I recounted this to Paul. “Remind me,” she said, “how long have you been a parent now?” I told her. “O.K.,” she said. “So there’s only a year’s separation between the actual time line and the possible time line.” She compared it to navigation: you take just a step or two off the path indicated on the map. It isn’t much—that’s where I was now—but keep going in that direction, she said, and after a while you will find yourself far, far away from the original destination. “I’m telling you, ten years from now, fifteen years . . .” ♦

Alice Gregory has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2013.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/the-philosopher-1-a-paul-wants-us-to-think-about-our-selves>

[Personal History](#)

Converting to Judaism in the Wake of October 7th

For decades, I maintained a status quo of living like a Jew without being one. When I finally pursued conversion, I discovered that I was part of a larger movement born of crisis.

By [Jeannie Suk Gersen](#)

December 2, 2024

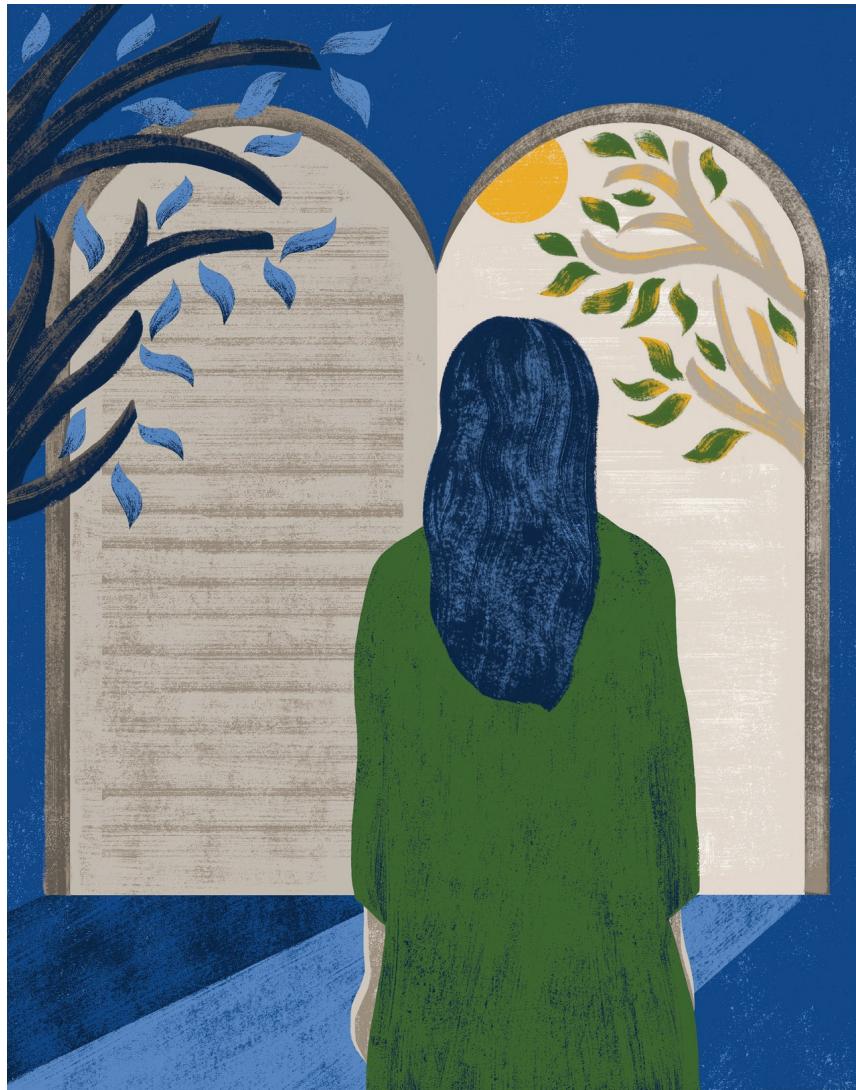


Illustration by Chloe Cushman

The saga of my Jewish conversion began twenty-five years ago, when I got engaged to my first husband. He'd grown up in an

Orthodox family, and his parents, my future in-laws, were devastated that he was marrying a non-Jew; under religious law, a child is born a Jew only if the mother is Jewish, so any kids we had would not technically be Jewish, either. An Orthodox rabbi pleaded with my fiancé one night not to marry me, then vomited all over the sidewalk—possibly from too much alcohol, but the point was vividly made. I remember feeling elated to realize that I could solve the problem by converting. It turned out not to be so simple. For decades, through our marriage and divorce and my subsequent remarriage, I lived like a Jew without becoming one. At home, my family lit candles and said blessings on Shabbat. I shook a *lulav* and *etrog* on Sukkot, taught my children when to make noise during the Megillah reading on Purim, and learned enough Hebrew to read and sing at the Passover Seder. It wasn’t until a Yom Kippur sermon last year—and, two weeks later, the events of October 7th—that I decided to finally follow through.

I was raised in a Korean American evangelical church, where people spoke in tongues as the Holy Spirit moved them. My Bible teacher referred to me as “devil’s spawn” because I had a habit of picking arguments with Scripture. (Eve’s lust for knowledge wasn’t sinful, I remember declaring; God’s curse on humankind was an overreaction.) By the time I reached adulthood, I’d developed an emphatically rationalist world view, which for a while I thought precluded religion. But I knew the first books of the Old Testament cold, and I still sometimes prayed to God. I also nurtured a nascent affinity for Judaism, born of both disposition and circumstance. My father, a physician, did his medical residency at Brooklyn Jewish Hospital, where his department chief was an Orthodox Jew, and he’d occasionally serve as a “Shabbos goy,” turning on lights for the religious doctor on the Sabbath. Like many devout Christians, my mother was fascinated with Israel, and she visited the country often.

My first husband, Noah, didn’t ask me to convert—Jewish law stipulates that a conversion must not be done merely to accede to

another's wishes—but through him I absorbed Jewish rituals and tradition. The Talmud, with its rabbinic legal codes and commentaries, its reams of debates and interpretive disagreements, provided a heady way into learning a new religion. I took a course in law school taught by an esteemed Jewish-law scholar, Hanina Ben-Menahem, who was known for arguing that, compared with Western legal thought, the Talmud allows judges a degree of discretion to deviate from the letter of the law in order to honor its spirit. Exploring the tradition's built-in disputation—reasoned differences touching on every conceivable subject—I felt that I might have a home in Judaism.

The only conversion that would have been legitimate in my in-laws' community, though, was an Orthodox one, and Orthodox rabbis typically required prospective converts to demonstrate their commitment to a strictly religious life. This would entail following hundreds of mitzvot, or commandments, including extensive kosher dietary laws, prohibitions of work and travel on the Sabbath, and many more obscure rules, such as eschewing garments that contain both linen and wool. It didn't seem plausible for me to promise to maintain such a life style, in part because Noah had let go of rigorous observance. Converting under the more lenient Conservative or Reform denominations felt more within reach, but I feared that pursuing a non-Orthodox conversion would amount to thumbing my nose at my in-laws' standards.

If I'm honest, though, my biggest barrier to conversion back then was a youthful allergy to the message that I could gain acceptance only by adopting a new identity. My parents and grandparents had fled their home in North Korea during the Korean War to avoid being killed; I was born in Seoul and immigrated with my family to the United States when I was six. The tragic history of my native country was in constant dialogue in my head with the story of the Jewish people, and I knew that Korean and Jewish identities could be compatible. But the Orthodox community at the time didn't make it easy to feel that the two could coexist. While I was

considering conversion, Noah and I went to a class reunion of the Modern Orthodox high school that he'd attended. Afterward, when the school's alumni newsletter came in the mail, with a group photo from the reunion, Noah noticed that he and I—the only Asian person there—were missing from the picture, though we both recalled posing for it. (The photographer told Noah, who wrote about the incident years ago, that he had taken some pictures that cut off one side of the group but hadn't selected the final photo.)

As a young immigrant with a fair measure of pride, I recoiled intuitively at such signals that my presence was shameful—a *shanda*, as Jews would say. I allowed those feelings to stymie my pursuit of what I wanted for myself, which was Judaism.

In 2023, on Yom Kippur, the Jewish day of atonement, my friend Rabbi Angela Warnick Buchdahl of Central Synagogue, a Reform congregation in New York City, gave a sermon focussed on atoning for the “sin of passing judgment,” and in particular judgment of intermarriage. Buchdahl has a Jewish American father and a Korean Buddhist mother. I’ve known her since we attended college together, in the nineteen-nineties, when she already seemed poised to become the first East Asian American Jew ordained as a rabbi. She reached that milestone in 2001, and has built a robust following within her congregation and beyond. She is fifty-two years old, with pixie-cut brown hair that frames the light freckles on her heart-shaped face, and a rich alto singing voice. When Buchdahl travels, even Orthodox Jews stop her to share that they watch her services, saying, “Don’t tell my rabbi!” I live-streamed her Yom Kippur sermon from my home in Cambridge, along with people in roughly a hundred countries.

Buchdahl drew a contrast between the Bible’s Ezra, who promoted the idea of a Jewish “holy seed,” and Ruth, a Biblical model of conversion. A Gentile by birth, Ruth married an Israelite and, when she was later widowed, told her mother-in-law, Naomi, “Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people are

my people, your God, my God.” Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David, an ancestor of the future Jewish Messiah. As Buchdahl later put it to me, “We’ve been a mixed multitude all along.” Plus, in her experience—contra fears about conversion “diluting” Judaism—those who join the faith often “make their Jewish spouses more Jewish.” Buchdahl invoked Rabbi Alexander Schindler, a former leader of the American Reform movement, who made the front page of the *Times* in 1978, when he pressed Jews to seek converts. Proselytizing is often understood to be anathema to Judaism, but Buchdahl told congregants, “Throughout Jewish history, you should know, whenever Jews felt safe, we sought new adherents. This moment in America should be such a time.”

Two weeks later came October 7th. Hamas invaded Israel, massacring some twelve hundred people and kidnapping two hundred and fifty more. Israel, in turn, launched a devastating war in Gaza that has killed approximately forty-five thousand people. Around the world, anti-Israel protests erupted, and antisemitism spiked; many Jews faced a fresh reckoning with the relationship between Israel and Jewish identity. It was a time of fear and dread and painful fractures within the Jewish community—it was no longer, as Buchdahl had suggested, a moment when Jews widely felt at ease. Yet rabbis from a broad range of Jewish institutions observed something they hadn’t anticipated: a surge of interest in Judaism. Elliot Cosgrove, a Conservative rabbi and the author of the new book “For Such a Time as This: On Being Jewish Today,” told me that since October 7th he’s seen engagement from “within and beyond the boundaries of the conventional Jewish community” at a level he’s never before witnessed. This has included increased synagogue membership, expanded enrollment in Hebrew-school programs, full houses at Shabbat services—and oversubscribed courses for people interested in becoming Jewish. Suddenly, my own halting path to conversion was meeting a larger movement.

At Central Synagogue, another rabbi, Lisa Rubin, runs the Center for Exploring Judaism, which educates and guides Jewish-curious newcomers. Since October 7th, the program's courses have enrolled double the usual number of students and accrued a seven-month waiting list. Rubin told me that she has warned potential converts that "this is not a great time to be stepping into Judaism." Still, as she put it, "They're running toward the house on fire."

Judaism is not only a faith but a tribe, a culture, and a life style, and the motivations behind conversion are as varied as Jewishness itself. I spoke to converts who had always suspected that they had Jewish ancestry. Deb Kroll, a woman in her early seventies, grew up in the Bible Belt with parents who became Pentecostal leaders, but when she was a child her Christian grandmother told stories of her family fleeing at night from a county where the Ku Klux Klan was active, soon after the lynching of Leo Frank. Kroll remembers thinking, I'm a little Jewish girl who's been born into the wrong family. For most of her life, she didn't realize that it was even possible to convert to Judaism. Then, in recent years, Kroll said, DNA testing of relatives suggested that she had significant Jewish ancestry on both sides. She was studying in Rubin's program online from her home, in Georgia, when the events of October 7th occurred. "I thought, Well, I'm not going to stop my Jewish journey out of fear," she recalled, adding, "I throw in my lot with the Jewish people."

Another graduate of Rubin's course, Keve Bates, is a thirtysomething Midwesterner. He comes from a long line of Methodist ministers on his father's side; his mother's parents were Christians, too, but they had surnames—Goldman and Kirsch—often associated with American Jews. Though his family members insisted that they had no Jewish past, Bates became interested in learning about Judaism. He eventually moved to New York, where he took Rubin's class and considered converting. Although he is, by his own description, "a person who has a problem starting things and not completing them," the aftermath of October 7th

spurred him to go through with it. Friends invited him to anti-Israel protests, but he didn't attend. One day, he was near the American Museum of Natural History when a protest march filled the street. He overheard a fellow-observer say, "It's like 1933 all over again" and felt an uneasiness that he couldn't shake. Bates didn't want to be "on the side, hiding in plain sight," he told me. "I wanted to belong."

A number of converts I spoke to had, like me, been with a Jewish partner for years without becoming Jewish themselves. Several said that they'd been planning to convert since before October 7th but now felt an increased sense of urgency. Leo Spychala, a forty-three-year-old graduate of Rubin's class who grew up gay and Catholic in New Jersey, said that he'd always felt an affinity for Judaism but that his impression from popular culture was that "it's almost like you wouldn't be welcome"; he recalled an episode of "Sex and the City" in which the Waspish Charlotte, embracing Judaism after her boyfriend says that he can't wed a non-Jew, goes to a rabbi asking to convert and initially has a door shut in her face. Then Spychala met his partner, a Jewish man who works in Jewish philanthropy. One of the first Jewish things they did together was attend synagogue, in 2022, for the holiday of Simchat Torah, a joyous celebration that involves dancing in the aisles while parading a Torah scroll. "I felt very welcomed," he said. "It was a big moment for me." A year later, Simchat Torah fell on October 7th. The mood in synagogue was sombre. There was no dancing this time. "Seeing the difference was just really sad," Spychala recalled, and he felt himself drawn closer to the Jewish community. This past August, he proposed to his partner with a diamond-studded Star of David necklace; he completed his conversion a week before the October 7th anniversary.

"Two Jews, three opinions," the saying goes. The canon of Jewish humor includes many jokes about Jewish dissensus, including one about a Jew alone on a desert island who builds two synagogues: one that he attends and another that he wouldn't set foot in.

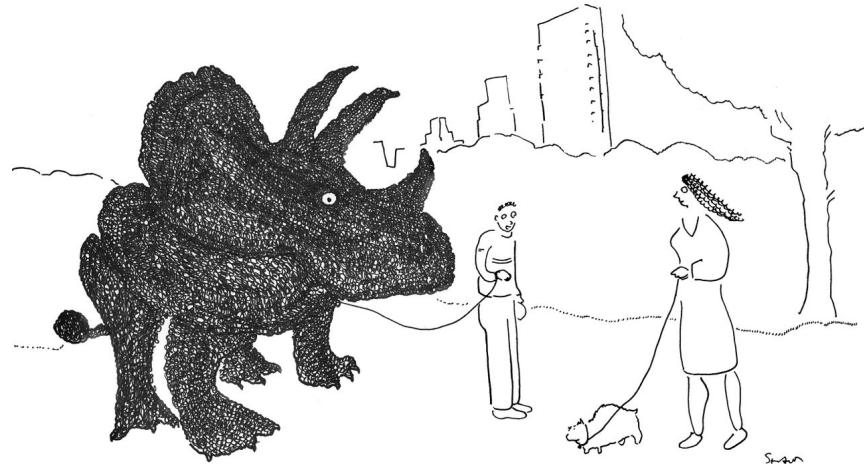
Conversion to Judaism inspires its own share of disagreement. Lacking a central authority comparable to, say, the Vatican's governance of the Catholic Church, Jews of different denominations have developed diverging rules and rites around what makes a valid conversion. Orthodox and Conservative Jews require converts to immerse themselves in a mikvah, a ritual bath, and expect male converts to undergo circumcision or, if they are already circumcised, to be pricked to draw a ritual drop of blood. The Orthodox typically do not recognize Conservative or Reform conversions; Conservative Jews may not recognize Reform ones. And those are just the three major North American denominations. Some Sephardic communities may not accept conversion at all.

The basic question of what makes someone a born Jew is no less divisive. American Reform Judaism, since the nineteen-eighties, has recognized "patrilineal Jews," but the Orthodox and Conservative denominations do not. As a result, a large portion of people who consider themselves Jewish are not acknowledged as such by some of their fellow-Jews. Buchdahl recalled that, as a teen-ager, during a fellowship in Israel for young Jewish leaders, her roommate commented that she wasn't Jewish because her mother wasn't a Jew. At the age of twenty-one, Buchdahl decided to undergo conversion rituals: appearing before a beth din, a Jewish court, and immersing herself in the mikvah. She chose to think of this as a way of reaffirming that she had always been a Jew.

I figured that I would pursue a non-Orthodox conversion, though it stung to know that some Jews would never consider me Jewish. Then, through an Orthodox friend, I learned about a New York-based rabbi named Adam Mintz. Mintz is a member of the century-old Rabbinical Council of America (R.C.A.), which, since 2007, has overseen standards for Orthodox conversions. But in recent years Mintz has gained, by word of mouth, a reputation for an unusual willingness to provide Orthodox conversions outside the R.C.A.'s system. Creating extreme hurdles for potential converts is "not good for the Jewish people," he told me, because it prevents

the formation of Jewish families. Once he began convening his own beth din, he found that a rising number of people from within the Orthodox Jewish establishment, including R.C.A. leaders, were asking him to convert their own family members. Because of the law of matrilineal descent, the majority of candidates who sought him out were women. Mintz now leads a growing cohort of Orthodox rabbis who share his view that less rigid requirements for conversion can still satisfy Jewish law. In 2022, he co-founded a nonprofit conversion organization, Project Ruth.

Mintz is sixty-three, with eyes that twinkle behind his glasses and an impish laugh that makes his deliberations seem like a series of adventures. I began studying with him over Zoom for several hours each week. One potential obstacle to my Orthodox conversion was that my second husband, Jacob, was a *kohen*, a member of a priestly male hereditary line going back to the time of Moses, and according to the Talmud *kohanim* are forbidden to marry converts. Mintz saw two ways around this prohibition. The first, and more controversial, was through interpretative leniency. Mintz considers laws that are stipulated in the Bible to be nonnegotiable. Because God commanded that males must be circumcised, for instance, Mintz requires that male candidates be free of foreskin prior to conversion. (He told me that not all of them stick around when they hear this news.) But the particular rule regarding *kohanim* and converts is rabbinic, not Biblical, which—arguably—allows a degree of discretion. A simpler solution would be for Jacob to abdicate his claim to the *kohen* lineage. After much lively discussion of these points of law, though, the issue seemed increasingly moot: Jacob’s probing of family memories made him highly doubtful that he was a *kohen*, after all.



"Triceradoodle."
Cartoon by Michael Shaw

Mintz's conversions typically entail six to nine months of study, but after assessing my Jewish knowledge he determined that I would be ready to go to the mikvah in a couple of months. True to Buchdahl's observation about converts making their spouses more Jewish, in my second marriage I had been the one to insure that our family kept Shabbat rituals. To the bemusement of my new in-laws, I'd cajoled Jacob into dusting off the Hebrew he'd learned for his bar mitzvah. He had never imagined that he'd be keeping kosher, yet he did his best to observe the rules of *kashrut* with me. During the High Holidays this year, as we walked home after hours in shul, he jokingly wondered aloud, "How did this happen?"

The Hebrew term for "convert," *ger*, also means "stranger." (My married surname, Gersen, happens to derive from it.) Buchdahl is writing a memoir, "Heart of a Stranger," thematically inspired by the Genesis story of Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, who leaves his birthplace when God calls on him to found a new nation. As Buchdahl put it to me, "He can't become a Hebrew until he becomes a stranger in a different land." The word *Ivri*—Hebrew person—comes from the term for "crossing over."

According to rabbinic sources, Abraham and his wife Sarah went on to convert a large number of people to Judaism. In Exodus, God admonishes the Jews not to oppress strangers, "for you were strangers in the land of Egypt," a line that rabbis have long

interpreted as one of God's many warnings not to mistreat converts. To be a convert to Judaism is to be one form of *ger*, and to be Jewish is to be another. Converts, by embodying a Jewish relation to strangers, remind Jews that they are strangers even to themselves. Buchdahl told me, "For so much of my Jewish life, I felt inauthentic, and like an outsider in so many ways. At some point, I understood that maybe that's the most Jewish thing about me."

Jewish texts are wildly ambivalent on the subject of converts. The convert is "more beloved than Israel when they stood at Mount Sinai," it says in a midrash, a rabbinic interpretation of the Torah. In the Talmud: "Converts are harmful to Israel as leprosy."

Medieval rabbinic discussions of the latter line underscore the divided thinking: one rabbi worries that converts will influence other Jews to become lax in their observance of God's commandments; others fear that Jews will inevitably mistreat converts and suffer God's punishment for it. Yet another rabbi, a convert himself, reasons that because converts are "more meticulous in their observance" they draw attention to the shortcomings of other Jews.

Unlike Christianity, Judaism does not teach that people of other faiths must adopt the religion to be saved. But Buchdahl is not the only Jewish leader today who believes that a tradition of Jews proselytizing has been underemphasized. Mintz said that during the early Roman Empire, when Jews were in a position of strength, at least some of them actively worked to convert people in the Hellenistic world. "Not proselytizing is a function of lack of power," he said. Whether Jews proselytized in this period and how much have been subjects of scholarly debate. Another rabbi, Ethan Tucker, the head of Hadar, a yeshiva in Manhattan, noted that the Jews' history of persecution includes not only massacres, expulsions, and forcible conversions but also prohibitions on converting people to Judaism, sometimes on pain of death. "I think Jews got very strategically attached to non-proselytizing as a self-

defense mechanism,” he said, “and then turned it into a philosophical virtue.” Tucker is the stepson of the late senator Joseph Lieberman, who published a book in 2011 about the Jewish Sabbath, “The Gift of Rest.” If you consider Judaism a “gift” and not a burden, Tucker told me, then it’s natural to want to share it with others.

In the Biblical story of Ruth’s conversion, Naomi says “turn back” three separate times before accepting Ruth’s determination to follow her. This has led to an idea that people seeking to convert to Judaism should be turned away three times, or at least initially, to test their conviction. The Talmud says that a person who comes to a court to convert is to be questioned as to his motivation and asked, “Don’t you know that the Jewish people at the present time are anguished, suppressed, despised, and harassed, and hardships are frequently visited upon them?” If he says he knows and still wants to convert, “the court accepts him immediately to begin the conversion process.” He is then taught “some of the lenient mitzvot and some of the stringent mitzvot,” but rabbis must not “overwhelm him with threats” or be “exacting with him about the details.” As Cosgrove, the Conservative rabbi, put it to me, “When I want to join a gym, they don’t say, ‘Get in shape and then join a gym.’ They say, ‘Join the gym and we’ll get you in shape.’ ”

In practice, though, within Orthodox Judaism, conversion candidates are often put through a process that Rabbi Mintz compared to hazing. Converts, candidates, and rabbis told me some of the demoralizing things they’d experienced or witnessed. (Most asked to speak anonymously because they feared retaliation from Orthodox institutions.) Wishful converts had reached out to rabbis and been repeatedly ignored or told to go away. They had been instructed to stop living with their Jewish partners, or to stop dating them altogether, throughout a multiyear conversion process. One candidate was required to move in with an Orthodox family to insure her religious observance. Others had their conversions delayed again and again, for years, because they weren’t deemed

ready. Rabbis typically prohibited the setting of wedding dates in anticipation of conversions, leaving couples uncertain about when they would be able to start a family. One Jewish man, who today leads a major Jewish organization, said that when he approached an Orthodox rabbi he knew to ask about conversion the rabbi became so cold and discouraging that the man considered leaving Jewish life. He'd been raised Jewish, with Yiddish-speaking grandparents on his father's side. But his mother had undergone a Reform conversion, so Orthodox and Conservative communities didn't recognize him as a Jew. He told me that when he eventually met Orthodox rabbis who agreed to convert him he broke down and wept. (R.C.A. leaders declined my requests for an interview, but a representative said, in an e-mail, that the council aimed "to create an apparatus that operates with professionalism, sensitivity, and transparency.")

Benjamin Samuels, a Modern Orthodox rabbi and a longtime member of Boston's Orthodox beth din (unaffiliated with the R.C.A.), told me that rabbis who choose to ignore potential converts are being "negligent of our religious obligations." He acknowledged the irony that "to become a Jew, you have to be a super Jew." Still, like many other Orthodox rabbis, he believes that conversion to Judaism should be difficult. Converting someone without having confidence that she will fulfill God's commandments would violate the Jewish mandate against "placing a stumbling block in front of the blind." Instead of leading a perfectly good life as a Gentile, Samuels said, she enters a "life of liability."

Mintz, meanwhile, has been inundated with inquiries from potential converts. In 2023, his beth din in New York completed about ninety conversions; in 2024, it has so far completed nearly two hundred—around the same number that the R.C.A., which has not seen an increased interest since October 7th, typically completes across North America in the span of a year. Candidates have flown in to see Mintz, sometimes as a family or in groups,

from other states—Kansas, North Carolina, California, Texas—and from as far abroad as Australia and Hong Kong. His beth din has regularly converted gay, lesbian, and transgender people, and their children. A few of the rabbis who work with him have presided over same-sex weddings. Though Jewish law has not traditionally recognized such unions, Mintz said that a rabbi’s choice to officiate them “in no way disqualifies” him from legally conducting an Orthodox conversion. But the diversity of Jewish communities and their respective rabbinic standards means that virtually no conversion is guaranteed to be accepted everywhere. Indeed, Mintz told me that a substantial number of his candidates are converting to “fix,” “upgrade,” or “strengthen” their Jewish status—and he acknowledges that if, in the future, any of them want to join a Jewish community with a different set of standards, they might choose to go to the mikvah again.

On Rosh Hashanah this year, Rabbi Rubin of Central Synagogue gave a sermon in which she likened the post-October 7th surge in conversions to one in post-Holocaust Germany, where so many people sought to convert to Judaism that a commission was formed in Berlin to help process requests. But the divisions within the Jewish community today complicate the comparison. Nancy Ko is a Korean American convert to Judaism and a doctoral student in Middle Eastern history at Columbia. She grew up around the many Jews who frequented her family’s grocery store, in Brooklyn’s Bensonhurst neighborhood. In college, she studied the history of Arab and Middle Eastern Jews. She also became involved in activism against the Israeli occupation and helped found an organization to promote the inclusion of non-Zionists and anti-Zionists in campus Jewish communities. She told me that she finally decided to convert after an Israeli American mentor, paraphrasing Moses’ metaphor about Jews opening their hearts to God, urged her, in Hebrew, to “circumcise your soul.” Ko was moved by the Talmud’s teaching that the souls of converts were present at Mt. Sinai with all Jewish souls when God gave Jews the

Torah. Though she had no Jewish partner or family, she wanted an Orthodox conversion, in part, she told me, “so that I could daven in any shul and bless the bread at any Shabbos table, and so that my children would be able to do so as well.” Mintz’s beth din converted her in 2022, sixteen months before October 7th.

When I spoke with Ko recently, she was working to get money to families who had fled from Gaza to Egypt. She connected her pro-Palestinian activism with her family’s origins on the Korean island of Jeju, where, in 1948, an uprising during the American military occupation was met with a massacre that eventually killed tens of thousands of civilians; the same year, in what’s become known as the Nakba, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians were displaced during the formation of the State of Israel. On October 7th, a friend and colleague of Ko’s, an Israeli American anti-occupation peace activist, was killed by Hamas. Another friend, a Palestinian in the West Bank, told her that he couldn’t get out because Israel had closed the border. When Ko posted critically about Israel on social media, a Jewish friend messaged her to say that she shouldn’t “pretend to be part of the Jewish community.” Ko belongs to a group of observant Jews who came together for prayer after October 7th, feeling out of step with Jewish institutions. She told me that it was “unbearable to be in the synagogue where folks are celebrating that a hospital was destroyed, or are standing up to do the prayer for Israel.”

Still, Ko’s anti-Zionism exists necessarily in relation to mainstream Jewish identity—as a form of dissent. “You cannot be a Jew alone,” she said. “No matter how Jewish you know you are, it’s not completely up to you. It’s up to the community to decide what kind of Judaism and Jewishness they want to advocate for.” Ko told me that, given her views on Israel, she suspects that the beth din might have rejected her if she’d tried to convert after October 7th. Rabbi Mintz insisted otherwise. “She would have been accepted,” he said. “The beauty of rabbinic Judaism—it is all about the argument.” On that last point, the two of them concur. Ko told me, “There’s been a

very rich history of Jewish anti-Zionists. There's been division on these questions. What are Jews if not disagreeers?" She added, quoting the Talmud, "*Machloket l'shem shamayim*"—"Disagreement for the sake of Heaven."

In June, my parents and I happened to be in South Korea when Rabbi Buchdahl delivered a speech at the launch of a center for Israel studies at Seoul National University, my father's alma mater. Before an audience of government officials, academics, and diplomats, Buchdahl noted parallels between the stories of Koreans and Jews, remarking that "the modern states of these ancient peoples" were formed within months of each other. But it was the differences between the cultures that enlivened her storytelling. She compared Korean folk tales about the value of filial piety with a midrash about Abraham smashing his father's idols. She contrasted her mother's solitary Buddhist learning with the Jewish tradition of *havruta*, studying in noisy dialogue with a partner. To conclude, she took out a guitar and sang a mashup of "Jerusalem of Gold," an Israeli song from the nineteen-sixties expressing longing for the Old City, which was then under Jordanian rule, and the Korean folk song "Arirang," which, during the Japanese occupation of Korea, became an anthem of anti-colonial resistance.

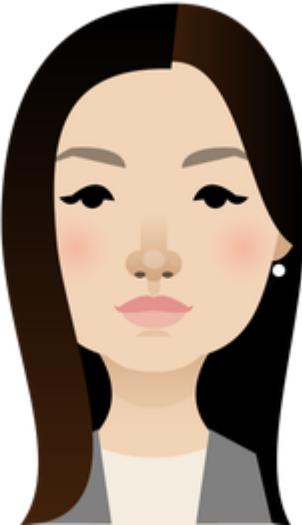
I made the unconventional choice to have two different Jewish courts oversee my conversion ceremony at the same time. Rabbi Mintz convened an Orthodox beth din with two younger rabbis, who gave off Brooklyn hipster vibes. Rabbi Buchdahl assembled a Reform one with another rabbi from Central Synagogue and a congregant of theirs, my longtime friend Tali Farhadian Weinstein, an Iranian American Jew. Another close friend, who is Orthodox, and Jacob accompanied me. A quarter century of dilemmas of identity and belonging had led me there, and the meeting, at the West Side Mikvah in Manhattan, seemed to embody its own fresh contradictions. Mintz also teaches at Yeshivat Maharat, an Orthodox institution in the Bronx that trains and ordains women as rabbis, but, per Orthodox conversion rules, there are no women on

his beth din. One of the Orthodox rabbis remarked to me later, “Angela is one of the great rabbis in the world” and joked, “Why would she need me, a little *pischer* rabbi in Brooklyn, to complete this conversion?”

The event began with an extended discussion between the rabbis and me about my path to conversion. I recounted my Korean childhood, my decades in a Jewish family, my love of Jewish tradition, and my sense of belonging among the Jewish people. Afterward, to prepare for the heart of the proceedings, I went alone into a spa-like marble bathroom. I took off my jewelry and makeup, undressed, washed, and put on a white bathrobe that a mikvah attendant had left for me. Some Orthodox rabbis insist on being present for a convert’s immersion, or at least on observing through slits in a partition, to insure that it’s done properly. Mintz doesn’t do that with female converts, so he waited outside, but Buchdahl and my two friends entered the room with me.

The mikvah itself was an inviting lapis blue and resembled a luxurious plunge pool. The water was warm. I submerged my body, then my head and my long hair. I curled into a ball underwater. Suspended there, I felt gently but fully held. I recited the mikvah prayer: “Blessed are You, O Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the immersion.” In the long-sought ritual, I momentarily sensed boundaries receding as I crossed over to become a Korean American Jew.

When I emerged from the mikvah, the two sets of rabbis showed me the documents they’d prepared to officially mark my new Jewish status. The papers bore my chosen Hebrew name: Chava, or Eve. Buchdahl told me that the certificate of conversion under Reform Judaism would be sent to be recorded for posterity in the American Jewish Archives. I looked expectantly toward the Orthodox rabbis. They seemed impressed. One of them said, “We keep a list in a Google doc.” ♦



Jeannie Suk Gersen is a contributing writer at The New Yorker and a professor at Harvard Law School.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/converting-to-judaism-in-the-wake-of-october-7th>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Letter from Buenos Aires](#)

Javier Milei Wages War on Argentina's Government

The President, a libertarian economist given to outrageous provocations, wants to remake the nation. Can it survive his shock-therapy approach?

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)

December 2, 2024



Milei’s supporters call him the Madman. They also believe that his radical initiatives can fix a long-troubled economy.

Photograph by Tommaso Protti for The New Yorker

Did I want a selfie? Javier Milei, the President of Argentina, was offering. So many of his supporters wanted them; the Internet is full of pictures of him with ecstatic fans, regional leaders, and such international fellow-travellers as Elon Musk. In his office, he adopted his customary pose, his face angled toward the good light, his lips pursed, two jaunty thumbs up. The stance seemed naggingly familiar, and then I realized that it recalled the psychotic character Alex from Stanley Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange.” “*Naranja Mecánica?*” I asked. Milei’s eyes sparkled, and he nodded, cackling, then obligingly resumed the pose.

For Milei, a self-described “anarcho-capitalist” determined to remake his country, this punkish presentation is not incidental to his success. His supporters refer to him as the Madman and as the Wig—a reference to his hairdo, an unkempt shag with disco sideburns. Milei has said that his hair is styled by the “invisible hand” of the market, but, during my visit, his stylist, Lilia Lemoine, stopped in to adjust it. “She wants me to look like a cross between Elvis and Wolverine,” he said. (Lemoine, who had recently been elected as a legislator with Milei’s party, was formerly a cosplayer, a special-effects producer, and, for a time, Milei’s girlfriend.)

Milei, who is fifty-four, came late to politics. Before he won a seat in Congress, in 2021, he was a low-profile economist, and then a frequent guest on talk shows, famous for explosive denunciations of the government. Argentina, after a century of economic struggles, was in crisis. As Milei campaigned for President, the inflation rate climbed to more than two hundred per cent, and roughly forty per cent of the population was living in poverty. Milei earned a following by blaming the trouble on a corrupt caste—*la casta*—that included politicians, journalists, trade unionists, and academics.

The solution, he argued, was a drastic reduction in the scope of government. He once declared, “The state is the pedophile in the kindergarten, with the children chained up and slathered in Vaseline.” He has vowed to abolish the Argentinean peso in favor of the U.S. dollar, suggested blowing up the country’s Central Bank, and advocated a market so unconstrained that it would permit trade in human organs. He carried around a chainsaw, with which he said he would cut away the fat and corruption of *la casta*. During the campaign, he stood at a bulletin board hung with the names of government ministries, then ripped them off one at a time, yelling, “*Afuera!*”—“Out!”

The Presidential office is a long room in the Casa Rosada, an ornate nineteenth-century palace named for its pinkish façade. During my visit, its tall windows were blocked by heavy gold curtains, which were carefully pinned shut to keep out the light. Explaining the crepuscular atmosphere, Milei pointed to his eyes and said that he was photosensitive. He told me that the task of fighting inflation kept him working from dawn until late into the night. Smiling ruefully, he patted his head and said, “I’m getting a few white hairs, and it’s thinning on top.”

Once a week, he said, he managed to go for a walk with his “four-legged children”—his dogs. Milei owns four cloned English mastiffs, each named for a famous economist: Murray, after Murray Rothbard; Milton, for Milton Friedman; Robert, for Robert Lucas; and Lucas, also for Robert Lucas. In interviews, Milei insists that there are five dogs, including Conan—his beloved original mastiff, named for Conan the Barbarian, who provided the DNA that the others were cloned from in a lab in Massachusetts. Conan apparently died in 2017, but Milei habitually refers to him in the present tense, saying that he communicates with him telepathically. (I didn’t ask about Conan; I was told there was a taboo around the subject.)

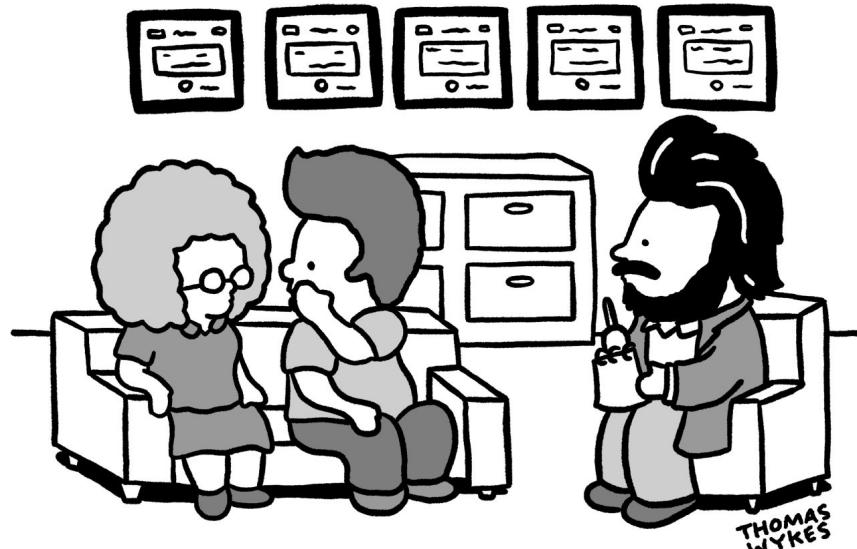
In public, Milei doesn't limit his ire to economics. He has derided opponents as "dirty asses," called Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, the President of Brazil, "corrupt" and a "communist," and described Pope Francis, a mild-mannered reformer, as "a filthy leftist" and "the Devil's representative on earth." As Milei approaches the end of his first year as President, his emotional stability is a matter of national speculation, and, in a country where psychotherapy is a widespread obsession, almost everyone I met offered a diagnosis. Most agreed that Milei was, at the very least, *desequilibrado*—unbalanced.

Yet Milei insists that he is implementing a carefully considered plan, and that only he can make Argentina great again. When I met him this fall, he had slashed government spending by thirty per cent and had begun reducing inflation. But he had done so by changing the compact between the Argentinean state and its citizens—cutting cost-of-living increases to pensioners, funding for education, and supplies for soup kitchens in poor neighborhoods. Depending on whom you talked to, Milei's Argentina was either an earthly paradise in the making or an aircraft plunging toward the ground.

Argentina can seem like a country of economists. There are thousands of professionals and countless impassioned amateurs, all happy to expound on monetary theory in the way that people elsewhere debate the defensive tactics of the Premier League. Pretty much everyone can reel off the latest dollar-to-peso conversion rates (official and black market), the minutiae of fuel-price fluctuations, and fiercely defended opinions about which past government has screwed things up the most.

Even by local standards, though, Milei is unusually fixated. In his office, I tried to briefly divert him from the economy by asking what excited him about being President. He replied instantly, "Knowing that I am making the best government in history, together with my team." How did he know that? "Because, as an

economist who specializes in economic growth, I am almost obliged through professional formation to have access to the right information and a good reading of the data.”



“We gotta get out of here—those are his marriage certificates.”

Cartoon by Thomas Wykes

For the next fifteen minutes, Milei unspooled statistics about interest rates, fiscal growth, and changes in the G.D.P. Much of his argument can be reduced to two of his favorite sayings: “Our government received the worst economic inheritance in the history of Argentina” and “There is no money.”

In public appearances, Milei indignantly claims that Argentina was once “the richest nation on earth.” He is referring to the so-called Golden Age, in the decades before the First World War. In those days, as international trade was transformed by refrigerated steamships, Argentina was a major exporter of grain and meat, by some measures as wealthy as the United States. It was also a destination for European migrants on a scale comparable only to the U.S.; new arrivals hailed it as the United States of South America.

In the century that followed, though, Argentina endured a succession of modest booms and punitive busts. It still exports wheat and beef, and it increasingly sends soy to China; it also

produces oil and industrial goods. But its debts have grown to the point of crisis. The foreign sovereign debt is now one of Latin America's largest, at more than four hundred billion dollars. In 2001, after a mismanaged intervention by the International Monetary Fund, Argentina defaulted on its debt; it has done so twice more since.

The causes are complex. The country's economy is largely built on extraction and agriculture, making it heavily susceptible to fluctuating commodity prices. Development suffered under several periods of military rule—including a devastating episode between 1976 and 1983, in which death squads helped prosecute a “Dirty War” against Argentine leftists, abducting, torturing, and killing thousands of civilians.

But, for Milei, the crucial causes of the collapse are government mismanagement, corruption, and, most of all, “communistic” policies—especially the big-government movement named for the late dictator Juan Domingo Perón, whose legacy still shadows Argentina’s politics half a century after his death.

Perón, drawing inspiration from Mussolini, created a political machine that eventually included officials ranging from the far left to the right. Nearly all of them helped prop up one of the world’s largest welfare states, nationalizing everything from public utilities to the Central Bank. To accommodate the expenditures, the government simply printed more money, and inflation became an accepted fact of Argentinean life. As people lost trust in banks, and in the peso, black-market U.S. dollars became the country’s semi-official currency; over time, Argentineans are thought to have stashed away some two hundred and seventy-seven billion dollars, possibly the largest cache outside the United States.

Left-wing Peronists have been in power for much of the past two decades. Starting in 2003, Néstor Kirchner served one term, and then his wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, served two. C.F.K.,

as she is known, is a charismatic, mercurial figure, who became increasingly mired in corruption scandals. In 2015, a right-of-center businessman named Mauricio Macri took office, but he, too, fumbled the economy, and Cristina Kirchner returned to power—this time as Vice-President to a handpicked former aide, Alberto Fernández. Their government was a fractious race to the bottom, exacerbated by the *COVID-19* pandemic, in which Argentina imposed one of the world's strictest lockdowns.

It was during Fernández's Presidency that Milei decided to run for Congress. He started out as a member of a libertarian electoral coalition but soon formed his own party. Its members called themselves Libertarios and their movement Libertad Avanza.

In Congress, Milei demonstrated a showman's instincts. Declaring that his salary was “money stolen from the people by the state,” he announced that he would hand it out in a monthly raffle, broadcast on television. Within hours, an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand people had signed up, and, as the raffles continued, more joined in. By the time Milei ran for President, at least three million Argentineans had participated.

Buenos Aires, built along the lines of Paris, has a city center of neoclassical public buildings, wide avenues, and grand parks. Despite the economic downturn, it retains a feeling of cosmopolitan refinement, with a thriving café culture and a world-class opera house; its residents are pleased to discuss their cultural linkages to Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Gardel, and Lionel Messi. Yet in the outskirts of the capital, ringed by vast slums that the locals call “*villas miseria*,” the deterioration of recent decades is impossible to ignore.

In the *villas*—there are some two thousand in Buenos Aires Province alone—many residents live in improvised shelters on unpaved streets. There is often no formal sewage system or electricity, and little or no police presence. Instead, there are gangs

and widespread drug use. Rodrigo Zarazaga, a Jesuit priest and a political scientist who works in one of the capital's toughest *villas miseria*, says that a new youth underclass is growing there—individualistic, entrepreneurial, and cut off from the formal economy and from the unions traditionally tied to Peronism. The jobs available to young people are delivering food or selling drugs, or, with the greater availability of the Internet, online gambling and sex work. “The girls are doing OnlyFans, and the boys are trading crypto,” Zarazaga said. The harshness of life has created a receptive audience for Milei among young people, particularly young men. “We had a society that talks all the time about rights, and they didn’t have any rights,” he said. “We talked to them about the need for rule of law, but they lived with theft and violence all around them.”

For Milei, one of the keys to attracting support has been making the language of theoretical economics satisfying to people who want to overturn society. At his inauguration, last December, he broke with tradition by holding the ceremony outside Argentina’s Congress building, where he spoke in front of a banner that read “The President Who Passes Into History Is He Who Makes History.” Milei’s followers are enthusiastic about displaying symbols, and the crowd that packed the square flaunted Argentinean flags and baseball caps emblazoned, in English, with “*Make Argentina Great Again.*”

A limousine drove up to deliver the outgoing President, Alberto Fernández, and an angry chant welled from the crowd: “*Hijo de puta, hijo de puta.*” Milei’s followers jumped up and down, like fans at a soccer match, and one held aloft a giant cardboard chainsaw. When Milei joined Cristina Kirchner, for the symbolic transfer of power, the crowd screamed that she was a whore and chanted, “Cristina is going to jail.” Kirchner, in a billowing red ensemble, gave them the finger.

After the ceremony, Milei descended a set of steps from the Congress building to a stage, where he embraced his sister, Karina, who is his closest adviser. Then, for the next forty minutes, under a relentless sun, he delivered an extraordinarily detailed exegesis of the country's problems. His predecessors, he said, had left "twin deficits of seventeen points of G.D.P.," and "fifteen of these seventeen G.D.P. points correspond to the consolidated deficit between the Treasury and the Central Bank." He pursued the point, in the tone of a professor working a logic proof: "Therefore, there is no viable solution that avoids attacking the budget deficit. At the same time, of these fifteen points of fiscal deficit, five correspond to the National Treasury and ten to the Central Bank. Therefore, the solution implies, on the one hand, a fiscal adjustment in the national public sector of five points of G.D.P." Warming to the topic, he added, "On the other hand, it is necessary to eliminate the Central Bank's interest-bearing liabilities, which are responsible for the ten points of the Central Bank's deficit. This would put an end to money issuance and thus to the only empirically true and theoretically valid cause of inflation."

A transcript of the speech records a rapturous response from the crowd: "Milei, dear, the people are with you!" In the area where I was standing, at least, the attendees spent most of the lecture shifting from foot to foot, seeming impatient for Milei to get back to the fighting words. Finally, he obliged: he promised to remake Argentina into "a country where the state doesn't run our lives." The crowd, reenergized, chanted, "Chainsaw!" Milei would be their tribune. He would hack away at public expenditure, and show criminals no mercy—a prospect that the crowd greeted with ecstatic shouts of "*Mano dura!*" Yet he promised that he would not be "vengeful," welcoming anyone who wanted to join him in building the new Argentina. Heaven itself, he said, was on his side.

In the Casa Rosada, Milei told me that, after years of reading mostly about economics, he had discovered a taste for biography—"biographies about me," he said, laughing and gesturing at a pile

of books on a nearby table. He picked one up for examination. Its cover showed Milei posing heroically next to a lion—one of his symbols—and the title “Milei: The Revolution They Didn’t See Coming.” He grabbed a pen and, smiling broadly, signed it for me in swooping cursive, then again in tidy print, and finally added his slogan: “*Viva la libertad, carajo!*”—“Long live liberty, dammit!”

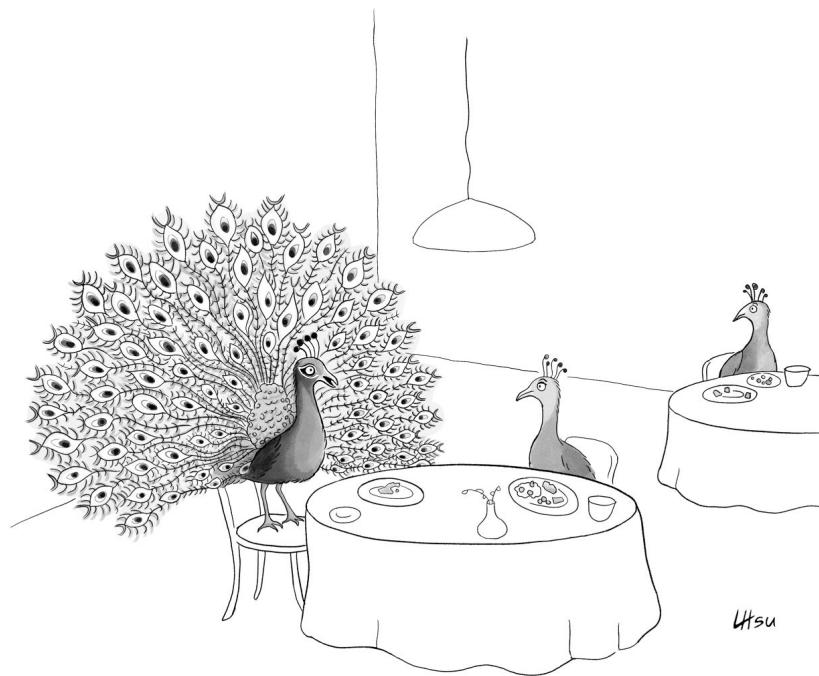
If the book was not commissioned by Milei, it reads as if it were. Its flap copy calls him “a gladiator who the establishment underestimated” and presents a litany of Milei’s personas: “The Goalkeeper, the Rocker, the ‘Austrian’ Economist, the Showman, the Pool Player, the Polemicist, the Outsider, the Disrupter, the Anti-Communist, the Uncombed One, the Divulger, the Ideologue, the Politician.”

Growing up in central Buenos Aires, Milei was unaccustomed to such flattery. He is the son of a hard-edged bus driver named Norberto, who eventually became the owner of a transportation company. According to Milei, his father bullied and beat him mercilessly, calling him “trash” and telling him that he would die of hunger. His mother, Alicia, a housewife, enabled the abuse. His closest ally in the family was his sister, Karina, three years younger. Once, according to *El País*, she became so upset at the sight of her father beating her brother that she had a panic attack. Their mother told Milei, “Your sister is like this because of you. If she dies, it’s your fault.”

In his teens, Milei took refuge in music—he sang in a Rolling Stones tribute band—and in sports. Like many Argentinean boys, he dreamed of being a professional soccer player, and he became a decent goalkeeper, distinguished by furious intensity. (It was on his soccer team that he first acquired the nickname Madman.) At eighteen, after spending years in the youth squad of a second-division club, he decided to give up.

It was the late nineteen-eighties, and the country was in tumult. Argentina's loss in the Falklands War had ended a period of military dictatorship, but inflation was rampant, and riots spread. Milei threw himself into economics, earning a degree at a private university and eventually two master's degrees. He spent the next twenty years as an economist at various firms and think tanks, as well as teaching courses at the University of Buenos Aires and elsewhere. He wrote more than fifty papers and published several books expounding his laissez-faire theories on economic growth.

Outside work, Milei seems to have led a solitary life. He apparently had few close friends, and he went a decade without speaking to his parents. Mariano Fernández, an economist who worked with him starting in 2005, recalls him as a loner; Fernández took him out a few times to bars, where Milei, a teetotaller, ordered juice. The conversation was generally impersonal, centered on politics, dogs, and, most often, debates about economics.



"Not flirting, just flagging the waiter."
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

Milei was absorbing the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, the Austrian-born theorist who was perhaps the twentieth century's most

influential apostle of the free market. But, Fernández told me, his arguments were more intellectual than visceral, and he didn't seem to have "a strong predetermined political vision." Like other people who knew Milei at the time, Fernández said that he had little feeling for individuals but an instinct for a crowd. "Milei has a kind of Asperger's thing," he said. "At the same time, he has some magnetism. I once took him to a barbecue, and he spoke with such vehemence that people stopped to listen to him."

Milei was perhaps at his best when talking with people who didn't know much about his subject. "As an economist he's mediocre—good at what he does but a bit local," a senior academic economist in the U.S. who knows Milei's theoretical work told me. "I also studied the Austrians in college. Then I moved on, and most other economists have, too—but he still believes in the free-market solutions of the nineties. He uses that discourse with a middling audience to impress them as a technician. But the technicians, frankly, find it mediocre."

After two decades of obscurity, Milei became a celebrity abruptly, at the age of forty-five. In 2016, he was invited on to a panel-discussion show called "Animales Sueltos" ("Loose Animals"). During the appearance, his first significant one on TV, the anchor asked about John Maynard Keynes.

Keynes, the seminal advocate of government intervention in times of economic unrest, was a longtime bogeyman for small-government conservatives. (Ronald Reagan once noted, peevishly, that he "didn't even have a degree in economics.") But Milei loathed Keynes with special intensity. Ernesto Tenembaum, a psychologist and a journalist who wrote a book about Milei, recalled an anecdote. A neighbor of Milei's once met him in the elevator and asked what he did for a living. When he told her that he was an economics professor, she innocently said, "Oh, so you must teach Keynes." Enraged, Milei began shouting, "Piece-of-shit

communist!” When she got out at her floor, he was still yelling: “*Hija de puta*, you’re ruining this country.”

In his television appearance, Milei was asked about one of Keynes’s books and went into a spasmodic rage. Shouting furiously, he called the book “garbage,” and ranted about how Keynesian theories had contaminated Argentina’s government. It made for great TV. Tenembaum said, “Remember the movie ‘Network,’ with the anchorman who shouts, ‘I’m not going to take this anymore’? That’s Milei.” After the taping, the anchor told him, “The whole nation is talking about you.” The ratings had soared, and they soared again when he was invited back. In the coming years, Milei made hundreds more appearances on TV. After his segments aired, his neighbors sometimes saw him standing on the sidewalk outside his apartment building with his dogs, as if hoping to be recognized.

In 1974, V. S. Naipaul published a speculative inquiry into Argentinean history, in which he traced a legacy of environmental extraction and violence against Indigenous people to a startling source: a penchant for anal sex. “By imposing on her what prostitutes reject, and what he knows to be a kind of sexual black mass, the Argentine macho . . . consciously dishonors his victim,” he wrote. In the years since, the essay has generated a series of mocking responses, including one in which the novelist Roberto Bolaño calls Naipaul’s analysis “a picturesque vignette that owes more to the erotico-bucolic desires of a nineteenth-century French pornographer than to harsh reality.” Many other readers simply thought that the argument was beneath notice.

Yet Milei seems determined to revive the discourse. In rallies and speeches, he deploys a kind of rhetoric usually confined to locker rooms and prison yards. He refers to his political adversaries as mandrills, the monkeys known for their purplish hindquarters, and makes triumphant declarations like “We broke the ass of those mandrills.” Not long ago, an ally of his celebrated a favorable

inflation report with a tweet that showed Milei gazing at a bent-over mandrill, with the caption “Keep dominating, Mister President.”

Part of Milei’s persistence as a media figure comes from his unusual willingness to talk about sex in public. He has described having had a formative experience with a prostitute at the age of thirteen. In one television appearance, he spoke of having a number of threesomes, “ninety per cent of the time with two women,” and disclosed that he was an aficionado of Tantric sex. He explained that he practiced delayed ejaculation, with such discipline that he became known as Vaca Mala—Bad Cow—because he withheld his “milk.” Asked how long he had abstained, Milei told the host, “Three months.”

This kind of self-disclosure has inspired a fervor in the tabloid press about Milei’s relationships. Since becoming a public figure, he has dated a series of actresses and show-biz personalities —“*vedettes*,” in Argentinean slang. When he became President, he was seeing a comedian, Fátima Flórez, who is noted for her impression of Cristina Kirchner. His current girlfriend is Amalia (Yuyito) González, an actress a decade older than he is, who was once rumored to have been a lover of the late President Carlos Menem. The two met at a launch party for Milei’s book “Capitalism, Socialism, and the Neoclassical Trap.”

People who know Milei well say that his most enduring relationship is with his sister, Karina; he dedicated his book “The Path of the Libertarian” to her, as well as to his dogs. Until Karina became the head of Milei’s Presidential campaign, she supported herself by selling cakes and giving tarot-card readings online. She is now his chief of staff, known by the masculine title of El Jefe. A shy, elusive figure who avoids interviews, Karina is said to wield immense influence over her brother; if she wants someone fired, her decision is final. In 2021, Milei described their compact in Biblical terms: “Moses was a great leader, right? But he wasn’t a

great communicator. And so God sent him Aaron so he could, let's say, communicate. Kari is Moses, and I am the one who communicates. Nothing more." The rumors about their relationship are so lurid and persistent that, late last year, Milei felt compelled to issue a written denial of the "fake news" that he "fucked his sister."

In person, Milei gives a less rakish impression. When I visited his office, he told me wistfully that, when his Presidency was over, he hoped to spend more time with his four-legged children, and with Karina. If he still had a girlfriend, he would spend more time with her, too. He would also study the Torah intensively. Raised a Catholic, he was converting to Judaism, but realized that he "still had a lot to learn."

Asked about his pastimes, he said, "I really like movies about mathematicians," and mentioned "Good Will Hunting," "The Oxford Murders," "The Imitation Game." He still loved rock and roll, with a particular fondness for Elvis Presley and the Rolling Stones. In a tone of fierce pride, he noted that the Stones had played fifteen shows in Argentina, and he'd made it to fourteen. "I would love to meet Mick Jagger in person!" he said.

But his responsibilities didn't allow much leisure. "When I have some time, I listen to opera," he added. He favored the Italians: Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, Puccini. (He has described himself as a Puccini character brought to life.) On Sunday evenings, he invites a small group of people to the Presidential residence, Los Olivos, to watch opera DVDs.

One of the participants, Miguel Boggiano, a financial consultant in his late forties, spoke to me in his apartment in a fashionable neighborhood of Buenos Aires. The living room was all white, spotless, and uncluttered with any visible books. Boggiano, a short, balding man in tight jeans, was tended to by a dark-skinned maid in a servant's uniform.

Boggiano said that he and Milei had met as guests on a TV show, and found that both saw themselves as partisans in a “cultural battle.” He told me that he had been impressed by Milei’s “enormous balls,” and by his willingness to court outrage. Yet he resisted the idea that Milei was on the far right. “He only talks about freedom. What’s far right about that? It’s a lie spread by the socialists. The far right is skinheads and xenophobes, and they don’t exist here in Argentina.” Milei might be controversial at home, Boggiano suggested, but he had found an enthusiastic audience among leaders abroad who resisted government constraint: “Everybody wants to meet him! The C.E.O.s of Google, OpenAI, Musk, Meloni—everyone.”

One of Milei’s crucial links to the global right is Fernando Cerimedo, who ran digital-media strategy during his Presidential campaign. Cerimedo, a husky fortysomething sometimes referred to as “Milei’s troll,” told me in Buenos Aires that he had honed his methods in unlikely circumstances. In 2008, before becoming an avowed anti-communist, he lived in Puerto Rico and worked on Barack Obama’s Presidential campaign. Then, in 2022, he supported Brazil’s far-right President Jair Bolsonaro in his attempt at reëlection. After that bid failed, Cerimedo participated in a campaign questioning the vote count, and eventually a mob of Bolsonaro followers assaulted Brazil’s federal buildings in an attempt to overturn the results. Police there have since accused Cerimedo of criminal conspiracy, which he denies.

During Milei’s campaign, Cerimedo had arranged an interview, on X, with Tucker Carlson, a lengthy conversation in which Milei enumerated a series of right-wing-friendly positions: leery of China, against abortion, bitterly opposed to the “social justice” policies of Argentina’s “socialist” government. Within twenty-four hours, the interview attracted three hundred million views—even more than Carlson’s interview with Donald Trump. Among its admirers was Elon Musk, who tweeted, “Government overspending, which is the fundamental cause of inflation, has

wrecked countless countries.” Cerimedo was delighted. “The Tucker interview was like a detonator,” he told me. With a laugh, he added, “And Elon, now even he’s a Libertario—more even than Javier! What the fuck?”

Last April, Milei visited Musk’s Tesla factory in Austin, and drove around in a Cybertruck; the two posed for photos together, and have since met three times more. Milei described Musk to me in extraordinarily uncritical terms. “Here’s a man who gets up every day saying to himself, ‘Let’s see, what problem does humanity have that I can fix?’ ” he said. “He’s a hero, a social benefactor. God knows, I hope he can come and find some business opportunity in Argentina. . . . It would be marvellous, and I would feel very lucky and honored.”

Musk has extended Starlink satellite services to Argentina and announced that his companies are “actively looking for ways to invest in and support Argentina.” In private, he and Milei are said to have spoken about Argentina’s enormous deposits of lithium, a crucial material in making batteries. They met again ahead of the CPAC investors’ summit hosted by Trump last month at Mar-a-Lago. Milei was the first foreign leader to visit the President-elect after his victory.

Before then, Milei had met Trump only once, backstage at an event in Maryland. In a video of the encounter, Milei bursts into the room, delightedly screams, “President!” and rushes up to embrace Trump. “It is a very big pleasure to meet you, President,” he says. “It is a great honor for me. Thank you for your words to me. I am very happy—it is very generous. Thank you very much, thank you very much, I mean it.” Trump, looking a bit startled, struggles to make small talk while “Y.M.C.A.” booms in the background.

Now Milei seemed to feel more confident about their relationship. In a television interview, he declared, “I am today one of the two most relevant politicians on planet Earth. One is Trump, and the

other is me.” As Musk proposed a near-impossible goal of cutting two trillion dollars from the U.S. federal budget, Milei said that he was “exporting the model of the chainsaw and deregulation to the whole world”—even though inflation and the scale of government spending in the U.S. are a small fraction of those in Argentina. The more important transaction will play out behind the scenes. Milei wants Trump to help him renegotiate a forty-four-billion-dollar loan from the I.M.F.



“Are you going to be long, or . . . ?”

Cartoon by Will McPhail

Like Trump, Milei has flirted with reactionary elements without quite avowing them. His Vice-President, Victoria Villarruel, is an arch-conservative culture warrior, as intent on social issues as he is on economics. Villarruel disparages “the dictatorship of minorities,” and has inflamed human-rights advocates by urging a reconsideration of the Dirty War. Under the Kirchners, the government tried and imprisoned hundreds of officers and officials who participated in the state terror. Villarruel, the daughter of an Argentinean lieutenant colonel, has spent years calling instead for the armed forces to be remembered as the “other victims” of terrorism.

Last summer, six legislators from Milei’s party visited a prison that contained some of the most notorious perpetrators of violence—including Alfredo Astiz, the “Angel of Death,” whose many victims included two French nuns. Not long afterward, a photo leaked of

the legislators posed with Astiz, setting off a furor. Villarruel denied any involvement in the visit, and the legislators rushed to defend themselves, with one deputy in her thirties claiming that she had had no idea who Astiz was. “I had to Google him,” she said.

When I asked Milei about Villarruel’s views, he responded testily that I should “talk to her.” I persisted, and he said he believed that both sides had committed “excesses” during the Dirty War—though, he added, “the difference is, when you’re the state and you have the monopoly on violence, you can’t commit excesses.” He seemed eager to return to talking about trade deals.

Many of his supporters seem to receive these kinds of ethical questions with an ironic shrug. In Buenos Aires, I met a young political strategist connected to Milei’s campaign. He picked the location: a bar that had been favored by the secret services during the military dictatorship.

The strategist, who asked to be identified only as Manuel, told me that the campaign had studied Trump’s communication techniques closely. “There wasn’t a single important member of Milei’s media team who didn’t know who Roger Stone was,” he said. But the likeness wasn’t just stylistic. “Without Trump there could be no Javier Milei,” he went on. “For Trump to exist in the United States, there had to be fertile ground. It’s the same here with Javier Milei.” Though their populism had been enabled by different conditions, in both cases their constituents believed that public institutions had ceased to represent them. In Argentina, Manuel said, Milei represented “a repudiation of the political class—populist vengeance.”

I asked what it was about Milei that appealed to him. “In my lifetime, I have never seen an ordered, stable Argentina,” he said. “Milei offers hope. He represents the negation of the status quo and brings some moral principles to the table, along with this libertarian idea. Will it work?” Manuel shrugged. The new revolutionaries

were on the right, he suggested: “The left—at least that is what the Peronists who have been in power for most of my life claim to be—have failed. They have also become over-institutionalized, and you can’t contemplate a revolution from within institutions.” He went on, “Milei represents a new right, which is uncontested, irreverent—even brainless, if you like, because it’s just an idea so far. Let’s see what it’s able to pull off, because there is no master plan. It’s still just hope placed in a doctrine.”

During the election, Milei had a stronghold of support in Villa 31, one of Buenos Aires’s best-known slums. It sprawls over nearly two hundred acres next to the city’s port and near its Beaux-Arts train station, Retiro. The station, a grand building that opened in 1915, still stands, but train service there was cut back after a privatization effort in the nineteen-nineties made it unprofitable; the park in front is now a hangout for addicts and indigents. Villa 31, a warren of jerry-built brick and cinder-block buildings that houses more than forty thousand people, dates back to the nineteen-thirties as a spot where migrant workers settled to try to scratch out a living.

Because of its proximity to central Buenos Aires, Villa 31 bustles with commercial activity. Its residents have contended with drug gangs and frequent problems with garbage collection, but in recent years the safety and infrastructure have improved, thanks to new bus lines and government-financed home-building schemes; there are a few schools, and people have opened shops around the neighborhood’s edges.

Villa 31’s most prominent entrepreneur, Héctor Espinoza, is a liquor dealer. He is a sturdy man in his early thirties from the city of La Quiaca, in a poor rural province of northern Argentina. In years past, people like him were what the European-descended élites contemptuously called “*las cabecitas negras*”—the little black heads, a reference to the fact that most of the capital’s workers and domestic servants were of Indigenous descent. Perón

and his wife, Evita, used a more heroic term—“*descamisados*,” or “shirtless ones”—and places like Villa 31 became centers of loyalty to his party. But Espinoza was a Milei man: he had named his shop Liberty 31, for the President’s catchphrase, and in last year’s election he helped turn out the vote.

When I visited, Espinoza greeted me amiably, dressed in a colorful shirt, white pants, and spotless new sneakers. His shop was rudimentary but well stocked, its shelves filled with whiskey, pisco, aguardiente, and beer. Espinoza explained that he bought supplies from importers around the port and then drove whatever he didn’t sell in Villa 31 to his home province, where he could turn a profit.

Espinoza grew up as one of five siblings, raised by a single mother. He went to work young, doing everything from picking tomatoes to tending a cemetery; his mother sold candy on the street. They never got ahead. “How is it that she could work her whole life and we had nothing?” he asked. The Peronists had given them little more than rhetoric, he said: “Words like ‘community,’ ‘dignity,’ and ‘human rights’ were just words for the poor. There was clientelism behind those words. They promised to get you out of poverty, but their only interest was in getting into power.”

When he was old enough, Espinoza came to the capital, where he lived with an older brother in one of the *villas miseria*. He eventually made it into the University of Buenos Aires and enrolled in economics classes. In 2013, while still a student, he began spending time in Villa 31, and he eventually moved there; it was better than where he had been living, and he saw possibilities. He sold water purifiers, and lent money to people who couldn’t otherwise get credit.

In 2014, he met Milei, through a politician and financial analyst who gave talks at the university. He began attending chats on economics that Milei was giving to small groups, spreading the ideas of the Austrian school. “It was the opposite of what I was

learning at university,” Espinoza said. “I began to study liberalism and realized that it fit me like a ring on a finger. The Peronists talked about a system of government that provided ‘ascendant social mobility’ for the working class, but that wasn’t happening—it didn’t exist.” Milei, on the other hand, “spoke of having a society where you had the freedom to produce your own wealth.”

Espinoza went on, “Milei talked bluntly, and I knew that his message would go far in the *villas*.” He said he had once asked Milei why he didn’t enter politics, and Milei had replied that it “disgusted” him. “That was his asset, something the people picked up on, because they were fed up with politics and politicians. They would say, ‘Politics is shit,’ and that’s why, when Milei did finally decide to enter politics and run for Congress, he won in the barrios. Now Villa 31 is the bastion of libertarianism!”

Yet ideological enthusiasm may not sustain many Argentineans through a long period of painful change. Milei has so far fired about thirty thousand public employees—nearly a tenth of the federal workforce. Many of those who remain fear they will be fired soon, as the administration recently announced that forty thousand of them would have to pass an exam or lose their jobs. There have been huge reductions to funding for health care and scientific research. Much of the education sector has been gutted; among other things, Milei cut inflation adjustments for universities, leaving many campuses unable to pay for lights and heat. A dozen ministries have been dissolved or downgraded and defunded. The department of public works has been frozen; an estimated two hundred thousand construction workers have since been fired, leaving behind half-finished buildings. There have been radical cuts in aid to impoverished children. While inflation has declined to less than three per cent, the poverty rate has grown roughly eleven points, to fifty-three per cent.

Sebastián Menescaldi, an economist with the Buenos Aires consultancy firm EcoGo, suggested that something like Milei’s

program of cuts was necessary—"otherwise, an even bigger crisis was inevitable." In fourteen years, government spending had increased from the equivalent of twenty-four per cent of the G.D.P. to forty-three per cent, even as the economy kept shrinking. "Milei got in because he proposed a change," Menescaldi said. "So he embarked on a reduction—but, for me, to an exaggerated degree."

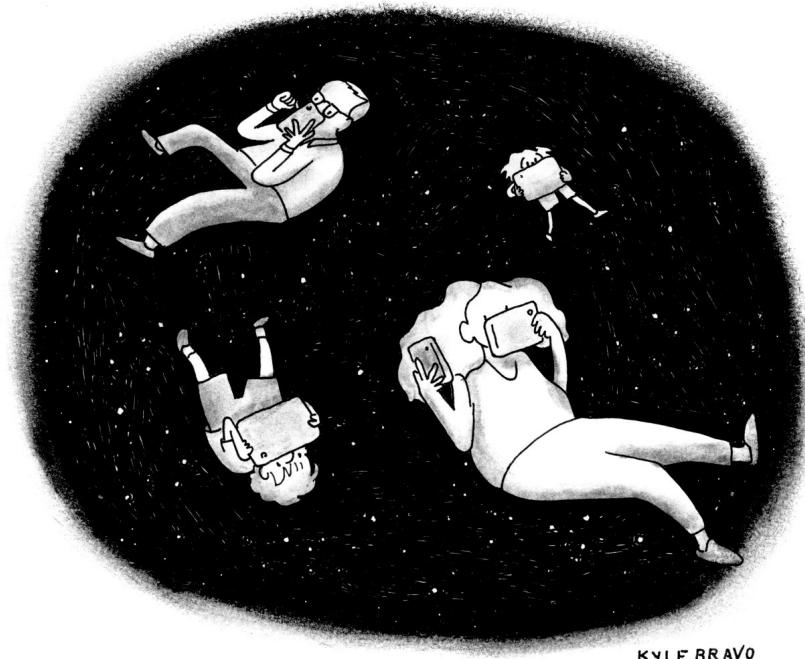
He argued that Milei has done too little to encourage local production. Instead, he controlled foreign-exchange rates to attract outside investment. Menescaldi calls this an illusion, noting that most of the money coming in is from short-term investors, attracted by Milei's offer of two-per-cent monthly interest on dollars. But people aren't going to keep their money invested for long if they don't trust that the country is fiscally stable. Some big firms, including Exxon, have already sold assets in Argentina. "All of the progress we're starting to make is based on speculation," Menescaldi said. "The challenge for Milei is to find a bridge to turn speculative capital into long-term capital. Sadly, most of the times that this process has occurred in Argentina, it's ended badly."

Menescaldi believed that it would take a year for the effects of Milei's policies to become clear. In the meantime, the cuts were increasing poverty and exacerbating tensions—consequences that he believes are just beginning to be visible. "I am afraid that many people are going to lose their jobs and quality of life, and that will cause social discontent," he said.

In late September, I returned to Villa 31 to visit a soup kitchen, in a row of squat concrete apartment buildings alongside a highway underpass. The kitchen was run by an activist group called Movimiento Evita. After years of lobbying for "the people's rights to shelter," the group had persuaded the government to erect the buildings, to house several thousand people who had previously lived in a crowded settlement under the highway.

In the soup kitchen, a small, bare room refitted for cooking, the staff members were anxious. A woman named Maribel explained that they fed about a hundred and seventy people a day—usually lentils or noodles, whatever they had on hand. Their patrons were mostly elderly, but recently there had been more young people, many of whom were struggling with drug addiction. There were also increasing numbers of indigents on the periphery of the community. As people grew more desperate, Maribel said, there was more crime on the street, even in the middle of the day.

THE SCREEN-TIME CONTINUUM



Cartoon by Kyle Bravo

The soup kitchen had managed to stay open, because its budget was provided by the city government. But many left-wing groups believed that Milei was targeting his cuts to weaken their influence in poor neighborhoods. He had already ended support for geriatric-care centers in Villa 31, leaving about three hundred elderly people bereft in their neighborhood alone. Maribel explained that many of them lived alone and relied on volunteers like her to assess their needs, offer some company, and provide a daily meal. Shaking her head, she said that it was “heartless to cut off the elderly, who are

vulnerable, like children.” She and the other aid workers were doing what they could, but she felt afraid for the people they looked after. At times, she said, with tears in her eyes, she was the only person at their bedside when they died.

One of Milei’s great advantages in last year’s election was that his main rival was Sergio Massa—the previous government’s economy minister, and thus an ideal scapegoat. Massa is a debonair man of fifty-two, known as a canny political operator. His office, in a skyscraper overlooking Buenos Aires, is decorated with religious figurines and photographs of his political friends: Bill Clinton, Lula, Joe Biden. When I visited, Massa lit a panatela and told me that he had known Milei for a decade and thought he was earnest about his economic theories: “He really believes what he says.” Still, he added, as the austerity measures deepened people’s suffering, “I don’t foresee conflict, but I do expect chaos.”

Massa said that Milei lacked a politician’s gift for broadcasting sympathy: “He doesn’t empathize with any particular social group and sees society as a place in which everything is measured by price.” But that hadn’t presented much of an impediment to getting his agenda passed. His rivals were disorganized, Massa acknowledged, noting that the Peronists “had no ability to pull a crowd.” Although Milei’s party holds a minority in Congress, he and his aides have proved skilled at legislative gamesmanship, forming tactical alliances and blocking their opponents’ initiatives.

In September, after Congress passed an eight-per-cent cost-of-living increase for pensioners, Milei vetoed it. The next day, hundreds of retirees, as well as some left-wing activists, gathered in front of Congress to protest. The police lashed out, and, as news broadcasts showed elderly men and women being beaten and pepper-sprayed, outrage spread. Pope Francis, with whom Milei had reconciled on a visit to Rome, broke his customary silence on politics to issue a chiding note: “Instead of paying for social justice, the government paid for pepper spray.”

The following week, the protests continued, but cautiously. A few dozen pensioners stood on a sidewalk holding placards, hemmed in by a phalanx of police in riot gear. One man, with a neat white beard, held a sign that read “Help Me Fight—You’re Next.” He introduced himself as Walter, a retired metalworker of sixty-two. He said that Milei’s measures would make life more difficult for people like him, and for the many others who were worse off. There are some seven million retirees living on government pensions in Argentina, with most set at the equivalent of about three hundred dollars a month. As their pensions have lost ground to inflation, many have struggled to pay their bills or have gone without food to save money for prescription medications. Walter expressed surprise that a man like Milei had become President—someone who seemed “unbalanced emotionally,” who had gratuitously insulted the Pope and praised Margaret Thatcher (a figure despised in Argentina for her part in the Falklands War). “People voted for him,” Walter said, with a bewildered expression. “I don’t get it.”

A seventy-one-year-old woman named Rosa, who had been a nurse’s aide, said that Milei didn’t “understand the needs of ordinary people,” especially those in the rural provinces who worked odd jobs and weren’t making enough money to pay rent. “The problem is, he doesn’t leave his circle—he doesn’t see,” she said.

By then, Milei had pushed through a vote in Congress that secured his veto, thanks to a group of eighty-seven legislators that included a crucial contingent from a centrist party. On social media, he wrote, “Today, eighty-seven heroes halted the fiscal degenerates who tried to destroy the fiscal surplus that Argentineans have achieved with such effort.” To celebrate, he invited the legislators to a barbecue on the grounds of Los Olivos. The news was met with indignation, as Milei’s opponents and media commentators assailed him for “heartlessness.” In response, the administration

said that attendees would pay for their own meals, and dismissed the criticism as fake news.

When I asked Milei about the pensioners, he reacted disdainfully and blamed “*los kirchneristas*.” They had nationalized the pension system and then plundered it, even as they doubled the number of people able to draw pensions. “I think it’s fabulous that you want to give an increase to the pensioners, but you must explain to me how you are going to finance it,” he said. “The bill that the Congress approved that we ended up vetoing implied that it would cost between 1.2 and 1.8 per cent of the gross domestic product in perpetuity—so that the real cost to Argentina, given the interest rate paid by the country and its growth potential, would have meant 62 per cent of our G.D.P. So that gives you an idea of the magnitude of the disaster that this populist adventure would have cost us, and which these people don’t even know how to do the math for!” Milei went on heatedly for five minutes, spitting out numbers. Not once did he express sympathy for the pensioners, or even acknowledge them as people.

Not long after the protests, a national poll showed that forty per cent of Argentineans disapproved of Milei and fifty-five per cent approved of him. He was exultant. The numbers were “incredible,” he said, given that he had just carried out “the biggest austerity measure in history.” He felt certain that Argentineans were “still hopeful” he could make their lives better.

Milei came to power amid an anti-incumbent wave that forced out establishment politicians around the world. He remains more popular than his opposition, but not necessarily popular enough to carry out a long-term transformation of the country. Kenneth Rogoff, an influential professor of economics at Harvard, told me, “The fact is, the odds are not in their favor, because nothing has worked in Argentina for a very long time. They have structural problems in their federal system that go beyond the problem of Peronism. The states, for example, are highly autonomous and can

run deficits that the central government is obligated to pay for. Their economy needs so much restructuring—it's been so corrupt for so long.”

Milei is calling for a kind of revolution in Argentina, and revolutions are by nature uncertain and unstable. “It’s very hard to find an example of shock therapy as drastic as this,” Rogoff went on. “Only Poland, maybe. But in Poland, which was leaving behind Communism, they were really willing to put up with a lot. And now they have maybe the best-performing economy in Europe. Russia, also, had shock therapy, but in their case it brought Putin.”

One night in late September, Milei held a rally in Parque Lezama, the park in Buenos Aires where he had concluded his first campaign for political office. As thousands of his followers crammed in, a screen onstage played clips of his greatest hits: insulting government officials, shouting, breaking something on a film set, high-fiving fans on the campaign trail. The crowd was transfixed, and people applauded and shouted for their favorite scenes.

A death-metal song played over the sound system, and a sepulchral voice repeated the refrain: “I am the lion.” In the crowd, people sang along, waving lion flags. Finally, Karina Milei came onstage. It was her first public speech, and her inexperience showed, as she plodded through such slogans as “It’s time for all of us to take the torch of liberty to every corner of the country.” But the crowd was with her, banging drums and calling her name.

Eventually, Milei burst onstage and sang a few lines of the death-metal tune in a raspy baritone: “*Hola a todos! Yo soy el león.*” He told his supporters that it was because of them, who had paid attention to him and been loyal, that he—they—had prevailed. *La casta* was bad, he shouted, but even worse were the journalists who spread fake news. He pointed to two elevated stages where news cameras were set up. A shout went up from the crowd—“*Hijos de*

puta, hijos de puta!”—and Milei pounded the air with his fists, conducting the chant.

As people chanted, a woman in front of me gave a startled jump: a thief had snatched a chain off her neck. She looked around fearfully, and, as everyone nearby began scanning the crowd, tensions rose. A few minutes later, someone’s phone was snatched; a fight broke out, and a girl was led away, looking faint. Oblivious, Milei continued shouting: He was the Lion, he was the President, they were all Libertarios, and soon they were going to be free. ♦



Jon Lee Anderson, a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998. His books include “*Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/javier-milei-wages-war-on-argentinas-government>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

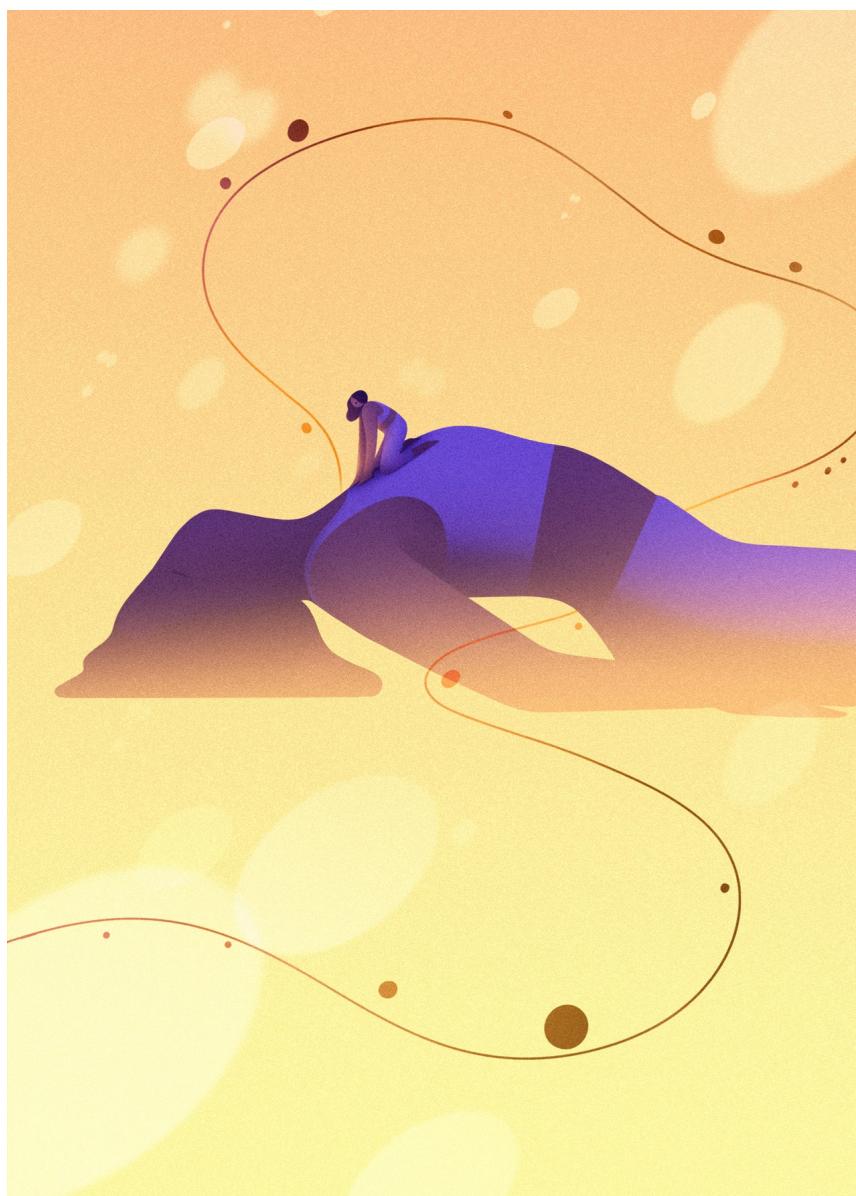
[Brave New World Dept.](#)

The New Business of Breakups

After getting dumped (by text), a writer investigates the feverish boom in heartbreak apps, breakup coaches, and get-over-him getaways.

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

December 2, 2024



It had been nearly ten years since I'd last been on the dating market, and I felt like I had slept through some kind of revolution.

Illustration by Sophie Miyoko Gullbrants

Heartbreak cures are as old as time, or at least as old as the Common Era. Around the year 1 C.E., the Roman poet Ovid followed up “The Art of Love,” his dating manual in verse, with an antidote titled “Cures for Love.” Among the recommendations are to pick up a hobby (“cow bulls into submission”), distract yourself with a new partner (“as they split off into many a stream, mighty rivers lose muscle”), and, if possible, take a trip at once: “Don’t fake an excuse, either, for sticking around. Don’t check the calendar. Don’t keep looking over your shoulder back at Rome.”

This past summer, I did the bidding of the ancients and booked a seat on the Berkshire Flyer—Amtrak’s seasonal train from Penn Station to Pittsfield, Massachusetts—to get some distance from my own romantic disappointment. A few weeks earlier, I had been dumped by a man I was seeing—and by text, no less. Even the rake Rodolphe had the decency to add a drop of water to his breakup letter to Emma Bovary, hidden in a basket of apricots, to make it look as though he was inconsolable. Yet does that spare Emma’s feelings? When the basket arrives and her husband invites her to smell the fruit’s sweet aroma, she shouts, “I can’t breathe!” With respect to breakups, the message is the message.

My friends, more schooled in these matters, reminded me that a breakup text was better than being “ghosted,” a practice that, when I learned of it, seemed worth bringing the guillotine back for. One friend asked if I had a “breakup plan.” A what? I found a worksheet on Etsy, seemingly modelled on a birth plan, only instead of “I may want a walking epidural,” the options to numb the pain included “start a side hustle.” Before I knew it, I was lost in a corner of the Internet populated by breakup coaches, heartbreak dietitians looking to replace the classic pint of ice cream with anti-inflammatory popcorn, and get-over-him getaways. The Chablé hotel, at its Yucatán and Maroma locations, offers a program called Healing Heartbreak, in which newly single guests can undergo a full-body exfoliation treatment to symbolize the “scrubbing away of the past.” When Al Green sang “How Can You Mend a Broken

Heart,” the question was rhetorical. Now there’s the Mend app, which leads users through a seventeen-module online course that will “turn your breakup into a breakthrough.” At StrIVeMD, which has locations in Ohio, Illinois, and Texas, Dr. Syed Ali advertises ketamine injections as breakup therapy, claiming that they can provide relief from heartbreak-induced depression and anxiety within hours.

It had been nearly ten years since I’d last been on the dating market, and I felt like I had slept through some kind of revolution. I met my now ex-husband in 2015, at a friend’s birthday party. We sat on opposite sides of a long table at a Burmese restaurant, and I noticed him across the din of gossip and requests to pass the tea-leaf salad. We parted last summer, after many months of what one could call deliberation but was mostly me pleading to be free. My marriage had been everything I thought I could ask for: sturdy. I just didn’t feel particularly tended to. At first, I thought that was O.K. I was a grownup; I didn’t need anyone to take care of me. In time, I just started to feel more on my own than seemed right for someone who wasn’t actually on her own. After it ended, as I was still trying to understand how I had got caught up in a mess of my own making, I met someone really, really hot. He had a face you could not help but project all of your fantasies onto—when I showed his picture to a friend, she said, “Ooh, he looks like he reads.” He made films and lived in Chinatown, near a funeral parlor that hired a marching band to process down the street as part of the service. The last time I saw him before he sent me that text, we were in his kitchen eating pastries when we suddenly heard the brass horns. “It must be someone rich,” he said. “This is lasting a long time.” I did not know then that I was listening to our swan song.

Ovid wrote, “Love is a scam—every time, every case.” Was that true of love cures, too? I decided to investigate, one heartbreak hotel at a time. This is why I was heading to the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. I would be taking

part in a three-day workshop—Healing from Heartbreak: A Woman’s Path from Devastation to Rebirth. I had also considered a program called Renew Breakup Bootcamp, run by Amy Chan, a former marketing specialist who calls herself the Chief Heart Hacker. Her retreat, which alternates between Mendocino and upstate New York, is staffed by an expert on men’s “emotional physiology,” a movement specialist, and a dominatrix with a Ph.D. from Berkeley. I called Chan. “Why a dominatrix?” I asked. She told me that most of her clients are high-achieving but lose their power in relationships: “So I thought, Well, who understands power? She’s not necessarily teaching you how to handcuff someone. She’s drawing the parallels of ‘How do we have handcuffs on? How are we in bondage?’ ” I was too late to register.

Kripalu was familiar to me from Taffy Brodesser-Akner’s 2019 novel, “Fleishman Is in Trouble.” This was the yoga retreat where, in the TV adaptation, Claire Danes as Rachel Fleishman, recently separated from her husband, becomes addicted to therapeutic-screaming classes, and slowly loses her mind. On the train, I listened to the audiobook of “Handbook for the Heartbroken,” by Sara Avant Stover, the woman who would be leading the workshop. To find it, I had scrolled on Amazon past titles like “Win Your Breakup: How to Be the One That Got Away” and “It’s Called a Breakup Because It’s Broken.” (There was also an adult coloring book called “Have a Nice Life Asshole.”) Stover’s voice, as it came through my headphones, had the slow, intentional cadence of a yoga instructor’s. She compared the “journey of heartbreak” to a tightrope. “One end of the rope is anchored to your old life, the other to your new one,” she said. “And to get from one end to the other, you must take one step at a time over a terrifying, treacherous chasm.”

The lobby of Kripalu was buzzing with fit white women carrying pastel-colored water bottles. A friendly blonde at the front desk handed me my room key, a map of the grounds, and an orange lanyard with a nametag that read “Jennifer. Healing from

Heartbreak.” I found Stover, an ethereal forty-seven-year-old who bears a passing resemblance to Marianne Williamson, perched on a green couch in a small seating area that looked out over leafy rolling hills. Above her was a poster with a quote from Maya Angelou: “Have enough courage to trust love one more time and always one more time.”

Stover was inspired to write her book after she went through a series of hardships—financial, professional, interpersonal—beginning with two painful back-to-back breakups, in 2016 and 2017; the first was after her fiancé came home one night and told her that he had been having an affair with a close mutual friend. I asked if it had been hard to record those parts of the book. “You know, it wasn’t,” she said. “I remember seeing an episode of ‘And Just Like That . . . ,’ the ‘Sex and the City’ spinoff, where Carrie Bradshaw was reading from her memoir about her husband’s death, and it was very emotional for her. I wondered if it would be that way for me, but it wasn’t. I had just done so much healing.”

I could see that. Her long brown hair was now full and lustrous. In her book, she describes it falling out amid the stress of her breakups. During that time, she also found out that she was prediabetic, despite having no history of blood-sugar abnormalities. She blamed the “toxic environment” in which she had been living, but did not think that her general practitioner would make the connection. She consulted with an Ayurvedic M.D. instead. “She could hear in my pulse the impact that the heartbreak had on me,” Stover said. The Ayurvedic doctor prescribed a yoga position called supported fish pose. “You take a block and lay your back on it right under your breastbone, to help the grief move more,” Stover explained.



"Meal prep's done for the week."
Cartoon by Drew Panckeri

During the next three days, Stover would be leading twenty-six women—including me—through grief-loosening yoga poses, meditations, and writing exercises. Stover is a certified practitioner of Internal Family Systems (I.F.S.), a school of psychotherapy rooted in the idea that the human mind is composed of various “inner parts”—family members—which act in concert to protect our psyches from old wounds. “Firefighters” douse the pain with quick fixes (like alcohol); “managers” may make things worse when trying to make them better (e.g., people-pleasing). I.F.S. practitioners guide patients in coaxing out “exiles”—past traumas that might destabilize the entire system—while keeping the “whole self” intact. It reminded me of Jenga.

That evening, I found myself on a seat cushion in a room with mustard-yellow walls and large windows. Indian sitar music played as women of all ages filed in and settled in a large circle. “A circle represents wholeness. It is also a boundary,” Stover said. Two spiritual elders from Burkina Faso, she told us, had taught her that “we need to plug into a village nervous system to handle grief.” Just when I thought I had accidentally stepped into a scene out of “Eat, Pray, Love,” Stover asked us if we remembered the part of Elizabeth Gilbert’s best-selling memoir in which the author sobs on

her bathroom floor. “Without spaces like these, all that’s left is the bathroom floor,” she said. Stover’s assistant placed a box of Crayola crayons at the center of the room. We were told to draw a “heartbreak time line” dotted with all the heartbreaks we had endured in the past and could imagine in the future. The size of each dot was meant to reflect the “charge” it held. The more unresolved the heartbreak, the bigger the dot.

I drew something that looked like one of those horizontal diagrams of the solar system that decorated my science classrooms in high school. I made my most recent breakup the size of Mars, whereas my divorce was more Pluto-like in dimension. I felt guilty that the latter was not more “charged,” but Chan had told me that this was common among people who attended her boot camp—they often felt more raw after the demise of short-lived “sitationships” than after decades-long marriages. (“It’s kind of like going to Disneyland,” she said. “If you were there for twelve hours, until you were exhausted, that’s like the end of a marriage. But imagine you leave after three rides—like, you haven’t even hit Space Mountain. Then you’re leaving on a complete high with all of the possibility that hasn’t been actualized.”)

It was hard to disentangle one heartbreak from the other. A year after the end of my marriage, I had decided to go full steam ahead with dating, even though I wasn’t quite ready. I had been broken up with before, of course, but this instance reminded me of another brief but passionate ride: the time my stepdad took the training wheels off my bike and I raced right into a neighbor’s hedges.

Next, Stover led us into butterfly pose. I forgot to stretch or warm up or whatever it is that physically fit people do, and I pulled a muscle in my hip. Stover gave me some tips on icing it, and also suggested I meet with someone in Kripalu’s Healing Arts Center, on the fourth floor. Holding a napkin full of ice against my crotch, I made my way there. At the front desk, alongside offerings for massages and Reiki, I noticed a treatment called Integrated Energy

Therapy. The description read, “Practitioners create a ‘heartlink’ to connect to the angelic realm and channel Integrated Energy to their client. This process helps to release emotions from their client’s cellular memory map.”

A woman with wavy blond hair streaked with gray named Mae Hedges Boyce—her nametag said “Mae B.”—led me into a room and began a “consultation.” I told her about the recent breakup and wondered if it was the sort of thing that she helped guests to process. “Could you erase him from my cellular memory?” I asked. She said no—and, anyway, that wasn’t the goal. “The goal,” Boyce informed me, “is to make sure you feel love again, to let go of all the things in the way.” As I lay down on the table, she told me that she was calling on celestial beings to “have their way with me,” which seemed to entail her pulling invisible needles out of my body. I kept trying to anticipate her movements, raising my back so that she wouldn’t have to lift me up. She stopped me. “Let yourself be taken care of,” she said. She noticed tightness in my hips and advised, “Keep your pelvis wide and open.” After fifty minutes, she stood above me, her hands on my shoulders. “There is so much joy waiting for you,” she said. “Have it.”

I confess: I have always romanticized heartbreak. I get stuck on the pages of “Great Expectations” with Miss Havisham, the jilted bride turned recluse, still wearing her wedding gown, her untouched wedding cake crawling with spiders. Her refusal to move on from the scene of her devastation seemed more passionate to me than most love affairs. In college, I read the Aeneid. Dido, after her lover Aeneas deserts her, kills herself with his sword on a funeral pyre, but not before building an effigy of him to burn alongside her. I was disturbed, but I was also impressed. These women understood that, even if you can’t count on a man for a great love, you can at least depend on yourself for an epic heartbreak. And it was not only women. Heathcliff. Gatsby. These were my people.

But life, as I occasionally need reminding, is not a novel. Heartbreak, it turns out, can land you in the emergency room. I contacted Ilan Wittstein, a cardiologist at Johns Hopkins, who has researched broken-heart syndrome. In the late nineties, Wittstein noticed a pattern of patients suffering from severe cardiac distress for whom further testing turned up contradictory results. Some of these patients had congestive heart failure and had to be moved to the intensive-care unit. As expected, their EKGs were abnormal. But when Wittstein took his patients to the catheterization lab their arteries looked clear. Then there was the matter of how they recovered. Whereas heart attacks damage the muscle, often permanently, these patients' ultrasounds showed that their heart muscles had healed, sometimes as soon as three days later. "And that was something we had never seen before," he told me.

Wittstein looked for any examples in medical journals of this constellation of symptoms. He found scattered references to something called takotsubo disease, named after the vase-shaped trap that Japanese fishermen use to catch octopuses. (On ultrasounds, the left ventricles of patients with this syndrome look like takotsubos.) "There was an article in Japan in 2000 that said, 'We think this only happened in Japanese people, because no one else in the world has ever described it,' " he said. After Wittstein published a paper on the subject in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, in 2005, the American Medical Association officially recognized broken-heart syndrome, also known as takotsubo cardiomyopathy, as a condition. Doctors now estimate that at least two per cent of all patients thought to be having heart attacks are actually experiencing broken-heart syndrome, which, in rare cases, can be fatal. (Wittstein told me that he and his colleagues settled on that name after they noticed that a lot of their patients had come in shortly after a loved one passed away.) Ninety per cent of diagnosed cases are in women, most of whom are postmenopausal. Wittstein posits that lower levels of estrogen, which improves blood flow in the arteries, are likely the culprit. (Wittstein

cautioned that younger people can still develop the condition, and that, on the whole, they have worse outcomes.) Fortunately, fewer than ten per cent of patients have a recurrence. The first cut really is the deepest.

Lovesickness was once regarded as an ailment that could ravage the mind and the body. That idea stemmed from thinkers like Aristotle, who hypothesized that the heart dictated the body's physiological and emotional systems. Earlier physicians such as Hippocrates had posited that the brain was in charge of the body—what is known as cephalocentrism. Aristotle's revisionist theory of the heart proved influential—for centuries, people believed that a broken heart meant a broken everything else. In 1558, the French writer Pierre Boaistuau published his record of global miseries, "The Theater of the World." He wrote about bodies ravaged by the "malady" of love: "Their bowels were shrunken. Their poor heart was all burned. Their liver had been invaded and consumed." In 1610, the French physician Jacques Ferrand devoted an entire book to the subject, "A Treatise on Lovesickness." He recommended enemas, the draining of hemorrhoids, and, in some cases, bloodletting almost to the point of heart failure.

Later medical literature sometimes painted lovesickness as an affliction that affected men in particular. (It was believed to inhibit the ability to reason, an ability women were thought not to possess in the first place.) But by the nineteenth century nervous states and conditions of all sorts—"excessive sensibility," erotomania—were largely the province of women. The "melancholy of disappointed love" was conceived of by Sir Alexander Morison, a Scottish physician. His 1840 book, "The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases," contains illustrations of his patients, among them young women sexually frustrated over clergymen. (Had Fleabag lived in nineteenth-century Scotland, Morison might have treated her with leeches.) As Victorian doctors turned their attention to hysteria, the figure of the lovesick woman faded from serious medical discussion, even as artists and writers continued to be fascinated by

her. In Henry James's "Watch and Ward" (1878), the wealthy Roger Lawrence can tell that the object of his affections, Nora Lambert, is preoccupied with thoughts of another man:

" 'Lovesick, lovesick is the word,' he groaned, 'I've read of it all my days in the poets, but here it is in the flesh.' "

For most of my life, it was said that breakups were best treated by Doctor Time. Or there was the more effective but perhaps slightly less advisable prescription for getting over someone—getting under someone else. In "When Harry Met Sally," a movie that is, in fact, mostly about two people going through breakups, the titular characters, played by Billy Crystal and Meg Ryan, fight over who is doing a better job handling theirs. Harry chides Sally for taking her time getting back out there, to which she responds, "You're gonna have to move back to New Jersey because you've slept with everybody in New York, and I don't see *that* turning Helen"—his ex-wife—"into a faint memory for you."

If the movie were remade now, we might see these characters "processing the trauma" of their breakups differently. These days, as an eclectic mix of terms from psychotherapy has become the lingua franca of the heartbroken, you don't "dump that jerk"; instead, you "go no contact from a narcissist." (You can also find convoluted forms of this thinking—"We broke up because he's an avoidant Scorpio and I'm an anxious Libra"—all over TikTok and Reddit.) This can invite a certain amount of eye-rolling, but a number of counsellors I talked to believe that we are more prone to underestimating the pain of heartbreak than to overtreating it.

I spoke with David Kessler, a leading expert on grief, after e-mailing him at david@grief.com. He has a refreshing sense of humor despite, or maybe because of, his line of work. Kessler co-wrote a book in 2014 with Louise Hay, titled "You Can Heal Your Heart: Finding Peace After a Breakup, Divorce, or Death." When we spoke, I explained that the impetus for this story was the end of a brief romantic relationship. "It's not a big deal," I reassured him.

“No,” he said. “Stop. Why do we do that? Why do we minimize our feelings?” Kessler told me that he is often asked to rank the various causes of heartbreak. He said, “People ask, ‘Which is the worst grief?’ I always say, ‘Yours.’” I still had my doubts that one could speak about death and breakups in the same breath. Then I recalled a colleague telling me about a difficult breakup she went through; the weirdest part, she said, was feeling like her boyfriend had vanished overnight—“vaporized” was the word she used.

Some in the heartbreak space have begun employing methods typically used to treat patients with post-traumatic stress disorder. One treatment that kept coming up in my reporting was eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (E.M.D.R.), whereby the patient experiences bilateral stimulation—visual, auditory, or tactile—while focussing on a traumatic memory. It was developed, in the late nineteen-eighties, by a psychologist named Francine Shapiro. One day, she was recalling a painful episode during a walk in the park, and observed that she felt better whenever she was looking back and forth. (She later argued in a paper that this darting of the eyes dulled the intensity of a triggering memory.) Syed Ali, of StrIVeMD, offers something called the stellate ganglion block as a breakup treatment. The procedure is not F.D.A.-approved, but it is used at a number of clinics for P.T.S.D. “Breakups, particularly where there’s betrayal involved, can create P.T.S.D.-like symptoms,” Ali said. He injects two local anesthetics near the stellate ganglion nerves in a person’s neck. According to Ali, within minutes patients should hopefully feel “rumination” begin to subside—what he called “that infinite loop of ‘What did I do wrong?’” It costs a thousand dollars. Insurance doesn’t cover it. (I asked.)

In the German Netflix film “The Heartbreak Agency,” from 2024, a journalist reeling from a breakup decides to write a story about a new business that claims to treat broken hearts. He arrives at a luxury hotel outside Berlin and is greeted at the front desk by a chipper concierge. “We’re going to help you heal,” she says, before

hanging a gigantic heart-shaped cookie around his neck. In the film, the journalist ends up falling in love with the owner of the agency, a character based on the German breakup coach Elena-Katharina Sohn. “That is so against my policy,” Sohn, the owner of Die Liebeskümmmerer (the Heartbreak Agency), told me as we sat in her office in Berlin.

The movie took other liberties. Unlike in the film, there is no heart-themed décor in Sohn’s office, and no empty fish tank into which clients deposit expired romantic mementos. Sohn is known for something called the Glücksherz-Methode (Happiness Heart Method), which she first proposed in her best-selling book “Goodbye Herzschmerz” (“Goodbye Heartbreak”). As I sat in a white leather chair, Sohn pulled out a tripod easel with a large sheet of paper and handed me a red Magic Marker. More coloring, I thought. I had asked her to show me how to make a Glücksherz. She told me to draw a heart and divide it into sections, each representing a part of my life from which I derive (or hope to derive) happiness. I sectioned off about a third of my heart and wrote “work.” “Wow, that’s a lot,” she exclaimed. “Oh, well, I’m American,” I replied. About twenty per cent was split between friends and family. Then I marked off the remaining half and put the word “love” inside. “Ah,” she said. “That’s the problem.”

Have you ever had a client whose heart was taken up a hundred per cent by love, I asked. Sohn said yes, absolutely. A person like that, if they lose love, they lose everything. “Sometimes people tell me, ‘Well, that’s not romantic, Elena, saying that love and romance should take up, like, twenty per cent of my heart,’ ” she said. “And then I say, ‘No, no, that’s a misunderstanding, because, if you have several sources for your personal happiness, only then can you be a good partner.’ ” She stopped and looked at me intently. “Otherwise, you are—it’s a very bad word, and I don’t know if it is as bad in English as well, but in German it’s really, really bad. You are *needy*. ”

SHE'S DOING IT! SHE'S TYPING A RESPONSE! SHE CLICKS SEND! AFTER TWO WEEKS OF LURKING IN HER IN-BOX, THE E-MAIL IS FINALLY OUT OF HER HANDS! THE CROWD GOES WILD!



Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

Nearly every heartbreak specialist I spoke with had the same origin story. Sohn was no exception. She began her career after an earth-shattering breakup. It happened sixteen years ago, when her first live-in boyfriend ended their relationship. She was working at a P.R. agency at the time, and spoke to her boss. “I told him, ‘I cannot work,’ ” she said. “I went to the doctor and got a sick note so that I could get some weeks off.” This, she told me, is an accepted practice in Germany, where health insurers diagnose heartbreak as a “failure to adapt psychologically.” The German-language interpreter I had brought along for the interview spoke up to say that she, too, had got a leave of absence following a breakup. “I think it is the impact of German Romanticism and our poets,” she suggested. No more young Werthers would be left to drown themselves in sorrow, the country had seemingly decided.

During Sohn’s sabbatical, she bought a used convertible and set off on a road trip with her dog. “He was a really big love story as well,” she said wistfully. “Lasse. I put him on the passenger seat, and we started travelling, visiting old friends.” The trip was

therapeutic, and Sohn wondered why there weren't dedicated getaways for people in the same situation. She worked with some therapists to plan a breakup retreat at a luxury hotel outside Berlin: "I got there early, to put uplifting messages on the guests' pillows." Sohn no longer organizes breakup retreats. It wasn't financially viable, she told me: "Somebody would book, and then two weeks before the trip he would say he was back together with his ex and cancel."

She pivoted to offering one-on-one counselling instead. In 2015, she completed an eighteen-month training program and was certified as an alternative practitioner of psychotherapy by the German health department. Sohn told me that most of her clients are college-educated. (Insurance does not always cover her services, and her fee is a hundred and sixty euros an hour.) They are often, she finds, too much in their heads, trying to rationalize their way out of a heartbreak. As a remedy, she does various exercises employing "body psychotherapy." If a client says that she wants to get back together with her ex, Sohn has her write that down on a notecard and place it on a chair. The client writes down other scenarios—seeing someone new, remaining single—and places those alternatives on other chairs. Then the client sits on one and waits for a bodily response. "But sometimes they do not need to sit down," Sohn said. "The choice of chair—if it is cozy or cold—can tell them the answer."

I was surprised to learn that slightly more than fifty per cent of Sohn's patients are men; most breakup services are targeted at women. (Stover only accepts applicants to her workshop who identify as women.) Sohn thinks that men and women react differently to breakups. "Women stay in and talk to their friends, their sisters, their colleagues," she said. "The typical man with heartbreak is the opposite. A lot of our male clients say we're the first people they've told. Instead, they play sports or go out for drinks. Sometimes my female clients say, 'Look at my ex-partner.'

He has no heartbreak.’ Then I say, ‘No, no, he’s just dealing in another way.’”

I spoke with a woman I’ll call Greta, one of Sohn’s former clients, a baby-faced blond filmmaker in her thirties who lives outside Munich. When she was twenty-eight, her boyfriend of three years abruptly ended things. At the time, she was devastated. “I had lost not only my life but also my future, because I was planning on having a family with this guy,” she told me. “All of my coping mechanisms that I thought would help—dating, eating sugar, meeting with friends—didn’t help at all. I had no tools whatsoever to get me out of this.” When Greta did the Happiness Heart exercise, the love portion of her heart was at nearly ninety per cent. She recalled the time that her boyfriend got a Vespa scooter: “I went to a meeting of Vespa enthusiasts. It was all men. I asked them, ‘What can I do as a girlfriend to support my boyfriend’s hobby?’” Greta giggled. “Now I think back on this, and I think, Oh, my God, how needy was that?”

Over Zoom, Greta showed me a recent drawing of her heart, now a more proportional mosaic that included hobbies. What sorts of hobbies? I asked. “Martial arts,” Greta said. After Sohn had her visualize herself as a child, Greta was reminded of how much she had loved Bruce Lee films. Sohn does this often with her clients. She said a lot of women suddenly recall a childhood love of horseback riding. “That is very common,” she said.

At Kripalu, Stover had urged us to see our broken hearts as cracked vases. She described the Japanese art of kintsugi, “where you take a broken piece of pottery and you piece it back together with gold glue. It’s like we’re healing our fracturedness.” Stover spoke genuinely, but the visual was an apt metaphor for a question that had been nagging me throughout my reporting: Was heartbreak just a new gold rush?

It's hard to quantify exactly how large the divorce industry is, but it's widely speculated to be in the tens of billions of dollars. With more and more couples opting to cohabit without marrying, the era of Big Breakup was probably inevitable. In 2014, Gwyneth Paltrow announced, in a blog post on her wellness site, Goop, that she and her then husband, Chris Martin, had decided to "consciously uncouple," a concept created by the psychotherapist Katherine Woodward Thomas. Thomas told me that she had been on a retreat in Costa Rica when the Goop post went live. She found the only landline available on site to answer questions from journalists around the world. "There was a lot of pushback, with people making fun of Gwyneth," Thomas said. "People tend to do that because she's so gorgeous and privileged." But Thomas believed that our attitude toward relationships needed updating. "Happily ever after is from a time when everyone died before they were forty," she said. Most people will now have two to three significant relationships in their lifetime. In the past decade, Thomas has seen an uptick in people seeking resources for "amicable" breakups and divorces. "Things have changed so quickly," she said. "Conscious uncoupling named it enough that it gave a new idea to people, and it was almost like . . . a dam was waiting to break."

Measuring the quality of the water can prove tricky. Anyone can call themselves a breakup coach, but there are programs that will, for a price, allow you to claim that you are certified as one. In the United Kingdom, Sara Davison, who is a breakup and divorce coach, told me that she has trained more than six hundred and fifty coaches in twenty-seven different countries. Her certification program, which starts at around four thousand dollars, entails forty hours of video training. It also comes with access to Davison's "black book" of support professionals—stylists, personal trainers, lawyers, financial advisers. "You name it," she told me. (After we spoke, Davison messaged me on WhatsApp to offer a limited discount on her breakup-coach course for *New Yorker* readers. I

politely declined.) Not every breakup coach has the same goalpost. Some services offer to help you #getyourexback using questionable methods such as manifesting, the law of attraction, and strategic texting. Natalia Juarez, a breakup coach who has appeared on “Good Morning America,” advertises a three-step process called “conscious recoupling” on her Web site. Lee Wilson, who calls himself Coach Lee, runs a popular service called MyExBackCoach.com that charges five hundred and seventy-nine dollars per one-on-one session with him. Many “get your ex back” coaches are men who advertise to heterosexual women, offering them the “male perspective.”

Despite my misgivings about the breakup industry, it still seemed like a good thing that people were paying serious attention to the ends of relationships other than marriages. While I was working on this story, almost everyone I spoke to about it assumed that I would be focussing on my divorce. It struck me that marriage is so hegemonic in American society that even its aftermath, divorce, takes all the oxygen out of conversations around heartbreak. My mom was never married to my father; they hadn’t even been a couple. Whenever I tell people that she was a single parent, they assume that I’m a “child of divorce,” and I have to correct them.

I decided to reach out to John Markowitz, of Columbia University. Markowitz conducts comparative research in the medical school’s Department of Psychiatry, evaluating the benefits of various psychotherapies for patients suffering from P.T.S.D. and depression. He believes that breakups, though distressing, should not qualify as traumatic episodes on their own. Markowitz is skeptical of E.M.D.R. He acknowledged that it was evidence-based (the W.H.O. has endorsed it as an effective treatment for P.T.S.D.), but he believed that it was efficacious because of its similarities to exposure therapy, which can be difficult to endure. He compared the use of bilateral eye movement in E.M.D.R. to a hypnotist’s watch. “You’re distracting the patient with magic,” he told me.

He also had reservations about “body psychotherapy,” another term that kept popping up in my reporting. If clients felt better after the breakup retreats and methods I was coming across, Markowitz said, it was likely because those treatments incorporated elements—such as emotional stimuli, ritual, and structure—behind many successful therapies. I had felt better after Kripalu, but perhaps I had been mesmerized by “structure” (e.g., designated times for Ayurvedic meals and kayaking).

I called Orna Guralnik, a psychoanalyst and the star of Showtime’s “Couples Therapy.” Her job, in part, is to help couples avoid breaking up, but it’s also to help them deal with the detritus of former heartbreaks. “People come scarred and with all sorts of haunting histories that color their expectations,” she said. I asked Guralnik what she thought of various breakup-targeted interventions. “It’s not how I work,” she said. “I’m a psychoanalyst. We address heartbreak like any other thing.” Getting over a breakup is a process, she said: “It’s a matter of coming to terms with reality, which is always a complicated thing, or coming to terms with various realities that remind us of things that happened earlier in our lives that brought us to our knees in one way or another.”

In September, I found myself in an alternate dimension. I was floating in space, and a gigantic, translucent heart was barreling toward me like an asteroid. I braced for impact, covering my face with my hands, which suddenly looked like tree branches. Words appeared before me: “The person you have lost finds a way back to you.” “Blimey,” a voice behind me said. It belonged to Alice Haddon, a British psychologist whom I had invited to the Gazelli Art House gallery, in London’s Mayfair neighborhood. I took off my virtual-reality goggles and handed them to the gallerist. We had been watching “Heartbreak and Magic,” a V.R. installation by the artist and quantum physicist Libby Heaney, who had lost her sister to suicide. It turned out that Haddon had also lost a sibling, a twin brother, who drowned in a swimming accident in Central America

at nineteen. “I think people who go into this profession have very sensitive antennae, which makes them good at their job,” she said. “But there was a reason that they had to be sensitive in the first place.”

We stepped outside. Haddon, a forty-nine-year-old blonde who lives in East London, was wearing sporty white sneakers and a long orange wool coat. “I don’t get to this side of town very often,” she said, pointing at a chauffeur polishing a black Mercedes-Benz. Haddon lectures in psychology at City, University of London, and also runs a retreat in England, two to four times a year, called the Heartbreak Hotel. She takes groups of six to ten women to a hotel in either Norfolk or the Peak District for four days of intense heartbreak therapy involving sharing circles, cold swimming, and sessions with on-site psychologists with P.T.S.D. training. She likes those regions of the country, she says, because “a long horizon helps the brain to process things.” She emphasizes the importance of “cocooning” during heartbreak, providing her guests with blankets and hot-water bottles. She didn’t feel comfortable having a journalist attend a retreat, out of concern for her clients’ privacy, but she had agreed to take me through some of the exercises included in the package.

The book she co-wrote, “*Finding Your Self at the Heartbreak Hotel*,” is also meant to re-create the experience of being at one of her retreats. It contains fictionalized versions of past guests, such as Nadia, a queer woman unable to stop ruminating over her ex-fiancée’s being with a new partner: “I have nightmares about killing them both, then wake up in a cold sweat and my heart breaks all over again when I realize they are both alive and probably in bed together.” Then, Haddon writes, Nadia “laughs through tears, retreats to the back of the sofa, draws up her knees.”

Now Haddon asked how I was responding to the breakup treatments I’d gone through, and I confessed that I felt better but also a bit empty inside. “I miss my wound,” I joked. Haddon

laughed. Heartbreaks can be defining, she agreed, adding, “They’re a big part of how we make meaning out of our lives.”

We took a taxi to her home, a small brick row house near London Fields. She had given her husband and teen-age children strict orders not to disturb us. There was nothing she could do about her dog, Bonny, though—a light-brown Lab mix who greeted us excitedly at the door. In the kitchen, she put on a kettle for tea while I looked through the windows. Her small, walled-in back garden was lush with overgrown ferns and an apple tree.

Haddon decided to be a psychologist when she was sixteen, after she read a book called “Dibs in Search of Self,” about a kid who hides under a desk. A therapist comes along and plays a game that draws him out from under it. “I thought, I’m going to do that,” she told me. She studied psychology at the University of Edinburgh, and started working at the Priory, a private psychiatric hospital, in her early twenties. She joined its eating-disorder unit, and then moved to Saudi Arabia, to treat a well-off young woman there. “I think it was a really influential bit of my life, because I’d never seen that kind of wealth before, and that kind of unhappiness,” she said. Haddon’s clients at the Heartbreak Hotel come from various walks of life, but, at around three thousand pounds, a stay there is certainly more expensive than bonbons and a box of tissues.

One of the guests at Haddon’s first retreat was a woman in her forties—I’ll call her Olivia—who lived in London. Her partner had had an affair with a co-worker, and paid for Olivia to attend the retreat after she found out. “Guilt,” Olivia said wryly, when I called her up. By the time she arrived at the Heartbreak Hotel, she had tried everything else. “I was seeing, like, five therapists. . . . I did hypnotherapy,” she said. “I think I read every single blog post since, like, 1992 on betrayal and heartbreak. I listened to every single podcast. I was obsessed.” Olivia was struggling with what she believes was P.T.S.D. “I would cry for days on end, and I’d never really been someone with mental-health problems before

that, so it was really scary,” she said. At the Heartbreak Hotel, Olivia found E.M.D.R. therapy especially helpful. “I had a lot of visual triggers really causing a lot of pain for me,” she said. “I’d seen photos of my partner and the other woman. It was just a constant—like, I close my eyes, and they were just always there.” Finally, they began to fade.

In Haddon’s bright kitchen, the tea had finished steeping. “I want to hear about your heartbreak,” Haddon said. By way of diversion, I offered my therapist’s theories for why I’ve struggled in my love life. “I purposefully pick people with whom it won’t work out,” I said, “where there’s some baked-in conflict.”

“If we were at the hotel,” Haddon said, “this is when I’d ask, ‘If you think that somewhere deep down you deserve rejection, how do you try to keep yourself safe?’ ”

I knew where this was going. I told her that I had never, to the disappointment of many a therapist, had big feelings about my father not being in my life. My parents had not been a couple. “He was my mom’s high-school math teacher,” I said. For her, it was four years of thinking nothing would ever happen, and then something happened, and suddenly I was there and he wasn’t. “It’s my mother’s heartbreak, not mine,” I said. Haddon said nothing. “He was twenty-three years older,” I continued. “If anything, I’ve always felt that him leaving me alone—I’ve met him only a couple of times—is his single act of love toward me.”

“Is that how you learned to protect yourself?” she asked. She was sitting close and was very still. Somewhere between asking and answering, I said, “To pick people whose rejection wouldn’t hurt me.”

“So,” Haddon asked, “how is that going for you?”

My jet lag was working like a truth serum. “It’s a life with very little love, very little warmth, just very little,” I told her. “I have this fantasy of coming home and someone cooking me dinner and offering me a glass of wine.” I let out an embarrassed sigh. “It’s the simplest thing, and it’s been the most elusive. And I’m, like, Why? Why haven’t I picked people who would do that for me?”

“Finish this sentence,” Haddon instructed me, beginning a cognitive-behavioral-therapy-inspired exercise that she does at the Heartbreak Hotel. “If I don’t have any needs in a relationship, then . . .”

“Then,” I supplied, “I would be loved more.”

“Where does that idea come from?” she asked.

“My mother was eighteen when she had me,” I said. “She was all alone. And I knew . . .” My voice was getting shaky. “I knew that I was this big imposition on this young woman’s life, and that she was still heartbroken. I tried to be self-sufficient whenever I could be. I felt like if I didn’t need too much, it would be O.K., like it would be O.K. that I was here.” I could hardly speak. “I was the same way in my marriage,” I told her. We both started nodding. She brought me a tissue.

“It can be very relaxing when people are clear about their needs, Jennifer,” she said. I took another sip of tea. “Very relaxing,” I repeated.

“Some might say my prescriptions are hard,” Ovid had warned. “Best to think twice if you’re counting on help from the sorcerous herbals.” There would be no magical shortcuts. The day after I got back home to New York, I stretched and went for a run in the park —an old hobby I had decided to take up again. ♦



Jennifer Wilson is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/the-new-business-of-breakups>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Obscure Familial Relations, Explained for the Holidays**

By Lillian Stone | Half siblings, great-aunts, cousins once removed, and how to tell the difference.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

Obscure Familial Relations, Explained for the Holidays

By [Lillian Stone](#)

December 2, 2024

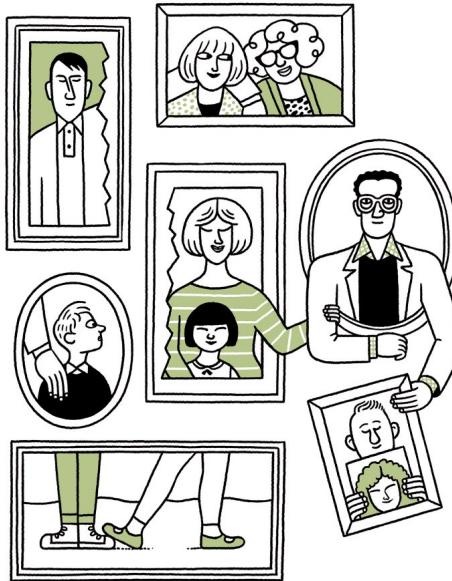


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Children who share only one parent are half siblings. Children who have been bisected via a tragic logging accident are also half siblings, but in a different way.

A great-aunt is someone with whom you communicate exclusively via Facebook. A great aunt is someone who catches you blazing that sticky icky after Thanksgiving dinner and doesn't tell your parents.

Your extended family includes grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. It also includes Enzo, your cousin's cousin's cousin, who owns the Italian place down the street and proudly displays a signed photo of Bernadette Peters above the cash register. Every time you walk by with your dog, he gives you a wink and screams,

“Proud home of preferred manicotti of Bernadette Peters! ” Enzo, too, is family.

Sometimes your aunt is your mom’s childhood best friend, who often reflects upon that one unforgettable summer—the year she and your mom turned thirteen and learned to kiss, to cuss, and to appreciate the true meaning of friendship, sharing existential musings on the boardwalk and savoring each precious day before the humid nights turned chill and culminated in a crushing loss of innocence. Other times, your aunt is your mom’s sister.

Cousins are people who share a grandparent, biologically. Cannibals are people who share a grandparent, al dente.

Your great-grandniece will almost certainly perish in some sort of climate disaster, so you probably don’t need to budget for her sweet sixteen.

The term “blood brother” can refer to either your biological sibling or someone with whom you’ve exchanged biohazards at Boy Scout camp. In a way, it might also refer to Enzo, who suffered a catastrophic nosebleed after walking into a telephone pole last week chasing after someone he thought was Bernadette Peters.

To be a monkey’s uncle, figuratively, is to express surprise, disbelief, or amazement. To be a monkey’s uncle, literally, involves an offense punishable by up to twenty years in prison.

To be “removed” from a cousin means you are separated by one generation. For example, your cousin’s daughter is your first cousin once removed. Your cousin’s daughter’s son is your first cousin twice removed. Bernadette Peters’s cousin’s daughter’s daughter’s son is named Peter, which is kind of fun.

When your parent remarries, the new spouse becomes your stepparent. Example: Your mother leaves your father for Peter

Peters, Bernadette Peters's cousin's daughter's daughter's son. You do not have to call him Dad.

At some point, you'll find out about Enzo's abhorrent political beliefs. You'll consume one too many scampi shooters in the back of his restaurant and get into a huge shouting match, after which you'll delete his number from your phone. You'll see him from time to time, and you'll force a tight smile and try to explain why you haven't called. This is what it means to be in a family. ♦

Lillian Stone has contributed humor to The New Yorker since 2019. She is the author of “Everybody’s Favorite: Tales from the World’s Worst Perfectionist.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/obscure-familial-relations-explained-for-the-holidays>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Fiction

- **[“Plaster”](#)**

By David Szalay | The things that left him feeling that nothing would ever be the same again—they just aren’t important here.

- **[Highly Successful Insomniacs](#)**

By Dahlia Gallin Ramirez | Marv W. sleeps only on Tuesdays. You know what he does on the other nights? Masterpieces.

Fiction

Plaster

By [David Szalay](#)

December 1, 2024

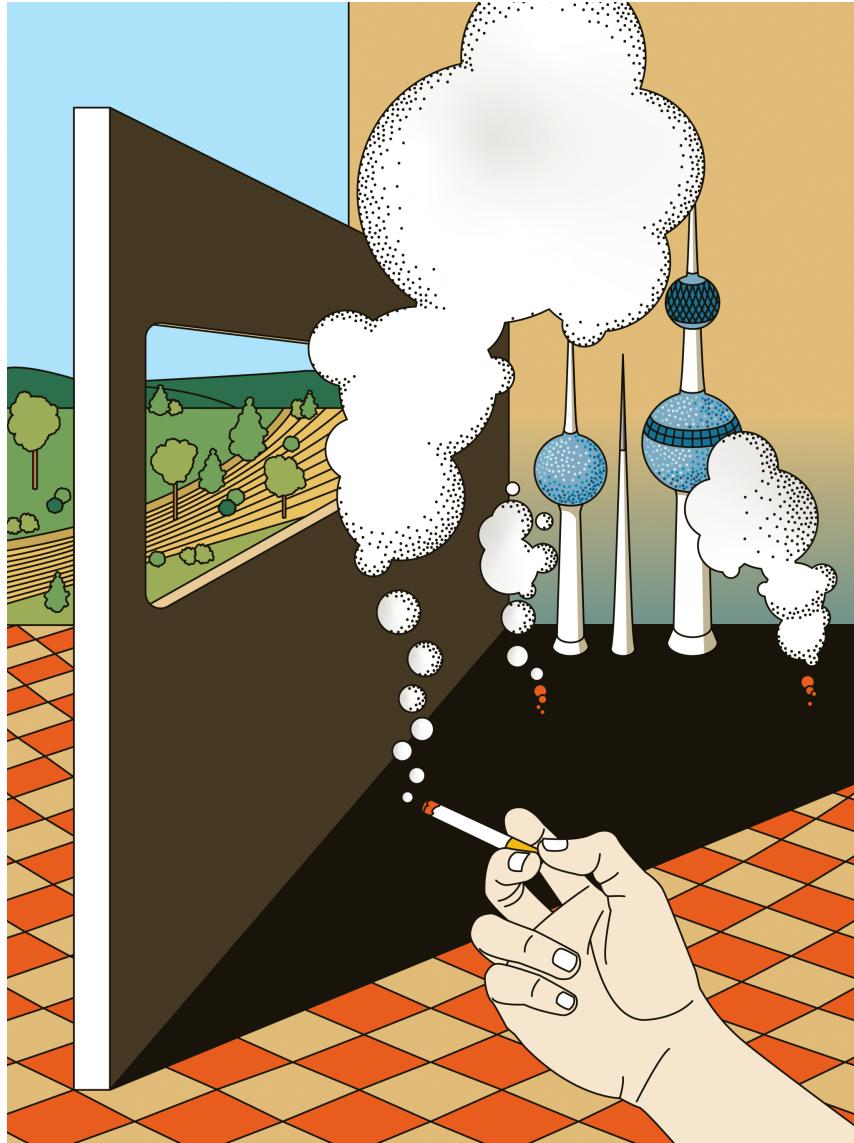


Illustration by Irena Gajic

There's some sort of holdup. Every day, they expect to fly out, and every day they are told it will be "another twenty-four hours." They're staying in a hotel with a swimming pool.

It's not really hot enough for swimming. It's not quite pool weather. It's, like, seventy-five or something. Still, they spend most of the

day poolside—there isn't anything else to do.

The plastic sun loungers next to the pool face those towers—those three towers that look like spikes pointing at the sky, with a few blue spheres impaled on two of them.

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

István opens his eyes and sees them there, in the middle distance, pointing at the empty sky.

Usually in the afternoon a sort of light sleep comes. Sounds in a spaceless world take on an abstract quality.

Sparrows.

A passing helicopter.

Voices at different distances.

Something else, he isn't sure what.

Sparrows.

He opens his eyes and finds things different. The shadows in different places. The quality of the light not quite the same, softer, more opalescent, and part of the pool in the shade, making the water there look flat and deep.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to David Szalay read “Plaster.”](#)

You want to have your last swim while the sun still has enough strength to warm you up again afterward. So at around four he stands and approaches the edge of the pool.

For a while he lingers there, with a sad feeling.

Then he dives in, and the water sloshes and gurgles in the drains at the side.

•

They have these vouchers they can use in the hotel restaurant, which always has a buffet. They eat all their meals there. There's a weird selection of things.

What there isn't is alcohol.

There isn't any alcohol anywhere.

Once or twice they go out into the city. There isn't anything to do there, so they soon return to the hotel.

In the evening there's the sound of the mosques or whatever.

They start up all over the place, not at exactly the same time but sort of overlapping, so that the over-all effect is slightly chaotic.

There's something about it that he likes, though.

The air seems to vibrate.

When they stop it's not all at exactly the same time, either. They drop out one by one until there's only one left, and then that one stops, too, and it's almost dark, and you can hear the sound of the swifts, the shrieks as they zoom around with what seems like incautious speed in the lingering twilight. Quite often he's sitting outside at that point, smoking a cigarette, with the swifts shrieking in the air around him. They skim the surface of the pool, he notices, to take a drink. It must taste horrible—the water is strongly chlorinated.

He stubs out his cigarette in one of the sand-filled ashtrays and takes the elevator up to the fifth floor.

He and Norbi are sharing a room.

•

At supper on Thursday word goes around that they'll be flying out tonight. They pack their stuff and wait in the lobby, still half expecting to be told that it was a false alarm. That has already happened twice.

Buses arrive, though.

There's a murmur of excitement when they see them through the front of the hotel. These two white buses with nothing on them to identify whose they are.

For quite a long time after that nothing happens. The buses just wait there, with their Pakistani drivers smoking next to them.

Then finally the major arrives and they board the buses, which set off through the mild, quiet streets of the city.

Facing them from the front, holding on to two seats to maintain his balance, the major says that they're on their way to Ali Al Salem.

They won't be flying home, though.

He tells them that they'll be flying to Ramstein Air Base in Germany.

"From there there'll be transport to Tata. I'm sorry, lads," he says.
"At least we're going home tonight."

There's some problem with the plane, though. It doesn't leave until the next morning.

They spend the night lying on the floor at Ali Al Salem, using their packs as pillows.

There's a table with sandwiches wrapped in plastic, baskets of Mars and Snickers bars, glass bottles of soft drinks, and tokens for the coffee machine.

There's also a cigarette machine.

Using his last Kuwaiti coins, with their Arabic writing and pictures of sailboats, he buys a few packs to take home.

•

It's already midmorning when they walk across the asphalt to the plane. The plane is painted pale gray and like the buses doesn't have any markings on it to show whose it is.

It's an American plane, though. They know that.

For one thing, there are Americans on it, too.

They mostly arrive in the morning, the Americans, looking like they've had a proper night's sleep. They're noisy and high-spirited.

“Where you guys from?” one of them asks.

“Hungary,” István says.

“Oh, yeah?” the American says.

“Yeah,” István says.

It's slightly cloudy. When the sunshine filters through, it's soft. If the weather here were always like this, it would be O.K.

They leave their packs on the asphalt to be loaded and walk up the metal steps.

There isn't assigned seating. It's a free-for-all. He sits with Norbi and Balázs, and they talk about the night out they're planning to

have when they get home. It's something they've been planning for a long time now, something they've sort of promised themselves—this massive night out, their first night home.

•

He sleeps on the plane.

He wakes up and looks around.

Everything seems exactly the same as it did when he fell asleep.

Most of the others are sleeping, too.

From somewhere there's the sound of music leaking out of headphones.

More than half of the window blinds are pulled down, including the one next to him. He lifts it a little. Strong light pushes in so that it's painful, and he slides the blind down again. It's impossible to tell from the quality of the light what time of day it is, wherever they are. It is day, though, and not night, even though it feels like it should be night.

•

They're waiting at the American airbase in Germany. The Americans who were on the plane with them have disappeared. It's just them, the Hungarians, about a hundred of them, waiting under fluorescent lighting with darkness outside the windows. There aren't enough seats for everyone. Some people are sitting on the floor. The officers went off somewhere as soon as they arrived. They come back later with a cart with sandwiches on it. The officers don't eat from the cart themselves; they seem to have eaten already. The men mob the cart, though. They're very hungry; there wasn't any food on the plane. While they eat, the major tells them

that the buses will be there in about two hours. “They’re on their way from Tata as I speak,” he says, and there’s an ironic cheer.

István, Norbi, and Balázs are sitting on the floor with their sandwiches. They’re talking again about the night out they’re planning. “We need to get some speed or coke or both,” István says.

“Yeah,” Norbi says.

“Do you know anyone?” István asks.

“At Tata?”

“Yeah,” István says.

“Not really,” Norbi says.

“You?” István asks Balázs.

Balázs, eating, shakes his head.

•

The walk from the building to the buses waiting in the darkness outside, their engines shedding a strong diesel smell, is the first time that he has felt real cold in more than a year.

It’s quite a pleasant feeling, the clean sting of it on his face, the unfamiliar sight of his own breath.

The light inside the bus is dim orange, almost brown.

He takes a window seat a few rows back from the toilet, and balls up his jacket to use as a pillow.

•

He wakes from a shallow sleep to find himself looking at a European landscape. Churches with onion domes. Wet green fields. It's weird to be back here.

•

When the buses arrive at Tata, about four hours later, the men disperse to their allocated rooms. István dumps his pack and then sits on the toilet, and after that has a shower and a shave. He has this meeting with a colonel. He puts on his dress uniform, after ironing the shirt with the communal iron in the room at the end of the corridor.

“You managed to get some sleep?” the colonel asks him.

“Yes, sir,” István says.

“We hoped to get you boys back here last night,” the colonel says.



“There’s a fifty-fifty chance these lab results are yours.”

István's eyes are focussed on a point beyond the colonel's shoulder.

"Yes, sir," he says.

Behind the colonel is a window, beads of rain partially obscuring a view of the car park.

"So you've decided not to do another five years?" the colonel asks.

"No, sir," István says.

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you, sir."

"You're a brave man," the colonel says, looking at a paper on his desk.

"Thank you, sir."

"What do you plan to do?"

"I don't know, sir."

"There are support programs that you can take advantage of," the colonel says. "I suggest you do so."

"Yes, sir," István says.

His five-year enlistment contract doesn't actually expire until the end of January, but he's owed enough leave to mean that this is basically it.

"Good luck," the colonel says. "With whatever you do do."

"Thank you, sir."

“And please remember that until the end of next month you’re still a member of the armed forces.”

István keeps his eyes fixed on the point beyond the colonel’s shoulder.

“Yes, sir.”

“Conduct yourself accordingly.”

“Yes, sir.”

After leaving the colonel’s office, he makes his way to the men’s room on the first floor.

The private is already there when he arrives. They spoke on the phone earlier.

They go into one of the stalls, and the private takes out the stuff. István and Norbi asked around as soon as they arrived that morning and his name was the one that was mentioned most often. He sells István a few wraps of speed.

“Have you got any coke?” István asks him.

“No,” the private says. “Not now.”

“O.K.,” István says.

•

Norbi’s brother has an apartment in Budapest. They arrive there in the middle of the afternoon, after taking the train from Tata, and then the metro. Norbi has a key to the apartment. His brother isn’t there. He works in England or somewhere.

“What does he actually do?” István asks.

“I don’t know,” Norbi says.

“He must have money,” István says. “Look at this place.”

Norbi shrugs.

He’s cutting lines of speed on the black marble worktop.

István sits on a leather sofa, using an empty Red Bull can as an ashtray.

Without the speed and the Red Bull to keep him going he probably would have fallen asleep already. He didn’t sleep much on the overnight journey from Germany. He fell asleep properly only once, he thinks. That was toward dawn. He must have slept for a while, though, because when he woke up it was broad daylight and there was a wet patch on his T-shirt where he’d drooled.

He stands up from the sofa to snort his line from the black marble surface. He feels the drug trickle down the back of his throat with a warm phlegmy sensation. He sniffs and rubs his nose.

“What time is it?” he asks Norbi.

He has no idea what time it is.

He keeps forgetting where he is as well. There was a moment, sitting there on the sofa, when he seriously thought he was still in Kuwait.

“Five,” Norbi says.

István has a look around the apartment. It has an empty, unlived-in feeling.

Though there’s furniture there don’t seem to be any personal possessions.

There's some sort of huge Jacuzzi thing in the bathroom, with steps down into it.

He breaks open another Red Bull from the otherwise empty fridge and lights another Philip Morris.

"You hungry?" Norbi asks him.

"No," he says.

•

He feels edgy as they troop down the stairs, which are massive and made of stone. Their feet and voices echo. They're making a lot of noise, an unnecessary amount of noise, shouting at one another, pushing and shoving, laughing loudly at stupid things.

Then they're in the street, walking along in the early evening darkness and the sound of the traffic. They have a few beers in a sports bar, the first place they see. There's soccer on a screen. Toward the end there's a punch-up, with several players involved. One player is sent off. Soon after that the match ends and they go to the men's room to do more lines. They take turns in the stall and snort the speed from the plastic top of the toilet. They've been looking forward to this evening for a long time. It was something they talked about a lot at Camp Babylon—this first night out when they got home. Just a normal night out, essentially. That's what they wanted. And that's what this is. Except there are moments when the very normality of it feels like a sort of outrage.

•

They have rum in some sort of rum place. It seems like a rum place. The bar has a thatched roof that's presumably supposed to look like something on the beach of a Caribbean island. The whole décor of the place is trying to get that vibe. They aren't that aware

of it. It's quite dark in there. The rum-based cocktails have little paper umbrellas in them.

"These things actually work," Balázs says, closing and opening one with a small papery flapping noise.

"Why don't you take it with you?" Norbi suggests. "It's raining, isn't it?"

Balázs holds it up as if it were an actual umbrella. They laugh at that.

It seems very funny at the time.

Out in the street Balázs is still doing it, he's still holding it up as if it were an actual umbrella, and they're still laughing at it.

They wind up at Morrison's and start talking to two foreign girls. One of the girls is quite tall, the other quite short. "Where are you from?" István asks them.

"Norway," the taller one says.

He tells them they served alongside some Norwegian soldiers in Iraq.

"What were their names?" the taller girl asks.

"Sven," István says. "There was Sven and . . ." He turns to Norbi.

"Olav?" Norbi suggests.

"Yeah, Olav," István says. "Sven and Olav."

"Where were they from?" the taller girl asks. The taller girl does most of the talking.

"Where were they from?" István says.

“Yeah.”

He turns to Norbi again. Norbi just laughs.

“Oslo, is it?” István says. He starts to laugh himself.

“Did these guys even exist?” the taller girl asks, smiling at him.

“Yeah, I swear,” István says.

They’re speaking English. His English improved a lot in Iraq. It was the language they used to talk to the other foreign troops they were stationed with.

Norbi asks the girls if they want another drink.

They’re drinking vodka Cokes, they say, after exchanging a look.

While Norbi takes care of that, István talks to them about what they are doing there. “You on vacation?” he asks.

“No, we live here,” the taller girl says.

“You live here?”

“Yeah.”

“Why do you live here?”

“We study here.”

“You study here?”

“Yeah.”

“What do you study?”

“Medicine.”

“Medicine?”

“Yeah.”

“You must be very intelligent,” István says.

“Yeah, very,” the taller girl says, and laughs.

When Norbi gets back with the drinks, he asks the girls if they want to do some speed.

They look at each other and sort of shrug and then say that they do.

They go to the toilet with them to take it, to the men’s.

First Norbi goes with the taller girl.

Then István goes with the shorter girl.

Then Balázs goes by himself.

“Is he O.K.?” the shorter girl asks when Balázs goes.

“I think so. Why?” István asks her.

It’s true that Balázs didn’t look well.

“He’s drunk,” István explains.

They have a sort of rapport now, he and the shorter girl, after their minute of proximity in the toilet.

“Did you kill anyone?” she asks.

She’s drunk, too.

Even though he’s drunk himself, she’s drunk enough that he thinks, She’s drunk, which must mean she’s even drunker than he is, he

thinks.

“In Iraq, I mean,” she says.

“Yeah, I know,” he says.

“So?” she says.

“I’m not allowed to tell you that,” he says.

Then he says, “No, I’m joking. I didn’t.”

The speed has made her more talkative and she asks him some other things, and then Norbi’s there with her friend saying why don’t they go back to his place.

They wait near the entrance while the girls sort themselves out.

“Where’s Balázs?” Norbi asks, after they’ve been standing there for a minute or so.

“Balázs?” István says.

“Yeah.”

“Dunno,” István says.

“When d’you last see him?” Norbi asks.

“He went to do some speed, didn’t he?”

“Yeah?”

“Didn’t he?”

They have a look for him, and István finds him semiconscious in the men’s room, sitting on the toilet though with his trousers still on

and his face pressed against a wall plastered with old stickers promoting d.j. nights at Morrison's and other venues.

"Wake up, Balázs," he says. "We're going."

Balázs opens his eyes.

He seems to have been sick. There's some fresh vomit on the floor anyway.

"Wake up. We're going," István says.

Balázs looks like he doesn't understand what István is saying.

"We're going," he says again.

•

They walk to the apartment, which isn't far away. Balázs falls over twice, and István has to help him. When they arrive, Norbi tries to remember the code that opens the front door of the building.

"You can't remember the code to your own place?" the taller girl says, laughing little puffs of steam.

"Yeah, of course," Norbi says.

Eventually he works it out and they go upstairs and he manages to get some music playing and finds a bottle of vodka and cuts some more lines of speed.

The taller girl has an Apple iPod and seems to know how to plug it into Norbi's brother's expensive sound system. "What is that?" István asks.

"It's a fucking iPod," Norbi says.

"What's an iPod?" István asks.

“What’s an iPod?” Norbi says.

“Yeah,” István says.

“What’s an iPod?”

“Yeah.”

“You seriously don’t know?”

“No,” István says. “What is it?”

The girls are laughing at them, and in fact they’re deliberately hamming it up to amuse them.

Then the girls put on their music very loud and start to dance.

István and Norbi dance with them, mostly making a sort of joke of it, which seems to amuse them, too.

After a while the girls go to find the toilet together and come back asking if that’s actually a huge Jacuzzi in the bathroom.

“Yeah,” Norbi says, looking up from the black marble counter.

“Does it work?” the taller girl asks.

“Yeah, sure.”

He asks if they want to try it. He has cut the last of the speed, and he passes the taller girl the banknote they’re using to snort it. “You want to try it?” he says again.

They don’t answer—they’re busy at the counter.

“Actually, I don’t even know if it works,” Norbi says.

After they've snorted the last of the speed, they go to the bathroom and Norbi tries to make the Jacuzzi work. For a while he presses buttons and there are beeping sounds. Nothing else happens, though, except that the tub fills with hot water.

"Is this actually your apartment?" the taller girl asks him.

At that moment the Jacuzzi starts.

They stand there watching it go glub-glub-glub.

"Want to try it?" Norbi says.

There's some discussion and the girls agree to do it if István and Norbi go out of the room while they get undressed and come back only when they're already in the water.

István and Norbi wait outside.

After a few minutes István knocks on the door. He makes eye contact with Norbi. "Can we come in?" he calls.

The girls are both in the Jacuzzi, sitting down low to hide their breasts under the surface foam.

Norbi asks them if it's nice.

They nod.

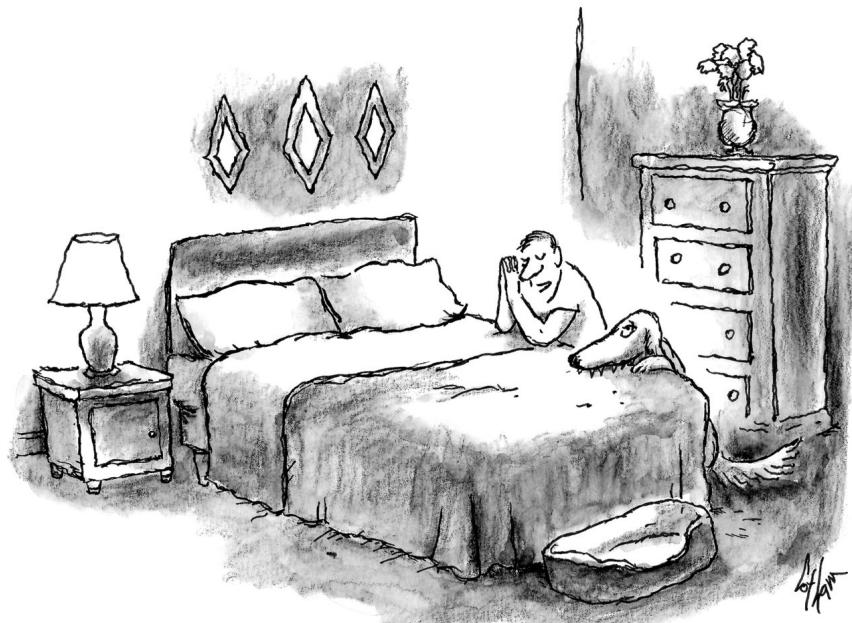
They seem maybe a bit nervous.

The Jacuzzi has underwater lights that keep changing color—they go from blue to purple to red to blue again.

There are no other lights on in the room now.

"Are you going to join us?" the taller girl asks.

“Of course,” István says, his eyes still adjusting to the semidarkness.



“And I have some special requests from my furry friend.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

He and Norbi start to undress.

“I like your tattoos,” the shorter girl says when István has stripped down to his briefs.

“Yeah, thanks,” he says.

Feeling slightly self-conscious, he slides off his briefs and steps into the water.

When he’s sitting on the submerged ledge, the smaller girl moves over so that she’s next to him and looks more closely at the tattoos on his shoulders and arms.

“They’re really good,” she says.

“Thanks,” István says again.

“Yours are cool, too,” she says to Norbi as he, also naked now, takes his place in the tub.

“You got any?” István asks her. She shakes her head.

Her taller friend is on the far side of the tub. Her face is flushed from the heat of the water, and she seems to be keeping her distance from them.

She also shakes her head when István asks if she has any tattoos.

There’s a definite tension.

Nobody seems to know what to do or say next.

István is about to say something just to keep things from getting awkward when the smaller girl says, “I’m too hot.”

She stands up and steps out.

At first the others seem unsure how to deal with this development. They just sit there in the water as she moves around the room looking at things, her wet skin shining in the dim and constantly changing light as the last traces of the tub’s spume slide off her. She has a pierced navel and no pubic hair.

“Nice body,” István says after a while, feeling again that someone should probably say something.

“Thanks,” she says without looking at him.

A minute later she’s sucking his dick while Norbi fucks her from behind.

The taller girl is still in the Jacuzzi.

She hasn’t moved at all.

István is sort of half aware of her, that she's still just sitting there in the water on her own, looking straight ahead as if nothing were happening.

•

The next day, in the afternoon, he takes a train to the town where his mother lives. Deer flee across flooded fields. In the distance are low hills the color of smoke.

He is sitting at one of the tables with four seats around it, and he sees the passenger diagonally opposite him notice that the health warning on his Philip Morris packet, which is lying on the table between them, is in Arabic. A flicker of perplexity passes over the person's face.

It's already nearly dark.

The last daylight flashes from the standing water on the fields and then instead of the dusky landscape it's his own face in the window, or a transparent, shadowy version of it.

He realizes that the things that are so important to him—the things that happened in Iraq, and that he saw there, the things that left him feeling that nothing would ever be the same again—they just aren't important here.

Those things have no reality here.

That's what it feels like.

It makes him feel slightly insane or something, to have those things inside him, when they aren't real here.

Next to his head hangs a rough blue curtain with an ingrained smell of cigarette smoke.

He's in the smoking carriage.

He lights another Kuwaiti Philip Morris with the end of the last one and then presses out the old one in the little metal ashtray with the clinky lid.

When he went to Iraq he smoked ten to twenty cigarettes a day.

Now it's forty.

•

His mother pushes the pan of *székelykáposzta* toward him. “Have some more,” she says.

“Thanks,” he says.

They're sitting at the small square table in her kitchen.

The kitchen is still the same as he remembers it, in every detail. Except there's the postcard he sent her from Kuwait attached to the fridge. A picture of those towers with the blue spheres on them. He sent it on his way out to Iraq, about a year ago. They spent a few days in Kuwait then as well.

He spoons more of the stewed cabbage and meat onto his plate. *Székelykáposzta* is his favorite, has been ever since he was a kid.

His mother knows that.

She stands up and saws off another slice of soft white bread.

“There you are,” she says.

He takes it from her.

She's drinking red wine. He said he didn't want any.

He asked her if she had any Coke.

She didn't.

"So what was it like?" she says.

He shrugs.

There's the sound of the phone from the other room.

"Sorry," she says.

She goes through to answer it.

While she's gone he unsticks the postcard from the fridge and looks at what he wrote a year ago. He looks at it with the feeling that it was written by someone else. *It's very hot here. I'm fine.* They weren't really allowed to write anything else.

He sticks the postcard to the fridge again.

Also on the fridge is a cutting from the local newspaper. It's about him. About how he was given a medal for what he did.

His mother comes back.

"You had enough?" she asks, indicating his plate.

He nods and says, "O.K. if I smoke?"

"Go on, then," she says, and opens the window. "I know your friend was killed," she says, putting the sour cream back in the fridge. "It was on the news."

"Sure."

"That he was killed," she says.

“Yeah.”

“What happened? Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not really,” he says.

“O.K., then,” she says. “I’m sorry anyway.”

“I know,” he says.

He lies on the bed in his old room, smoking a cigarette.

He wonders why he didn’t want to talk to her about it.

Usually he talks to her about things.

She’s the person he talks to about things.

So why didn’t he want to talk to her about this?

There’s this feeling that she wouldn’t understand something important about it, something so important that the whole exercise of talking about it would seem futile, or worse.

The strange thing is, he isn’t exactly sure what that something is, the thing that she wouldn’t understand.

In a way it’s all of it.

The whole thing, what it was like. She wouldn’t understand that.

And without that—

There’s a knock on the door.

“Yeah?” he says.

“You O.K.?” her voice says.

“Yeah,” he says.

She opens the door a little. “I’m going to bed,” she says.

“O.K.,” he says. “Good night.”

“Good night,” she says. “Sleep well.”

“Yeah.”

•

Toward the end of January, his mother says she might have found him a job.

“What?” he asks.

“At the winery,” she says.

“Them again? They didn’t take me last time.”

“You weren’t a war hero then,” she says.

The winery is in a village about thirty-five kilometres south of the town, almost on the Croatian border.

His mother drives him there for the interview.

She has a car now, a secondhand Suzuki Ignis.

The morning they drive down there the countryside looks totally dead. The only signs of life are the faint plumes of smoke above some of the single-story houses when they pass through a village.

The winery is in a more substantial village than most of the others in the area. There’s even a sort of café, where his mother sits while he does the interview.

The owner of the winery talks to him. He's a red-faced, middle-aged man. He mostly asks him about Iraq, what that was like.

"So probably you want to know a bit about the job," he finally says.

"Sure," István says.

The winery owner explains that it would involve managing the warehouse—keeping track of deliveries and shipments.

"O.K.," István says.

"So you'll take it?"

"Sure," István says.

They shake hands.

His mother is having a second coffee and doing a sudoku puzzle when he gets back to the café.

"How did it go?" she asks.

"I got the job," he says.

"I knew you would," she says. "How much did they offer you?"

"You mean money?"

"Of course."

"I don't know," he says.

"You don't know?"

"He didn't say."

“And you didn’t ask?”

“No,” he says.

“You’re so innocent,” she says.

•

The work at the winery is essentially a matter of keeping records. Since Hungary is now in the European Union, the winery buys its new bottles from Italy. They are cheaper and better, the owner says. They arrive on a truck every second Tuesday, tens of thousands of them. It takes a while to unload, and as well as keeping track of the numbers István has to make sure that they aren’t damaged. With so many, there are always a few that are cracked or whatever, and that’s O.K., the owner says, as long as it is only a few.

When the bottles are full of wine they go out to shops around the country and to restaurants mostly in Budapest.

Again, he has to make sure that the shipments are properly recorded.

One of his colleagues also lives in the town and drives down to the winery every day. He takes István, and István pays him some money toward the gas. Every morning he shows up in his old red Citroën AX.

When István first starts working at the winery, it’s icy and only just beginning to get light when his colleague shows up.

By April, though, the sun is already above the trees between the housing estate and the road, and the trees are in leaf, and the air is quite mild when he goes down the concrete stairs and leaves the building.

The drive takes about forty minutes. His colleague has been working at the winery for a long time, and he seems to assume that István will do the same. He says things like “After you’ve been here a few years” and “You wait till you’ve been here as long as I have.”

István mostly just sits there looking out at the countryside, which is quite picturesque, especially now, in spring, and enjoying the taste of the cigarette smoke in his mouth. The wind ripples at the windows, which are down a few centimetres to let the smoke out.

To the extent that he thinks about it at all, he thinks of the job at the winery as a very temporary thing, something he will do for a few months maybe, just until he finds something else.

Except that he isn’t actually trying to find anything else.

It’s like he’s waiting for something else to find him. Or not even that. He isn’t really thinking about the future at all.

When he gets home in the afternoon he walks up the stairs of the building and forgets about all that, about work and the future and everything.

He looks in the fridge.

He smokes on the balcony.

He watches TV—the news, or some quiz show.

He pours himself a glass of Coke.

His mother makes them some food.

And then it’s the next morning again, and he’s standing in front of the building waiting for the old red Citroën to arrive.

•

It's the Pentecost long weekend, in late May.

On Monday afternoon he's lying on his bed, smoking a cigarette. When he's finished it he stubs it out in the ashtray.

He doesn't know why he does what he does next. Something wells up in him. It feels as purely physical and involuntary as throwing up.

There's a surprisingly loud noise, and the door has a splintery dent in it now.

For a while he doesn't feel anything in his hand, but when he tries to take another cigarette with it he can't.

He uses the other one.

Yeah, fuck, his right hand hurts a lot.

It hurts so much suddenly that he needs to do something.

In the kitchen, using his left hand, he opens the freezer and pulls out a bag of peas.

He sits at the kitchen table with the frozen peas on his right hand.

He's sweating weirdly heavily, he notices. His shirt is sticking to him.

The peas seem to be helping, and he takes them to his bed and lies there on his back with his right hand on his chest, and the peas on his hand.

He's shivering now even though it's warm, and when he looks at his hand again half an hour later it's about twice its normal size and

dark red. It's also hurting more than ever. He should probably show it to a doctor, he thinks.

Still heavily sweating, he leaves the apartment with his shoelaces flapping around undone and starts down the stairs.

The nearest hospital isn't far.

He shows his hand to someone in the entrance area and they tell him where to wait—it's a wide, windowless corridor with metal seats down the sides and another two rows of them back to back in the middle. All the seats are taken so he stands next to the vending machine. It's noisy in the corridor, with so many people there.

There are some doors with numbers on them—though the numbers don't seem to make any sort of sequential sense—and every so often one of the doors opens from the inside and some of the people who are in the corridor press in around the person who opened it, usually a middle-aged woman in green hospital clothes whose expression seems designed to deter inquiries. Sometimes, though not always, she says a name and one of the people waiting there is admitted to the room. After he has seen that happen a few times, he understands that he's supposed to make himself known to the woman as well, and the next time she opens the door he pushes his way to the front and shows her his hand and without saying anything she adds his name to a list.

Finally his name is called, and he's admitted to the room behind her. The room seems very quiet and peaceful after the noise and tension of the corridor. There's the woman in medical green and a bearded young man in a white coat who's presumably a doctor. He's no older than István and possibly younger. He asks what the problem is and István shows his inflated hand. "O.K.," the doctor says.

"I'm not sure if it's broken or what," István tells him.

“Oh, it’s broken,” the young doctor says, with a laugh. “What happened?”

István says he punched something.

The doctor waits for him to elaborate.

“A door,” István says, feeling ashamed.

When he doesn’t add anything further, the young doctor says, “O.K.”

Something about him irritates István. Maybe it’s the way that he’s smiling. Or maybe it’s just that he’s the same age as István and already a doctor. “Does it hurt?” the doctor asks.

“Yes,” István says.

“A lot?”

“Quite a lot.”



“It’s really good, and I’m not just saying that because you’ll get totally depressed and make my life miserable if I sound even the slightest bit negative.”

Cartoon by David Sipress

“Have you taken any painkillers?”

“Today?”

“Yes.”

“No, I haven’t.”

The doctor asks the woman in green for some codeine, and she gives the white pill to István with a small paper cone of water.

“Thanks,” István says.

When he has swallowed the pill, he returns the empty cup to her and she drops it in a bin.

“We’ll need an X-ray,” the doctor says while that’s happening.

He says some technical-sounding things to the woman in the green clothes, and she writes out a slip, which she hands to István.

The doctor tells him to take it to the radiology department upstairs and wait there.

•

He waits about an hour for the X-ray, and once it’s done he waits another hour in the noisy corridor downstairs to see the doctor again.

“So,” the young doctor says, smiling at him when it’s finally his turn. “It’s not a simple fracture.”

“O.K.,” István says.

The doctor says that it might be necessary to do an operation.

“Why?” István asks.

“You might lose some movement in these two fingers,” the doctor tells him, indicating the two smallest fingers of his own right hand, “without an operation.”

“What do you mean lose some movement?”

The doctor explains. It doesn’t sound very serious, the loss of movement he’s talking about, and István says so.

“So you don’t want the operation?” the doctor asks.

“Is it worth it?”

“It’s up to you,” the doctor says.

“What happens if I don’t have the operation?” István asks him.

“Well, then I’ll just try to put the bones back the best I can and set it,” the doctor says.

“You mean with plaster?”

“Yes.”

“O.K.”

“You want to do that?”

“Yeah.”

The doctor says he’ll need him to sign a paper that the woman in the green clothes starts to prepare. While she’s doing that the doctor gives István an injection in his right hand. “This might hurt a bit,” he says.

“O.K.,” István says.

It does hurt, though not as much as he thought it would. “We’ll give it a few minutes,” the doctor says.

The hand already feels numb.

The woman in the green clothes has the paper ready for him now.

“What is this?” István asks.

“It just says you refused the operation,” the doctor tells him, from the other side of the room, where he’s taking things out of a drawer.

Put like that it sounds as if he might be making a mistake, and István hesitates. “Am I doing something stupid?” he asks.

“It’s your decision,” the doctor says.

“Do you think I should have the operation?”

“It’s your decision,” the doctor says again.

The woman in green is still waiting there with the paper. She puts it down for István to sign, and he takes the pen with his left hand, and then turns to the doctor with a look that says, *What am I supposed to do?*

“Just make some sort of mark,” the doctor tells him. “How is it?” he asks, meaning the hand he injected.

“I can’t really feel it,” István says, using his left hand to put an illiterate-looking scrawl on the paper.

“Can you feel this?” the doctor asks, prodding it with the pen that István has just handed back to him.

“No,” István says.

The doctor says he's going to try to put the bones back as they should be.

"O.K.," István says.

"This will probably still hurt," the doctor warns.

"All right," István says.

The doctor takes the hand and starts to tug and shove at the smallest two fingers and immediately out of the numbness a dull pain comes.

He can only imagine what the agony would be like if it weren't for the anesthetic. For the past few hours, the slightest brush of anything on the hugely swollen hand has made him flinch with pain, and now this doctor is sort of wrestling with it.

The pain starts to get worse, and he has an impulse to pull the hand away. He feels something like fear. He wants to tell the doctor to stop. He inhales through his nose.

There's sweat on the doctor's smooth young forehead. The woman in green watches, looking slightly worried.

The doctor stops. "O.K.," he says. "That should do it." He shapes the hand into a particular position—all four fingers bent about halfway into a fist, with the thumb free at the side—and says, "Hold it like that for me, please."

István does, and the doctor starts to wrap a bandage around it. He wraps it until the bandage entirely covers the hand, except for the tips of the fingers and the free thumb, as well as István's wrist and part of his forearm. Then, after putting on latex gloves, the doctor takes a roll of heavier-looking material that the woman in green has prepared for him by soaking it in a stainless-steel basin of water. The doctor unrolls some of this wet material, which looks like

white slimy cloth, and starts to wrap it around István's arm and hand, on top of the bandage that's already there. "Can I ask you a question?" he says, as he does that.

"Yes," István says.

"Where did you go to school?"

"Where did I go to school?" István says, and as he says it he understands why the doctor looks so familiar to him.

"I thought so," the doctor says, after István tells him. "I was there, too."

"Oh, yeah?" István says.

"We were in the same year, I think," the doctor says.

"Maybe," István says.

"How are you doing?" the doctor asks him, smiling again now in his narrow beard.

"How am I doing?"

"Yeah." The doctor is still winding the slimy material around his wrist and hand, and the separate layers of material have started to merge into one another, forming a single white mass, which the doctor smooths and molds.

"I'm O.K.," István says.

"What do you do?" the doctor asks. "If you don't mind my asking."

"No," István says. "I don't mind. I was in the Army."

"O.K.," the doctor says.

He takes a second roll of dripping-wet material from the woman and starts to apply it over the first one.

“Until a few months ago,” István says.

“And now?” the doctor asks.

“Not sure,” István says.

“Fair enough,” the doctor says.

He doesn’t ask any more questions, and István doesn’t ask him anything about what he’s doing. He’s obviously a doctor.

That’s what he’s done with the past decade or whatever—turned himself into a doctor.

Ten years ago he and this doctor were the same, István thinks.

They were the same.

And now the doctor’s a doctor and he’s . . . whatever he is.

Although they began at the same place, this enormous space has opened up between them, is how it feels.

They seem to be on opposite sides of some fundamental divide now.

The plaster is already starting to dry, at least on the surface.

It looks chalkily matte in places.

It feels solid, fixed.

His hand feels trapped in it. ♦

This is drawn from “Flesh.”

David Szalay is the author of “*All That Man Is*,” which was short-listed for the 2016 Man Booker Prize. His other novels include “*Flesh*” (2025).

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/plaster-fiction-david-szalay>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

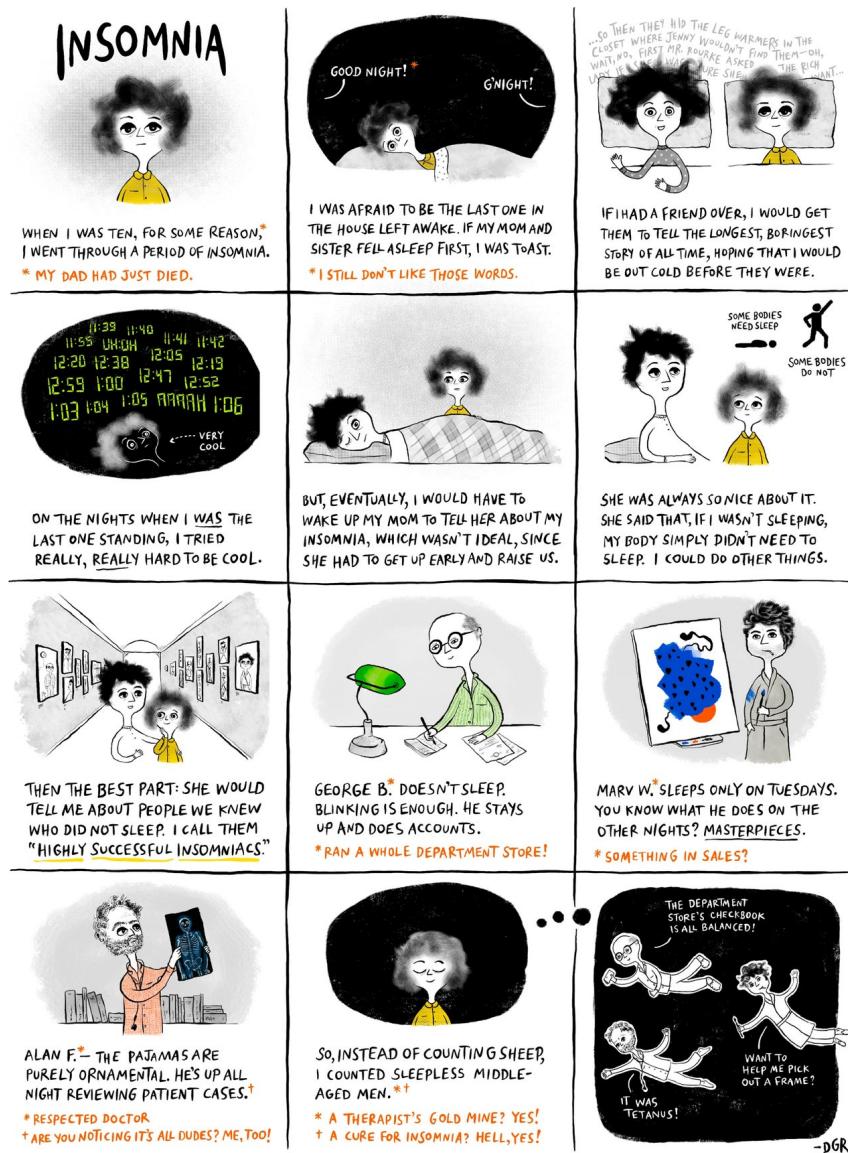
Sketchbook

Highly Successful Insomniacs

Marv W. sleeps only on Tuesdays. You know what he does on the other nights? Masterpieces.

By **Dahlia Gallin Ramirez**

December 2, 2024



Dahlia Gallin Ramirez is a cartoonist and a writer who has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2020. She is the author of “*Sex and the Single Panda: The Revolting Pursuit of Love in the Animal Kingdom*.”

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

The Critics

- **[The Deep Elation of Working with Wood](#)**

By Casey Cep | In “Ingrained,” Callum Robinson honors not just the art of carpentry but the passion of labor itself.

- **[Briefly Noted](#)**

“Valley So Low,” “The Impossible Man,” “Blood Test: A Comedy,” and “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things.”

- **[Houston’s Thriving West African Food Scene](#)**

By Hannah Goldfield | As the city has welcomed more immigrants from Nigeria and neighboring countries, the local restaurant landscape has flourished.

- **[The Meditative Organ Soundscapes of Kali Malone](#)**

By Alex Ross | The eighty-minute suite “All Life Long” is slow, hushed, and gnawingly beautiful, but it does not supply conventional musical comforts.

- **[Looking Back on a Fallen Life in “Oh, Canada”](#)**

By Richard Brody | In Paul Schrader’s latest film—his most audacious religious vision yet—a documentarian on his deathbed confesses, on camera, to a lifetime of misdeeds.

[Books](#)

The Deep Elation of Working with Wood

In “Ingrained,” Callum Robinson honors not just the art of carpentry but the passion of labor itself.

By [Casey Cep](#)

December 2, 2024



Robinson specializes in elaborately designed chairs, tables, and luxury objects, some of which take hundreds of hours to make.

Photographs by Alice Zoo for The New Yorker

What do people do all day? My daughter loves to read Richard Scarry’s book of that title, though she generally skips ahead to the hospital pages. Once we’ve read about Doctor Lion, Doctor Dog,

and Nurse Nelly four or five times, she's ready to go back to the beginning. She never tires of studying the various professional activities of the residents of Busytown: Farmer Alfalfa and Grocer Cat, Blacksmith Fox and Captain Salty, homemakers and construction workers, police officers and firefighters, bakers and engineers.

The literature of work begins in childhood but doesn't end there. Novelists have long attended to labor, from the mills of Charlotte Brontë's "Shirley" and the mines of Émile Zola's "Germinal" to the more recent portrayal of Target loading docks in Adelle Waldman's "Help Wanted." In the world of nonfiction, though, we regrettably associate work with how-to and self-help: the manuals that teach you to become anything from a mechanic to a movie director; the wikiHow pages that promise to make anyone, regardless of profession, capable of cleaning a P-trap, refinishing a floor, or replacing the coolant in an air-conditioner.

But there are also wonderful nonfiction books about work, above all by those who have dedicated their lives to specific types of it. I don't mean political memoirs, which instrumentalize the past to secure votes or shape legacies, or celebrity memoirs and tell-all, which forsake the bedrock of a vocation to examine its subsoil and topsoil, recording social scenes and settling scores. I have in mind books that dwell deeply on the nature and practice of work itself. Think of James Herriot's account of life as a rural veterinarian, "All Creatures Great and Small," or Reinhold Niebuhr's reflections on parish ministry, "Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic"; Michael Lewis's revelatory "Liar's Poker" or Anthony Bourdain's scandalous "Kitchen Confidential." More recent books like this include Caitlin Doughty's "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: And Other Lessons from the Crematory," Hope Jahren's "Lab Girl," Finn Murphy's "The Long Haul: A Trucker's Tales of Life on the Road," and Stephanie Land's "Maid: Hard Work, Low Pay, and a Mother's Will to Survive." Such memoirs provide the satisfaction of a surreptitious Take Your Child to Work Day, documenting in

pleasing and illuminating detail what people do all day, but also why they do it. A charming new addition to this genre is “Ingrained: The Making of a Craftsman” (Ecco), by the carpenter Callum Robinson.

Robinson was born to a schoolteacher and a landscape architect turned woodworker outside Edinburgh, in the eastern Lowlands of Scotland. For decades, his parents slowly restored the leaky-roofed, draft-prone eighteenth-century farmhouse in which he was raised, and he watched every evening as his father plastered, plumbed, and painted the dwelling, adding and repairing outbuildings as needed. Around the edges of all that, the elder Robinson made time to help his son craft wooden weapons: first, a catapult like the ones in “Ben-Hur,” hewn from solid pine and strung with bailing twine, and then a series of longbows, crossbows, and redwood swords that transported the boy from the age of Margaret Thatcher back to the court of King Arthur.

What We’re Reading

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



The family’s spread was not far from the North Sea, surrounded by barley fields and frequented by seagulls, but Robinson was drawn to the eerie forests of Sitka spruce just beyond their boundary fence: dense woodlands with ogreish trees that can grow to more than three hundred feet, which he remembers as being “wet and slimy underfoot, riddled with fairy-tale red blobs of fly agaric fungi.” If that makes Robinson sound like a nature writer, it’s because he is. Some of his best prose attends to the natural world, and to the way our manufactured world makes use of and mimics

it. “The sawdust is granular and damp to the touch, like coffee grounds between my fingers,” he writes, while resin that is too old or cold can clump and require a day “spent picking the sticky uncured goop from a knothole—like digging toffee from a tooth cavity.”

As for trees, the necessary heart of his trade: they are lavished with even more attention than Robinson’s adored wife and beloved parents. His father’s landscaping work gave him a graduate-level education in botany at a young age. “It was the reason,” he recalls, “the trees we encountered were never simply oak, ash, or monkey puzzle, but *Quercus petraea*, *Fraxinus excelsior*, and *Araucaria araucana*.” He knows these species as well as many of us know our siblings. Oak, he says, is “heavy, sharp, and bristly. Its fibers catch and prickle like an old man’s stubble.” Elm is “the tenacious swaggering dandy of the forest.” Sycamores are “ghostly, almost luminescent,” and, like some kind of arboreal werewolf, “must be cut in the light of the full moon.”

When Robinson’s father was declared redundant at his landscape firm, he began making furniture to support the family. He started small, with picture frames, mirrors, doorstops, cutting boards, and key rings, but soon he was crafting bespoke cabinets and taking on full remodels. Callum, the eldest of three children—“surly, socially awkward, already close to six feet tall and with all the clumsy strength of the heavy-set teenager”—was enlisted as a helper and trainee.

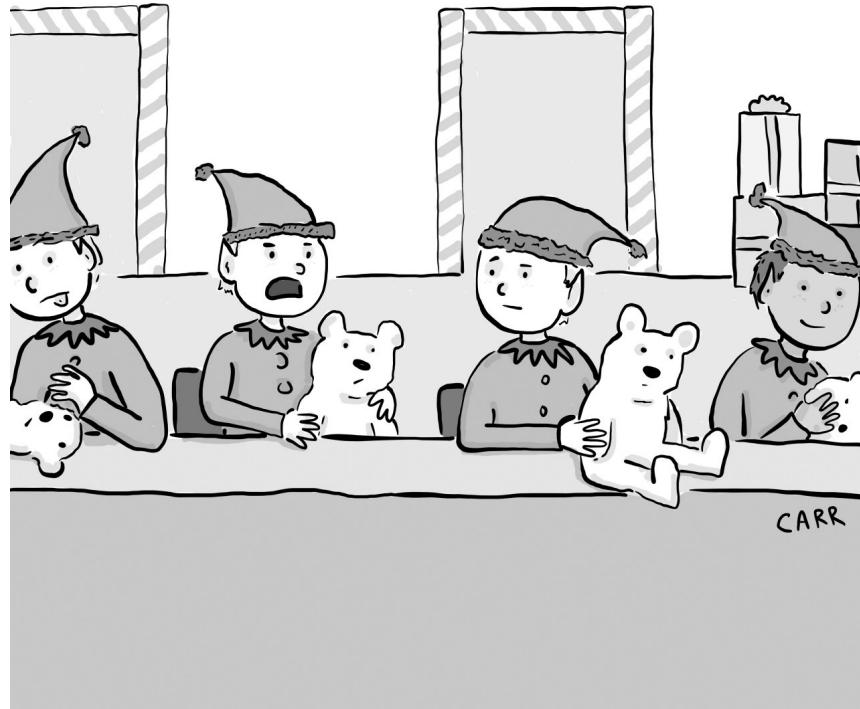


Robinson apprenticed under his father, one of the few Master Carvers in the United Kingdom.

Rather than attend college, Robinson went to work as a bartender, then apprenticed for another five years with his father, making staircases, tables, “and a hundred other things besides.” At twenty-four, he took a walkabout in New Zealand, and later he came home to Scotland, where he met his wife, Marisa Giannasi, “whose particular mix of mountain Tuscan and East End Glaswegian makes her garrulous and gregarious, and entirely immune to fear.” An architectural designer by training, she paid their bills by teaching design and working at an architectural firm while Robinson developed his trade, built a client base, and assembled a tool kit befitting Hephaestus: mortiser, lathe, jack plane, spokeshave, thicknesser.

It's a captivating marriage, not only of equals but of opposites: entrepreneurial and optimistic, Giannasi is a foil for Robinson, whose shyness and awkwardness can rattle the teacup in his hand at any trade conference or gallery opening. He struggles to strike up conversations with potential customers and seems reluctant to hand out his business cards. "From the moment we met, I've marveled at it," he says of his wife's ambition and social stamina. "She's one of those rare people who doesn't just talk about things, she actually gets on and does them. Formulate a plan, act on it. No fucking around."

Together, Robinson and Giannasi eventually open Method Studio, a workshop specializing in sybaritic display cabinets, cases, and travel trunks for luxury brands like Burberry, Bentley, Hermès, and Estée Lauder. The couple advertise themselves as "architects of objects" and soon hire three other "makers" to help them. They refine and perfect their sales skills over the years, convincing an increasingly élite coterie to invest in their increasingly elaborate objets d'art, some of which take hundreds of hours to make and sell for tens of thousands of pounds. "The Royal Ballet's performing at the unveiling," they're informed about a million-dollar watch for which they design a treasure-chest case, while the ornate, leather-bound trunks they make for a motor show come with surprising strings attached: "Perhaps you'd consider flying to Paris to fit them?"



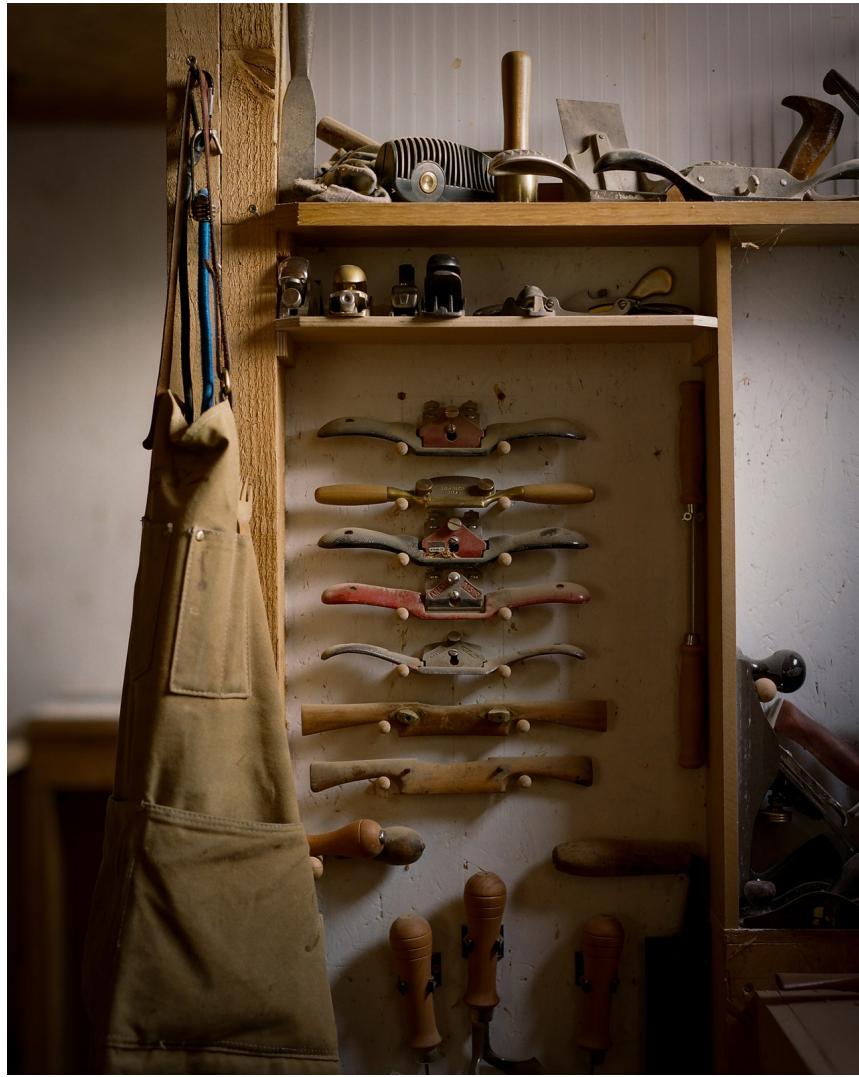
“The bears would be done by now if the big guy would stop asking us how to make a PDF.”
Cartoon by Chelsea Carr

But, when “Ingrained” begins, that work has abruptly collapsed. Readers are never privy to the identity of the corporate client who drops Method Studio or even the exact nature of what Robinson was designing for them, but, after months of courting what might have been a life-changing account, he fields a call notifying him, in vague management-speak, that the job has fallen through. “I’ve heard it said that miners working deep underground prefer wooden pit props to modern materials like iron or steel,” Robinson writes. “Timber lacks metal’s strength, but it creaks and moans if the load becomes too great. Wood warns you when it’s about to break, giving you a fighting chance to escape. The others simply crumple and your world caves in. I hear no warning, only a *click*, a dial tone, and the hammer-thudding of my own heartbeat.” Insofar as “Ingrained” has a plot, it tracks what Robinson and Giannasi do after that phone call, opening a retail shop in the suburb of Linlithgow, twenty or so miles west of Edinburgh, which they hope will generate enough sales to help them repay their overdraft and retain their talented employees.

As the book marches toward the shop's opening day, Robinson offers some marvellous set pieces from his profession and his personal history. In one, he reveals that many woodworkers worry over *l'appel du vide*, or what his father calls Machine Tool Vertigo, which Robinson first experienced in a Tasmanian timber yard:

"More often than I'd like to admit, when I see a bandsaw running, I feel a desperate and terrible impulse to sprint in from a distance, leap headfirst to meet the blade fully horizontal, and split myself right down the middle." Closer to home, he recalls his father toughening him up by sending him into the forest to turn on a water line. Carrying only a parang and a T-bar, Robinson falls into a stream, is spooked nearly to death by a deer, and returns home twice in defeat, only to triumph in his third attempt, undeterred by the sulky teen-ager's version of the pathetic fallacy: "Mud was deeper, branches were lower, spikier and even more vindictive, and the rain that had begun to fall found its way down the back of my neck with extraordinary precision."

Extraordinary precision is Robinson's forte: a necessary gift for his career, and a boon to his writing. In an account of creating a commissioned rocking chair, he writes, "A pair of one-piece sinuous sides, each built up from several smaller parts but sculpted with templates to feel like one smoothly transitioning component. Linked not by a footrail, but by slim braces and the chair's angled wooden seat. The backrest, by client request, will be one great swathe of tensioned bridle leather." He's conjuring the blues music of Sonny Boy Williamson while sketching with a pencil, trying to imagine the design into being, considering how the materials might come together. "Leather like this will stretch and move over time, softening and slackening as it ages and molds to the client's back, mellowing like an old shoe. Predicting the right tension, and allowing for adjustment, will be challenging. To tackle this, we have added buckling straps at the back, like corsetry. Something we hope will feel more like saddlery than S&M."



Robinson's tools.

Once the retail shop opens, Robinson is shocked by their first sale. He is unprepared to use the credit-card reader, which turns out to require the Internet, which doesn't penetrate the shop walls. He also lacks any sort of packaging. After considering toilet paper, he instead opts for a swatch of leather large enough to wrap the oak coatrack a woman is taking home to her flat in Twickenham. “Digging out the scissors—small, cheap, blunt—I begin to hack away at the hide,” he writes. “It’s heavy going, with each finger-straining bite chomping through another ragged inch. I don’t think the scissors are going to make it, but after five long minutes I finally have something I can hold up for inspection.” It looks fine enough, he concludes, though he can’t stop himself from calculating the cost of forgetting to acquire shopping bags—“at

least forty quid's worth of full-grain cowhide"—and he still has no way of tying it up, until he remembers the laces in his brogues.

That coatrack and that chair are just two of many handwrought artifacts in this book. And although Robinson is a gifted writer, "Ingrained" might have benefitted from illustrations of some of the things he's made and sold—a strange omission, since he pauses to admire the marketing savvy of Thomas Chippendale, who revolutionized furniture sales when he published "The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director," in 1754, replacing the rudimentary schematics that were common in furniture catalogues with finely detailed, multidimensional representations of his designs. One desperately wants to see the lifelike osprey that Robinson's father carved from elm for the opening of the retail shop, and the so-called "Goldin Table" commission: two tables expertly united and divided with intricate brass mechanisms, named for the twentieth-century stage magician who became famous for sawing people in half. The client wanted an heirloom for each of her two daughters but also a table large enough for hosting, a challenge that bedevilled and delighted Method Studio at every stage.

Both those treasures passed invisibly into private hands, but the Internet will show you another of Robinson and Giannasi's masterworks: the chairs they made from aluminum, Swedish leather, and white ash for the Glasgow School of Art, under the influence of the Art Nouveau designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The "Mack Chairs" look, improbably, like industrial flowers: backs standing like stamens, legs curving like tendrils, seats resting on metal cruciforms as bright as tropical petals. These seats are so serenely stylish that it's jarring to learn of the mayhem that went into making two dozen of them. Robinson remembers "resorting to ballistics-grade adhesives, building forming jigs so large I needed the postman's help to move them, and badly scalding myself in amateur steam-bending attempts."



Robinson outside his woodworking studio.

If this consistently lovely memoir has a shortcoming, it is that, funnily enough, Robinson misses the forest for the trees. The best books about work manage to transcend the individual author's experiences; we learn from them not just the lingo of truck drivers or the jargon of geobiologists but something about the changing labor market in which all of us consciously and unconsciously operate—the exploitative economics of low-wage domestic jobs, say, or the fraudulent tactics of bond salesmen. “Ingrained” mostly shies away from the broad view, though it does offer a sometimes contrived, HGTV-like portrayal of life in retail. Episode 1: Will they find a storefront? Episode 2: Will they have enough inventory? Episode 3: Will anyone come? Robinson brings more intrigue and drama to the selection of single boards from a sawmill shed than he does to any of these very real entrepreneurial

predicaments. Craft and craftsmen are by far his best subjects, and he is eloquent not only on how he makes the things he makes but on how he himself was made—the tender if thorny relationship between father and son; the stabilizing yet propulsive forces of marriage.

To the extent that there is an argument in this book, it arises subtly from Robinson's love of handcrafted goods. Of the tables he's made for families, he writes, "Nostalgia is a powerful thing. An ethereal link. An ache for something long ago, something that might never really have existed. No other material I know can hold it, or radiate it, quite the way wood can. And almost nothing made from wood will ever have as many stories locked inside as a family table." His own family's kitchen table, made from solid elm, lives in his body not because he helped make it but because of the scars it left from all the times he bumped his toddling head against it. Sitting at that table a thousand meals, parties, and conversations later, he finally asks his seventy-year-old father why he never went back to work in an office after losing his job. Three decades into an accomplished second career, his father, one of just a few dozen Master Carvers in the United Kingdom, says plainly, "I'm all about making stuff with my hands."

On this, father and son agree, though Robinson is not a purist. He prefers raw over engineered materials but uses medium-density fibreboard for patterns, and he does not disparage or dismiss other kinds of work. Toward the end of "Ingrained," he advises readers on "making a start," praising manual labor for its ancientness, its groundedness, and its independence. He points out what his field has in common with cooking, gardening, plumbing, and cutting hair, recognizing the many arenas in which these virtues can be pursued. Still, he can't help but offer a shopping list for those who would like to try their hand at woodworking: tape measure, router, jigsaw, speed clamps, sharpening stone, and sundry other tools.

Those are the implements by which Robinson has made everything from rocking chairs to writing desks, but also meaning in his life. “All the creative thinking, fortitude, skill and muscle in the world isn’t enough to make something remarkable,” he concludes in the book’s epilogue. “You must know, deep inside, that what you are doing is important, meaningful—vital. That someone somewhere *needs* it to be special, that you have thought about them, and that you care.” That might not amount to a structural analysis of labor, but it is a beautiful aspiration for laboring, a call for all of us, whatever we do all day, to do it with passion and care. ♦



Casey Cep is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “[Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/ingrained-callum-robinson-book-review>

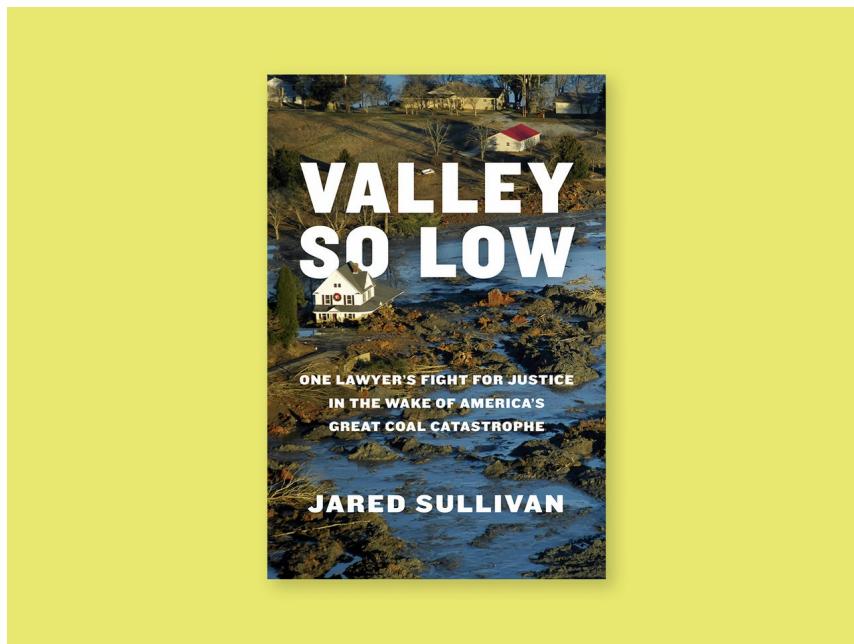
| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Books](#)

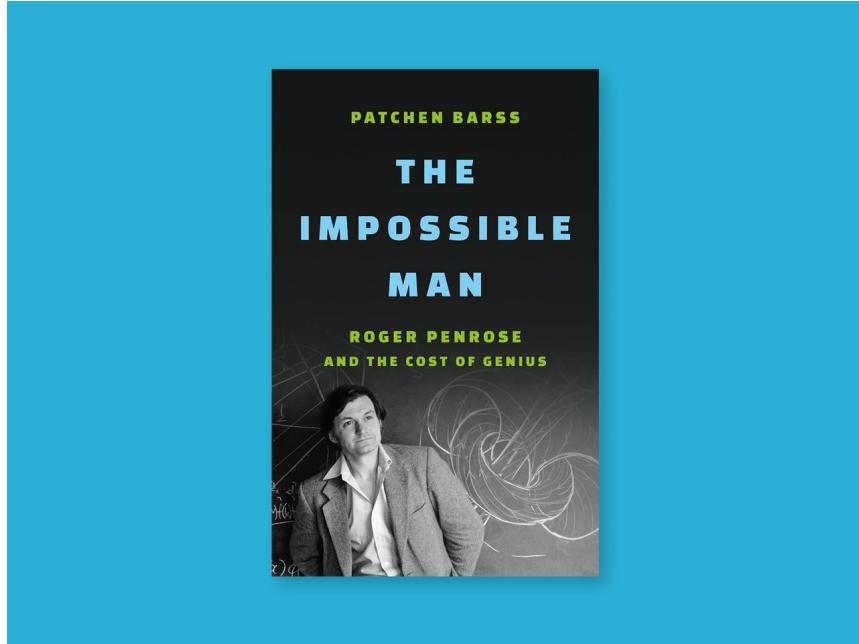
Briefly Noted

“*Valley So Low*,” “*The Impossible Man*,” “*Blood Test: A Comedy*,” and “*This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*.”

December 2, 2024



[Valley So Low](#), by *Jared Sullivan* (*Knopf*). In 2008, a landslide at a coal-powered electricity plant in Kingston, Tennessee, released more than a billion gallons of toxic coal-ash slurry into nearby neighborhoods. This tense investigative chronicle of what Sullivan, a journalist, calls the “single largest industrial disaster in U.S. history in terms of volume” focusses on the workers who cleaned up afterward. Many were told by their supervisors that their exposure to the slurry was safe, and were denied access to protective gear. Hundreds have developed cancer and other ailments; more than fifty have died. As Sullivan follows the court case filed by some of the affected men, the book becomes a legal thriller—a story of “simple, hardworking” Davids fighting the Big Energy Goliath who poisoned them.



The Impossible Man, by *Patchen Barss* (*Basic*). The mathematical physicist Roger Penrose, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2020, is known in part for his ability to visualize complex mathematical and physical concepts, from the twisting of light rays to the four dimensions of space-time. In this elegant biography, Barss vividly evokes Penrose's geometric sensibility and his quest to prove that a geometrically perfect world lies hidden behind everyday reality. Throughout the book, Barss describes how Penrose escaped into "this Platonic mathematical realm" to sidestep worldly problems, particularly his strained personal and romantic relationships.

What We're Reading

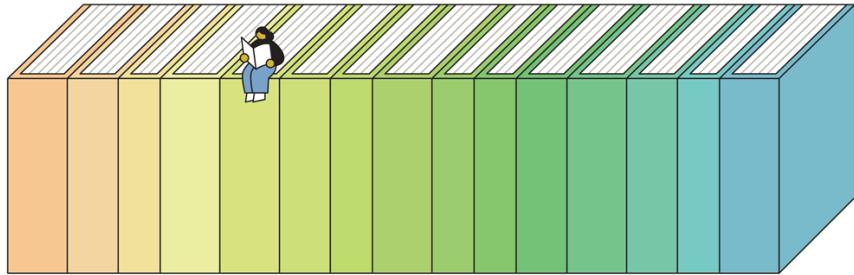
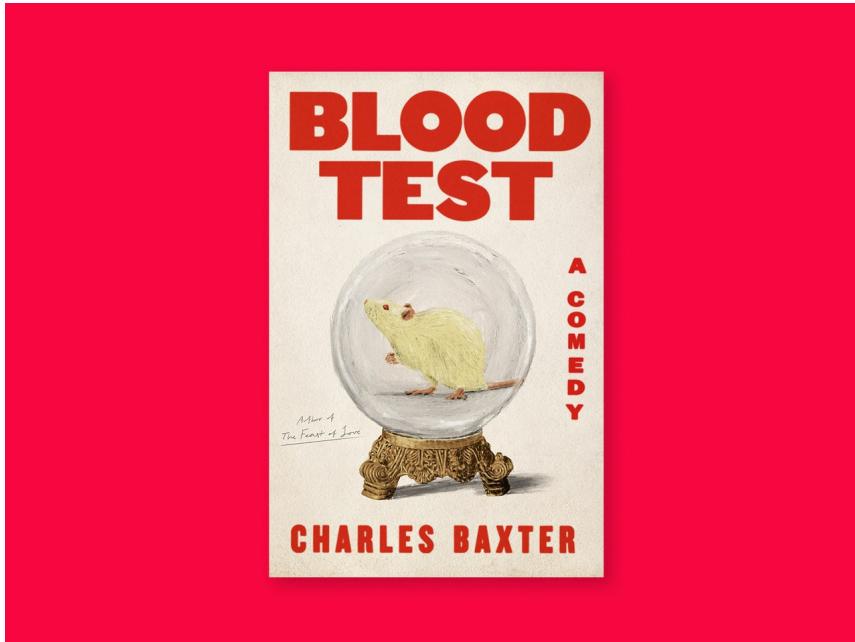


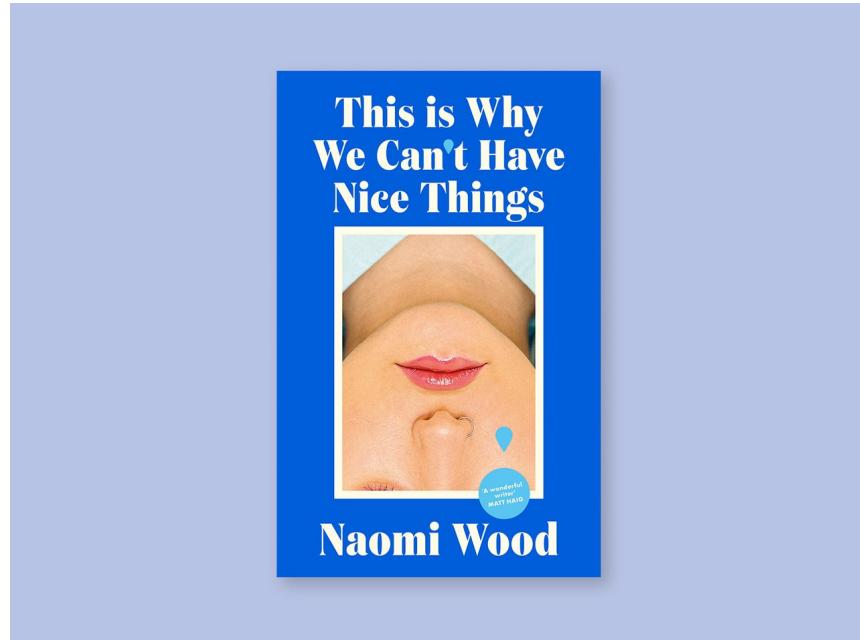
Illustration by Rose Wong

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Blood Test: A Comedy, by Charles Baxter (*Pantheon*). This delightful deadpan novel, set in the post-industrial Midwest, follows a middle-aged insurance salesman and Sunday-school teacher named Brock Hobson, who, at a medical appointment, takes a blood test offered by a shady biotech startup that uses genetic data to forecast participants' future actions. When his results predict "criminal behavior . . . drug taking, and possible anti-social tendencies," Hobson feels liberated from his straitlaced life. He shoplifts, and gets into an argument that leaves a man in a coma. After further tests suggest more extreme violence ahead, Hobson begins to question his identity and his sanity. The result is

a comic parable about the possibilities, and the perils, of self-transformation.



This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things, by Naomi Wood (*Mariner*). Many of the stories in this candid collection about imperfect women embracing their messiest instincts involve motherhood. A woman who has come back to work from maternity leave is forced to do group therapy for returning parents and finds it so irritating that she throws a pen as hard as she can at the counsellor's head. A pregnant director attempts to coerce her star into showing genuine emotion by drawing on her darkest moments. A woman insists that her ex leave his wedding to deliver their five-year-old child to her apartment. She later remarks, “I felt a pulse of dark energy and wondered who I was—this woman; this type of woman.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/valley-so-low-the-impossible-man-blood-test-a-comedy-and-this-is-why-we-cant-have-nice-things>

[On and Off the Menu](#)

Houston's Thriving West African Food Scene

As the city has welcomed more immigrants from Nigeria and neighboring countries, the local restaurant landscape has flourished.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

December 2, 2024



*Fufu, a staple across West Africa, is usually served as a starchy accompaniment to soup or stew.
Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin*

The other day, at a Nigerian restaurant called Safari, in Houston, Texas, I peeled back the plastic wrap on a ball of fufu, a staple across West Africa. Made from a steamed root vegetable or grain—

in this case, yam—that's been pounded and hydrated until it's soft and slightly stretchy, reminiscent of rising bread dough, it falls under a pan-African category known as “swallow,” most often served as a starchy accompaniment to soup or stew. This was not my first time eating fufu. With confidence, I tore off a small piece and began to roll it between my palms. Suddenly, I heard a voice behind me. “Unh-unh. Mm-hmm. What are we doing?”

The voice belonged to Kavachi Ukegbu, a Houstonian whose mother, Margaret, a Nigerian immigrant, opened Safari in 1994. After checking, and then checking again, that I was after “*traditional* traditional” Nigerian dishes, Ukegbu, the co-author of a 2021 book called “The Art of Fufu,” had ordered for me, ferrying plates from the kitchen herself. There was a meaty whorl of land snail, which was draped in sautéed onions and peppers, and required a sharp knife to slice; *abacha*, shredded cassava tossed with palm oil and hunks of stockfish; and the fufu, which came with a bowl of *nsala*, a thick, fragrant soup, crowded with offal and various cuts of beef and goat.

Ukegbu shot me a look of amused exasperation before correcting my fufu technique. I should use only one hand, she explained, to tear off a piece, roll it between my fingers, and then flatten it into a scoop to dip into the soup. I followed her instructions, but as I raised my hand to my mouth I could see in her gaze that my tutelage was not over. “Now let me see if you’re going to chew it or to swallow it,” she said. I froze, and gulped. “Swallow,” I realized, was a literal term.

I had arrived in Houston on the day after the election, and driven directly from George Bush Intercontinental Airport to another restaurant, this one brand-new, called ChopnBlok. In some sense, it’s a novelty, being the first West African restaurant in Montrose, a historically gay neighborhood that’s home to a buzzy dining and night-life scene, plus the Rothko Chapel. But ChopnBlok’s arrival there reflects a decades-long development in Houston’s remarkably

diverse makeup. Since the nineteen-eighties—in part because local universities recruited students and staff from Nigeria and its neighboring countries—the West African population has grown, slowly for many years and then explosively in the past decade. According to census data, the number of people of Nigerian ancestry living in the Houston metropolitan area more than doubled between 2010 and 2022, from more than twenty thousand to nearly fifty-three thousand. When a Nigerian teen-ager considers college in the U.S., one Houstonian told me, “the question is: Harvard, Stanford, Yale, or U. of H.?”

In the early nineties, opening a Nigerian restaurant made Margaret Ukegbu a pioneer. In the years since, dozens of other businesses have followed, mostly in and around Alief, an area of southwest Houston that borders the city’s Asia Town and encompasses Little Africa. On a brief tour that included the wholesaler Bukky Enterprises, which imports goods from all over West Africa, and Suya Hut—a tiny restaurant specializing in exceptional grilled meat, as perfected by the Hausa people, marinated in a mixture of ground peanuts and spices—Ukegbu emphasized that we were barely scratching the surface. In October, Houston’s city hall mounted an exhibition commemorating “notable Houston Nigerians,” including the rapper Tobe Nwigwe; Seun Adigun, a biomechanist who has competed in both the Summer and the Winter Olympics; and Ope Amosu, ChopnBlok’s thirty-seven-year-old owner and chef.

Amosu, who was born in London and grew up in Houston, opened the first location of ChopnBlok in 2021, as a fast-casual stall at Post, a food hall in a converted mail-sorting facility near Houston’s downtown. Armed with an M.B.A., but little experience in restaurants—save for a six-month stint moonlighting as a line cook at Chipotle, while working full time in oil and gas—he wanted to do for West African food what he’d seen restaurateurs do for countless other cuisines: make it more broadly accessible.

The new, expanded outpost in Montrose approaches this goal with even greater ambition. In the stylish dining room, replete with striking wallpaper, textiles, and art, I met Jailyn Marcel, the restaurant's publicist, who ordered a full spread from the menu while we waited for Amosu to finish a meeting at the bar. The "chips & dip," a bowl of silky and savory "Liberian greens" served with plantain chips, were astonishingly delicious, as was the "reimagined" Scotch egg, made with ground turkey and devilled-egg filling. By the time I'd sampled an entrée called the Black Star, featuring grilled shrimp, Ghanaian-style *waakye* rice (so named for the sweet, nutty dried sorghum leaves that season it), and *yassa* curry—an homage to a Senegalese marinade made with mustard and caramelized onions—I was fantasizing about moving within walking distance.

Amosu, who has the build and the cheerful demeanor of a cartoon bear—he played football at Truman State University, in Missouri, where his fraternity brothers nicknamed him Chef Homeboy, for his grilling skills—smiled shyly as he pulled out a chair to join us. "I think we're blessed with good palates," he said modestly, when I asked if his family had been obsessed with food when he was growing up. Beyond that, he said, the secret to his success was the wisdom of "home cooks," meaning the cottage industry, in West Africa and across the diaspora, of (mostly) women who specialize in a single dish—jollof rice, egusi soup—and supply it for parties and events. In his spare time, Amosu had embedded with the home cooks of Houston, including one of his cousins, and studied their techniques before developing his own recipes.

The chips & dip were inspired by one of Amosu's favorite Nigerian dishes, a spinach-based stew called *efo riro*, which he likes to eat with plantains, and by his travels in Liberia, on the West African coast, which was founded in the early nineteenth century as a haven for people who had been enslaved in America. Amosu's dish is made with finely chopped kale and collards—which repatriated Africans brought to Liberia—plus peppers, onions, and spices,

cooked relatively briefly, to maintain the vivid color of the greens, with a bit of baking soda to tenderize them.

Almost everything on the ChopnBlok menu nods not only to West Africa but also to the Black American South. Amosu's "smoky jollof jambalaya" is a mashup of the Louisiana staple and its West African forerunner. The elements of the Black Star, each rooted in Old World recipes, come together to resemble Southern-style shrimp and gravy over grits.

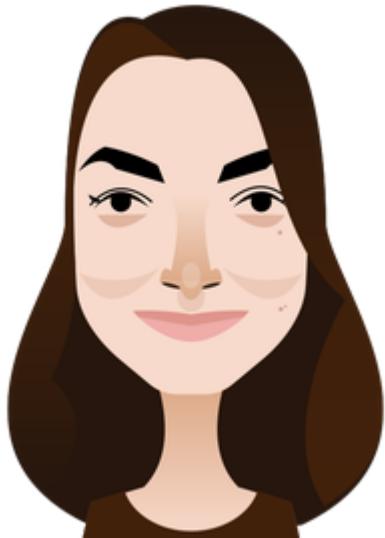
In 2023, Amosu organized a food festival called Chopp & Stewd—a reference to the locally born, remix-heavy music genre known as chopped and screwed—in celebration of the many Houstonians who have West African ancestry. "There's a lot of conversation that comes up within the community about Black heritage," Marcel, the publicist, whose grandparents moved from Louisiana to Houston before she was born, and who speaks with a slight Texas twang, said. "Like, do Black people *really* know where they come from? And I'm, like, no, I do know where my ancestors came from. I am the descendent of slaves, and that's enough. But sometimes, from an American perspective, you can feel a sense of division from people who can trace it back to the African continent, and so it's cool to see it all come together."

On my last morning in town, I met Amosu and Marcel at the Breakfast Klub, a restaurant serving daily brunch in Midtown. The "K" in Klub is a reference to Kappa Alpha Psi, the Black fraternity; the owner, Marcus Davis, was a member in college. Since it opened, in 2001, the place has become a nexus of Black culture in Houston, a stop on any politician's campaign trail, drawing lines down the block, even on weekdays. We were joined by Davis, by two of Amosu's mentors, the restaurateur Benji Leavitt and Chris Shepherd, a chef and the founder of the Southern Smoke Foundation, an organization that supports food-and-beverage workers, and by Kayla Stewart, a Houston-born food writer.

“I don’t know that I realized how Black the city of Houston was until I left for grad school,” Stewart, who is Black, said, over enormous plates of fried catfish with eggs, grits, and biscuits. “You have the diaspora of West African and Caribbean and Black folks here that sort of naturally merges, and I think that’s why places like Ope’s have been able to thrive.”

Conversation turned to the Michelin guide, which was finally arriving in Texas; the anointed restaurants would be announced the following week. Nobody at the table had been invited to the ceremony, or seemed particularly concerned about who would make the list. It seemed foolish to try to define Houston’s sprawling dining scene so narrowly. Miles of strip malls offer thrilling meals from all over the world: taco shops; dim-sum palaces; Indian and Pakistani banquet halls; Vietnamese restaurants that specialize in banh mi, or pho, or borrow Cajun traditions like crawfish boils. Earlier in my trip, I had eaten succulent grilled lamb over broken vermicelli from a Senegalese food truck, sitting in an old office chair in an otherwise deserted and trash-strewn parking lot.

In the wake of the election, being in Houston was a heady and surprisingly hopeful experience. After decades of living in the U.S., Amosu was in the process of finally getting his citizenship; the day before, he’d gone for his interview. Within a few months, he’d be able to call himself an American—secondary, perhaps, to his identity as a Houstonian. “It’s become a sanctuary for our community,” he said, of his home town. “With more numbers, we’re able to amplify our voice, ingrain ourselves in the fabric of the city.” He added, “And I’m a Nigerian—we know how to make noise.” ♦



Hannah Goldfield, a staff writer covering restaurants and food culture, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her *Profile of the chef Kwame Onwuachi*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/houstons-thriving-west-african-food-scene>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Musical Events](#)

The Meditative Organ Soundscapes of Kali Malone

The eighty-minute suite “All Life Long” is slow, hushed, and gnawingly beautiful, but it does not supply conventional musical comforts.

By [Alex Ross](#)

December 2, 2024



“I love working in a restrictive system,” she told me. “I give myself three or four or five chords and then see what I can do with permutations.”

Illustration by Michelle Mildenberg Lara

“All Life Long,” the title of the most recent album by the composer and organist Kali Malone, is taken from a poem by the British Symbolist author Arthur Symons: “The heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea, / All life long crying without avail, / As the water all night long is crying to me.” The poem appears as an epigraph in W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Souls of Black Folk,” which is where Malone found it. Beneath Symons’s lines, Du Bois supplies musical notation for the opening phrase of the spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” The topic, then, is sorrow, songs of sorrow, sounds of sorrow.

Malone’s album, a hushed, meditative collection of pieces for male vocal quartet, brass quintet, and organ, is steeped in melancholy, but it is not the kind of melancholy that you can absent-mindedly sink into, as if wrapping yourself in a comforter on a cold night. Malone and a group of collaborators recently presented a live rendition of “All Life Long,” at Lincoln Center’s Alice Tully Hall, as part of the annual New York edition of the Polish festival Unsound. The titular work, vaguely in the key of A minor, was heard in versions for choir and for solo organ. The music seems, at first encounter, an exercise in trancelike minimalist repetition, with compactly rising-and-falling five-note phrases recurring dozens of times. The words “all life long” unfold as a primordial sigh. There is, however, a harmonic tension at the heart of the conception, as semitone dissonances pierce the texture in almost every bar—F against E, D-sharp against E, C against B. As one of these twinges is resolved, another intrudes. The tension subsides only in the last iteration, as the bare interval A-E swells and then breaks off.

This is music at once pristine and forbidding, redolent of the austere polyphony of the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance. You might expect the composer to be a solitary hermit, living in a lighthouse on an otherwise uninhabited island. Malone is, in fact, a thirty-year-old cosmopolite who grew up in Colorado and played in experimental bands in her teen-age years; in 2012, she moved to Stockholm, where she became active in the

city's drone-music and electronic scenes. Her husband, Stephen O'Malley, who also plays organ on "All Life Long," is a founding member of the overpowering drone-metal band Sunn O))), which also performed at Unsound. So far, Malone has won a following more in the electronic world than in the classical sphere. The gnawing beauty of "All Life Long" may, however, bring her new admirers. Its presence is as vast as it is mysterious.

A couple of days after the Tully Hall concert, I met Malone in Sara D. Roosevelt Park, on the Lower East Side. As basketball players hooted in the background, she described her compositional methods, her favorite tuning systems, and her free-floating status among musical traditions and genres. "I grew up singing classical vocal music," she told me. "I was in a children's choir, and then I went to an arts middle school and high school, where I was a vocal major." But she also gravitated toward underground-music venues in Denver, where she spent most of her youth. At the age of sixteen, she enrolled at Simon's Rock, an early-college program in the Berkshires, where she began playing in a noise duo.

Malone's life took an unexpected turn when, on a trip to New York, she met the Swedish experimental composer Ellen Arkbro, who told her about the scene in Stockholm and invited her to visit. After an exploratory trip, she decided to move there, eventually entering the composition program at the Royal College of Music. She became a devotee of just intonation, in which intervals are tuned according to whole-integer ratios. Music created along those lines, such as La Monte Young's monumental drone pieces, has a strange purity that is very different from the rounded sound of the modern equal-tempered system, in which intervals are homogenized. Malone also delved into electro-acoustic instrumentation, making use of facilities at the state-funded Electronic Music Studio and the artist-run hub Fylkingen.

Malone had never been a keyboardist—in bands, she played guitar and sang—but in Stockholm she found herself serving as an

apprentice to an organ tuner, who led her into the arcana of the most ancient of sound synthesizers. She told me, “I realized I could translate these experiments I’d been making on the computer onto the organ.” She made a crucial leap when she obtained access to historical organs that were tuned in meantone temperament, which preserves whole-integer ratios for certain intervals. The organ version of “No Sun to Burn,” a composition that appears twice on “All Life Long,” was recorded on the Malmö Art Museum’s sixteenth-century instrument, among the oldest functioning organs in the world. The piece begins with a sustained F and stepwise descents of E-flat, D-flat, C, and B-flat. As the music moves into the upper register, the thirds take on an eerie tinge, at least to ears accustomed to modern tuning.

A professional tuner inhabits a realm of elementary intervals and chords, adjusting their nodes to match conventional norms. Malone’s music amounts in some ways to a tuning ritual, a testing of the myriad possible combinations of the basic facts of harmony. “I love working in a restrictive system,” she told me. “I give myself three or four or five chords and then see what I can do with permutations, looking for a breadth of different emotional identities.” Chords have cultural identities attached to them: major triads are bright, minor triads are gloomy, perfect fifths are sturdy, tritones and semitones are unsettling. In Malone’s hands, those associations change under the pressure of repetition, particularly in the stark, piercing sound-world of the organ. In another track on the album, “Prisoned on Watery Shore,” she noted, the supposedly diabolical tritone becomes poignant, even sensual, in a landscape of rigid fifths.

Adding to the estrangement of the ordinary is Malone’s quirky approach to rhythm and pacing in her organ music. Somewhat in the spirit of twentieth-century serialist composers, she controls the durations of notes according to a rotating matrix of values. In “No Sun to Burn,” the pattern for the opening descent is two beats, four beats, six beats, and eight beats. The upper line follows the same

pattern, six beats behind. In the next section, the pattern changes to four, six, eight, two; then to six, eight, two, four; and, finally, to eight, two, four, six. That irregular rhythmic sequence, together with the instability of Malone’s ostensibly simple harmonies, generates stealthily accumulating tension. It’s as if the music were being controlled by some slow, clanking medieval machinery—an organ with a mind of its own.

Malone is by no means an impersonal operator of systems. She invests much of herself in her music, although she shies away from supplying too many specifics, for fear of trapping listeners in a limited interpretive framework. While planning “All Life Long,” she thought of the solitary labor of mountain climbing—her father was a vigorous climber and cyclist prior to a life-changing accident—and of Du Bois’s evocations of unending political struggle. (The epigraphs for “The Souls of Black Folk” supply a second choral text, in the form of James Russell Lowell’s abolitionist poem “The Present Crisis”: “Truth forever on the scaffold, / Wrong forever on the throne.”) The album begins with a kind of minimalist motet titled “Passage Through the Spheres,” whose text comes from the contemporary Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben: “There is a profane contagion, a touch that disenchants and returns to use what the sacred had separated and petrified.” Last year, a concert that Malone had planned to give at a church in Carnac, France, had to be cancelled when a far-right Catholic faction staged a protest, on the ground that she was profaning a sacred space with her “electro” sounds.

The vocal and brass arrangements on “All Life Long” are so immaculately crafted that one could see the pieces becoming repertory items for progressive-minded groups. For the moment, however, Malone doesn’t wish to make the music available outside the format she has devised for it. She rehearses painstakingly with her collaborators to find the right balance of cool precision and expressive warmth. The ensemble at Tully included the vocalists Matthew Robbins, Sam Strickland, Zach Ritter, and Brian

Mummert; the trumpeters Luke Spence and Atse Theodos; the horn player Austin Sposato; and the trombonists Nikki Abissi and Jennifer Hinkle, the last accompanied by her impressively serene medical-alert dog, Kita. The trumpeter and composer Sam Nester conducted for most of the evening, until Malone herself took over.

The cumulative power of the event at Tully justified Malone’s wariness about letting her creations out of her grasp. The vocal settings came first, then a suite of pieces for brass. Finally, Malone and O’Malley entered to play the organ, sitting side by side at the manuals. The brass, positioned in near-darkness, augmented the textures in the closing sections. In “No Sun to Burn,” the penultimate work, rays of hope seemed to break through, as the brass dwelled on the notes E-flat, F, and G, summoning an ecstatic haze of overtones. In “The Unification of Inner & Outer Life,” a dissonant fog descended again, with E-naturals grinding quietly against F’s. Yet there was an Arctic calm in that gray, distant sound —no place of comfort, to be sure, but a protected space nonetheless. ♦



Alex Ross has been the magazine’s music critic since 1996. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/the-meditative-organ-soundscapes-of-kali-malone>

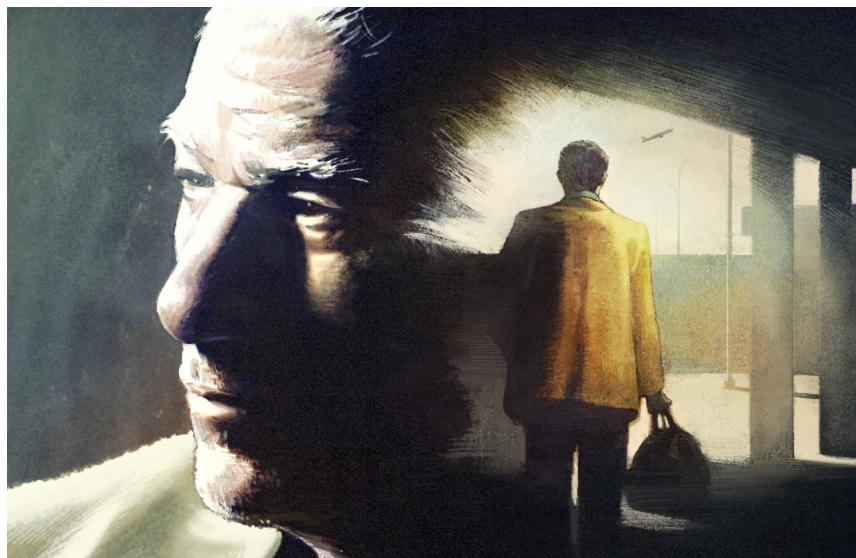
[The Current Cinema](#)

Looking Back on a Fallen Life in “Oh, Canada”

In Paul Schrader’s latest film—his most audacious religious vision yet—a documentarian on his deathbed confesses, on camera, to a lifetime of misdeeds.

By [Richard Brody](#)

November 29, 2024



Richard Gere and Jacob Elordi play the same character decades apart.

Illustration by Hokyoung Kim

The resurgence, in the past decade, of Paul Schrader as one of the most accomplished and acclaimed contemporary movie directors is part of a bigger trend: the self-reinvention of Hollywood auteurs as independent filmmakers. Since 2010, such directors as Martin Scorsese, Spike Lee, and Sofia Coppola have made their movies without studio financing, thereby often enjoying more creative freedom than previously. Schrader, who has been directing movies since 1978, has been an enthusiastic adopter of this production mode; his film “The Canyons” (2013) was crowdfunded on Kickstarter. His recent trio of independent movies—“First Reformed” (2017), “The Card Counter” (2021), and “Master Gardener” (2022)—offers scathing visions of corrupted American institutions through dramas of individuals whose repentance takes

destructive forms. Constituting a kind of trilogy about expiation through violence—whether toward others or toward oneself—the films have a newfound starkness that reflects the severity of their subjects. Schrader’s latest, “Oh, Canada,” is his freest yet in terms of form, and, in its way, also presents his most extreme depiction of a fallen life. It is another drama of regret and confession, but Schrader’s approach is altogether new, making the movie seem less like the capstone of a tetralogy than like a radical revision of the themes and the styles of its three predecessors.

Schrader, who was raised in a strict Calvinist family, has built a career on the unfolding of religious themes in secular settings. Although “First Reformed,” about a minister in crisis, may be his most explicitly religious movie, “Oh, Canada” is, arguably, his most audacious religious vision. Adapted from Russell Banks’s novel “Foregone,” it is about an octogenarian documentary filmmaker based in Montreal named Leonard Fife (Richard Gere), who, terminally ill, sits for an extensive interview about his career—a kind of exit interview from life that becomes a confrontation with the self. Schrader’s casting of Gere in the role of Leonard (who goes by Leo) renders the film’s inherently retrospective premise deeply personal. Gere delivered the stylish and bristling lead performance in one of Schrader’s sleekest, most aestheticized films, “American Gigolo” (1980), and his presence in the new movie gives it an aura of a summing-up, as if the film embodied Schrader’s own career, his own past. “Oh, Canada” is a movie about the making of a movie, and this reflexive twist sparks Schrader’s flights of imaginative daring, along with his skeptical view of the business, with its vanities and compromises.

Leo made his name in 1970, with a film that revealed the testing of Agent Orange on Canadian farmland, and is celebrated for a body of issue-oriented investigative work. He’s being interviewed by two of his former film-school students, Malcolm (Michael Imperioli) and Diana (Victoria Hill), who are partners in life and art, and Oscar winners, though Leo dislikes their output. Malcolm claims

that, by making a documentary about Leo, he will be enshrining him as “an artiste engagé” and making him “as big in the Canadian collective memory as Glenn Gould,” but Leo has agreed to the interview in order to destroy his own reputation. He has a nonnegotiable proviso—that his wife and filmmaking partner, Emma (Uma Thurman), must remain in the room to see and hear the interview. He will confess things about his public and private life that he has never told her, with complete indifference to whatever use Malcolm and Diana may make of the material after he’s gone.

Leo isn’t Canadian; he was born in the United States and moved to Canada in his mid-twenties, in 1968, as a draft resister during the Vietnam War. Much of the movie dramatizes Leo’s recollections of his actions during the sixties, and Schrader tears into these flashbacks with palpable excitement, as if he’s been waiting for this rematch with the decade and with youth itself. The flashbacks cover the subjects of Leo’s confession, including his failed political commitment, two failed marriages and a failed romance, a failed cross-country trip inspired by “On the Road,” his failure to fulfill his youthful literary ambitions, his fateful effort to avoid military service, and his betrayal of a friend. There are also flashbacks that extend to more recent episodes, including reminiscences of his time as a film-school professor, in the nineties, with his then students Malcolm, Diana, and Emma. One of Leo’s failings is built into the architecture of the story—his abandonment of a son. The son’s voice (he’s played by Zach Shaffer) is heard at the very start of the film, looking back at Leo’s confessional interview (dated December 22, 2023) and death on that very day. This added frame—a retrospective view of retrospection—gives Leo’s narrative an encompassing sense of the irretrievable, of vanished opportunities for reconciliation.

The multiple layers of flashbacks are interwoven with scenes of the interview—of Leo’s fraught interactions with his three former students, and with his health aide, Rene (Caroline Dhavernas), and

the interviewers' assistant, Sloane (Penelope Mitchell). Schrader keeps things straight for viewers through the use of shrewd visual cues. The interview and the goings-on around it take place in the Fifes' Montreal town house and are filmed with a nearly square frame and a broodingly dark dun-and-amber color scheme. Many of the other flashbacks are in black-and-white, portrayed as abstract and distant.

In contrast, for the center of the film—the crucial year 1968—Schrader uses a wide-screen frame and an alluring peach-and-mint palette that evokes classic Hollywood melodramas. The resulting vividness shows that this is, essentially, the eternal present of Leo's entire life, the defining moment that he self-punishingly revisits in greatest detail for the documentary. In March of that year, Leo (played as a young man by Jacob Elordi) is teaching at the University of Virginia and married to Alicia (Kristine Froseth). Their son is a toddler, Alicia is pregnant again, and they're planning a move to Vermont, where Leo has been hired by Goddard College. Before that, they're visiting her wealthy parents in Richmond. The day before Leo is to travel to Vermont to buy a house—with money from Alicia's trust fund—her father (Peter Hans Benson) and her uncle (Scott Jaeck) offer him the chance to take over the family's pharmaceutical business as a sinecure that they liken to Wallace Stevens's insurance work and T. S. Eliot's bank job. For Leo, this is an offer he can't *not* refuse: it would pin him to his wife's family and their "genteel, Southern white politics" and separate him from his friends in the Goddard bohemian circle.

In these scenes, Schrader films with a visual romanticism and a loving attachment to the era's physical stylings: the sleek lines of Leo's mid-sixties Corvair, the swooping modernism of a new airport, the gleam of a diner counter, the confident solidity of the refrigerators and telephones. The principal flashback is a road movie in itself—Leo's travels from Virginia to Washington, D.C., then to his home town, near Boston, and on to Vermont, and, finally (it's no spoiler), to Canada. The surface-cooled, internally

raging melodrama of this brisk journey is fuelled by Leo's self-loathing account of the lies—overt deceptions and crafty silences—on which his life has ever since been based.

The distinction of Schrader's latter-day method and manner becomes clear if one considers his previous adaptation of a novel by Banks, "Affliction" (1997). That film, which tells a bitter story of a killing and a coverup and features an emotionally scarred protagonist, seems impersonal and externalized—as if soaked in Hollywood's industrial varnish. Schrader's recent work—shot rapidly, on low budgets—displays rough textures that run through the performances, the editing, the dialogue, and the sense of form.

In "Oh, Canada," Schrader realizes a tale of immense complexity with bold ease. He is helped by the sharp-eyed editing of Benjamin Rodriguez, Jr., and the variety of Andrew Wonder's cinematography. Schrader's script, meanwhile, is full of conceptual leaps, and he daringly assigns some actors to play multiple roles. At the center of things is the dual characterization of Leo: Elordi plays young Leo with an appealingly diffident gruffness that gently abrades the surfaces of his cultivated politeness; Gere projects a dying man worn down and roughed up by physical and moral suffering to the point where he has no surfaces and no politesse left. (In another twist, Gere sometimes takes Elordi's place as Leo's younger self.) Later, there is an extraordinary turn that both wrenches Leo's confession away from practical, on-camera delivery and raises it to sublime spiritual heights—to a subjectivity akin to a God's-eye and God's-ear perspective. Schrader frames Leo's crossing of the border as the end point of his life, as the real death, the one he'd traded his soul for more than fifty years earlier. The story of Leo's entire public life, of his acclaimed cinema and teaching career, of his romantic and professional partnership with Emma, is the story of a life lived posthumously. Its religious vision is also a horror; "Oh, Canada" is, in effect, a zombie movie. ♦



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*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/oh-canada-movie-review>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Poems

- **[“Elegy for a Name”](#)**

By Kaveh Akbar | “How you used to come when called. / Blood-in-Me. Best-of-All.”

- **[“The Sterling Silver Mirror”](#)**

By Nikki Giovanni | “My great great grandmother was a slave holding inside / Her the first of our family to be born / Free.”

[Poems](#)

Elegy for a Name

By [Kaveh Akbar](#)

December 2, 2024

How you used to come when called.
Blood-in-Me. Best-of-All.
I liked when you'd show up wet
like wet marble, or liver.
Keeping nothing in us then
to commend ourselves to God:
our minds wandering during sex,
bird shapes shifting in the reeds.
No-Grave-to-Visit.
No-Sheets-on-the-Bed.
I drank from you
as a goat from the trough.
Boulders blushed in the rain.

Like stars, there are saints now
for almost everything.
Red-One. Drowned-One.
Even the dog knows his name
and how to do “down.”
Each morning at the old pond
he swims himself tired.
Little-Blue-Sultan.
Four-Chambered-Heart.
Drugs don't make you stay dead,
you told me once. But then
the drugs made you stay dead.

Kaveh Akbar is the author of the novel “*Martyr!*” and the poetry collections “*Pilgrim Bell*” and “*Calling a Wolf a Wolf.*”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/elegy-for-a-name-kaveh-akbar-poem>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Poems](#)

The Sterling Silver Mirror

By [Nikki Giovanni](#)

December 2, 2024

No matter how the wind and the stars carried the news
The slaves knew
Sherman was coming
All they had to do was wait:
As they sang the Spiritual “Why can’t I Wait on the Lord?”
They had the patience to know He may not come
When you call Him
But He always comes on time

My great great grandmother was a slave holding inside
Her the first of our family to be born
Free
Sherman came burning the hate
And greed freeing my ancestors
My great great grandmother who had never seen her own face
Carried her free baby and a sterling silver hand mirror away

Cornelia whom we called MamaDear was the first
To be born free

MamaDear married Watson and birthed
Three sons and a daughter
MamaDear gave her youngest son the sterling silver mirror
When he graduated from Fisk University

We forget the enslaved had no way of knowing
What they looked like except through the eyes of those who loved
them

The men had no shoes to wear other than their feet became leather
Both were precious
Grandpapa had shoes and the mirror

Some in the family say
The mirror was stolen
But how can you steal when you were

When I left my parents' home I was the youngest daughter I took only
Two things:
A diamond pendant Sister Althea gave me for eighth grade graduation
And The Sterling Silver Hand Mirror
I am 81 years old: I have both still

This is drawn from “The New Book.”

Nikki Giovanni has won numerous awards, including the 2022 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Her books include “[A Good Cry](#)” (2017), “[Make Me Rain](#)” (2020), and “[The New Book](#)” (2025).

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/09/the-sterling-silver-mirror-nikki-giovanni-poem>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Cartoons

- **[Cartoon Caption Contest](#)**

Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.

- **[Cartoons from the Issue](#)**

Drawings from the December 9, 2024, magazine.

| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

<https://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/contest>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

| [Next](#) | [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) | [Previous](#) |

<https://www.newyorker.com/gallery/cartoons-from-the-december-9-2024-issue>

| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Monday, December 2, 2024**

By Patrick Berry | A challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, December 2, 2024

A *challenging puzzle.*



By [Patrick Berry](#)

December 2, 2024



[Patrick Berry](#) has been publishing puzzles since 1993 and lives in Athens, Georgia.

<https://www.newyorker.com/puzzles-and-games-dept/crossword/2024/12/02>