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ME

The New Yorker Magazine

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[Goings On](#)

Dev Hynes Returns as Blood Orange

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By [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Zoë Hopkins](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Marina Harss](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Ray Lipstein](#), [Vince Aletti](#), [Charles Bethea](#), [Jessica Winter](#), [Amanda Petrusich](#), [Kyle Chayka](#), and [Anna Russell](#)

November 21, 2025

The British musician Dev Hynes stays booked and busy. Hynes, as accomplished an artist-curator as he is a musician, has performed in concert halls with the composer Philip Glass, written music for Broadway (in the transfer of Max Wolf Friedlich’s thriller “Job”), scored a half-dozen films (including Paul Schrader’s “Master Gardener” and Rebecca Hall’s “Passing”), and written or produced for many talented friends, on albums and accompanying art pieces. In fact, his dance card has been so full that he spent seven years away from his defining project, **Blood Orange**—for which he serves as singer and producer—his longest hiatus since he took up the moniker, in 2011.



Photograph by Gareth McConnell for The New Yorker

At long last, he returned in August, with “Essex Honey,” a glorious and devastating album that puts his deep connections to great use, enlisting the pop savants Lorde and Caroline Polachek, the alt-folk singer Mustafa, and the cellist Mabe Fratti, among others. He harnesses all that energy to make reflective music that seeks the head-clearing expanse of a wide-open countryside. Blood Orange plays [Brooklyn Steel](#), Nov. 29-30 and Dec. 2-5.—*Sheldon Pearce*



About Town

Art

In **Charisse Pearlina Weston**'s sculptures, sheets of glass are gathered into configurations of intimacy which verge on mutual destruction. Politics and history seethe from the hazardous touch of the meeting points. In the precariousness of Weston's chosen material—and of its arrangement—she finds a metaphor for Black life, its fragile metaphysical surface, the forces that give it form. The sculptures seem to hold their breath as the tenuous question of their future hovers in the air: the image of their shattering under pressure is readily available to the mind's eye, made even more so by regions in several sculptures where glass has already been broken, and put back together again.—*Zoë Hopkins (Jack Shainman; through Dec. 20.)*

Dance

New York City Ballet kicks off the season with “**George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker.**” For kids, there is the giant Christmas tree that grows to terrifying proportions. For even the most blasé among us, there is Tchaikovsky’s excitable score, which incorporates popular songs (“Cadet Roussel”) and the tinkling sound of the celesta—a perfect analogy for the delicacy of Sugarplum’s pointe work. Ballet aficionados can argue over whether *this* year’s Sugarplum, or Marzipan Shepherdess, or Candy Cane measures up to last year’s. Balanchine’s “Nutcracker” always has some little revelation to impart, which is why people return to it, again and again.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; Nov. 28-Jan. 4.)*

Movies



Isabelle Corey in “Bob le Flambeur.”

Photograph from Alamy

A highlight of Film Forum’s “[Le Heist Français](#)” series is Jean-Pierre Melville’s 1956 drama **“Bob le Flambeur,”** which finds melancholy romanticism in a complex criminal scheme. Bob Montagné (Roger Duchesne), an elegant middle-aged gambler in the Parisian gangland milieu, loses all his money; in desperation, he gathers a team to rob a casino, but the teamwork is hopelessly entangled with affairs of the heart. Rescuing a young woman (Isabelle Corey) from a violent pimp, Bob—acknowledging his age with bitter wisdom—pairs her off with his hotheaded protégé (Daniel Cauchy). A police inspector (Guy Decomble) whose life Bob saved long ago and a croupier (Claude Cerval) with a sharp-eyed wife (Colette Fleury) and a hidden past embody a principled

vision of secret loyalties and betrayals.—Richard Brody (Nov. 21-Dec. 4.)

Classical

Back in 2012, the venerable Iranian musician **Kayhan Kalhor** sat on an intricately patterned rug and performed twelve minutes of bowed improvisation for NPR's Tiny Desk series. The concert was transfixing, prompting one YouTube commenter to call him “the Paganini of Kamancheh,” the string instrument native to Iran. One Grammy win and almost fifteen years later, Kalhor takes the stage at the Town Hall for an evening of classical Persian music. He will be joined by two other virtuosos, Kiya Tabassian, on *setar*, and Behrouz Jamali, on *tombak*. Paganini may be long gone, but he's no doubt alive in Kalhor, and these days more than ever, being transfixed by art is a welcome experience.—Jane Bua ([The Town Hall](#); Nov. 30.)

Broadway

In “**Chess**”—the sonically exhilarating disco-rock musical by the ABBA composers Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus, with lyrics co-written by Tim Rice—an international love triangle plays proxy for Cold War tensions, narrative sense be damned. The script has been under revision since 1986, and for this stripped-down production, directed by Michael Mayer, the book writer Danny Strong takes a tongue-in-cheek swing: now the narrator, named the Arbiter (the charm-bomb Bryce Pinkham), info-dumps while making snide remarks. Does it make sense? Nyet particularly. But I tipped my king in ecstatic surrender anyway, overwhelmed by three Broadway superpowers: Aaron Tveit as the American bad boy Freddie, Lea Michele as his chess second, Florence, and Nicholas Christopher as the Russian introvert Anatoly, whose astonishing voice could bring an entire Iron Curtain down.—Helen Shaw ([Imperial](#); open run.)

Indie Rock

There will still be turkey in the fridge when **Aimee Mann and Ted Leo** play three Christmas shows at [City Winery](#). In the twenty-tens, Mann and Leo, two long-legged dons of indie music, staged a version of Mann’s cult holiday variety show, with friends—Liz Phair reportedly sang “Why Can’t I Wreath?”—and the tradition still reigns. Under the moniker the Both, they bring together their wry, feeling, politically alive writing in delicately laminated harmonies—Leo’s hairline grooviness hand in glove with Mann’s crazily clarion alto, in which notes are always twisting from the moody to the bright. They’re joined by the comedians Josh Gondelman and Paul F. Tompkins and the singer-songwriter Nellie McKay. It’s Christmas, apparently, and not a moment too soon.—*Ray Lipstein (Nov. 28-30.)*

Off Broadway

In Ethan Lipton’s surrealist **“The Seat of Our Pants”**—the composer’s musical adaptation of Thornton Wilder’s “The Skin of Our Teeth,” directed by Leigh Silverman—the Antrobus family survives millennia of catastrophes that are, somehow, all happening “now” in New Jersey: the Ice Age swallows suburbia; the Atlantic City boardwalk washes away in the Biblical flood. The superb Micaela Diamond cracks jokes as the family’s saucy maid, while Andy Grotelueschen plays a Garrison Keillor-esque announcer. Lipton’s wry, light-hearted treatment gives the 1942 play crucial buoyancy, removing the logier passages to reveal Wilder’s message: yea, though the “end times” may be upon us, that’s just the normal order of business for the family of man.—H.S. ([Public Theatre](#); through Dec. 7.)

R. & B.

2025 was a banner year for Dijon Duenas, the singer-songwriter and producer who performs mononymously as **Dijon**. After spending the mid-twenty-tens in the alt-R. & B. duo Abhi//Dijon, the singer débuted solo with “Absolutely,” in 2021, cultivating a liquid soul sound. But many listeners were first exposed to him this summer, by poring over the credits for “Swag,” Justin Bieber’s comeback album. He then popped up in Paul Thomas Anderson’s riveting political thriller, “One Battle After Another,” this fall. In between those appearances, Dijon made his own statement, with “Baby,” his best album yet. The record is a quantum leap, toying with all conventional notions of style, order, and shape.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Brooklyn Paramount](#); Dec. 1-2. Terminal 5; Dec. 4.)

Movies

With “**Benita**,” the documentary filmmaker Alan Berliner takes on a personal project suffused with grief and regret. In 2021, the New York-based filmmaker Benita Raphan died by suicide; Raphan’s family asked Berliner, who had been an adviser on several of her films, to complete her final, unfinished project. Instead, Berliner, granted access to Raphan’s personal archive, made this candid and poignant biographical portrait. Her talent and originality were evident in childhood; after college, she started making films, confronting difficulties with financing and recognition, and also increasing pressure from mental illness. Berliner honors a fascinating artist who, with grim irony, becomes better known than ever through his memorial tribute.—R.B. ([Firehouse Cinema](#); opens Nov. 28.)

Art

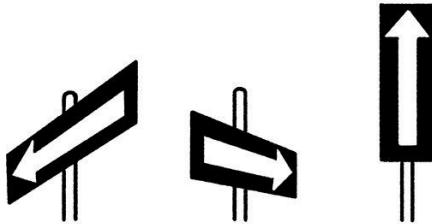


Ringl+pit's "Glass and Paper," from 1931.

Photograph by ringl+pit / Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery

Grete Stern and Ellen Auerbach were in their twenties in 1930, when they opened a studio in Berlin and began collaborating under the name **ringl+pit**. Their work—black-and-white portraits, still-lifes, and advertising shots, some now on view at Robert Mann gallery—subverts an education in Bauhaus severity with playful, quirky Surrealism. Their speciality was sophistication with an attitude, epitomized by a portrait of Auerbach (a.k.a. pit) giving viewers a knowing side-eye from under a veil. A reserved portrait of Bertolt Brecht stands out in a group that skews decidedly sensuous, including a twisted, fleshy glove, dandelions floating in a glass of water, and a woman's hands in a bowl of soapsuds. Ringl+pit softened the avant-garde's serrated edge, and then added

their own sort of bite.—*Vince Aletti* ([Robert Mann](#); through Dec. 6.)



Local Gems

Beloved holiday traditions.



Illustration by Philip Lindeman

Every December, in Atlanta, for as long as I can remember, I've watched "[A Child's Christmas in Wales](#)" with my parents and my younger brother. We are decidedly not Welsh. But after my mother stumbled across the 1987 TV movie, starring the British character actor Denholm Elliott, viewing it became a holiday ritual. Based on the Dylan Thomas prose poem of the same name, published in 1952, the film lovingly and mournfully depicts the boyhood

Christmastime of an old Welshman, tenderly and a tad mischievously embodied by Elliott. Mustachioed firemen soak a smoky parlor, port-drunk aunts croon in the side yard, and a “clockwork mouse” zips underfoot. One line became a kind of code in my family, signifying time’s slippery passage: “I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve, or whether it snowed for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.”—*Charles Bethea*

Some thirty-five years ago, an attorney, whose clients included a captain of the Genovese crime family, decided to celebrate his lymphoma going into remission with an extravagant Christmas-light display at his home in southwest Brooklyn. His neighbors caught this fever, and it hasn’t broken. Visiting the **Dyker Heights Christmas Lights** will require, for most, a schlep on the D or the R train, plus a bus jaunt or a fifteen-minute walk, providing time to steel oneself for a conflagration of holiday spectacle: kick lines of animatronic nutcrackers, armies of inflatable angels, snowmen the size of giraffes. One year, my daughter, then six and reaching sensory overload, nudged her brother and me off a million-watt main drag toward a quieter side street, where we sat on a low stone wall and peered up at the murky night sky, newly appreciative of the darkness.—*Jessica Winter*

Me, I like to sidle up to the stereo at a Yuletide gathering—the more staid and elegant the better—play “**Must Be Santa**,” the most patently unhinged cut from Bob Dylan’s 2009 holiday album, “Christmas in the Heart,” and see how long it takes before someone demands that I stop. (Spoiler alert: I very rarely make it to the end of the song.) On a slightly more earnest note, I also find myself making a Christmastime habit of reaching out to friends who have lost people, whether it was just earlier this year, or several decades ago—the holidays can be a wildly fraught and stark reminder of the passage of time. There are no consolations to offer the grieving, really, but a squeeze of the hand, or a text, or a phone call, or a card in the mail can be transformative. I remind myself to not be shy

about bringing grief up—after all, there's a good chance it's already in the room.—*Amanda Petrusich*

My family is from the Czech Republic on one side and Italy on the other. In terms of holiday cuisine, the Italian side wins out like a dominant gene. Every Christmas Eve, my parents, in Connecticut, celebrate with enormous plates of antipasto, requiring pounds of cured meats, aged provolone, fresh mozzarella, and Sicilian olives composed into layer cakes with lettuce and shaved fennel. For decades now, those raw materials have been acquired from **Panino Italian Gourmet**, an unassuming deli on the side of the highway in Brewster, New York. It's a family operation that started in Queens fifty years ago; the original matriarch runs the register while her two sons man the slicers. Traditionally, my younger brother and I hit Panino on December 23rd, sort out the meat-and-cheese order, then add sandwiches for the ride home. I suggest the Italian Flag, with mozzarella, roasted peppers, and broccoli rabe—but add prosciutto. As Grandpa Alfonse would say, *bellissimo*.—*Kyle Chayka*

Christmas in London starts perilously early. Every year, deep in the city's financial district, a spectacular tree-lighting ceremony occurs at one of London's oldest covered markets. Dating back to the fourteenth century, **Leadenhall Market** stands on the ruins of Roman Londinium. In the Victorian era, it was a well-known place to buy poultry, and it is likely where Scrooge picked up his turkey in "A Christmas Carol." Today, it's full of bougie coffee shops and pubs popular among men wearing blue button-downs. In November, a buzzing crowd gathers under the market's iron arches to watch the towering tree as it lights up. There's mulled wine, fake snow, and a band jazzy enough to make you forget that Christmas is still more than a month away.—*Anna Russell*

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- Hilary Duff loves mahjong
- A realistic morning routine
- *Get into the discourse*

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

Zoë Hopkins is a contributor to *Goings On* who writes about art.

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*.”

Marina Harss has been contributing dance coverage to *The New Yorker* since 2004. She is the author of “*The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet*.”

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

Ray Lipstein is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

Vince Aletti is a photography critic and the author of “*Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines*.”

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Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “*Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78rpm Records*.”

Kyle Chayka is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His column, *Infinite Scroll*, examines the people and platforms shaping the Internet. His books include “*Filterworld: How Algorithms Flattened Culture*.”

Anna Russell, a contributing writer for *The New Yorker*, began writing for the magazine in 2017. She lives in London.

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/dev-hynes-returns-as-blood-orange>

[The Food Scene](#)

I'm Donut ? and the Allure of the International Chain

The viral Japanese bakery, now with a location in Times Square, is one of the few imported brands that has broken through to become genuinely hot while maintaining considerable good will.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

November 23, 2025



*The chain's viral *nama* doughnuts are known for their airy texture and eye-catching decorations.*

Some varieties exceed ten dollars apiece.

Photographs by Mischelle Moy for The New Yorker

I'm Donut ?, a Japanese bakery chain known for its viral popularity and its curiously punctuated name, opened earlier this year in a sleek Times Square storefront. The company's specialty is the *nama* doughnut (the word, in Japanese, means “raw,” or “fresh”), an impossibly moist and light cumulus of starch and sugar that seems captured by gravity thanks only to the marginal heft of various frostings, icings, and fillings. This textural sorcery is achieved by way of a proprietary yeasted dough whose recipe involves, among other things, kabocha squash, which introduces a bit of earthy sweetness and gives the interiors a sunny yellow hue. The brand's “original” doughnut, a sugar-dusted, circular pillow

without a hole in the center, is something of a miracle—breathy, yeasty, tender, and warm, it was the dream doughnut I didn’t realize I had always yearned for.

These miracles don’t come without sacrifice—of one’s time, mostly, but also of one’s money, since the more ambitiously stuffed and decorated selections can exceed ten dollars apiece. Still, the New York location of I’m Donut ? is a bona-fide sensation, even months after its début. The shop, aggressively minimal, with a soaring blank-white façade that evokes the attenuated minimalism of an Apple Store, is the chain’s first outside of Japan, where the brand originated in 2022. Depending on the day, the time, and the weather, you might waltz right in or join a snaking queue of a hundred people alternately wondering if the wait is worth it, gazing up at the “Oh, Mary!” marquee across the street, and enthusiastically filming vertical videos about the phenomenon of the line itself.



Savory options include a doughnut-encased B.L.T.

You should get the original doughnut, of course, not just for its own virtues but as a control. There are chocolate and matcha variants, their subtle flavors baked into the dough. Then there are filled doughnuts, whose puffy centers are pumped with flavored creams,

all of them vivid and none too sweet: custard, more matcha, fragrant sake gelée with Chantilly, airy peanut-butter cream swirled with tart Concord-grape jelly. There are some New York-exclusive flavors, like a ring doughnut glazed in neon-pink strawberry icing, freckled with bits of freeze-dried berry that crackle and melt on the tongue, or a chocolate variety with a caramel-espresso cream filling that was unexpectedly, thrillingly bitter and complex. The somewhat controversial scrambled-egg doughnut features a sugary original doughnut piped full of soft curds and a squirt of a sweet-savory tomato mayonnaise—a bold and bizarre breakfast manifesto that refuses to be definitively sweet or definitively savory. I loved it unreservedly, though I imagine I might be in the minority.

I'm Donut ? doughnuts are, in short, excellent, but, as with so many places that achieve extraordinary viral velocity, what the store is really selling is the experience of experience, the novelty of novelty. Call it hype as infrastructure: the stanchions corralling the line outside, the security guard at the door, the smiling employees walking up and down the queue, handing out checklist-style paper menus to speed the flow of orders. This is far from the first international chain to open in the city, but it's one of the few that's broken through to become genuinely hot while maintaining considerable good will.



A matcha doughnut with a matcha filling.

What do New Yorkers want in a chain from elsewhere? We will cheer the arrival of Juici Patties, a Jamaican fast-food joint that launched several locations this year, right around the same time that folks started trying their first *nama* doughnuts. We'll line up for the first American Sanku Maots'ai, a hot-pot restaurant originating in Chengdu whose recently opened East Village storefront is one of four-thousand-plus outposts, and buzz is already buzzing for the imminent Canal Street opening of Mixue Ice Cream & Tea, a Chinese chain with more stores worldwide than McDonald's. Heck, there was a ribbon-cutting for the city's first location of the Taiwanese dumpling juggernaut [Din Tai Fung](#). But when Raising Cane's, a Louisiana chicken-fingers operation that really does have a fantastic signature dipping sauce, arrived here in

2023, it became a punch line, an avatar of the strip-mall-ification of the city.

Helen, Help Me!

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

Some of this has to do with the essential internationality of New York: for better or worse, we are a city more concerned with the rest of the world than with the rest of America. But a chain's reception is also shaped by whether it manages to transcend its chain-ness, to become a totemic evocation of culture, or place, or social-media clout. I'm Donut ? seems to have at least nailed the last part of this equation, though its reputation could very well shift once everyone has got their photo and moved on to the next new thing. The distinction between a welcome import and an intrusive one is, perhaps, only the story we tell ourselves to justify standing in line for a doughnut that we now believe we've been looking for all our lives. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, received a 2025 James Beard Award for her [Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi](#).

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-food-scene/im-donut-and-the-allure-of-the-international-chain>

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The Talk of the Town

- **The Justice Department Hits a New Low with the Epstein Files**

Not only is the department's behavior not normal; it is also, as is becoming increasingly clear, self-defeating.

- **Kurtis Blow, Still Blowing**

After the rapper's 1979 hit "Christmas Rappin'," his song "The Breaks" was the first rap single to go gold. Now he's embracing the good ole days with a "Legends of Hip-Hop" concert.

- **In a Sargent Painting, a Vicomtesse Lives On**

The great-great-grandmother of Laurent Saint Périer was one of John Singer Sargent's alluring muses, before she died in a notorious fire. Now Saint Périer visits her portrait in the Musée d'Orsay.

- **What Happens in Kyoto Comes to New York**

In 1997, scientists and bureaucrats gathered in Japan to talk about greenhouse-gas emissions. At Lincoln Center, a group of actors rehash all the drama—in front of the original negotiators.

- **The World's Fair That Wasn't**

"Tomorrowland Amerifair," a previously unpublished piece by the late artist and writer.

[Comment](#)

The Justice Department Hits a New Low with the Epstein Files

Not only is the department's behavior not normal; it is also, as is becoming increasingly clear, self-defeating.

By [Ruth Marcus](#)

November 23, 2025



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

On a Friday evening in October, 2021, the Justice Department launched into damage-control mode. The Attorney General, Merrick Garland, the Deputy Attorney General, Lisa Monaco, and other senior officials gathered on an emergency conference call to decide how to deal with what they considered out-of-line remarks from President Joe Biden.

Steve Bannon, the former adviser to Donald Trump, had defied a subpoena from the House select committee investigating January 6th. Committee members were weighing whether to refer Bannon to the Justice Department for prosecution. The White House press secretary, Jen Psaki, had ducked commenting on a matter of such delicacy. “That would be up to the Department of Justice, and it would be their purview to determine,” she told reporters. “They’re independent.” But Biden, asked by the CNN reporter Kaitlan Collins whether he thought those who ignored subpoenas should face contempt charges, didn’t mince words. “I do, yes,” he said.

As Carol Leonnig and Aaron C. Davis report in their new book, “Injustice,” those three words so alarmed Garland and his team that they felt compelled to issue a statement effectively rebuking their boss. Just fifty-one minutes after Biden’s comments, the department’s chief spokesman, Anthony Coley, released this deliberately tart comment: “The Department of Justice will make its own independent decisions in all prosecutions based solely on the facts and the law. Period. Full stop.”

Compare this with the reaction of another Department of Justice, on another fall Friday, four years later, to a Presidential directive that was far more pointed. “Now that the Democrats are using the Epstein Hoax, involving Democrats, not Republicans, to try and deflect from their disastrous SHUTDOWN, and all of their other failures, I will be asking A.G. Pam Bondi, and the Department of Justice, together with our great patriots at the FBI, to investigate Jeffrey Epstein’s involvement and relationship with Bill Clinton, Larry Summers, Reid Hoffman, J.P. Morgan, Chase, and many other people and institutions, to determine what was going on with them, and him,” Trump posted on Truth Social. “All arrows,” he wrote, are “pointing to the Democrats.”

This time, the answer from the Attorney General was not full stop; it was full speed ahead. “Thank you, Mr. President,” Bondi replied

on X, as if grateful for the assignment. Jay Clayton, the U.S. Attorney for Manhattan, would “take the lead,” she assured Trump. William Barr, Bondi’s predecessor during Trump’s first term, was driven to complain publicly that the President’s frequent tweets about pending cases “make it impossible for me to do my job.” Bondi takes instant obedience to Trump’s social-media edicts as her job description.

A challenge of covering Trump’s Washington is to guard against being worn down by the unceasing flow of aberrant behavior, one politically motivated and factually deficient investigation after another. But, until the announcement of Clayton’s probe, Trump’s Justice Department at least engaged in the flimsy pretense that it was investigating crimes—that there was some basis (“predication,” in the language of the D.O.J.) for F.B.I. agents and prosecutors to be rooting around in the actions of the President’s political enemies. Trump’s prosecution by social media, and Bondi’s eager compliance, cross yet another line once thought inviolable.

Not only is this behavior not normal; it is also, as is becoming increasingly clear, self-defeating. Experienced, ethical prosecutors want to have nothing to do with political prosecutions. That leaves such cases in the inexperienced hands of attorneys like Lindsey Halligan, the insurance lawyer named by Trump to serve as U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, after his initial pick for that job, Erik Siebert, balked at bringing mortgage-fraud charges against New York’s attorney general, Letitia James. So it was that Halligan found herself appearing for the first time before a grand jury, racing against a statute-of-limitations deadline to file false-statements charges against the former F.B.I. director James Comey. Last Monday, a federal magistrate judge, citing a “disturbing pattern of profound investigative missteps,” granted the “extraordinary remedy” of giving Comey access to grand-jury materials. These are ordinarily secret, but the judge said that

Halligan had made “fundamental misstatements of the law that could compromise the integrity of the grand jury process.”

The judge’s order is partially redacted, but Halligan appears to have misled the grand jurors about Comey’s constitutional right not to testify. The judge also found that, as grand jurors wrestled with whether there was adequate evidence against Comey, Halligan “clearly suggested” that “they did not have to rely only on the record before them to determine probable cause but could be assured the government had more evidence—perhaps better evidence—that would be presented at trial.” This is not how prosecutions work. Grand juries aren’t instructed to issue indictments in the hope that the government produces more proof down the road. Halligan filed an emergency appeal, but her seeming incompetence could doom the case against Comey. On Wednesday, the district judge hearing the case, Michael Nachmanoff, questioned Halligan about whether the indictment was valid if all the grand jurors had not approved the final version —something that she acknowledged, but then later denied.

In the end, it took just two days for Trump to shift from decrying the “Epstein Hoax” to backing a House move to order the Justice Department to release the Epstein files. No matter that he had just gone to extreme lengths to pressure lawmakers to vote against the measure. No matter that he didn’t need to wait for congressional action; he could order the release on his own. This was a humiliating about-face of the sort we’re not used to seeing from the President, but it reflected Trump’s bowing to the inexorable political arithmetic: a single Republican House member, Clay Higgins, of Louisiana, voted against the bill, and the Senate passed it with unanimous consent and sent it to Trump, who signed it. Despite that lopsided vote, the documents may not be so quickly forthcoming; the Justice Department could seek to invoke the investigation that Trump ordered up to avoid releasing the files. The Republican-controlled Congress may be showing stirrings of independence, however belated. But the President can take solace

in the knowledge that he still has the subservient Attorney General of his dreams. ♦

Ruth Marcus, a former columnist for the Washington Post, became a contributing writer at The New Yorker in June, 2025. She is the author of “Supreme Ambition: Brett Kavanaugh and the Conservative Takeover.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/the-justice-department-hits-a-new-low-with-the-epstein-files>

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O.G. Dept.

Kurtis Blow, Still Blowing

After the rapper's 1979 hit "Christmas Rappin'," his song "The Breaks" was the first rap single to go gold. Now he's embracing the good ole days with a "Legends of Hip-Hop" concert.

By [David Kamp](#)

November 24, 2025



In a rehearsal studio in the Echo Park neighborhood in Los Angeles, Kurtis Blow was limbering up and getting loose. Earlier this year, his left arm swelled up abruptly, requiring four surgeries to resolve what was eventually diagnosed as deep-vein thrombosis. Blow usually holds the mike in his right hand when he raps, but he had to get his left arm going, he said, “because it’s my ‘Throw your hands in the air’ arm.”

Lithe at age sixty-six, Blow was dressed in leather cargo pants, a track jacket, and a black baseball cap with the words “*I AM HIP HOP*” above its brim. He was whipping himself into shape for a “Legends of Hip-Hop” concert to be held just after Thanksgiving at the Peacock Theatre, in downtown L.A. He will be on a stage that will also feature such foundational rappers as Big Daddy Kane, Doug E. Fresh, and two members of the Furious Five, Melle Mel and Scorpio.

Blow’s youngest son, Michael, the studio’s owner, manned the d.j. deck, wearing a hoodie from Stanford, his alma mater. The rapper’s eldest, Kurtis, Jr., nodded his do-ragged head to the beat and offered counsel alongside his mother, Kurtis, Sr.,’s wife of forty-two years, Shirley. (The Walkers, to use the family’s civilian surname, also have a third son, Mark.)

It has been forty-five years since the release of Blow’s song “The Breaks,” the first rap single to be certified gold. Blow had already scored a novelty hit, “Christmas Rappin’,” at the end of 1979, the watershed year in which rap transitioned from clubs in the Bronx and Harlem to singles pressed on vinyl, chief among them “Rapper’s Delight,” by the Sugarhill Gang. “I had a singles deal with escalating options,” Blow recalled. “I had to sell thirty thousand records in order to do another single. The Christmas rap

sold over four hundred thousand copies. So the producers said, ‘What do you want to do for your next single?’ ”

Blow was first discovered a couple of years earlier, when he was spotted in performance by Robert (Rocky) Ford, Jr., a *Billboard* journalist covering the burgeoning rap scene. Ford and a colleague on the ad-sales side, J. B. Moore, were so impressed by the teenage performer that they asked if they could produce and co-write records with him. Blow agreed, and, abetted by Ford’s and Moore’s connections, became the first rapper to sign with a major label, Mercury.

With Ford and Moore eager for a follow-up to “Christmas Rappin’,” Blow said, “I told them, ‘Well, I want to do a song for all my b-boys.’ I was a hard-core break-dancer and a d.j. as well. James Brown was my thing. The most important part of a song for a b-boy is the break, the part where the vocals drop out. So I wanted a song with a lot of breaks.”

As Blow recalls, Moore, a bespectacled white man in his late thirties, was intrigued by the connotations of the word “breaks.” It could refer to good breaks and bad breaks. It was a homonym for brakes, the things you pump to slow down your car. And it was also, as Blow articulated, a musical term. Moore and Blow fashioned a litany of breaks/brakes in all manner of categories.

Some of them betrayed the thought processes of the older writer, e.g., “And the I.R.S. says they wanna chat / (That’s the breaks, that’s the breaks) / And you can’t explain why you claimed your cat.” Other lyrics, like one in which Blow exhorted a girl in brown to stop messin’ around, bore the stamp of the rapper himself.

The end result was an infectious bop enlivened by Blow’s exuberant rapping style, which was inspired, he said, by the rhyming patter of Hank Spann, a d.j. on the New York radio station WWRL, then devoted to R. & B.

“The Breaks” was a crossover smash, and it bent the course of musical history. Chris Frantz and Tina Weymouth, the married rhythm section of Talking Heads, were so taken by the song that they name-checked the rapper in “Genius of Love,” the 1981 post-punk-funk single by their side project, Tom Tom Club: “Stepping in a rhythm to a Kurtis Blow / Who needs to think when your feet just go?”

“When that song came out, I was, like, cheesin’ so much you could’ve put a banana in my mouth sideways,” Blow said.

In a Zoom call, Frantz avowed that the influence of “The Breaks” goes even deeper. “The timbale breaks in the first Tom Tom Club single, ‘Wordy Rappinghood,’ were inspired by the timbale parts in ‘The Breaks,’ ” he said. It had an effect on Talking Heads, too.

Once, when David Byrne was stuck on a lyric for the song “Crosseyed and Painless,” Frantz recalled, “I said, ‘David, there’s this new thing called rap, and if you could just rap a part it would be cool.’ ” He played him “The Breaks,” which yielded Byrne’s now famous “Facts are simple and facts are straight” bars.

Blow is proud of his squeaky-clean image, which was a conscious choice. “I made two hundred and forty-three rap songs and never used profanity,” he said. “I sacrificed my career so guys like Chuck D and KRS-One could come up and really teach and empower our youth.”

He’s Kurtis Blow, and he wants you to know that *these* are the *breaks*. ♦

David Kamp is the author of “*Sunny Days: The Children’s Television Revolution That Changed America*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/kurtis-blown-still-blowing>

[Paris Postcard](#)

In a Sargent Painting, a Vicomtesse Lives On

The great-great-grandmother of Laurent Saint Périer was one of John Singer Sargent's alluring muses, before she died in a notorious fire. Now Saint Périer visits her portrait in the Musée d'Orsay.

By [Lauren Collins](#)

November 24, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

Laurent de Saint Périer had something he wanted to show his parents. On a recent Tuesday morning, he left his apartment, in the Sixteenth Arrondissement, and walked several blocks to their place, on Avenue [Victor Hugo](#). Saint Périer was wearing dark jeans and a white shirt with raspberry stripes. He had an embroidered scarf that he'd picked up in Ethiopia slung around his neck, and he was discreetly sweating from the effort of having hauled the surprise, which he'd stuffed into a large canvas tote from the children's-clothing brand Bonton. Once he'd greeted Papa (more formally known as Amaury-Urbain Florian Marie de Poilloüe de Saint Périer de Kergorlay) and Maman (Hélène-Henriette Charlette de Bourbon, before her marriage), he produced an ancient-looking wooden box, which he set on a sideboard between two brass pheasants.

Saint Périer had spent the weekend spelunking in the archives of his mother's family's château, where his father's family's archives have been stored since *their* château passed into public hands, in 1978. He slid the lid off the box. Inside: a profusion of plum-colored silk, so dried out that anyone who touched it risked turning it to dust. The bundle was accompanied by a yellowing calligraphed label: "Dress of the Vicomtesse de Saint Périer worn by her the day of the Bazar de la Charité fire where she met her death (4 May 1897)."

"It's very moving," Laurent said.

Amaury-Urbain, who happened to be celebrating his ninetieth birthday, chimed in. "As you can see, she didn't burn. She was asphyxiated.

The Vicomtesse de Saint Périer was Laurent's great-great-grandmother. She was born Jeanne de Kergorlay in Paris in 1849 and, in 1874, married Jean-Guy de Poilloüe de Saint Périer, who was perfectly respectable but not as rich as her father. She died in the Bazar de la Charité blaze, alongside a hundred and twenty-five others, mostly women and girls. It was something of a Triangle

Shirtwaist fire for French aristocrats, who were manning booths at a Catholic charity fair when a projectionist's assistant struck a match close to an ether lamp. The victims' families paid tribute to them by erecting a chapel called Our Lady of Consolation—one of Paris's hidden wonders, accessible only by appointment—at the site.

The Vicomtesse has her own, better-known memorial. John Singer Sargent painted her in 1883, amid a legendary jag of society portraiture that included likenesses of the eerie Pailleron siblings, the dashing gynecologist Dr. Pozzi, and the scandalously bare-shouldered Virginie Gautreau, a.k.a. Madame X. These works and others are part of “John Singer Sargent: Dazzling Paris,” which is drawing crowds at the Musée d’Orsay following a run at [the Met](#) last year. After visiting his parents, Saint Périer hopped in a taxi to visit his ancestor.

The galleries were packed. Saint Périer beelined straight to the Vicomtesse. In the portrait, she’s thirty-four. She wears a gauzy red gown with a sweetheart neckline and holds a garland of pink and white roses, another flower festooning her swept-back hair. “This was her golden age,” Saint Périer observed. “She’d been married ten years. She’d had her children.”

The portrait was deeply familiar to him. Once, for his father’s birthday, his mother had commissioned a reproduction, which hangs in their apartment. Over the weekend, Saint Périer had also unearthed a pair of letters his forebears had received from Sargent. “Chère madame,” one reads in impeccable French. “Here, the sad sketch, framed exactly as it deserves!” (One of the show’s revelations is that the American painter Sargent didn’t set foot in the States until he was twenty years old.) Saint Périer wasn’t sure whether the painter was referring, self-deprecatingly, to his famous portrait or whether the “sketch” referred to another work. He’d

already marked off the coming weekend to continue his archive quest.

In the Musée d'Orsay, Saint Périer stood in front of the portrait for a long time. He saw a family resemblance. "Blue eyes, long face," he said. "That could be from the de Kergorlay side." But it was Sargent's expressive brushstrokes that bowled him over.

"He has such a quick touch," he said. "It's like his writing, rapid and precise."

Saint Périer's eyes settled on the upper-left-hand corner of the painting, where a vertical dark-red line cut through the dark background.

"It's almost like he put a flame there," he whispered.

Saint Périer went uncharacteristically quiet. Later, he composed two pages entitled "Vicomtesse—My Feelings." In them, he said that he had walked home from the museum along the Seine, "overtaken by a kind of intoxication, a light trance," induced by seeing Sargent's "great spray of sparks crackling on the oil, right behind the Vicomtesse's smile, against that dark-purple background which so recalls, indeed, certain burnt hues of her purple dress." He said he'd felt pride but confessed that he'd also felt jealous, sharing the portrait with the public when once he could've had it all to himself. It was incredible to think that none of the hundreds of people standing there at the Musée d'Orsay had any idea that the man in the striped shirt was the Vicomtesse's great-great-grandson, carting her final frock around town in a Bonton tote bag. ♦

Lauren Collins has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2008. She is the author of "[When in French: Love in a Second Language](#)."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/in-a-sargent-painting-a-vicomtesse-lives-on>

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[The Boards](#)

What Happens in Kyoto Comes to New York

In 1997, scientists and bureaucrats gathered in Japan to talk about greenhouse-gas emissions. At Lincoln Center, a group of actors rehash all the drama—in front of the original negotiators.

By [Ben McGrath](#)

November 24, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

Three dozen climate negotiators and scientists were at Lincoln Center the other day, in the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre, to see a performance of “Kyoto,” about the landmark 1997 treaty on greenhouse-gas emissions. It was a bittersweet reunion for “Team Climate U.S.A.,” as Sue Biniaz, a State Department lawyer for more than thirty years, put it, while addressing the group in the

lobby after the show. On the one hand, “we usually work in total obscurity,” she said. “So to make it the subject of an incredible play is really, really nice for us.” On the other hand, “we are no longer in that business.” The [Trump](#) Administration eliminated the department’s climate-negotiation office in April, a few months after announcing its withdrawal from the [Paris climate agreement](#), a successor to the Kyoto Protocol.

The play stars Stephen Kunken as an oil lobbyist named Don Pearlman, who addresses the audience at the outset. “I think we can all agree on one thing,” he says. “The times you live in are fucking awful.” Then, with a smile, he adds, “The nineteen-nineties were freakin’ *glorious!*” His cynicism in playing the Saudis against the Tanzanians and the Chinese is matched only by his hunger for cigarettes. (The actual Pearlman died of lung-cancer complications in 2005, at sixty-nine.) Yet Kunken gives the character a roguish charisma, in his tireless defense of American freedom, that Biniaz couldn’t help observing was arguably fictional. “Don was not nearly as charming in real life,” she said, to knowing laughter.

The cast and the forlorn climateers mingled. Biniaz remarked that she was struck by how well something as ostensibly dry and technical as multilateral negotiation translated to the stage. “There’s a certain performative aspect to the negotiations where you might have to appear more frustrated or angry than you actually are,” she granted. “There’s also kind of an onstage-offstage aspect. It’s, like, ‘Oh, So-and-So is just so annoying.’ You’ll say, ‘Yeah, but offstage he’s really a nice guy.’ ”

Kunken, for his part, felt that the core theme of the story—arriving at consensus—was an apt metaphor for live theatre. “Doing a play is coming to an agreement,” he said. “Every actor wants to tell their character’s story: this is my moment. And another actor says, ‘I know, but, if you do that, then you’re missing this set of beats for

me.’ You’re in front of an audience, and any single person on any given night can pull the focus by doing something extraneous.”

Tim Lattimer, a former deputy office director at the State Department, and a longtime environmentalist, asked Kunken if he was familiar with the Scott Freeman studio, an acting school. “Oh, sure,” Kunken said.

“Scott and I did high-school theatre together,” Lattimer said. “I’ve had people say I shouldn’t have been a scientist.”

A memorable scene in the play depicts the various international delegations arguing over punctuation marks in a singsong cadence. The real-life negotiators praised this as an illustration of the art of “constructive ambiguity,” allowing each country to declare slightly differing interpretations of victory. “The Chinese negotiator, my counterpart there, was named Su,” Biniaz recalled, referring to Su Wei. “We were the two Sues. We one time had something without commas, which is how I wanted it. And he said, ‘I accept that, if we add a comma,’ because his English was so amazing that he knew that that would give him a slight advantage. It was like playing tennis with someone who’s better than you—forces you to up your game. And every time I was with Su, even though this was not his native language, I felt like I had to be completely in the zone.” She added, “One of our major principles is called common but differentiated responsibilities. So I wrote an article called ‘Comma but Differentiated Responsibilities.’ ”

One of the playwrights, Joe Robertson, mentioned another Chinese negotiator, an academic named Shukong Zhong, whose command of English was such that he translated Charles Dickens in his spare time. “Dickens was viewed as sort of the epitome of the terrors and excesses of Western capitalism,” Robertson said. “So he was very popular in China.”

“Professor Zhong was amazing,” Biniaz agreed. “He would always argue for principles before you could start negotiating. He would talk about ‘In China, when a housewife makes a rice meal, she starts with rice.’ Our guy was Dan Reifsnyder at the time, and he would have some other metaphor, about how, when he cooks, he usually starts with a recipe. The whole room was just watching the two of them go back and forth.”

“A duel of metaphors,” Robertson said.

“All about the kitchen.”

Joking, one of the ex-negotiators asked Joe Murphy, the other playwright, if they were going to tackle the Paris agreement next. “This is the first of a trilogy!” Murphy replied. “Yeah, the next one’s like ‘[The Empire Strikes Back](#).’ Copenhagen: everything collapses and it’s a disaster.” Then would come Paris, as “[Return of the Jedi](#),” a bit of optimism before, well, the fucking-awful present. Tim Lattimer raised his hand. “Can I just say thank you for doing it in this theatre and not the [Koch Theatre](#)?♦”

Ben McGrath has been a staff writer since 2003. His first book, “[Riverman: An American Odyssey](#),” was released in 2022.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/what-happens-in-kyoto-comes-to-new-york>

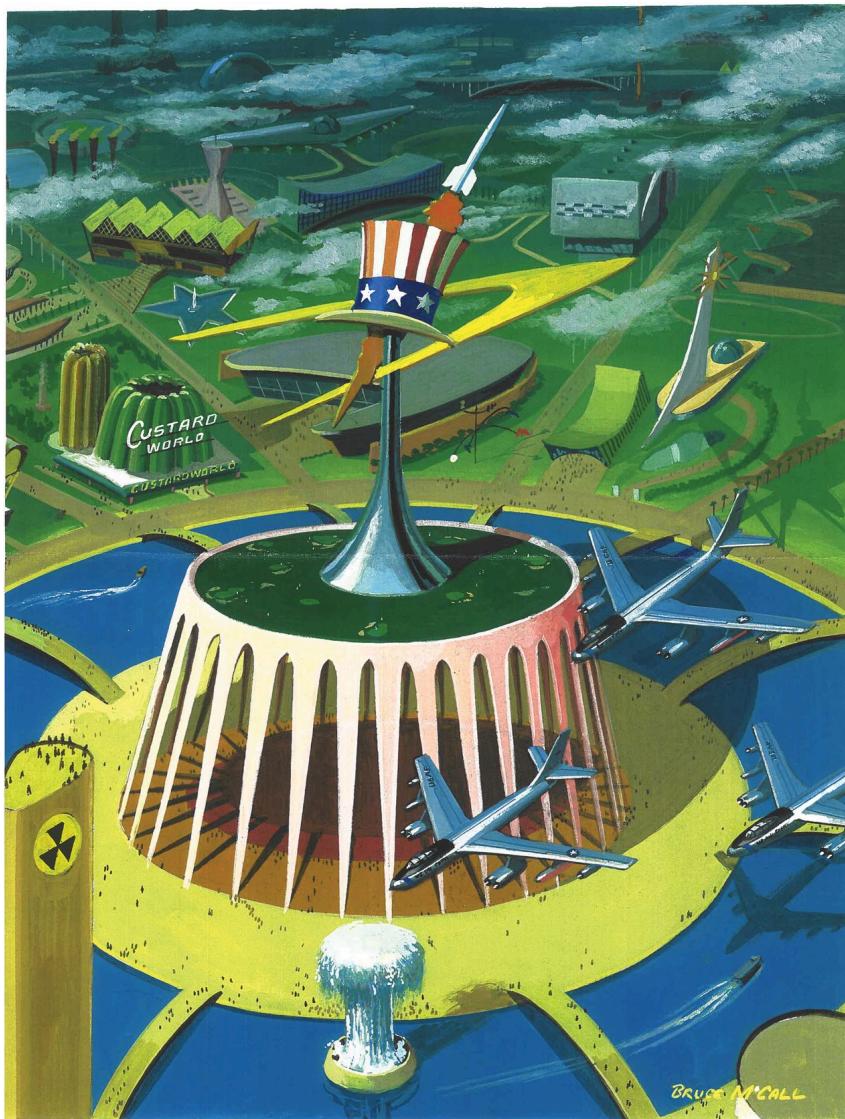
[Sketchpad](#)

The World's Fair That Wasn't

“Tomorrowland Amerifair,” a previously unpublished piece by the late artist and writer.

By [Bruce McCall](#)

November 24, 2025

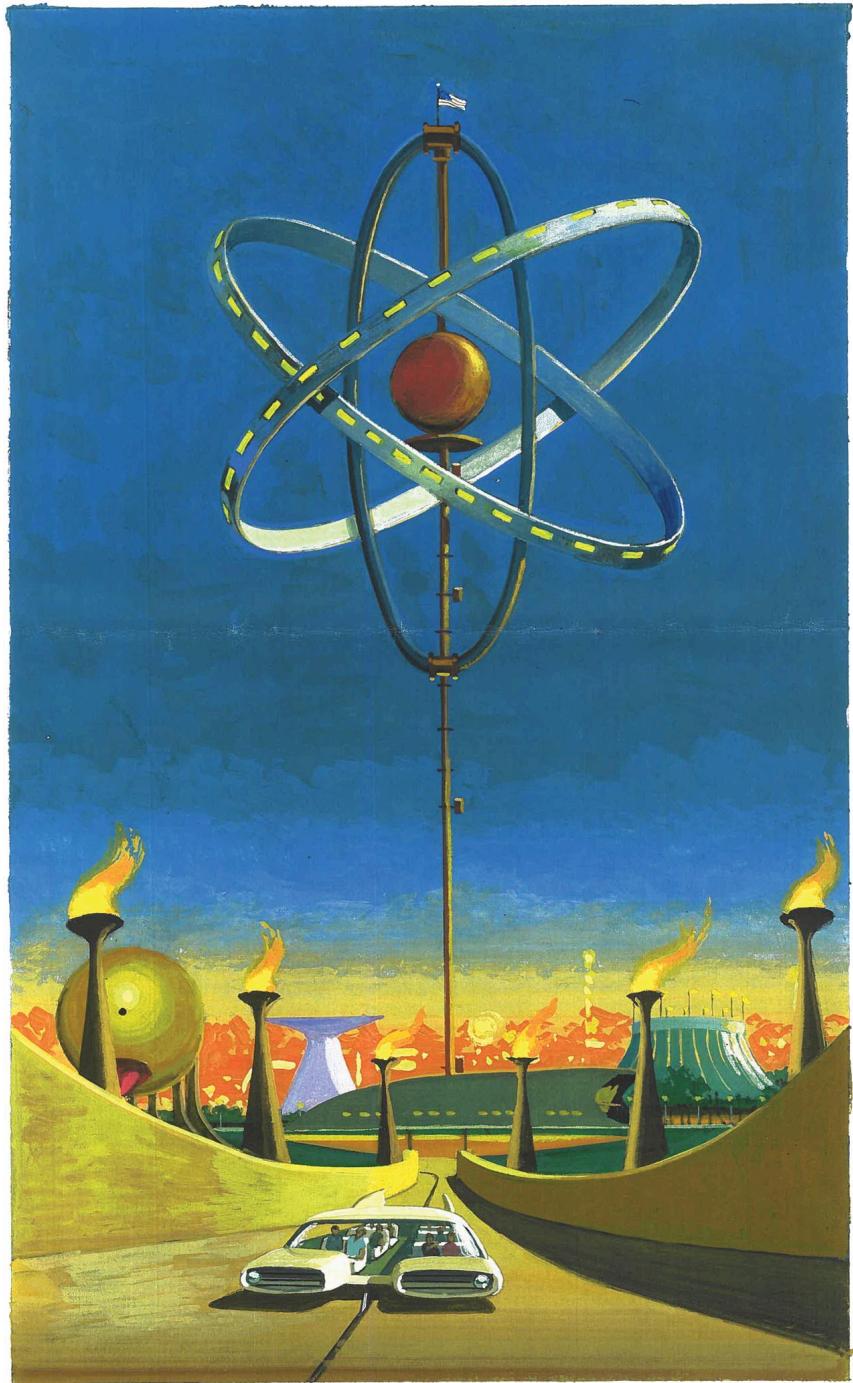


Tomorrowland Amerifair, held in San Diego in the fall of 1957, was a billion-dollar salute to the American way. The theme—Man, the American—was dreamed up by the C.I.A. to keep the Cold War Kremlin on its toes. The Ameritron, the fair's colossal center point

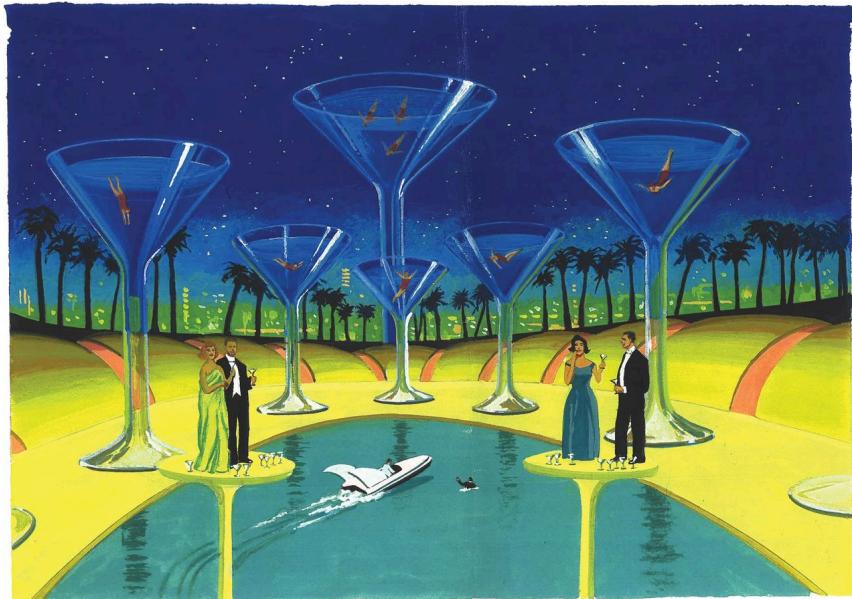
and the largest prefab structure ever erected, enclosed the bubbling red Atomic Lagoon (soon drained because it made fairgoers sick) and featured a no-entry Strategic Air Command early-warning center; meanwhile, up top, golfers merrily padded over an Ultrasuede-surfaced eighteen holes. Too bad that the fair's closing ceremonies were marred by the sight of Sputnik racing across the October night sky.



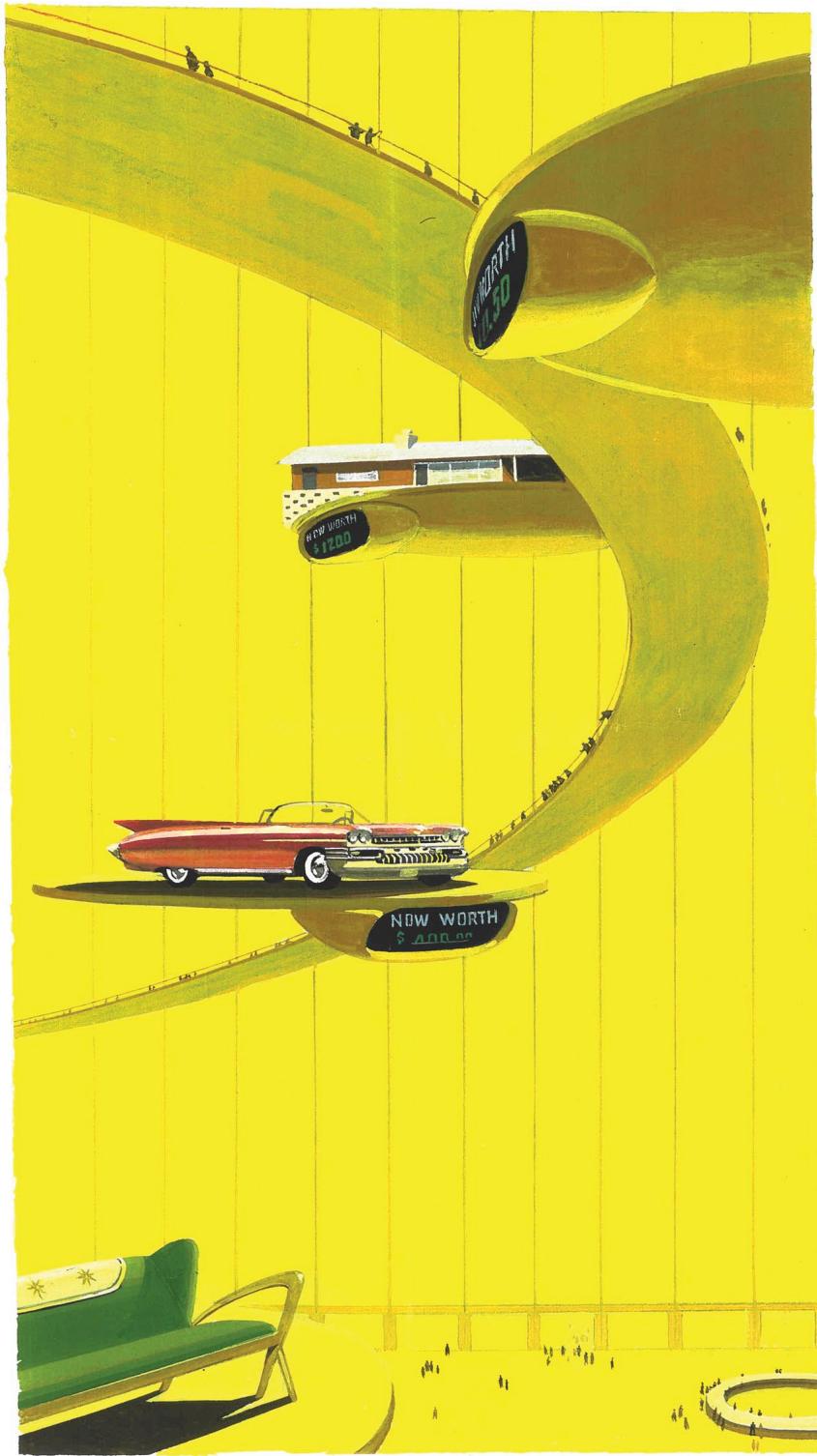
The Little N-Bomb That Could: A hands-down fair favorite, this missile nose-dived out of the clouds to blow a simulated Kremlin to kingdom come every thirty minutes, in an entertaining and educational example of what the U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command is all about.



*The Atomic Energy Commission's **Up and Atom Pavilion**, patterned after the commission's logo, was the free world's first and only atomic-powered thrill ride. Two giant passenger-carrying titanium rings spun around and around in elliptical orbits high above the fair. What a ride! So satisfying for thrill-seekers that nobody ever took it twice!*



Make Mine Martini! The U.S. Gin Council (an Amerifair sponsor) came through with a tribute to the health properties of vermouth and gin. Note Ginny and Her Dip-Somniacs doing their synchronized "alco-batic" swim routines inside jumbo Martinis, towering over the world's only hundred-and-one-proof lake.



*By displaying nearly new products already made obsolete by even newer products, the **Obsolarium** dramatized the magic effect of planned obsolescence on the fifties economy. The Obsolarium itself became obsolete during the fair's run and was demolished to make room for a new, improved Obsodome.*

Bruce McCall contributed to The New Yorker from 1980 until his death, in 2023, painting more than seventy-five covers and writing more than eighty Shouts & Murmurs.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/the-worlds-fair-that-wasnt>

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The Trump Administration is deporting people to countries they have no ties to, where many are being detained indefinitely or forcibly returned to the places they fled.

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Megalithic monuments in the otherworldly Orkney Islands remain a fundamental part of the landscape.

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When you're waiting for a flight, what's the difference between out there and in here?

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The President declared a diplomatic triumph. The view from the ground is more complex.

[Annals of Immigration](#)

Disappeared to a Foreign Prison

The Trump Administration is deporting people to countries they have no ties to, where many are being detained indefinitely or forcibly returned to the places they fled.

By [Sarah Stillman](#)

November 24, 2025



Deportees have been sent to South Sudan, a nation struggling to recover from a civil war, along with Eswatini, where they've been held in a maximum-security prison.

Illustration by Anuj Shrestha

One Saturday morning in early September, I got a WhatsApp video call from eleven strangers locked inside a secretive detention camp in a forest in Ghana. Their faces looked glazed with sweat and stricken with fear. In the background, I could hear birdsong and the drone of insects. An armed guard watched over the group as they huddled around a shared cellphone.

“There are big snakes here, and scorpions!” a male voice with an American accent called out.

“My stomach is really hurting, and we have to beg for food,” another man said.

A third added, “We fear we’ll be tortured and killed.”

One of the men, a car salesman and a real-estate agent from Miami, whom I'll call Jim, gave me a tour of the scene: an open-air military complex known as Bundase Training Camp, some forty miles from Accra. "I have five U.S.-citizen children, and they don't know where their father is," Jim said.

Just months earlier, one of these men had a job with UPS in Chicago. Another had lived in Houston, where he worked for his mother's catering business, composed R. & B. music, and babysat his little brothers. Some had lived in the U.S. from an early age. Jim, a political refugee, had come to Miami from Liberia in the early nineties, when he was twenty-three, after his parents were murdered for their tribal and political affiliations during the country's civil war. Others, including a twenty-one-year-old woman who had fled Togo fearing genital mutilation, had arrived in the U.S. recently, seeking asylum.

All of them had been taken from the United States against their will. Nearly all had been granted forms of legal relief that bar the government from deporting them to their home countries. At the heart of the protections they'd received was one of the most basic and sacrosanct concepts in both U.S. and international law: non-refoulement. This principle means that no nation should intentionally deport or expel people to a place where they are likely to face torture, persecution, death, or other grave harms.

The forest detainees had got my number from an Atlanta-based immigration attorney named Meredyth Yoon, who works as a litigation director for a nonprofit called Asian Americans Advancing Justice. "Traditionally, we focus a lot on immigration detention, and we engage in advocacy on issues affecting Asian American and Pacific Islander communities," she told me. But, in recent months, Yoon has had to repeatedly reimagine her work, racing to help community members whose loved ones were seized in large-scale *ICE* raids and working to defend lawful immigrants

from unlawful deportations. This spring, she'd agreed to represent Jim after learning that he'd been held in an *ICE* processing center in Folkston, Georgia, for more than two years. Jim had won asylum and become a lawful permanent resident of the U.S in the nineties. But, in 2011, he'd been convicted of bank fraud and, more than a decade later, *ICE* had initiated removal proceedings against him and detained him.

In late summer, Yoon learned that *ICE* had moved Jim to its Alexandria Staging Facility, in central Louisiana, from which detainees tend to get deported. Yoon contacted *ICE* to find out where the agency was planning to send him. *ICE* never answered her e-mails. At that point, Yoon told me, "more alarm bells started going off."

Then, on the morning of September 8th, Jim called Yoon in a panic. "I'm in Ghana!" he cried out. Yoon scrambled to gather information on Jim and the other detainees who were being held with him. Four days later, she and her colleagues filed an urgent lawsuit, sketching the life-or-death fears of five of them. The next morning, I received the call from all eleven individuals held in Bundase Training Camp, who asked me to describe their plight. "They didn't tell us where we were going," Jim said that morning. "They just kidnapped us overnight and whisked us out."

For months, I had been trying to document the Trump Administration's secretive third-country removals. At first, getting access to any information was daunting. Some of the deportees were held in far-off prisons or detention sites; others had gone into hiding. Friends and relatives in the U.S. often felt terrified of speaking out, fearing retaliation. "I don't know that the piece you're contemplating is necessarily writable right now," a leading lawyer on the topic, Anwen Hughes, of the advocacy group Human Rights First, wrote to me in late July.

Initially, I'd focussed on two groups of third-country deportees, known to human-rights lawyers as the South Sudan Eight and the Eswatini Five. The first group, from countries including Myanmar, Mexico, and Laos, had been deported, in early July, to South Sudan, a nation struggling to recover from a civil war. Days later, the second group—five men from Cuba, Jamaica, Laos, Vietnam, and Yemen, all of whom had lived in the U.S. for many years—had been deported to the southern African nation of Eswatini, formerly known as Swaziland. There, they were detained in a maximum-security prison, without clear justification.



“And this is my room. My parents kept it the way it was when I was little.”
Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

These deportees appeared to have been handpicked by the Trump Administration to test a new approach to mass deportation. According to the Department of Homeland Security, all of them had been convicted of serious crimes, including murder. Announcing the flight to Eswatini, Tricia McLaughlin, a spokesperson for D.H.S., had called the five deportees “so uniquely barbaric that their home countries refused to take them back,” a claim that at least one of the countries disavowed. Arguably the most surprising part of these early removals was also the least

understood. It wasn't just that these men were being sent to nations where they had no ties, and to places that were not safe. It was also that, in many cases, men who had completed their sentences in the U.S. years ago were now being subjected to indefinite detention abroad.

The wider strategy of forced third-country transfers had clear policy roots. On January 20th, the first day of Donald Trump's second term, Trump issued an executive order called "Securing Our Borders," which, among other things, declared an intention to expand the use of third-country deportations. On February 18th, D.H.S. issued an internal guidance memo, instructing immigration officers to "review for removal" all cases "on the non-detained docket"—meaning anyone with an immigration case who was not in *ICE* custody. As part of this review, D.H.S. officials would "determine the viability of removal to a third country"—and, if they found that third-country removal was viable, attempt to detain the person. The first large-scale third-country removals occurred that month and targeted newly arrived asylum seekers. Between February 12th and 15th, the U.S. sent two hundred and ninety-nine people—from countries such as Afghanistan, Cameroon, Somalia, and Iran—to Panama. On February 20th and 25th, the U.S. sent an additional two hundred people, including eighty-one children, to Costa Rica. Soon afterward came third-country-deportation flights to Uzbekistan and El Salvador, where more than two hundred and fifty non-Salvadoran immigrants were detained in the brutal Terrorism Confinement Center, also known by its Spanish acronym, *CECOT*. Some of the men held at *CECOT* were transferred there as part of another third-country-removal experiment: the President declared that the U.S. had been "invaded" by the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua, authorizing the removal of supposed gang members. (In June, U.S. District Judge James Boasberg found that the government had violated the rights of those men by not giving them an opportunity to challenge their deportations.)

In late March, a young, gay Guatemalan asylum seeker, known to the court as O.C.G., filed a class-action lawsuit with several other plaintiffs, challenging the new policy of deporting people to third countries without meaningful notice or a chance to contest their removal. According to the complaint, O.C.G. had fled Guatemala because of “multiple death threats on account of his sexuality.” An immigration judge barred his deportation to Guatemala. The Department of Homeland Security then placed him on a bus with some twenty other men and, without issuing a new removal order, deported the group to Mexico. O.C.G. was not able to protest that he also feared persecution and torture in Mexico, where he’d been held hostage and raped while on his journey to the U.S. The lawsuit, known in the courts as D.V.D. v. D.H.S., became the primary legal battlefield for an urgent question: Can the government deport people to third countries without giving them an opportunity to claim that they could be tortured or killed there?

In April, a Massachusetts federal judge, Brian E. Murphy, issued a preliminary injunction, saying that the government must grant people at least fifteen days to challenge third-country deportations. But two months later the Supreme Court granted a stay, reversing Murphy’s order. (Using the so-called shadow docket, the Court offered no public explanation of its reasoning.) The result is that, for now, D.H.S. can deport people to countries not listed on their removal orders without giving them any notice. Justices Sonia Sotomayor, Elena Kagan, and Ketanji Brown Jackson dissented, decrying the government’s “flagrantly unlawful conduct.” Sotomayor wrote, “In matters of life and death, it is best to proceed with caution.”

McLaughlin, the D.H.S. spokesperson, had a different response: “Fire up the deportation planes.” Shortly after the ruling came down, ICE deported the South Sudan Eight and the Eswatini Five. Among those sent to Eswatini was Orville Etoria, a sixty-two-year-old man who’d lived in New York for nearly fifty years.

In late August, I met with Etoria's aunt Margaret McKen at her home in Canarsie, Brooklyn. A professor at Hunter College's School of Education, McKen confessed that she was reluctant to talk with me. (I agreed to use her maiden name.) "I've been a naturalized citizen for thirty years, and I don't even have a parking ticket, but you never know what they can do to you," she said. "I've started to have a phobia that ICE will come and break down my door."

Still, McKen felt that the public ought to know what had happened to her nephew, and who he was. Born in Jamaica, Etoria came to Brooklyn at the age of twelve, in 1976. He lived with his mother in Crown Heights, where she worked at a day-care center. As a young adult, Etoria suffered from psychiatric problems. In 1997, he was convicted of second-degree murder, for shooting a man in a leather-goods store, and received a sentence of twenty-five years to life. Eventually, an immigration judge issued an order of removal against him, meaning that he could be deported once he got out of prison.

Etoria had been convicted of a serious crime, but, McKen said, he had evolved as a person. While incarcerated, Etoria had earned a bachelor's degree in behavioral science and worked toward a master's in divinity. After his release, in 2021, he got a job at a homeless shelter in Queens, helping to get health care and housing for men who needed support, as he once had. He lived in a three-story brownstone, which he shared with his mother and one of his two adult sons.

They were a close-knit family, McKen told me, noting that, upon his release, Etoria had cared for his mother through a terminal illness. "When Orville was in prison, his mom was like the mailman—rain, sleet, or snow, she'd always travel to see him," McKen said. "When he came home, he eased his mother's burden, cleaning the house, buying groceries, and cooking her oxtail and

salmon.” More recently, McKen recalled, “He got a car, and he told me, ‘I’m paying my own water bill!’ ”

At a routine *ICE* check-in this past spring, an agent told Etoria that he had ninety days to prepare his Jamaican passport. Shortly after he reported back to *ICE*, in June, McKen got a call from one of Etoria’s sons, saying, “They detained him and he’s not coming home!” She tracked Etoria’s whereabouts, using *ICE*’s online locator, as he was transferred from Manhattan’s Federal Plaza to Orange County, New York, and then back to Manhattan. She arranged for relatives in Jamaica to prepare a place for him to stay, in case he was sent back there.

Then Etoria vanished from the *ICE* tracker. McKen panicked. “God, are you going to send us a message?” she asked. He had been missing for more than two weeks when, one morning, McKen looked at her phone and saw an image that made her jump: Etoria’s face, in an online news dispatch. McKen clicked on the story. She found her way to McLaughlin’s announcement that Orville and four other “barbaric” men had been deported to Eswatini.

“Orville isn’t a monster,” McKen told me. “We get it—we know what he did was wrong. We raised our children to respect that there are consequences. But, if you paid for those consequences once already, why a second time? It’s a political ploy, to keep us in line. It’s them saying, ‘I have the power to destroy you.’ ”

McKen called the office of Jamaica’s Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and learned that the country had not declined to take Etoria back. The minister implied online that the government had not even been asked. McKen couldn’t reach Etoria in Eswatini. “We are wondering if we will ever see him alive again,” she said.

McKen wondered, too, who else the Trump Administration might deport this way. It had started off its third-country removals with men like Etoria, who had served out criminal sentences. But soon

she saw more third-country removals unfolding in the news, affecting a broader group. Less than a week after our conversation, news broke about the third-country deportations to Ghana, which included men and women who'd never been charged with any crime.

On September 12th, Meredyth Yoon and her colleagues filed their lawsuit on behalf of five of the people who'd been sent to Ghana. The attorneys pleaded that their clients were "now in immediate danger of being sent on, within hours, to their countries of origin," despite the fact that immigration judges acknowledged that they would likely face persecution or torture there.

Late that night, I spoke to Yoon. She told me, "It's absolutely shocking and illegal. And it fits this Administration's general pattern—draconian, cruel processes that create a spectacle and coerce people into leaving of their own accord." She added, "I hope we can do something. I hope we can stop this train."

The next morning, I received the call from Yoon's clients in the Ghanaian military camp. "Here, it's all bushes and forest," Jim told me. He wanted to start his story back in Louisiana, where a violent removal operation had taken place in the dark on September 5th. "They came to our cell," he said, "and woke us in the middle of the night."

Jim had asked the agents where they were taking him. They refused to answer. "I need to talk to my attorney," Jim said, adding, as Yoon had advised, "I fear for my life if sent back to Liberia." An agent called over a group of colleagues. "They punched me—I have bruises right now from it—and they kicked me," Jim told me. "Then they put me on the ground, handcuffed me, and put me in a straitjacket." He'd wept as they dragged him through the dark onto a tarmac. Other men in full-body restraints and chains were also being forced onto the flight, screaming and crying.

“Sir, all I asked is to speak to an attorney because I fear for my life,” Jim repeated. At that point, he told me, the agents carried him “like cargo” onto the military plane. “That’s what you get for not coöperating,” one of the agents said, according to Jim.

As Jim spoke, other men crowded around the phone, calling out similar stories. A heavyset Chicago resident, T.L., confirmed the violence of *ICE*’s initial removal. “They beat me up and punched me to the ground,” T.L. told me. He’d come to the U.S. years ago, fleeing political persecution in Nigeria. He made a good life for himself in Chicago, and had children; he found work as a cleaner in a hospital and at UPS. But, in 2022, he was sentenced to two and a half years in federal prison, for bank fraud. When he got out, he said, *ICE* agents instantly detained him.

T.L. fought his deportation, and a judge granted him relief under the Convention Against Torture (*CAT*), agreeing that T.L. was “more likely than not” to face torture in Nigeria and barring the government from sending him back there. Protection by way of *CAT*—and a similar status known as “withholding of removal”—doesn’t include the full benefits of asylum, such as a path to citizenship. But typically, under both Republican and Democratic Administrations, people granted these forms of relief have been allowed to keep living in the U.S. Technically, they could be deported to a country where they did not have credible fears of torture or persecution, but that rarely happened, and, when it did, it required a series of careful steps. (The American Immigration Council has attested that a mere 1.6 per cent of people who were granted withholding of removal in 2017 were deported to a third country that year.) Clear due-process rights governed such removals. “But then, when the *ICE* agents came for me,” T.L. said, “no laws worked.”



Orville Etoria, who'd lived in New York for nearly fifty years, was deported to a prison in Eswatini before being returned to his home country of Jamaica.
Photograph by Destinee Condison for The New Yorker

T.L. told me that he refused to board the *ICE* flight on September 5th without speaking to his attorney. He said that he'd also been placed in full-body restraints and dragged onto the plane by *ICE* agents. T.L. and Jim both told me that the agents had said, "Either you go the easy way or you go the hard way." Trump used similar phrasing earlier this year, in a promotional video for a new Customs and Border Protection app that allows immigrants to declare their intent to self-deport, saying, "People in our country illegally can self-deport the easy way or they can get deported the hard way, and that's not pleasant."

In a statement to *The New Yorker*, McLaughlin, the D.H.S. spokesperson, said, "Any claim that *ICE* personnel 'beat,' 'kick,' or 'drag' detainees or use 'straitjackets' is categorically false." She also wrote, "Every single detainee receives due process. Get a grip." Of the people who were sent to Ghana, she added, "Many of these were heinous criminals with rap sheets that included injury to a child, robbery, aggravated assault, and fraud."

But the group in Bundase Training Camp also included people such as D.A., a Nigerian human-rights advocate who'd never been convicted of a crime. In Nigeria, his work on behalf of tribal

groups facing displacement by the government had led to death threats. Eventually, he'd sought asylum in the U.S., and an immigration judge granted D.A. protection from deportation to Nigeria through *CAT*, affirming his fear of torture. But, on September 5th, he said, he was beaten and forced onto the flight. D.A. recalled an *ICE* agent telling him, "Your ass is getting on the plane." He responded, "You're abusing your badge."

As we spoke, D.A. looked terrified. "I did everything possible to try to do the right thing," he told me, emphasizing that he'd followed U.S. asylum law. He is married to a U.S. citizen from Texas. "Today, they brought a Nigerian officer from the consulate to see me!" he said. "I want the people of the United States to know my life is in danger—not just back home in Nigeria but also in Ghana."

As D.A. and others panned the camera across the camp, I noticed several women standing in the group. I asked if they, too, wished to speak. A woman whom I'll call Miriam stepped forward. She had lived in Lomé, the capital city of Togo, where, she explained, in a warm, gentle voice, she'd studied marketing, earning bachelor's and master's degrees, and hoped for a career in the import-export business.

But, when Miriam was in her twenties, her life took a turn. Her relatives expected her to return to her father's ancestral village, to submit to ritual genital mutilation. She refused and escaped to Ghana, where, she said, an uncle offered her protection but raped her instead. She tried hiding in another city in Togo, she recounted, but relatives found her there and tortured her for days. Finally, Miriam fled to the U.S., taking a flight to Brazil and trekking across more than a dozen borders to reach Texas. "I fought as best I could," she told me. An immigration judge in Arizona granted her withholding of removal. She assumed this meant safety. "But instead they just deported us," she said.

Miriam ushered forward the youngest person in the group, a slender woman with braids who stood there putting on a brave face. “She’s only twenty-one years old,” Miriam said, of the woman, who was also from Togo.

The twenty-one-year-old waved. She did not speak English, but others interpreted. She’d arrived in the U.S. seeking asylum last November. An immigration judge granted her withholding of removal. I later obtained her account in writing, translated by another detainee. “I was forced to go through female genital mutilation for them to give me to an old man for a marriage which I refused,” it read. “I ran to the U.S. to save my life.”

One result of the surge in third-country deportations has been the creation of a detective agency of sorts, comprising attorneys, human-rights groups, and flight-tracking experts. Together, they’ve been trying to solve the mystery of who is being deported, and to where, and when.

The flight trackers are often the first to warn that a deportation is afoot. Their digging originated with the work of a retired JPMorgan Chase executive named Tom Cartwright, who, in 2020, took up a new volunteer effort: using publicly available aviation data to track *ICE* flights. Human Rights First has formalized and expanded Cartwright’s log, tallying more than seventeen hundred deportation flights in the first nine months of the second Trump Administration. “Just keeping up has been a monumental effort,” Savitri Arvey, a refugee-protection expert working on the project, told me.

Arvey gave me an example. “Late Wednesday night, there was a flight out of J.F.K. with all the characteristics of a third-country removal to Uzbekistan,” she told me. “It wasn’t the normal flight number for flights to Uzbekistan, and we saw that the plane was parked on the tarmac, not at the gate, and it left six hours late,” she said. “The stars align with a repatriation, but we’re digging to get confirmation, since it’s all been a mystery.” Unless a person on a

deportation flight calls someone in the U.S., Arvey said, that person's fate remains "a total black hole."

The State Department declined to comment on the details of its diplomatic communications with other governments. But the U.S. has reportedly sought third-country-deportation agreements with nations including Ukraine, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Uganda, and Kosovo, sometimes threatening countries with economic or diplomatic consequences if they don't oblige. In court, *ICE* has invoked agreements for which no records were apparent. I obtained a sworn declaration from an *ICE* officer which stated that "the U.S. Department of State currently has a valid agreement with Bolivia to accept third country removals." The officer attested that *ICE* had served a young Colombian woman with "notice of removal to Bolivia" and that D.H.S. had scheduled her flight. But the woman's lawyer told me that she could find no public reports or evidence of such a deal. The lawyer won her client's release after an *ICE* official admitted in court that the woman could not, in fact, be sent to Bolivia.

The financial incentives driving these agreements have also been hidden from public view. Last March, the Trump Administration paid El Salvador more than four million dollars to imprison non-Salvadoran deportees. But in most places the numbers remain undisclosed. I obtained a copy of the "memorandum of understanding" that the U.S. government signed with Eswatini, revealing that the U.S. had agreed to pay the country more than five million dollars in exchange for accepting up to a hundred and sixty foreign-national deportees. I also reviewed a copy of the deal struck with Rwanda: in that instance, the U.S. pledged \$7.5 million in exchange for taking up to two hundred and fifty deportees. Both Eswatini and Rwanda made a commitment to "prevention of refoulement." In June, two activist groups, the National Immigration Litigation Alliance and Refugees International, sued the State Department, seeking the release of deportation agreements with a half-dozen countries. In the lawsuit, which is

ongoing, the groups argue that the government shirked its duty to fulfill their Freedom of Information Act requests, leaving critical information “shrouded from public view.”

In Eswatini, where Orville Etoria and four other men had been detained, Etoria’s family and a group of U.S. advocates found a local lawyer named Sibusiso Magnificent Nhlabatsi to take up their cause. “These men haven’t committed any crime in Swaziland, and they finished their sentence in the U.S., so under what circumstances are they being detained without access to counsel?” Nhlabatsi asked me in September. “It’s a textbook case of kidnapping and human trafficking, at the center of which is the United States, with Swaziland as an active accomplice.”

When Nhlabatsi first went to visit the men, he told me, “I thought I’d walk into the prison, see these men, help out, and that would be the end of the matter.” But the prison deputy denied him access to them, saying that they hadn’t yet had a chance to reach their families. Nhlabatsi returned the following week, and was told to come back the next day. When he returned again, he was informed that the men had refused to see him. Later in the day, Etoria and the others called home, and all said that they had not been told of such a visit.

On July 31st, Nhlabatsi filed a habeas petition in a court in Eswatini, asserting the men’s right to legal counsel. “The right to legal representation is not a privilege to be granted at the convenience of the correctional services, but a non-negotiable right that attaches from the moment of detention,” he wrote. But, on multiple occasions, the government ignored its legal deadline to respond to the case. When Nhlabatsi was slated to appear in court in mid-September, the court went into recess without informing him. “These men have a right to a fair hearing, and the right to be presumed innocent, and the right to a speedy trial,” Nhlabatsi told me. “I cannot let this injustice go unchallenged.”

Nhlabatsi was frustrated. He knew, too, that he was risking his life to stand up for these men. In 2023, his mentor, a prominent human-rights lawyer and pro-democracy activist named Thulani Maseko, was shot dead in front of his wife and children, after years of advocating for an end to Eswatini's monarchy. Now that Nhlabatsi was in the local press defending the U.S. deportees' basic right to counsel, he was getting regular calls from friends. "They weren't encouraging me," Nhlabatsi told me. "They were saying, 'Are you sure you're safe?'"

Then, in late September, I got an update from Etoria's lawyer in Brooklyn, Mia Unger, of the Legal Aid Society. He had just been released, and was the first person to make it out of Eswatini's black site. He was nervous about speaking out—the Trump Administration had described him to the public as "barbaric," and he worried about the repercussions for his family. But, eventually, he decided that he would talk to a journalist for the first time.

When I reached Etoria, I learned that he had been my near-neighbor in Brooklyn. We spent our weekends in the same parts of Prospect Park, enjoying the people-watching. "I love Eastern Parkway—just sitting on the benches under the trees in the summertime, watching kids go by on their bikes and families hanging out," he told me. "New York is what I know."

When Etoria showed up to his *ICE* check-in last June, he knew immediately that things had changed. "I gave my passport to the officer, and he said, 'Step to the back wall,'" he told me. At 26 Federal Plaza, in lower Manhattan, he slept on the floor. "That place was too filthy for any human being to live," he said. From there, he was punted between *ICE* facilities and finally taken to the El Paso Service Processing Center, in Texas.

The true shock came soon after. On July 14th, Etoria was called down to intake with a group of men of diverse nationalities. He assumed that they'd be deported to their respective countries. They

walked onto the tarmac. “For real, I thought I was going to Jamaica,” Etoria told me. “Why would I think I was going anywhere else?”

The men boarded the *ICE* flight in shackles. The idea of returning to Jamaica felt, to Etoria, like “an unimaginable loss.” Someone asked, “Where are we going?” An agent replied, “The first flight is six hours, and then the second flight is eight hours.” Etoria felt his stomach drop. They stopped in Djibouti, where the men were transferred onto a military cargo plane. “It was like something you’d see in a movie, as if we were some notorious gangsters,” Etoria said. Roughly a half hour before that flight landed, the men learned their true destination. “The officer came around wanting us to sign a paper saying we agreed to go to Eswatini,” he told me. “I’d never even heard of Eswatini!” Panicked, he refused to sign.

“We all expressed the same disconnect from reality in that moment,” Etoria said. He told me that an *ICE* official had snapped paparazzi-style photographs as he stepped off the plane, still wearing chains. He felt like an unwilling prop in an ad for the Trump Administration. “You could tell it was a charade, all for show, so that they could use it and say, ‘Look what we did,’ ” he said.

“To be honest,” Etoria added, “it helped me imagine how the slaves might have felt, going to another land in shackles and chains—that loneliness, that disconnect, that sense of loss.”

Local guards shuttled the group to Matsapha Correctional Complex, a maximum-security prison. No one explained the grounds on which the men were being held. At first, Etoria said, the guards treated the U.S. deportees with suspicion. “They’d seen a military plane come onto their land—the kind of plane that drops bombs on people and takes troops to war—and they were told, ‘These five men are people to be afraid of.’ But, over time, we conversed with the guards, and they could see that they’d been lied

to about who we really were.” Soon, the guards gave the men a chessboard. They fielded Etoria’s complaints about the food, although it hardly improved. “For the first three days, we ate only porridge, and I raised my hand real quick and said, ‘No more!’ ” Etoria told me.

The Eswatini Five had only occasional monitored calls to their families and little to no access to their lawyers in the U.S. Mostly, they spent time in their cells. “We looked up at the ceiling a lot, and we talked about our families,” Etoria said. “We tried to help each other release the thoughts that were inside of us that were screaming to come out, the things that meant the most to us, and family was the No. 1 thing. The second-biggest thing was realizing that our lives had meaning—that we weren’t the bad, bad people that society had told us we were.”



“Everything we’re eating was trapped by Rufus.”

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

Weeks passed. One day in late summer, officials from the International Organization for Migration visited the group. They brought “mental-health” provisions: badminton equipment, a basketball, Ping-Pong paddles, and five novels. Etoria stressed that what he really needed for his mental health was freedom. Soon

after, he said, I.O.M. informed him that he would soon be able to return to Jamaica. On September 21st, he boarded the first in a series of four commercial flights that brought him to the island. No one knows how much money the U.S. government spent on this elaborate detention detour to Africa.

In Jamaica, Etoria has wondered about the men left behind: the Eswatini Four. They remain imprisoned without explanation, and without clear paths to repatriation. Ten more people have been added to the group. “There is something sinister going on here, and something has been taken from my spirit that I might never get back,” Etoria said. In mid-October, his Cuban cellmate, Roberto Mosquera del Peral, began a monthlong hunger strike. “Roberto is an unbelievably kind dude, who likes to analyze stuff with a critical mind,” Etoria said. Mosquera del Peral’s attorney, Alma David, of Novo Legal Group, told me during the strike, “I’m very worried—he has been in pain and looks very thin.”

Eswatini has continued to rebuff Nhlabatsi’s attempts to meet with the detained people. He finally won his habeas case in front of a judge, only to have the government file an appeal. In response to Mosquera del Peral’s hunger strike, Eswatini issued a press release. “The third country national was found to be in good health and spirits,” it read. “He did, however, mention that he was currently fasting and praying because he was missing his family.”

When we spoke recently, Etoria was hunkered down without electricity in the home where he’s been living in Jamaica. His phone was dying, and Hurricane Melissa—a Category 5 storm—was headed toward the island. He worried about not having stocked up on groceries. “I’ll just rough it out,” he told me. Since landing in Jamaica, he said, he has felt completely lost. “I’m trying to catch up, trying to fit in, but, at my age, it’s not easy to get a job here,” he said.

Etoria hopes that, at some point, he can confront the U.S. government about his treatment. But, even more so, he wishes that he could speak to African leaders, as a Black man who feels he was sent across the Middle Passage in reverse. “I want to say, to all the African nations who are taking people into their country in chains and shackles, it’s not a good picture,” he said. “You’re hurting these people, spiritually and emotionally. I don’t just want Eswatini to hear it. I want Ghana to hear it. I want South Sudan to hear it. I want Rwanda and Uganda to hear it.” He paused. “Please,” Etoria said, “let the Trump Administration take care of its own dirty work.”

On a recent evening, I spoke again to Meredyth Yoon, who told me that another deportation flight from the U.S. to Ghana—she believed it to be the fourth—had just landed. Among the latest deportees was a Maryland nurse named Rabbiatu Kuyateh, who’d lived in the U.S. for roughly thirty years and has never faced criminal charges. Kuyateh had won withholding of removal, convincing an immigration judge that she’d likely face serious harm in her native Sierra Leone. Even so, she was shackled and sent to Ghana, where she and others were held under armed guard at a hotel near Accra. Yoon had been on the phone with Kuyateh and other detainees, she said, when Ghanaian officials came to the hotel and dragged Kuyateh away. They put her on a flight to Sierra Leone.

Since we’d first spoken, Yoon had been trying to defend the rights of dozens of people who’d been deported to Ghana. In mid-September, she and her colleagues had appeared in U.S. district court, where they argued that members of the first group of deportees should be returned, swiftly, to America. At the time, eleven men and women were still held at Bundase Training Camp; they were hearing rumors that at any moment they could be sent back to their home countries, from which the U.S. government had promised them protection. “There is still time to act,” Lee Gelernt, who had joined the case from the American Civil Liberties Union,

had pleaded. “We would implore you to do some kind of relief now.”

The Justice Department attorney, Elianis Perez, did not contest the basic fact of the removals. Instead, she insisted that the U.S. had obtained “diplomatic assurances” that Ghana would comply with the Convention Against Torture and other safeguards. Yet one member of the group—a bisexual Gambian man who had been granted protection under *CAT* by a U.S. immigration judge—had already been returned to his home country.

“How is that O.K.?” the judge, Tanya Chutkan, asked.

“Your Honor, the United States is not saying that this is O.K.,” Perez replied. “What the government has been trying to explain to the court is that the United States does not have the power to tell Ghana what to do.”

Two days later, Chutkan issued her decision. The deportations “appear to be part of a pattern and widespread effort to evade the government’s legal obligations by doing indirectly what it cannot do directly,” she wrote. Even so, she concluded, her “hands are tied.” The court lacked the jurisdiction to prevent Yoon and Gelernt’s clients from being deported by Ghana to their home countries. The resulting policy, Gelernt told me, is “unprecedented and wholly at odds with the humane discretion exercised by past Administrations of both parties.”

I wondered what would become of the terrified men and women I’d talked to in Bundase Training Camp. I soon found out. When I got hold of Jim, in early October, he and nine of the other people I’d spoken with had been placed in vehicles and driven out of the camp, to the border of Togo. Among them was Miriam, who feared torture or death if she was forced to return there, and the twenty-one-year-old Togolese woman who had also fled genital mutilation.

“Right now, we’re in Togo illegally!” Jim told me. He explained that Ghanaian immigration officials had left the group with Togolese officials who, rather than affording them proper documentation, had pushed them quietly across the border. “They passed us through the back door into Togo, but we aren’t invisible, and we’re an easy target for the cops,” he said. “We don’t speak the language here, and we have no money.” His family had tried to send him funds through Western Union. But he couldn’t easily obtain them, he said, because the U.S. government had confiscated his I.D. He and others in the group had to beg strangers to get the funds, for a cut of the cash.

Jim told me that he was trying to stay indoors, for fear of being detained or extorted by officials in Togo. But, on occasion, he’d been sneaking out to the ocean, to listen to the waves. He worried most about the Togolese women in their group. “They cried so helplessly, and they were scrambling and running for their lives,” Jim told me. “They’ve gone underground.”

A few days later, I spoke to Miriam, who was hiding in a boarding room. A local journalist had learned Miriam’s real name and published it on social media. Soon afterward, her cousin began receiving ominous calls from strangers, asking, “Where is Miriam?” She sobbed as we spoke.

“This morning, I drank a porridge, and it’s the only food I’ve had,” she told me. In her hiding place, she’d been rehashing her trajectory. She’d been shipped like cargo “from Arizona to Louisiana, and then Louisiana to Ghana, and then Ghana to Togo,” she said. “ICE treated us like animals, handcuffed us, and wouldn’t let us eat—just bread and water.”

At Bundase Training Camp, “they didn’t tell us that they would take us to Togo,” Miriam continued. She had tried to confront the Ghanaian officials as they shoved her group across the border. “Why are you doing this? You’re supposed to protect us, as a third

country!” Miriam pleaded. An officer, she told me, said, “Shut up. We have to respect the orders we were given.” Some of the detained men were told they’d be shot if they tried to escape.

Back in May, Miriam told me, she’d been elated to receive protection from a U.S. immigration judge. She thought that this offer of refuge was what defined the United States. It was true, I told her. After the last British ship left New York Harbor in 1783, George Washington and his officers famously made a toast: “May America be an Asylum to the persecuted of the earth!”

“As I’m talking to you right now, I don’t know what will happen to me,” Miriam said. But, for the moment, she had one wish: “I need other people to know that this is my true condition. I am not free.” ♦

Sarah Stillman, a staff writer, won a 2024 Pulitzer Prize for her investigation into the legal doctrine of felony murder. She runs the Investigative Reporting Lab at Yale, and was named a MacArthur Fellow in 2016.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/disappeared-to-a-foreign-prison>

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In Northern Scotland, the Neolithic Age Never Ended

Megalithic monuments in the otherworldly Orkney Islands remain a fundamental part of the landscape.

By [Alex Ross](#)

November 24, 2025



Sheep linger at the Stones of Stenness, the remnants of a ceremonial circle.

Photograph by Jim Richardson

The Stones of Stenness, a brood of lichen-encrusted megaliths in the far north of the British Isles, could be mistaken for a latter-day work of land art, one with ominous overtones. The stones stand between two lochs on the largest of the Orkney Islands, off the northeastern tip of mainland Scotland. Three colossal planks of sandstone, ranging in height from fifteen feet nine inches to eighteen feet eight inches, rise from the grass, along with a smaller stone that has the bent shape of a boomerang. In contrast to the rectilinear blocks at Stonehenge, the Stenness megaliths are thin slabs with angled upper edges, like upside-down guillotine blades. Remnants of a ceremonial circle, they are placed twenty or more feet apart, creating a chasm of negative space. The monoliths in

“2001: A Space Odyssey” inevitably come to mind. Given that the stones were erected five thousand years ago by a culture that left no trace of its belief system, it is unwise to project modern aesthetics onto them. Still, they can be seen only with living eyes.

During a recent visit to Orkney, I kept returning to Stenness, at all hours and in all weather. On drizzly days, with skies hanging low, the stones resemble ladders to nowhere. In bright sun, hidden colors emerge: streaks of blue against gray; white and green spatters of lichen; yellowish stains indicating the presence of limonite, an iron ore. Pockmarks and brittle edges show the abrading action of millennia of wind and rain. I watched as tourists approached the stones and hesitantly touched them, as if afraid. When I put my own hands on the rock, I felt no obvious emanations, though I did not feel nothing. One evening, I leaned on a fence as the sun went down, the horizon glowing orange against a cobalt sky. A whitish mist stole in from the lochs, encircling a nearby house until only its roof and chimneys remained. Spectral shapes caught my eye: sheep were trimming the grass around the site. When they detected my presence, they streamed away en masse, fading into the fog, which matched their coats. The stones loomed as black silhouettes. I felt a sweet shiver of the uncanny.

The Stones of Stenness are part of one of Europe’s richest archeological landscapes—the legacy of a Neolithic society that flourished between 3800 and 2200 B.C., after the introduction of agriculture but before the advent of metal tools. A mile to the northwest, on higher ground, is another mesmerizing assemblage of megaliths in open space: the Ring of Brodgar, a stone circle some three hundred and forty feet in diameter. To the east is the tomb at Maeshowe, where, beneath a grass-covered mound, Stenness-size slabs anchor a thirteen-foot-high chamber with a corbelled roof. Like Stonehenge and other Late Stone Age sites, Maeshowe has a solar alignment: on the midwinter solstice, the setting sun shines down the entrance passage. Together, these monuments, which are

part of a *unesco* World Heritage complex called the Heart of Neolithic Orkney, seem to constitute a minimalist holy land.

Ruins can be deceiving, though. We fall in love with their stark grandeur and forget the life that flowed around them. In 2003, a momentous discovery on the Ness of Brodgar, a narrow isthmus just north of Stenness, transformed perceptions of prehistoric Orkney. A plow traversing a property called Brodgar Farm snagged against a five-foot-long stone that exhibited signs of human handiwork. Arnie Tait and Ola Gorie, the farm's owners, sensed the importance of the find; Gorie is a jewelry designer who has long employed traditional Orkney motifs. Archeologists were alerted, excavations began, and a sprawling settlement—including several structures that were stunningly sophisticated in execution—materialized from the earth.

After my first stop at Stenness, I went to meet the archeologist Nick Card, the excavation director of the Ness of Brodgar project. He and his team are based in a small house south of Brodgar Farm, known as Dig H.Q. A laconic, mildly grizzled sixty-seven-year-old Scot, Card grew up in Ayrshire, to the south, but has lived in Orkney for three decades. He served me coffee in the kitchen, from which the previous homeowner, Carole Hoey, had observed the historic plow episode of 2003. After twenty summers, the dig had ended, and the trenches were being filled in. Nevertheless, some structures remained visible—lower parts of walls, hearths, clay flooring, drains, and other evidence of a prosperous daily life.

“This part of Orkney used to be seen as a ritual landscape,” Card told me. “We hadn’t found many signs of habitation—it seemed like the sacred had been kept apart from the domestic. Then, in the eighties, my colleague Colin Richards discovered a settlement at Barnhouse farm, down by Stenness. After that came the Ness, which was really next level. The area was much more densely populated than we thought. Something new and strange was going on here back then.”

We walked over to Structure 27, a single-room edifice measuring forty-nine by thirty-eight feet. The masonry of the walls, rising to about two feet, was so impeccable that it looked freshly done.

“People passing by would sometimes ask what kind of thing we were building,” Card said. “We’d have to tell them it was thousands of years old.” He went on, “We found stone slate for a roof, the kind that’s still used in traditional buildings, but we didn’t find postholes for timber supports. So they must have had a roof truss resting on the walls—an A-frame. If you read architectural history, it says that the Greeks invented the A-frame, but—Tam, out!” Tam, Card’s black-and-white border collie, had jumped in the trench and was poised to undertake an unauthorized dig. “This wasn’t just thrown together,” Card continued. “It was planned, laid out, engineered. It’s a piece of architecture in every sense.”

Back at Dig H.Q., Card showed me a few of the hundreds of thousands of specimens that had been collected at the Ness. One was a polished, dark-streaked stone, with a perfectly drilled hole, which had been the head of a mace. It was fashioned from gneiss, a hard metamorphic rock. Boring the hole would have taken a very long time. Several gneiss samples found at the Ness can be traced back to rock formations more than a hundred miles to the west, in the Outer Hebrides. Pitchstone was brought in from Arran, two hundred and fifty miles south. “This wasn’t an isolated community,” Card explained. “You see artistic designs comparable to what you find in the Boyne Valley in Ireland. People must have come from all over. The trash heaps contain peat ash from innumerable fires, thousands of cattle bones from enormous feasting events. It’s conspicuous consumption gone mad.”

Orkney is one of those places where the veil over the distant past seems to lift. At the Ness of Brodgar, we can glimpse an ambitious, gregarious culture, perhaps a bit decadent, mixing the sacred and the profane. Mountains of data have identified the DNA of cattle bones, the microscopic qualities of soil, the geomagnetic properties of ash. Geometric designs hint at the contours of the Neolithic

imagination. Beyond a certain point, though, the veil drops again. We cannot know who these people were or what they had in mind. “Not a word or a name comes out of the silence,” the Orkney poet and novelist George Mackay Brown wrote of the prehistoric landscape. “We wander clueless through immense tracts of time.” It is a good way to travel.

The Orkney archipelago possesses a singular aura—luminous, changeable, dreamlike. I first fell under its spell in 1985, when I visited the islands as an archeologically curious teen-ager. Standing in the middle of the Mainland, as the biggest isle is known, you could be somewhere in Nebraska, with green fields undulating in all directions. Because of the Gulf Stream, the climate is much more temperate than at other locations along the fifty-ninth parallel, such as Stockholm, St. Petersburg, and Homer, Alaska. At ocean’s edge, though, pastoral repose gives way to geological violence. Sheets of rock crash into the water at sharp angles or plunge straight down. On the isle of Hoy, sandstone cliffs rise more than a thousand feet above the sea.

Orcadians, as residents of the islands are known, dislike hearing their world described as “remote.” They will ask, “Remote from what?” Yet they value their apartness. The genetic makeup of the population indicates extensive migrations from Scandinavia. The Norse ruled Orkney from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries A.D., when the territory passed into Scottish hands as part of a wedding-dowry transaction. Norse heritage remains popular: Viking festivals draw throngs, bushy beards are de rigueur. The islands’ flag is essentially the Norwegian flag with a splash of royal Scottish yellow. The Scottish National Party polls poorly; the Conservatives are all but nonexistent. Old-fashioned Liberal politics prevail. Proposals for greater autonomy, even for a secession in order to become part of Norway, have been floated.

For a place of only around twenty-two thousand inhabitants, Orkney has an impressive cultural tradition. The poet and translator

Edwin Muir, a Mainland farmer's son, won the admiration of T. S. Eliot and helped introduce Kafka to English readers. After Muir came George Mackay Brown, who, at first glance, is an archetypal "local" writer: he was born in Orkney in 1921, died there in 1996, and seldom looked beyond the islands for inspiration. Yet Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, among others, insisted that Brown, whose archaic-modern style telescopes entire epochs into a few flinty lines, belongs among the major twentieth-century bards. In "Brodgar Poems," Brown evokes how generation after generation grew up in the Ring's shadow:

She who threw marigolds over you, stone,
A child,
She is a crone now with cindery breath.
You, stone,
Two younger stones curve beyond you.

In 1971, the English composer Peter Maxwell Davies became so transfixed by Brown's writing that he moved to a croft on Hoy and began producing works inspired by the author's texts and by island lore. In his 1973 piece "Stone Litany," Davies set to music some Norse runes that were inscribed on the walls of Maeshowe in the twelfth century: "Crusaders broke into Maeshowe. Hlíf, the Earl's housekeeper, carved." You hear the somewhat desperate insolence of the medieval intruders, and, at the same time, the cosmic indifference of the Neolithic tomb.

Such time-collapsing epiphanies come easily because Orkney is strewn with detritus from every stage of human history. U-boat barriers and anti-aircraft batteries still dot the area around Scapa Flow, the former base of the British fleet. A half-dozen German battleships and cruisers lie at the bottom of the harbor, having been scuttled there at the end of the First World War. The landscape also offers up eighteenth-century farmhouses, lairds' castles, Norse churches, Iron Age forts, and Bronze Age barrows alongside the Neolithic tombs, settlements, and standing stones—thousands of

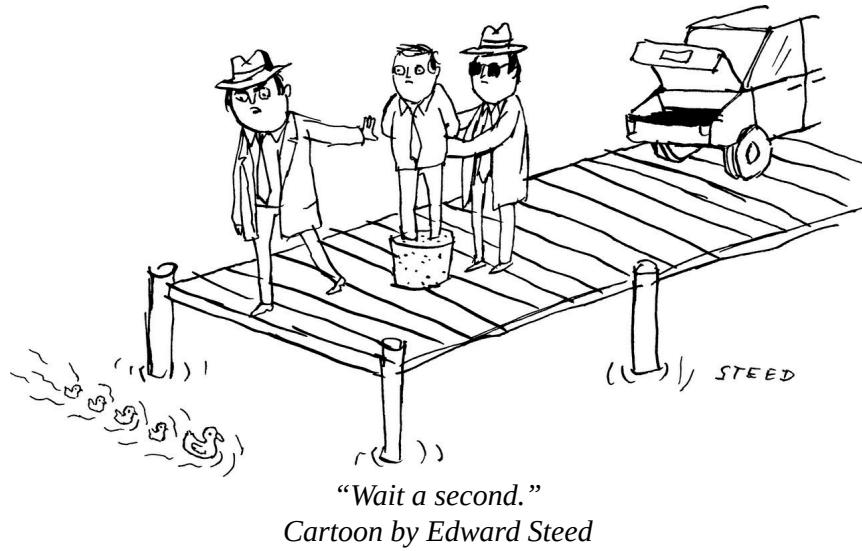
sites altogether, across twenty-odd inhabited islands. Many prehistoric structures were pillaged for rock, but a remarkable number are intact. At Skara Brae, northwest of the Ness, you can see a gloriously well-preserved complex of stone houses, complete with beds, seats, cupboards, and, as Indiana Jones once had occasion to mention, a drainage system.

Tom Muir, an Orkney-born writer and storyteller, can explain why so much of the deep past was left alone. “The simple reason is fear,” Muir told me. He was sitting in his study in Stromness, a pungently atmospheric fishing town that attracts Orkney’s artistic class. On his bookshelves, archeological works sat beside tomes on Greek, Norse, and Celtic mythology. “You don’t mess around with the other world,” he went on, with only a hint of a smile. “Fairies—trows, as we call them—were said to live in mounds. Children were warned away from going near one. The trows might steal you away and leave a changeling in your place. Those who suffered from dementia were said to be ‘in the mound.’ When people passed the Comet Stone, near the Ring of Brodgar, they’d doff their caps, and if you asked them why, they’d say they don’t know—it’s just done. It was about saving your own skin, which, in turn, saved the site.” This protective aura of spookiness goes far back. According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, the islands’ medieval chronicle, when a Norse leader and his soldiers took refuge in Maeshowe during a blizzard, two of the men went insane.

A telling incident took place at Stenness in 1814. An oblivious farmer decided to get rid of the stones, which then numbered six, and succeeded in blowing up two of them before the authorities intervened. Horrified Orcadians ostracized the miscreant and twice tried to burn down his home. Alexander Peterkin, Orkney’s learned sheriff, deplored such vigilante behavior but insisted that any attack on historical sites was an attack on collective memory. “A link in the chain of our associations is broken,” Peterkin wrote in 1822. “Something should therefore be done for preserving these stones for the future.” Sixty years later, Stenness, Brodgar, and Maeshowe

came under the aegis of a new U.K. law, the Ancient Monuments Protection Act.

Orkney's prehistoric heritage is now more prized than feared. Muir puts it this way: "People like to think—even if they have no interest in archeology whatsoever—that the place that they come from was a bit special at one time, even if you have to go back a thousand years or five thousand years to find it." To some extent, the interest is pragmatic: the Heart of Neolithic Orkney attracts hundreds of thousands of tourists each year, many of them day-tripping from cruise ships. But the Ness of Brodgar also became a native obsession. Hundreds of Orcadians volunteered at the dig, and local businesses supplied food, lodging, tools, and tires (to hold down tarps between seasons). Craftspeople stopped by to admire the work of their long-deceased predecessors. A stonemason came to examine Structure 27, where the walls gently curve and meet at an angle of a hundred and five degrees, rather than ninety degrees. Afterward, he said, "I've never been more proud to be Orcadian."



Arnie Tait and Ola Gorie were hardly alone in their experience on Brodgar Farm: most landowners eventually stumble across an overgrown ruin or a smattering of artifacts. Traces of an Iron Age fort could be seen in the back yard of my B. and B., at Corrigall Farm. Maps of Orkney by the Ordnance Survey, the government mapping agency, are speckled with innumerable inscriptions in

Gothic type: “standing stones,” “cairn,” “tumuli,” and the like. Scotland’s right-to-roam law allows recreational access to many private lands, meaning that archeological tourists can visit these sites, as long as they show respect. As a paranoid American, I hesitated to exercise this right, picturing someone coming at me with a shotgun. But only the cattle are likely to cause trouble. At the dilapidated Ring of Bookan, a herd of bulls trundled toward me and bellowed, forcing me to retreat.

Such expeditions can turn into a Buddhistic exercise in enlightened pointlessness. You trudge for an hour in cold rain, slipping in mud and ripping your jeans, only to find a few fallen stones buried in shrubbery and cow manure. Sometimes, though, the reward is gasp-inducing. When, in 1985, I went to the Tomb of the Eagles, on South Ronaldsay, the sea fog was so thick that I could see only a few feet ahead. I was following Ronnie Simison, the farmer who had discovered the tomb, and he had to holler to indicate the way. Inside, crisp stonework was on display. By the time I emerged, the fog had lifted, and I found myself looking out over a natural amphitheatre toward jagged cliffs and a seething ocean. Once again, a spectacular scene is being staged, to unknown ends.

The construction of the Stones of Stenness may have required around fifty thousand hours of labor, as slabs were extracted from quarries several miles away, transported by wooden sleds or some other conveyance, and hauled upright. Why did Neolithic peoples expend so much energy on undertakings of this kind? The standard explanation used to be that the diffusion of agricultural practices from the Fertile Crescent, starting around 10,000 B.C., brought about year-round settlements, complex forms of civic organization, and a symbolic representation of power in the form of large-scale projects. But the excavation of temple-like buildings at Göbekli Tepe and other sites in Turkey overturned that narrative; those structures, dating from as early as 9500 B.C., had been made by predominantly nomadic groups. The impulse to do extravagant things with stone must have had deeper, obscurer roots. Ultimately,

the question of motive may be tautological, given the species in question. We humans routinely throw ourselves into enterprises that lack rational purpose: stone circles, cathedrals, opera, football, archeology itself.

Every age fashions the Neolithic period in its own image. The Romantics conjured gatherings of noble savages; Walter Scott, in “The Pirate,” compared the Stones of Stenness to “phantom forms of antediluvian giants.” Early twentieth-century archeologists looked for signs of social hierarchy or, alternatively, evidence of a lost egalitarian utopia. The space age brought a spate of cosmological interpretations. At around the time the astronomer Gerald Hawkins hailed Stonehenge as a “Neolithic computer,” a retired Scottish engineer named Alexander Thom advanced even more convoluted theories about “lunar observatories” in Scotland. At the Ring of Brodgar, Thom claimed, lunar motions were tracked over a period of a hundred and seventy-eight years. Regrettably, Thom’s methods suffered from selection bias: many, if not most, of his astronomical alignments appear to be coincidental.

These days, amid resurgent nationalism, archeologists often emphasize the quasi-cosmopolitan character of Neolithic life—the way ideas and goods were exchanged among far-flung cultures. Many megalithic sites are by the sea, marking out a maritime network that stretched from Iberia and France to Ireland and the British Isles. Orkney’s prominence in that circuit is evident in the vogue for Grooved Ware, a style of pottery that originated there and then spread across Britain and Ireland. The bowls are flat-bottomed, making them more practical than the rounded ware that had earlier prevailed, and are decorated with intricate patterns recalling designs on Irish tombs. Grooved Ware is seen as far south as the area around Stonehenge, where local houses also recall Orcadian models. Recent studies suggest that the Altar Stone, a six-ton sandstone slab at Stonehenge, was quarried in northern Scotland and then transported five hundred miles, probably by boat. Almost nothing is known of Neolithic ships, but the

woodworking must have been as excellent as the masonry in Structure 27.

Travellers navigating the sea lanes likely spread word of major ceremonial centers. People in Orkney surely knew about Stonehenge, and vice versa. The presence of gneiss mace heads in both places possibly honors a megalithic complex called Callanish, on the isle of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides. That majestic array of green-gray gneiss sentinels may be the most conceptually elaborate Neolithic monument in Europe. In 1909, an Irish naval officer named Boyle Somerville surveyed Callanish and noticed a feature that is unlikely to be accidental: every 18.6 years, observers positioned at the end of an avenue would have seen the moon slide horizontally behind the stones at the center of the site. The builders of Callanish could not have known that Lewisian gneiss is among the oldest rock on earth, dating back three billion years, but they may have sensed it.

Almost every year, something new surfaces in the Orkney soil. In 2023, a team began excavating a Neolithic tomb at a farm called Blomuir, in East Mainland. The dig went on for two more summers. Leading the project were two English-born archeologists: Vicki Cummings, a professor at Cardiff University, and Hugo Anderson-Whymark, a senior curator at the National Museums Scotland, in Edinburgh. Students from the Archaeology Institute at the University of the Highlands and Islands (U.H.I.) were on hand to watch and assist. I joined the group for several days.

At first sight, Blomuir was unprepossessing: a shallow cavity atop a glacial knoll, within which only some low fragments of walls were visible. In the nineteenth century, most of the stone was carried off to build a farmhouse. Yet enough is left to indicate a formidable tomb of the Maeshowe type, with a high central chamber surrounded by six smaller cells. When Maeshowe was excavated, starting in 1861, no human remains were found, probably because Vikings and other intruders had emptied the site.

Blomuir has proved an excitingly different story: some two dozen skeletons were found in situ, exactly where they were placed more than five thousand years ago. In one side cell, a figure was in a curled-up position, its left arm lying against its rib cage. Almost touching its skull was the skull of a second body, clearly that of a child. They looked as though they were sleeping on their sides. You could sense the tenderness with which the bodies had been laid down.

Sam Walsh, an osteoarcheologist from the University of Lancashire, was crouched over the remains, preparing to remove them for study. She was dressed, like most people at the dig, in a knit cap, a high-visibility all-weather jacket, and waterproof pants. She picked up a disk of bone lying at the bottom of the larger figure's legs. "The epiphysis is separate," she said to two students, who were squatting next to her. "The long bones haven't fused with it yet, meaning that this individual was still growing. Probably a teen-ager. The teeth are in good shape—no sugar in the diet." She then pointed to the teeth in the second skull. "Two child molars, one permanent molar. Probably about six years old." Walsh cleaned the bones with a brush, lifted them with a spatula or a stick, and then placed them in specimen containers. After an hour or two, the sleepers were gone.

Anderson-Whymark became aware of the tomb a few years ago, when he came across an 1896 article in the *Orkney Herald*, reporting that the antiquarian James Walls Cursiter had learned of artifacts being found at Blomuir, including a "finely polished hammer head of gneiss." Cursiter's field notes pinpointed the tomb's location: "150 yards East of Blowmuir." A geophysical survey revealed an anomaly at exactly that spot.

A chilly drizzle threatened to turn into steady rain, which would require the skeletons to be covered. "It's likely to be bucketing down by one," Anderson-Whymark told the team. "We need to get as much done as we can." Team members sifted through nine cubic

metres of backfill, searching for bits of bone or pottery. The students made sketches of the site, honing their faculties of observation. One of them was Kat Nickola, who writes for *Stars & Stripes*, the U.S. military newspaper, and who had earned a master's in archeology at U.H.I. As she drew the stonework in a notebook, Nickola told me, "I think you get a sense of how things were visualized and made by copying them."

Although a few interesting objects had turned up—notably, a handsome stone ball, of unknown purpose—the human remains were the main event. Cummings, the Cardiff professor, said, "We have a strong feeling about relatedness among these people. Last year, we had a case where one person's hand had been very carefully placed upon another person's knee. This year, we see skulls set down close together." There were few signs of aberrant mortality or violence. "In the early Neolithic, they were always bashing each other over the heads and shooting each other with arrows," Cummings said. "Things weren't so bad in the late Neolithic." Still, it wasn't an easy life: fused vertebrae testify to severe back problems, and many died young.

Antonia Thomas, a specialist in prehistoric visual culture at the Archaeology Institute, arrived to examine markings inside the tomb. Thomas has a knack for picking out incisions that have gone unnoticed. Neolithic art in Orkney tends to be angular and abstract—less florid than the spirals seen in Irish tombs. Thomas has catalogued chevrons, zigzags, saltires, opposed triangles, lozenges, and lattices. The patterns occasionally resemble the doodles of Paul Klee.

Thomas hadn't visited the site before, and she marvelled to Cummings, "You think everything in Orkney has been found, but there's always more." She zeroed in on a two-foot-wide slab of flagstone resting atop a wall in the north cell. Scratched on the stone's outer face were three short, sharp parallel lines. On the top,

a lattice of faint lines ran parallel and perpendicular to the outer face.

“You can tell that they are marking the stones as they go along,” Thomas told me. “The top of this one would have been completely covered by the next one. We saw a lot of this ‘hidden’ art at the Ness, too.” Needless to say, it’s unclear why the builders worked in this way, but Thomas believes that in the Neolithic mind-set the finished product mattered less than the process. Marking the stone imbued it with a kind of life. Medieval carvers had a not dissimilar approach to design, fashioning grotesques for obscure nooks in cathedrals.

The excavation was completed this past summer, but a welter of material awaits study. Preliminary radiocarbon dating suggests that the burials were performed sometime between 3300 and 3100 B.C. Analysis of ancient DNA will reveal whether those clustered bodies belonged to the same family. Cummings hopes to create a “family tree,” like one that she and others developed for Hazleton North, a chambered tomb in Gloucestershire. “At Hazleton North, we found one main guy who had offspring with four different women, which tells you something,” Cummings said. “He and three of the women were buried at the tomb along with at least seven of their sons, and some of *their* offspring.”

I returned to Blomuir two days later. The floor of the tomb had been swept and tidied. Anderson-Whymark was taking pictures with a camera affixed to a telescopic pole, gathering data for a 3-D digital model of the site. Tom O’Brien, an Orkney photographer who plays in a punk band called Dirty Røtters, had launched a camera-equipped drone to map the area from above. No skeletons were left. It struck me that every excavation is also an act of destruction: much is learned, but the status quo is lost. Then again, much else waits in the earth for future archeologists, who will have even more refined methods at their disposal. A geophysical survey

shows anomalies all over the field around Blomuir. An unknown settlement could come to light.

Toward the end of my Orkney stay, I stood with the archeologist Mark Edmonds at the Ring of Brodgar—twenty-six megaliths and assorted stumps arranged in a nearly perfect circle, with causeways on opposing sides leading over a circular ditch. We had a commanding view of the Ness of Brodgar, the two lochs, the Stones of Stenness, and the green mound of Maeshowe. If Stenness is a cool enigma, Brodgar invites interpretation, speculation, storytelling. Each pillar seems to have its own personality. As you walk around the circumference, the stones gather and retreat in quirky groups, with vistas shifting behind them.

“They’re all Devonian sandstone and flagstone,” Edmonds said. “But, when you go up close, you see enormous variety—in size, in shape, in physical texture. Some look like a book that’s been left on a windowsill and gotten damp—the pages open up. Others are so tight and dense that the weather will never do anything to them. In the Neolithic, they understood that variety, and they brought in rock from at least half a dozen sources—some from quarries to the north of Skara Brae, some from that ridge you see beyond Maeshowe, some from places farther around the Mainland. The geology of the circle ties the islands together.”

It was also a place where people came together. “Some of the mounds you see all around were made in the Neolithic, and we think they served as viewing platforms—as performance platforms,” Edmonds explained. “You can picture people from all over the islands—maybe a thousand or more—gathering in this great bowl, camping, putting up temporary shelters, tethering their cattle, exchanging news, exchanging gifts, holding tournaments.”

Edmonds, who is sixty-six, has a wiry mop of silvery hair not unlike that of the conductor Simon Rattle, and habitually wears striped Breton shirts. In 2009, he retired from the University of

York to settle with his family in Orkney, where he'd done decades of field work. He co-directs the Ness of Brodgar project and in his spare time helps run the West Side Cinema, an art-movie venue in Stromness. Showing that week was "Sisters with Transistors," a documentary about female innovators in electronic music.

When Edmonds first made his name, he belonged to a school of thought known as "post-processual" archeology, which caused controversy around the turn of the millennium. Much like post-structuralists in literary studies, post-processualists rejected master narratives and embraced a diversity of perspectives. For Edmonds, this meant reaching past the accumulation of data and seeking a way into the Neolithic mind. "I realized," he told me, "that, if I *really* wanted to find out what I thought about a past landscape or an artifact, I had to try to find the right way of working—poetry, painting, making music."

In 2019, Edmonds published "Orcadia: Land, Sea and Stone in Neolithic Orkney," which translates decades of research into fluid, lyrical prose. The narrative is organized around quotations from George Mackay Brown, who cherished the islands' prehistory. "It's not just that these texts are very beautiful," Edmonds said. "As an archeologist, I can learn from them." He singled out a Brown poem about Skara Brae, where snug, podlike homes conjure idyllic fantasies—you feel that, with a few trips to *ikea*, you could make them eminently livable. Brown, though, had a crucial insight. Years before the grand houses at the Ness were excavated, he intuited that Skara Brae had been on the margins of a bigger social order:

Here in our village in the west
We are little regarded.
The lords of tilth and loch
Are Quarrying (we hear)
Great stones to make a stone circle . . .
They come here from Birsay
To take our fish for taxes. Otherwise

We are left in peace
With our small fires and pots.

In “Orcadia,” Edmonds quotes these lines and proposes that Skara Brae was “caught up in the cycles of exchange, ceremony, feasting and feuding that lay at the heart of the wider political process.”

Although Edmonds has a poetic streak, he doesn’t sentimentalize the past. Visitors to the Ness, he said, often pictured the Neolithic era “as a golden age, where these very sophisticated structures were built consensually, in some form of primitive communism.” He continued, “People are nostalgic for a world without hierarchies and classes. In reality, I suspect the Ness was not like that at all. It’s hard to believe that a building like Structure 27 was open to just anybody. Terrifying amounts of labor would have been required, and I doubt that all of that was consensual.” Similarly, Edmonds said, tourists liked to believe that the residents of the Ness must have been living in sustainable balance with nature. “But then you look at these gigantic mounds of peat ash, thousands and thousands of tons. You see hundreds of cattle being slaughtered in one go. It’s a monument to *unsustainable* living.”

Neolithic society, as Edmonds depicts it, was beset by the same contradictions that mark every phase of human existence. Brown, in the preface to his “Brodgar Poems,” sagely commented, “People in A.D. 2000 are essentially the same as the stone-breakers and horizon-breakers of 3000 B.C.” Yet early Orcadians showed a compensatory reverence for their environment. At the Ring of Brodgar, Edmonds pointed at the slanted tops of the stones—the same shape that, at Stenness, had put me in mind of guillotines. “That’s just the way a piece of flagstone naturally splits when you remove it from the bed,” he said. Antonia Thomas, the Neolithic-art expert, has noted that many abstract-seeming scratchings on stones resemble geological patterns. These sites were built not in defiance of the land but in solidarity with it.

“The natural assumption with a place like Brodgar is that it was made to last,” Edmonds went on. “If stones are missing from the circle, it must be because of later interference. In fact, chances are that a lot of stones actually came down in the Neolithic. Some have solid foundations, but others aren’t set very deep. If you were concerned about long-term stability, you wouldn’t have done it that way. Which tells us that a place like Brodgar is really a performative space. The making of it is what counts. New stones are added, others are taken away. There’s a fluidity to it all. That’s what we can never see but have to try to imagine.”

I followed Edmonds down to the Ness, where the past was going back underground. An earthmover operator was filling in the excavation trenches and restoring Brodgar Farm to its former state. Structure 10, an imposing ceremonial building that I had earlier toured with Nick Card, was no longer visible.

“The question of permanence comes up here, too,” Edmonds said. “After a couple of generations, Structure 10 was suffering from subsidence and had to be partly rebuilt. Over time, it fell out of use. Finally, around 2400 B.C., it was sealed up in a huge ceremony that involved that massive slaughter of cattle.” Such “decommissioning” festivals were common in the Neolithic: they involved the razing of roofs, the trampling of pottery, the breaking of gneiss mace heads. Now, in an epochal recurrence that would have pleased George Mackay Brown, Structure 10 had been sealed up again.

The last redoubt was the masterly Structure 27. After greeting Card and Tam at Dig H.Q., Edmonds headed there to take some final soil samples. “Architecture with a capital ‘A,’ ” he said, as if still surprised by the sight. Less subsidence had occurred here. The megalithic slabs that anchor the building differ in level by only a few centimetres.

“The orange-looking earth is ash from peat fires,” Edmonds said, scraping at the trench wall with a trowel. “There’s a layer of burnt bone. That’s a big slab of pottery, which is decaying back into clay, leaving dark bits of igneous stone that were used for the temper of the ceramic.”

Becky Little, an artist who leads classes in traditional methods of working with clay, was visiting the Ness that day, and she came over to say hello. “We’re in our final days here,” Edmonds told her. “By the middle of next week, it will all be gone.” Little climbed into a trench and bent over a vertical stone that was incised with a web of typically Orcadian geometric patterns. “I hadn’t seen that when I was here before,” Little said.

“The light’s just perfect for it now,” Edmonds replied. Orkney was having one of its rapt pastoral hours, the afternoon sun fashioning a world of pure green and blue.

I stopped one last time at the Stones of Stenness, which have dwelled in my memory since I was seventeen. Despite the deluge of new data, the megaliths had given up none of their obdurate strangeness. They may not have been intended to last millennia, but, now that they have, they are stone doors through which the living try to touch the dead. I had the sense that my own life had been a couple of shadows flickering across the rock. Preoccupied with thoughts of time and death, and also worried about missing the ferry, I got into my car and disappeared. ♦

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/in-northern-scotland-the-neolithic-age-never-ended>

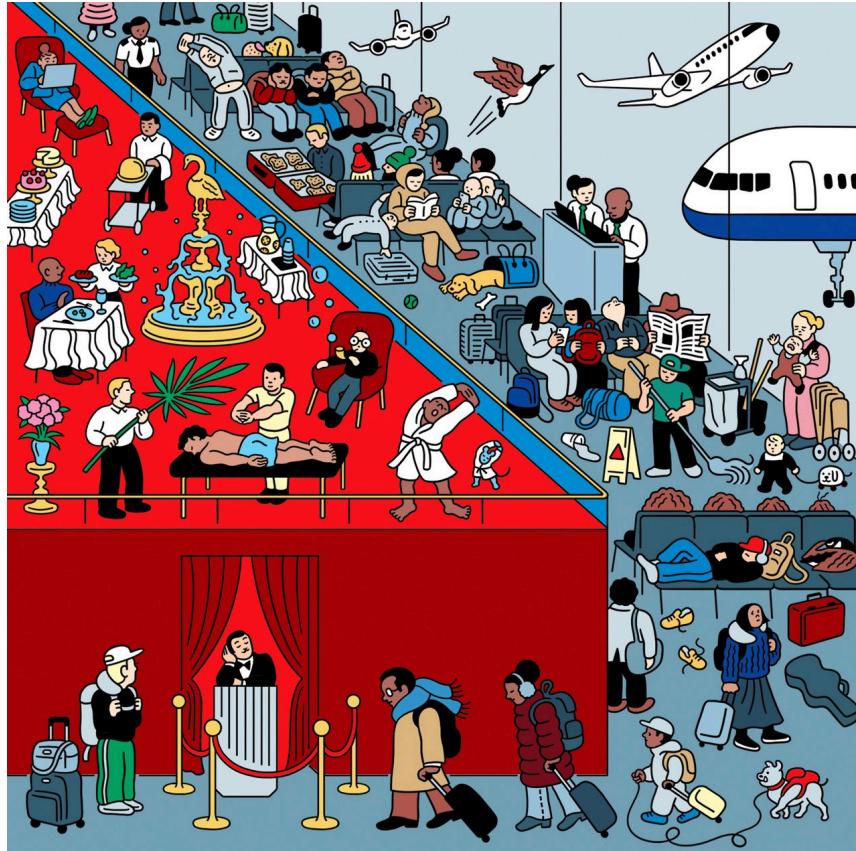
[Brave New World Dept.](#)

The Airport-Lounge Wars

When you're waiting for a flight, what's the difference between out there and in here?

By [Zach Helfand](#)

November 24, 2025



The thing about lounging is that it's impossible to lounge without worrying that someone, somewhere, is lounging better.

Illustration by Tomi Um

Airport lounges are about who gets in and who does not. There are lounges with hot dogs on rollers, lounges with pedicurists, and lounges with personal butlers. Ease of admission varies accordingly. Most people at an airport don't visit a lounge. If they did, it would kind of defeat the purpose. But we're getting there. Last year, Priority Pass, a membership network of mostly low- and mid-tier lounges, saw a thirty-one-per-cent increase in visits. By

2023, amid the post-pandemic travel boom, John F. Kennedy Airport had increased its lounge space in Terminal 4 alone to some seventy thousand square feet—about the size of Bill Gates’s mansion, Xanadu 2.0. Since then, the terminal has added another Xanadu’s worth. There are more than thirty-five hundred airport lounges in the world. Suvarnabhumi Airport, in Bangkok, has thirty-seven—roughly one for every two gates. Kasane, Botswana, a town of about ten thousand people, has an airport smaller than some lounges; it has an airport lounge. Three of the four lounges in Punta Cana’s airport have outdoor pools.

Some people fly just to visit a specific lounge. Others go to great lengths to get in. In 2016, at Changi Airport, in Singapore, a Malaysian businessman named Raejali Buntut missed a flight to Kuala Lumpur. He’d dozed off in the Plaza Premium Lounge. Instead of rebooking, he went to more lounges, hopping from one to the next, a total of thirty-one times. He didn’t leave the airport for eighteen days. He got into the lounges with a Priority Pass—a perk of his Citi credit card—and forged flight tickets. A staffer at one lounge eventually alerted the authorities. She received a special ceremony and a plaque. Buntut received a fraud conviction and was sent to jail, a place definitionally very similar to a lounge, but emotionally very different.

Recently, I endeavored to visit as many lounges as I could in the span of a week without leaving New York, like Buntut but without the fraud. I have a fondness for free stuff and a willingness, on occasion, to sit around and do nothing. I do not have status—of any kind—but I do have a Priority Pass. Thus I found myself at the HelloSky Lounge, in a busy corner of J.F.K.’s Terminal 4.

Like a D.M.V. with couches, HelloSky had ceiling tiles, almost no natural light, and carpet that will take centuries to decompose. There were cheap Halloween decorations everywhere. Everyone seemed thrilled to be there. I sat down in front of a paper cutout of

a witch. Nearby were Matt and Joann Gross, who were waiting for a flight to Memphis. “We’re going on a geriatric cruise down the Mississippi,” Joann explained. They were fans of HelloSky. “It’s really nice!” Joann said. “In here it’s less airporty.”

“It’s not very crowded,” Matt said. “I’ve been in some that are like being on the subway. You might as well sit out there.” He gestured to the concourse.

Kevin James, a history professor at the University of Guelph who has studied airport lounges, called their product offering “an enhanced experience of stasis”—waiting but better. Peter Greenberg, CBS News’ travel editor, who, fifty years ago, bought lifetime lounge passes with six airlines, said, “What they want people to say is ‘Well, it’s better than nothing.’ And that’s usually what they are—slightly better than nothing.” A lounge is the kind of place that puts fruit in your water. One better-than-nothing criterion to judge a lounge is its bathrooms. An Air France lounge in Paris has rest-room suites with padded leather walls and blown-glass chandeliers, like a jewel box for bowel movements. HelloSky had no bathrooms. The water was basic: lemons, cloudy, warm. I ate some mushy cheesecake bites out of a supermarket box labelled “Dianne’s Fine Desserts” and some meatballs (tasty), and ended my experience of stasis.

I’d heard that the Air India lounge had toilets, so I made my way over. The lounge looked like a college cafeteria and smelled of fenugreek. I loaded up a plate at the buffet. The cheesecake bite tasted familiar: Dianne’s. As I nibbled on a soggy samosa, I noticed that the two men next to me weren’t eating at all.

“We’re just waiting to get into the Virgin Clubhouse,” one of them, Ryan, said. Lounge access is governed by a complex array of memberships, airline alliances, and credit-card partnerships, with rules stipulating duration of stay and hours of entry. Sometimes you can pay to enter. (HelloSky charged fifty-nine dollars for three

hours.) The Virgin Atlantic Clubhouse is a different lounge at different times of day. “It’s a Priority Pass lounge from 5 A.M. to 1:30,” Ryan said, meaning that you get a bagel, yogurt, porridge. “From two to later, it’s the real clubhouse,” meaning sit-down service: venison burgers, pan-fried salmon, beet salad.

Ryan’s friend Danny explained that the Air India lounge served as a kind of pre-lounge for the Virgin lounge—a place to wait for the place you wait. They were on a Delta layover from Stockholm. Ryan is only twenty but said that he expected to hit a million miles soon. “I can’t count all of the lounges I’ve been to,” he said. “I’ve probably been to all the Delta clubs in Atlanta.” There are nine; some fliers do a club crawl, which involves finishing one drink at each Sky Club during a single layover. “Obviously, I’ve been to a lounge on every continent,” Ryan went on. (He doesn’t count Antarctica, though there is a lounge there, consisting of a complex of igloos on a private airstrip which advises you to “drink your champagne quick before it freezes!”) “One lounge gave me food poisoning, twice,” Ryan told me. “One lounge in China was just a room.” That was in Shangri-La, in the Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Oddly, he wasn’t a fan of lounges. “In Atlanta, it’s better to go to P. F. Chang’s,” he said.

Ryan was diamond-medallion tier on Delta, but this did not afford him admission to any of the three Delta lounges at J.F.K. “If you’re platinum or diamond medallion on Delta and travelling internationally, you’re allowed into the Virgin Clubhouse but not the Delta Sky Club, unless you’re flying Delta One,” he said. “Delta is very judgy. They make you feel like you did something special to get in, to be worthy.”



Chris Gural

“Behold—the future. We have flying cars and global peace, we’re free from illness, and we have working printers, microwaves that cook things in the center, and buildings shaped like eggs and hamburgers.”

Cartoon by Chris Gural

The men offered to try to get me into the Virgin lounge. “There’s no guarantees,” Ryan warned. The distracted attendant let all of us in. The lounge gleamed. There were polished wooden floors and a red felt pool table. One couch looked like it was made of red balloons. The water pitcher had slices of orange and lemon and sprigs of mint, spaced evenly around its perimeter, and it was ice-cold. A waitress brought me a duck tostada.

We used to spend a lot more time waiting than we do now. We waited for the mail, for the milkman, for the news, for a ship, for a sign, for the bread to rise, for the tide to ebb, for the cavalry, for good things to come. As people were always waiting for something, dedicating special areas in which to do so would’ve been ludicrous. In the sixteenth century, kings, Popes, Medicis, and other aristocrats began constructing rooms where courtiers would wait. In “The Antechamber: Toward a History of Waiting,” the historian Helmut Puff recounts that, when Mozart was twenty-one and seeking a patron, he complained in letters home about waiting in antechambers across Europe: an hour in Bavaria, another “whole hour” in France, a half hour in a frigid room of a duke and a

duchess. When the duchess finally appeared, he told her, “I’d be only too happy to play something but that it was now impossible, as my fingers were numb with cold.” Waiting can make one feel needy, like a baby. The waiter waits because the waitee is too important to.

By contrast, waiters wait in the airport lounge because they are important. The airport lounge was created in 1939 by American Airlines’ C.E.O., C. R. Smith, as a way to build support for commercial aviation. Smith called his first lounge, at LaGuardia, the Admirals Club. (He referred to his planes as the Flagship Fleet.) Membership was private, free, and at the company’s discretion. A manual listed those eligible: generals, congressmen, governors, judges, members of the U.N. Secretariat, “persons listed in Who’s Who.” New “Admirals” were commissioned in faux naval ceremonies. Often, they’d get a writeup in the local paper. Smith would send personal letters about Admiral business. (“Dear Admiral: As you know, we are not permitted to extend membership in the Admiral’s Club to the ladies. . . .”) He’d sign off, “C. R. Smith, Fleet Admiral.”

The lounge itself was homey: low ceilings, lamps, blue carpet (“Flagship Blue”), and red leather armchairs. “It’s the kind of room men enjoy, but in which women will feel at home,” a company brochure claimed. It was staffed by a young woman called the skipper and hidden within the airport; you’d ring a doorbell, then, once inside, play bridge, or maybe send a telegram. At Washington National, Admirals would come on Sundays, without a flight, just to drink.

Other lounges followed: Continental’s Presidents Club, T.W.A.’s Ambassadors Club. Braniff Airways’ president wrote to prospective members that “we would consider it an honor if you would become a member of the Braniff International Council.” Drinks could be more expensive than they were in the concourse. Exclusivity was the appeal. A Pan Am employee-training guide instructed that

members of its Clipper Club should be made to feel “*VERY V.I.P.*” Some very, very V.I.P.s got special tags that read “*EXCOR*,” meaning that they were deserving of extra courtesy. Within a few decades, there were half a million lounge members. The *Times* described them as “an arbitrarily created aristocracy of nabobs, moguls, tycoons and big cheeses whom the airlines like to indulge on the chance that they might eventually throw some business their way.” In 1959, the Civil Aeronautics Board, the industry regulator, began an investigation to determine whether American Airlines used undue influence to win a lucrative route between New York and San Francisco. One person involved testified that he’d been made an Admiral.

In 1965, a night-light salesman from Providence, Rhode Island, named Herbert Goldberger was flying on American Airlines with a layover in New York. There were lots of delays. Goldberger wanted a Scotch-on-the-rocks. His seatmate suggested the Admirals Club. He found it, after some searching, behind a door marked with a drawing of a hat that looked like Cap’n Crunch’s. The skipper asked if he was an Admiral. He asked to enlist. She sent him away.

“Frankly, I was humiliated by the assumption that I wasn’t as good as the next person,” Goldberger later recalled. He filed a discrimination complaint with the C.A.B., seeking to open the clubs to the paying public. The board seemed uninterested. Years passed. The airlines fought back. One American Airlines executive asked, “If we let just anybody become an Admiral, why would anybody want to be an Admiral?” Goldberger kept pushing his case. It was a lonely stand. C. R. Smith appeared at a hearing and said that Goldberger would be the end of lounges. Senators got involved. Walter Mondale was briefed with updates. Goldberger received hate mail. His wife and kids were hardly supportive. The case went into its eighth year. Goldberger would not relent.

Goldberger eventually won, and he became a minor cult hero. The *Times* labelled him “the James Meredith of the private airline

clubs.” “I never joined the Young Communist League, never marched on Washington, never even wrote a letter to the editor,” he said. “Now I’m drawing people with problems to me.” But, he promised, “this is my last big cause. I do have another pet peeve—I think people who pay cash in restaurants ought to get a seven-percent discount. . . . But I am going to do nothing about it.”

Goldberger could come across as a troll—aggrieved but amused. His daughter, Joy, recently assured me that he was not. “It was the biggest thing in his life,” she said. “I don’t remember my father ever standing up for any other causes, ever.” Something about the lounges inflamed a latent sense of righteousness. Either that or he just wanted in. One of the last times Joy saw her father, he had a layover in Baltimore, where she lived. “He wanted me to meet him. Where?” she asked. “At the Admirals Club.”

Like Venice or the “Mona Lisa,” lounges can become victims of their own appeal. Initially, the lounge glasnost was a letdown. People expected the Elizabeth Taylor movie “The V.I.P.s,” which was set in a Heathrow lounge where white-tuxedoed servers carried trays of champagne and patrons discussed tax shelters. Instead, they got “bad hummus and sweaty pretzels,” Greenberg, the travel editor, said. At least you could get in. The more lounges improved, the more crowded they became—lounge gentrification. It’s not uncommon to see a lounge line snaking through the concourse. Inside, seats are scarce. The difference between out there and in here can be blurry—shoe taker-offers, phone talkers, seat hoggers. There are ninety-minute waits for Delta Sky Clubs, standby lists at Chase Sapphire lounges. Queuers would rather sit on the floor than skip the lounge for a chair at the gate, a desperation that might have something to do with Instagram envy, inequality, or an overabundance of premium-economy professionals with business-class expectations. The reason for the lines is obvious: the airlines started letting more people in.

In 1986, Continental Airlines and Marine Midland Bank rolled out the airline industry's first co-branded credit card. Co-branded credit cards are the ones that offer perks like free checked bags, reward miles, and lounge access. "Our product was terrible, our reliability was terrible, our service was terrible," Henry Harteveldt, who worked on Continental's marketing team at the time, told me. They hoped the cards might sell some seats. They became wildly popular. Harteveldt explained, "Now you sell the airline seats to get people to sign up for credit cards."

Credit-card deals have become the core of the airline industry. During the pandemic, United's mileage program, built around its partnership with Chase, was valued at around twenty billion dollars; the rest of the business—the passenger part—was ten billion dollars underwater. Annually, charges on Delta's American Express cards total about one per cent of the U.S. G.D.P. ("It's amazing how much money people will spend for a free flight," Harteveldt observed.) In most years, the programs account for much of the airlines' profits. This year, Delta's card will earn the company eight billion dollars. Why do people sign up for the cards? "Lounge access is the No. 1 reason," a Delta executive recently said, of their Reserve card. Since the airline business is largely a credit-card-loyalty business, and since the credit-card-loyalty business is largely a lounge business, it's only a minor stretch to think of Delta or United as lounge companies that also fly planes. In Atlanta alone, there are two lounges that together cost more than a hundred million dollars to build.

Lounge purveyors view overcrowding as a grave long-term threat. To address it, Delta recently changed its admission policies, capping the number of annual visits and prioritizing American Express passengers. United has a similar policy with Chase. The airlines are also increasing supply. Emirates' business-class lounge in Dubai is a hundred thousand square feet, which is significantly larger than J.F.K.'s original terminal. United is building a lounge in Houston that will be fifty thousand square feet. "It's a little bit

larger than a football field,” Aaron McMillan, who runs United’s hospitality programs, told me. The only space they could find big enough to mock up the floor plan was an airplane hangar.

I visited a new United Club at Newark that was styled like a lofted co-working space: skylights, subway mosaics, exposed brick. It had a remarkable view of the Manhattan skyline. The sandwiches were fresh. The water had cucumbers. The club wasn’t at capacity, but there must have been hundreds of people in there—it felt as bustling as the terminal. This one was thirty thousand square feet, about the size of the main concourse at Grand Central and several times bigger than some airports I’ve been to.

The most intense fighting in the “lounge wars,” as the aviation press calls them, is among the credit-card companies. In 2013, American Express opened a stand-alone lounge, for owners of its high-end cards, called the Centurion Lounge. “The narrative was ‘Why would you do that?’ ” Audrey Hendley, the president of American Express Travel, told me. “We’re trying to convey the world-class service and backing of American Express.” Chase soon followed. Each competes to out-fancy the other. The Centurion Lounge at LaGuardia was nice, with refreshing lemon-cucumber water, but a little cramped. If this was once world-class, it is no longer. So, this summer, American Express rolled out a new buffet menu—crab frittata, cornflake-crusted French toast—created by four James Beard Award-winning chefs, including Kwame Onwuachi, the star chef of Tatiana. Onwuachi’s plantain bread pudding, I feel obliged to say, was way better than P. F. Chang’s.

The Chase Sapphire Lounge, next door, offers private lounges within the lounge, starting at twenty-two hundred dollars for three hours. Each is a suite that comes with a PlayStation, a shower, and bathrobes. Dana Pouwels, Chase’s head of airport lounges, showed me around. “Typically, when you arrive at the suite, you would have welcome caviar and champagne,” she said. The suite seemed unnecessary; the rest of the lounge was nice enough. There was an

Art Deco bar, custom wallpaper, and carpentry imported from Germany. Everything was JPMorgan blue. Water taps were built into the wall. “We rotate this quarterly to maintain seasonality,” one of Pouwels’s deputies said. “This rotation includes a blackberry-sage spa water.”

There was also a photo booth, a faux fireplace, and a spa. “The Sapphire Reserve customer is an experience maximizer,” Pouwels said. I was booked for a facial.

The technician told me, “Your skin’s kind of sensitive and dry.” She prepared a mask and an infrared treatment, “to help with the collagen.” Afterward, she rubbed cold metal balls around on my face. “This is cooling,” she said. “It’s for puffiness.” My skin was analyzed and graded using A.I. My score: seventy-four out of a hundred. I went to a mirror and rubbed my cheek. “You look nice and shiny!” the technician said. My face felt smooth, cold, and a little wet, like a hard-boiled egg in the fridge.



“What pea? I just wanted to see if you’d notice you were sleeping on, like, thirty extra mattresses.”
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

When I emerged, I received enough compliments that I felt closer to an eighty-four. Pouwels said, “We have principles called the host mentality.” They’re granular enough to cover how to refer to a

guest—first name, sir, ma’am, honorific—in different situations. She declined to elaborate. “Our competitors pay attention,” she said.

Everyone at the Capital One Lounge at J.F.K. called me Mr. Zach, which made me feel like a preschool teacher, only wealthier. Capital One was a late but enthusiastic lounge-war combatant. Last year, it opened a lounge at Washington National Airport which included a kitchen custom designed by José Andrés, who oversees the food. One company executive told the *Times*, “If there was a budget, I was not aware of it.” There’s a little cart, which is wheeled around to deliver cones filled with caviar. In New York, it’s used for a sunset champagne service. There’s also a counter meant to evoke a bodega, stocked with fresh Ess-a-Bagel. I spent a delightful forty-five minutes at the cheesemonger’s bar, where I was served a personalized flight consisting of a Swiss cows’-milk cheese shaved into little bouquets, a deep-orange cheddar, and a black-truffle sheep-milk cheese from Italy, along with sherry and wine, with limoncello to clear my palate. When I was done, I moved to hand my plate back to the cheesemonger. “The cheese attendant will take care of that, Mr. Zach,” the cheesemonger told me. Out of the wall taps flowed regular water. A Capital One travel employee told me that fresh-fruit-infused water can be a pain—everything has to be cleaned constantly and kept at a low temperature, and the fruit clogs up the spigots. “I just want a glass of water,” she said. “We don’t need all that stuff.”

Credit-card lounges are a way to feel like you have status and money, but they do not necessarily require you to have that much of either. (Chase and American Express recently raised their annual fees; you can still break even, but only by carefully coupon-booking the perks.) For those who are actually wealthy, there are even more rarefied options. The Delta One Lounge at J.F.K. has its own check-in area, which looks like the lobby of a luxury hotel. I was met there by a friendly woman named Hiroko, from the premium-services department. After checking me in, she escorted

me through T.S.A. “We’re supposed to have our own separate security line,” she said, apologizing. It was closed because of the government shutdown. This cost us approximately sixty seconds.

The private checkpoint, when open, leads directly to the lounge, which is furnished with marble, hardwoods, and burnished metals. Hiroko showed me around: sunroom, business workstations, hand towels in the showers arranged into cute animal shapes. Occasionally, as we walked, a diffuser let out a puff of fog that smelled like clean linen. Near the spa, Hiroko stopped by some spigots and announced, “The magic juice wall.” She poured me her favorite, kale-cucumber-celery-fennel-lemon juice. I downed two cups.

The space wasn’t vastly different from the Polaris lounge—United’s top-tier offering—at Newark. Delta had the spa; United had little sleeper suites, with a ceiling lit up like the night sky. Neither is open to credit-card holders or day-pass buyers. These are only for those with long-haul business-class tickets, which typically go for several thousand dollars.

The fancier the lounge, the less the lounge goer has to interact with the actual airport. “We have Porsches,” Hiroko told me, by the windows. “You see them down below?” She led me to the tarmac, where there was a fleet of six cars. For an extra five hundred and fifty dollars, Delta will drive you straight to the plane and pick you up on the other end.

Hiroko booked me at the lounge’s restaurant, a Danny Meyer venture. I had trouble deciding what to eat. I eventually ordered the mussels with charred pineapple as an appetizer, and an entrée of lamb chops. “Are you sure you don’t want to order two?” my waiter, Darren, asked. I added risotto. “No surf and turf? Maybe the swordfish?” I ordered the swordfish. It was 11:30 A.M. Everyone around me was drinking red wine.

I'd made a miscalculation and accidentally booked a massage at the same time I was supposed to be getting my dessert. So Darren held my soufflé and pretzel brownie while an attendant escorted me to the spa. Around me, passengers wore compression pants that looked like astronaut suits, to drain the fluid out of their travel-bloated legs. My treatment was a chair massage. It was a little disappointing. Even this lounge was filling up, making it hard to fully relax, and I couldn't help but think of Thai Airways' first-class lounge in Bangkok, whose free one-hour massages are full body—the real deal.

The thing about lounging is that it's impossible to lounge without worrying that someone, somewhere, is lounging better. My swordfish was, frankly, perfect, but would it have been even more perfect in Frankfurt, where Lufthansa has an entire first-class terminal whose restaurant has items from all of the cities in its route system flown in fresh daily? Had I missed out on the best lounge without even knowing it? The Virgin Clubhouse at Heathrow used to have a hydrotherapy, bath-steam, room-tanning, booth-ski simulator, and a four-hole putting green with a sand trap.

The best lounges generally are abroad, often in destinations with a long history of aristocracy. Air France's first-class lounge in Paris, with the jewel-box bathrooms, offers fifteen-year-old Veuve Clicquot, twelve different brands of bottled water, and an Alain Ducasse restaurant serving foie gras and truffles. According to one visitor, "The difference between this meal and one in a Polaris-lounge restaurant is like the difference between that same Polaris-lounge meal and the food you'd get at an Ambassadors lounge." You can pay for your own hotel-style suite with a bed, an outdoor patio, and a dedicated butler. They're militant about entry rules. If you're merely business class and want to partake, you have to pay nine hundred and ninety euros, and you're allowed to do that only if you've flown first class sometime in the past year. The Al Safwa First Lounge, in Doha (private duty-free shop, screening room, Keith Haring on the wall, architecture "more comparable to a

cathedral, mosque, mausoleum, or state monument than anything else,” as one visitor described it), is more lenient. You can even bring your nanny. She’ll go in the nanny room, a windowless white space with a few seats and high chairs.

In the U.S., the best you can do is P.S., short for “private suite,” which houses its lounges in bespoke buildings far away from the terminal so that you never even have to deal with the airport at all. (Their tarmac cars are BMWs.) “It’s meant to feel like you’ve been invited into a good friend’s home,” Jean Liu, who is designing a P.S. lounge in Dallas, told me. There’s art and curated bookshelves, along with Michelin-rated chefs and a spa. Liu was prioritizing vintage pieces. “So it feels a little more storied, not everything is new, new, new,” she said. “We are also really fortunate to work with Sandra Jordan. She was the pioneer in luxury alpaca fabrics. She is actually giving us all of the fabrics for the window treatments.” You still have to go through T.S.A. and customs, but they feel more like the help you’ve invited into your home. “For example, when you approach C.B.P., the podium is actually a custom piece of furniture that we’re designing with them,” Liu said. Each departure and arrival with P. S. costs thirteen hundred dollars. (For an extra sixteen hundred and fifty dollars per person, a car will pick you up directly from the plane and drop you off at your final destination.) “I don’t know where you live,” Liu told me, “but you really should try it.” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/the-airport-lounge-wars>

[Letter from Greenland](#)

One of the Greatest Polar-Bear Hunters Confronts a Vanishing World

In the most remote settlement in Greenland, Hjelmer Hammeken's life style has gone from something that worked for thousands of years to something that may not outlive him.

By [Ben Taub](#)

November 24, 2025



In the past, a hunt by dogsled could last more than a month. But the days of the long hunt are over, and the warming of the Arctic has shortened the window in which polar bears can be pursued on the sea ice.

Photograph by Ragnar Axelsson for The New Yorker

In early 1993, the Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson arrived at the most remote settlement in Greenland, a lonely town in the east that is tucked away in the world's largest fjord system, which is usually locked in by ice. The temperature was minus forty degrees, in both Fahrenheit and Celsius—right where the scales converge. Sled dogs howled through the night, a warning against polar bears. The dogs smelled the bears. The bears smelled the children.

This piece was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

The only other humans who had settled on that side of Greenland were five hundred miles to the south, separated by impassable mountains and glaciers. To the north was nine hundred miles of frozen wilderness, inhabited only by animals and a dozen or so Danish soldiers who were doing two-year shifts on the world's most arduous patrol. To the west was the Greenlandic ice sheet—up to two miles thick and filled with perilous crevasses. The town was supplied by a ship from Denmark, fourteen hundred miles to the east: once in late summer and once in early autumn, before the pack ice re-formed, rendering passage impossible. Amid this isolation, the town's name rang out as a riddle: Ittoqqortoormiit, the “place of the large houses.” Large houses? Compared with what?

Growing up in Reykjavík, Axelsson had always wondered what it would be like to experience genuine Arctic extremity. Now, at thirty-five, he flew to a small gravel airfield, built by an oil-prospecting company, about forty kilometres northwest of Ittoqqortoormiit. From there, he boarded a helicopter and flew over the fjord and the mountains to a small heliport above the town—its only access point in or out for most of the year. He had been told about an Inuit hunter, Hjelmer Hammeken, and hoped to accompany him far onto the sea ice, to photograph, as he later put it, “people who live way beyond the edge of what we might consider the habitable world.”

One morning, Axelsson sat on a rock, eating a tin of cod liver by a graveyard overlooking the town. A man about his age walked up to him—calm, alert, utterly confident in his environment and yet also cautious and reserved, a little shy. He had a trim mustache and wore a black woollen hat. “I am Hjelmer,” he said.

They set out north on Hammeken’s dogsled, into the uninhabited wilds, but after some hours the snow got too deep and wet for the dogs to forge ahead. So they turned south, toward the pack ice on the sea. Another hunter in his mid-thirties, Isak Pike, joined them.

The two sled teams kept just far enough apart that the dogs wouldn't fight.

After several hours on the ice, the dogs needed to rest. The late-winter sun had brought some warmth, "but when it went down it was like hitting a wall," Axelsson recalled. "It was like a claw, just squeezing all the life out of you."

The three men strung an old sailcloth between the two sleds and pitched tents beneath it. The dogs curled up and jammed their snouts into their haunches, to defend against the wind. Axelsson shook himself inside his sleeping bag, desperately trying to generate heat.

At dawn, Hammeken and Pike searched for holes in the ice where they could shoot seals coming up for breath. Each dog team required a seal per day—natural-world math. After the dogs had eaten, the teams rounded the southeastern tip of the fjord and set off down the coast, running on frozen ocean. There was an island near the edge of the ice, where polar bears hunted seals and Hammeken hunted polar bears. Such hunts could last weeks, sometimes more than a month. There was no radio contact, no point in signalling with flares. Hammeken's wife, Condine, would find out what had happened when he came back—if he came back.

There was a constant risk of attack by polar bears. Even as Hammeken hunted them, he feared them. They are incredibly cunning and dangerous; when hungry, they have been known to prey upon humans.

Hammeken seemed to notice things that no one else did—not even other Inuit hunters. He was so attuned to his surroundings that he sometimes spotted a seal poking its head through the ice from a quarter mile away. "I know my world," he said. When he stalked an animal on foot, his entire body moved as if only in service of his eyes and the rifle that he raised up to them.

One night, the men played cards in a tent. Axelsson bet his woollen long johns and his cold-weather gear, and lost it all; Pike lost his socks. “Hjelmer was just laughing,” Axelsson recalled. They agreed that each man would keep his clothes until they were safely back in town.

A gale blew in. They had been out on the ice for more than two weeks. “I’m freezing,” Axelsson said. Each time he took off his mittens to change rolls of film, his fingers turned white.

“You’re not going to die,” Hammeken told him.

In time, Axelsson learned to relax by drawing on the advice of another Inuit hunter: “If you focus on being cold and frightened, then nature will not be kind to you.”

After three weeks on the ice, they had caught no bears—only seals. On returning to town, Axelsson left his winter gear with Hammeken before flying back to Iceland. A bet was a bet, and he didn’t necessarily expect to return. “I thought of it as a once-in-a-lifetime adventure,” he told me. “But that ice fjord is the most beautiful gallery in the whole world. It’s like a magnet. It draws you back, over and over again.”

From Alaska to Greenland, traditions that sustained the Inuits for many generations in some of the world’s most hostile conditions are vanishing along with the ice. The Inuits lived by the rhythms of seasons and wildlife, temperature and light. The Vikings brought their own sheep to Greenland, and died out; the Inuits adapted to the world as it was. But, in the past several decades, policies and behaviors in other parts of the world have inflicted themselves on small Arctic settlements so rapidly that towns like Ittoqqortoormiit are left unable to continue as they have in the past, yet also unable to meaningfully shape their own futures. Ittoqqortoormiit was a place that did not affect anywhere beyond itself. But the world started happening to Ittoqqortoormiit.

In June, I travelled to eastern Greenland with Axelsson. We took a Twin Otter utility aircraft from the northern Icelandic town of Akureyri. About a hundred kilometres from the coast, we started to see icebergs and floes. Then came the pack ice—millions of jagged pieces, breaking up in the late Arctic spring, a sea of brilliant white fragments against the deep, dark blue.

We landed at the gravel airfield, then boarded a helicopter to Ittoqqortoormiit. The helicopter pilot noted that he sometimes flew low over polar bears, hoping to scare them away from the town. Last summer, a bear crossed over the mountains and approached a small AstroTurf field where children were playing soccer. A hunter shot it dead when it was about a hundred metres from them.

Axelsson has returned to the area at least twenty-five times, to document the vanishing world of Indigenous Greenlandic hunters. He has worked mostly with Hammeken, who became one of the greatest hunters in Arctic history. Hammeken has less hair than he did when the two men met, thirty-two years ago, and more of it is gray; otherwise, he looks almost the same. But, in the span of Hammeken’s career, his way of life has transformed from something that worked for thousands of years to something that will hardly exist after him.

“There used to be many hunters,” Hammeken told me. “Now we are ten.”

Greenland is the largest island in the world. It is three times the size of Texas but home to fewer than fifty-seven thousand people, scattered among seventy-two towns and settlements, none of which are connected by roads. Ninety-six per cent of the population lives on the west coast, which has milder weather, ample fish stocks, and year-round ice-free ports. The remaining four per cent, in the east, are subjected to a current of sea ice from the Arctic Ocean and to violent winds that roar down the slopes of the ice sheet into the fjords. The conditions are so hostile that the Kingdom of Denmark

—which established a colonial administration in what is now Greenland's capital, Nuuk, in the seventeen-twenties—believed that no one lived there, until a settlement of four hundred and thirteen people was accidentally discovered during a mapping expedition in 1884. The area became known as Ammassalik. Its people spoke their own language, developed in the course of a few centuries in isolation, and are known today as Tunumiit—"people of the back side."



"The tourist on the bus goes, 'Was that my stop? Was that my stop? Was that my stop?' "
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

The Inuits of Ammassalik survived the polar winters in semi-subterranean homes of stone and earth. In warmer months, they ventured out to live among their quarry in sealskin tents. They fed themselves by hunting and fishing with tools made of stone, bone, and driftwood—tools that were unchanged since the Stone Age. After a person died, his or her name was not spoken again until a new child was born to receive it. The Inuits believed that times of hunting scarcity reflected their own spiritual failings toward the Mother of the Sea: their poor behavior on the surface of the ice caused her hair to become matted below, trapping the animals. In response, shamans held ceremonies in which they entered a trance

and symbolically journeyed into the frozen underworld to comb her hair. In years of abundance, there were surges in births; in years of famine, infanticides. Those people who weren't central to the survival of the community—the elderly, the sick, widows, orphans—often disappeared out onto the ice.

The Danes introduced new pathogens, then colonial administration, Christianity, money, metal, midwifery, schooling, and a rapid dependence on imported rifles and food. By 1894, Ammassalik had a fur-trading post; by the early nineteen-twenties, the Inuit population had almost doubled, and was exceeding the capacity of the local hunting yield. Danish administrators began to worry about overpopulation.

But, in a single generation, major aspects of Ammassalik Inuit culture had been obliterated. By 1901, just seventeen years after contact with the outside world, shamans were cutting their hair, getting baptized, and taking Danish Christian names. “We had many customs and various habits which we thought we could not abandon—that by forsaking them, we would have destroyed ourselves,” a shaman in training named Qio, who became Georg in 1915, reported. By 1921, the naming practice that had connected each person in the community to his or her ancestors was officially over. Everyone was a Lutheran.

Meanwhile, a thousand kilometres away, a handful of Norwegian fur trappers started building hunting cabins in the vast, empty territory of northeastern Greenland, hoping to eventually incorporate it into Norway. The Danish government set out to solve this problem by establishing a new settlement in the northeast, near the mouth of the Scoresby Sound fjord. A small team of Danes started building houses there in 1924; the following summer, seventy Ammassalik Inuits volunteered to board a ship and head northeast along the coast to the place that became Ittoqqortoormiit. It is unclear whether they knew where they were going, or that they would never return.

Five of them died during the first winter. But the hunting was plentiful, and the settlement soon flourished, spreading among six locations, including Ittoqqortoormiit and two satellite villages, Cape Tobin and Cape Hope, at strategic hunting points on either side of it. A confluence of ocean currents and winds at the entry to the fjord system creates a polynya, a patch of open water. The polynya attracts narwhals, whales, walruses, birds, and seals, which in turn attract polar bears.

The practice of subsistence hunting continued for decades, little changed. The men went out onto the sea ice to feed themselves, their families, their dogs, and their neighbors; women cooked, raised children, and prepared seal and polar-bear skins. The person who first saw a bear kept the skin, no matter who fired the fatal shot. When there was ice, the hunting was done by dogsled; when there was open water, it was done by kayak. The weeks when the ice was too thin or rotten to walk on, and yet too present for the use of boats, were a time of patience, of comfort with uncertainty, of rest.

The new settlement soon had its own municipal administration and regular wage-earning jobs. There was a school, a hospital, a police station, an old-people's home, and a general store. But the Danish administrators imported people from western Greenland to occupy the highest positions after their own, and the Ammassalik Inuits, lacking any formal qualifications, were given menial, practically interchangeable roles. At school, children were forced to learn in the Danish and western-Greenlandic languages and were sometimes punished for speaking their own.

By the mid-fifties, “the trend in Danish policy was to concentrate the Greenlandic population as much as possible around three services deemed essential: the hospital, the school, and the church,” the demographer Joëlle Robert-Lamblin wrote, in a study published by the Société d’Anthropologie de Paris, in 1971. “This policy had disastrous economic and social effects.” Where there is a high

concentration of people, there is too low a concentration of wild animals to feed them. “Food, becoming insufficient, is then supplemented with imported European products, poorly suited to the climate,” she noted. The diffuse world of Scoresby Sound collapsed into the administrative center. Everything was in Ittoqqortoormiit.

By the late sixties, men under forty were killing fewer seals on average than their elders were. “They are increasingly losing interest in hunting,” Robert-Lamblin observed. “The new game sought by contemporary Greenlandic society is no longer an animal but purchasing power.” People had difficulty, however, adapting to the artificial daily rhythm of salaried work: “Many of them suddenly quit their jobs and return to hunting. Then, some time later, they take on another job and abandon it again.”

Hjelmer Hammeken was born in 1957. His father, who worked as the schoolteacher in Cape Hope, hunted recreationally—as almost everyone did. But the family relied more on his salary than on what he shot.

When Hjelmer was about seven years old, he threw a rock at an Arctic bird called a little auk. It was a clean hit—his first kill. In the years that followed, a hunter named Jakob took him deep into the fjord and taught him how to live and hunt on the ice. Jakob stored some of his meat, narwhal tusks, and seal and polar-bear skins and sold the rest, both privately and to the store. These goods were exported out of the village when the supply ship arrived from Denmark late in the summer. Hunting was a viable profession: hunters’ earnings easily met and usually surpassed those of unskilled workers.

At eighteen, Hammeken killed his first polar bear. When Axelsson arrived, he had killed eighty-two. But the economy had already inverted. The animal-rights movement of the seventies had driven down demand for sealskin, cratering prices. By the late eighties,

even the best hunters could barely make half of what people earned working in the store.

The devolution of the traditional life style coincided with a surge in social problems. Crimes had been “so rare in this region that when they do occur, the individuals responsible are sent to Denmark for a psychopathological examination,” Robert-Lamblin reported. Then alcohol became the leading cause of violence in Ittoqqortoormiit, and violence and horrific accidents became the leading causes of death. According to the Danish social scientist Finn Breinholt Larsen, from 1975 to 1989—a period when the population of the village hovered around four hundred—there was an average of more than one homicide and more than one suicide per year.

The ice started forming later in the winter season and melting earlier in the summer. It became less reliable, less knowable, more prone to causing accidental deaths. “The big ice is sick,” a hunter told Axelsson.

Hammeken married Jakob’s daughter, Condine, and became best friends with her brother, Konrad. He and Konrad spent weeks out on the ice, travelling hundreds of kilometres to hunt bears. One day, Konrad was crossing the fjord on his dogsled when a layer of snow obscured the transition from solid ice to weak ice. He went through, with his sled, and drowned.

Snowmobiles largely replaced dog teams; cruise ships disturbed the narwhal population in the fjord. Atmospheric pollutants poisoned the marine-mammal food chain in Scoresby Sound, from fish to seals to bears to people. By the turn of the millennium, only a few people were living in Cape Tobin or Cape Hope; by 2008, both had been formally closed. Axelsson and Hammeken picked up the last man living in Cape Hope, a former hunter who, in his solitude, had started seeing tiny ghosts running through the settlement, taunting him. The man now drifts around Ittoqqortoormiit, sleeping in the houses of those who will have him. Each year, more young people

venture out and never return; it's not clear what kind of life is left for them.

In the past fifty years, the Greenlandic people have, through two referenda, taken control from Denmark of most aspects of internal governance. The nation is at a pivotal moment in its history, determining its future in business and in geopolitics, and it has never been of so much interest to the international community. Denmark is investing billions in Arctic sovereignty and defense, and recently staged the largest international military exercise in Greenlandic history. Foreign leaders have flocked to Nuuk, pledging partnerships in security and trade, and businessmen have taken a sudden interest in exploiting Greenland's rare-earth minerals. Meanwhile, the melting of the polar ice cap is opening up potential trade routes that could reshape global shipping. Greenland finds itself at the center of a geostrategic race for the Arctic, and its politicians are newly aware of their leverage.

But the small places—especially those in the disconnected east—feel forgotten. Settlements that never required or had an economy that extended beyond their own survival are unmoored. People still hunt as a matter of cultural identity but are unable to sustain themselves by it. The primary employer in many such places is the municipal government. “It would be cheaper for society to send everyone in those towns off to a five-star hotel in Gran Canaria with three meals a day, all-inclusive, but that’s not how we measure the value of a society,” the director of the Greenland Business Association told me. A particularly remote settlement was recently down to three inhabitants—two of whom were brothers—and cost the government the equivalent of some half a million dollars a year, in salaries, groceries, fuel, subsidized travel connections, and electricity. Then one brother killed the other, and only the third man remained. The municipality kept the lights on for several more months.

In the coming centuries, what the world inflicts on Greenland will be reflected back on it; the melting of the Greenlandic ice sheet will inundate coastal areas from Dhaka to Mar-a-Lago. But, for now, the ill effects are going in just one direction. In 2019, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Donald Trump coveted Greenland for purchase or annexation. Days later, Trump posted to Twitter an image of the Trump International Hotel in Las Vegas in front of the Ittoqqortoormiit school. “I promise not to do this to Greenland!” he joked. The building stood directly on top of Hjelmer Hammeken’s house.

This past June, there was an enormous iceberg locked in the pack ice in the middle of Scoresby Sound; Hammeken suggested one evening that we head out there with the dogs—Axelsson on Hammeken’s sled, me on Isak Pike’s. Thirty years ago, there were almost a thousand dogs in the town, and just about everybody travelled on sleds. Now there were some hundred and fifty, and they were chained up at the periphery, or out on the sea ice, their world reduced for much of the year to a five-foot radius. As Ittoqqortoormiit became more disconnected from traditional hunting practices, the municipality introduced new rules to keep dogs out of town. Many of them looked thin. Most were caked in feces. The ice they had lived on all winter was turning into slush. They didn’t go out much, and they are fed less when they’re not running.

It was almost the summer solstice; the sun hadn’t set in three weeks. But most people now keep to the municipal wage-earning schedule, so we decided to set out the next morning. I walked down to the sea ice at 9 A.M., and met Pike as he was harnessing six dogs to his sled. He was hunched over, his hair white, his teeth mostly gone. Although he is just a year older than Hammeken, their appearances and capacities seemed decades apart. He struggled with the dogs, and smacked those who defied him. Two of them became so entangled that they started choking, and he had to cut them loose with a knife. A third was limping. When we started

moving, trailing a hundred metres behind Hammeken's sled, I noticed that with each stride the dog left blood in the snow.

Pike's dogs rarely heeded his commands, and they didn't know what to do when he whipped them. His daughter drove a snowmobile behind the sled, and often rammed up against it, pushing and steering from behind. You could hear the ice fizzing as it melted, deteriorating fast. There were moments when the dogs were up to their chests in water and the sled was partially submerged. But, after about half an hour, we had travelled five kilometres, mostly following in the safe path left by Hammeken's sled.

It is difficult to approximate the scale of an iceberg until you are right in front of it. The one in the middle of the fjord towered over us, larger than any building for hundreds of miles, carved by the dynamics of the glacier it once fell from and, later, by the wind. There were deep vertical lines where it appeared ready to calve into something new. The pack ice that had locked it in place all winter was turning to slush beneath our feet, and it was impossible to know whether the berg was stable.

Axelsson and I switched sleds for the journey home. Hammeken's dogs knew how to spread out on thin ice, and they navigated the worst puddles and crevasses largely on their own. Where they needed guidance, he steered them with commands and occasional snaps of his braided sealskin whip. "*Hiri hiri hiri*," he called out, and they turned right; "*Yoh yoh yoh*," and they turned left. They were strong, attentive, well fed, and clean.

On the other sled, Pike told Axelsson that this was the last run for the season. The dog whose paw was bleeding was lame, effectively useless to him. So was another of them. Both were six years old, and he had two puppies to replace them. He intended to shoot them when we got back to land.

“Snowmobiles have been terrible for the dogs,” Hammeken told me. When snowmobiles arrived in Ittoqqortoormiit, some forty years ago, they were used only for travelling between the town and the neighboring settlements. The engines scared off polar bears and other animals, so people were prohibited from using them in hunting. But that rule has gradually eroded, and with it the capacity of most hunters to run a dogsled team for more than a short jaunt.

“I have very stupid dogs now,” Hammeken said. He blamed himself: “I used to have good dogs, back when I used them for everything. I miss them a lot. I think about them every time I’m driving my sled.”

Hammeken’s best dog was Qerndurmior, a black dog he had in the nineties. Qerndurmior learned to follow polar-bear tracks, and, during hunts, Hammeken sometimes cut him loose to attack bears before he got close enough to shoot them. One day, a bear clawed Qerndurmior’s head, scalping him. “He was breathing very heavily, he was so badly wounded,” Hammeken recalled. “I had to sew his face back on with nylon. He looked a bit strange after that.” The two hunted together for several more years, with Qerndurmior as the leader of the sled team. “He understood me,” Hammeken recalled. “We relied on each other.”



"You don't have to eat it now, but we both know you're gonna be hangry in, like, two hours."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Dogs have kept the Inuits alive for thousands of years. Once, after a particularly frigid night, one of Hammeken's dogs stood abruptly and left behind its tail, which had frozen into the ice. The dog yelped in pain for a few seconds, then carried on as before.

When Qerndurmior grew old and feeble and could no longer keep up, Hammeken told him that they were going out on one last hunt. "I took him to the edge of the ice, with my rifle, and said, 'There's a polar bear—get him!' He was so curious, and he tried to look for the bear," Hammeken said. "That was the final moment of his life."

That afternoon, Hammeken hitched a sled to the back of his snowmobile, and drove Axelsson and me to the abandoned village of Cape Tobin. The ice was rotting from above and below, and I spent much of the journey eying the shoreline for polar bears. When we reached Cape Tobin, I asked if the ice was in such a state that, had we stopped in certain areas, we might have fallen through.

“We didn’t stop,” Hammeken replied.

Fog covered the settlement. A polar-bear skin was stretched over an A-frame scaffolding, its snout and feet tied to poles. For almost twenty years, it has been illegal to export polar-bear hides, but hunters can still sell them within Greenland. The going rate is around fifteen hundred dollars. Hammeken uses one as a cushion on his sled.

The fog occluded vision beyond a hundred metres—a distance that polar bears can cover in about ten seconds. Hammeken clutched his rifle and crept up the rocks, stepping carefully over decades’ worth of hunters’ detritus: cans, utensils, oil drums, animal bones.

Hammeken has killed three hundred and twenty-six bears in the past half century—by far the most of anyone in the history of Greenland. It is not the fault of Greenlandic subsistence hunters that the polar bears face a high risk of extinction in the wild; the sea ice they depend on is melting faster than they can adapt to life without it. But there is an obvious tension between bear hunting and environmentalist campaigns. Hammeken sighed. “Those who don’t want to understand how our world is—they only have their little world,” he said. “And we have our big world.”

The days of the multi-week hunt by dogsled are over. By 2006, the Greenlandic government had introduced quotas for polar bears, narwhals, and musk oxen. The hunters of Ittoqqortoormiit are collectively allowed thirty-five bears a year. Hammeken said that, when he started hunting, “the bears rarely ever came here.” But in recent years the warming of the Arctic has shortened the window during which bears can hunt seals out on the sea ice. Unable to catch prey in open water, they now follow their noses in the direction of Ittoqqortoormiit. “They are all caught around here,” Hammeken said.

According to Erling Madsen, the local hunting-control officer, polar bears are the only animals that still must be “hunted in the traditional way.” Musk oxen can be shot from snowmobiles, narwhals and minke whales from speedboats. But polar-bear hunts are supposed to involve dogs, to align with Inuit subsistence-hunting practices that go back thousands of years.

For the past decade, however, “maybe five per cent they get from the dogsleds,” Madsen told me. Each January, when the quota resets, hunters hitch speedboats to their snowmobiles and drive to the ice edge near Cape Tobin. They patrol the ice coast in boats, dodging floes, searching for bears. By early May, the quota has usually been filled.

Hammeken led us through the remains of the village, past a radio antenna from an abandoned weather station and street lamps that hadn’t been switched on for some twenty years. At the far side of the village, near the water, he pointed out a small, dilapidated house on stilts, and said that it had once been his home. We went inside. The floor was strewn with batteries and broken furniture, the corners filled with snow. But the layout was just as Axelsson remembered it from when he’d stayed there, some thirty years ago.

“Will you hunt when you’re a hundred?” Axelsson asked.

“I want to,” Hammeken said. But his shoulder hurts, and each year the ice edge moves closer to the shoreline. “When I think back to the old days, I always miss them,” he said. “I miss the old Greenland. I miss it, always.”

Hungry bears begin to arrive in Ittoqqortoormiit in mid-August, right as the children are starting school. Since the hunters’ quota has already been filled, Madsen, who is sixty-six, tries to scare the bears away from the town. In 2015, the World Wildlife Fund bought him an A.T.V., a snowmobile, and other equipment to establish a polar-bear patrol. The idea was to reduce the number of

instances in which bears needed to be killed for public safety. Madsen estimates that he has scared off about a hundred and twenty bears in the past decade, and killed eight that refused to go away. “Every morning, I get up at four o’clock, five o’clock. I open my window, and listen: What can the dogs tell me?” he said. The handful of remaining dogsled teams are chained up at strategic points to warn of incoming bears. If a dog team is going nuts, Madsen heads to it.

Most houses in Ittoqqortoormiit have no running water. For toilets, people use buckets lined with thick plastic bags. Filled bags go to the dump, where garbage is burned in an open pit. The smell attracts hungry bears from vast distances; they can smell a seal through three feet of solid ice.

This July, I rode with Madsen on his A.T.V. from the dump, in the east, to Walrus Bay, the site of a whale-butcherering beach, in the west. Another place that draws in hungry bears is the glacial-runoff river, from whose source the town gets fresh water. A dog team is stationed there, and this means there are usually seal remains scattered around. The river runs close to the town’s locus of activity, the store. People go there for everything from frozen fruit to fishing line, underwear to bullets. Hunting rifles dangle over the meat freezers; a few feet away, there are handbags, fishing anchors, and birthday balloons.

The hunters provide the only fresh meat in the village. Occasionally, in summer, a cruise ship will drop off fresh fruit and vegetables, a rare—and, to some, unfamiliar—luxury; during one such delivery, in late July, I saw small children chewing on raw Brussels sprouts as if they were apples. The supply ship hadn’t come since October. There is no restaurant, no bar, no café; the nearest of each is in Iceland, across a five-hundred-kilometre stretch of freezing ocean.

In 1983, Denmark and Greenland started coöperating in an international effort to study polar-bear populations. Since then, Hammeken and other hunters in Ittoqqortoormiit have been collecting biological samples from bears they kill: a skull, adrenal glands, a slice of muscle, of liver, of reproductive organs, of fat, of fur. I asked Hammeken what happens to these samples. “They go to Denmark,” he said. And then what? “I don’t know.”

Six other hunters said much the same thing. Mona Danielsen—the only female hunter in Ittoqqortoormiit—told me that they give the samples to a guy who works at the Polaroil station. I found him the next morning; he told me that he mails the samples to a scientist from Denmark who last visited the town ten years ago.

Scientific papers based on these samples have been coming out for decades, and have been presented at numerous international conferences. “East Greenland polar bears are among the most polluted species, not just in the Arctic but globally,” one of the papers reads. Pollutants travel up the food chain, getting magnified at every stage. PFAS, the so-called forever chemicals that accumulate in the liver, blood, and kidneys, have been found in polar bears in concentrations approaching thirty million times those in mollusks, which are near the base of the Arctic food web. There are twenty subpopulations of polar bears; the ones caught near Ittoqqortoormiit are thought to be the most severely affected. They have lesions on their internal organs; impaired endocrine and immunologic systems; high levels of mercury; bone-density loss; and impaired reproductive organs.

The marine mammals of Scoresby Sound are so contaminated that, in order not to exceed the European Food Safety Authority’s “tolerable weekly intake” of PFAS, locals should not consume more than ten grams of meat a week—a portion that is roughly the size of a grape. But the only alternatives are canned, frozen, or junk. In late July, I found frozen meat for sale that had been packaged more than two years earlier and had expired in 2024.

There is no factory in Ittoqqortoormiit, no lab producing Teflon or plastic or raincoats. The population is not responsible for any generation of PFAS. Nevertheless, samples of blood and urine, collected at the village hospital in 2015, revealed that the people of Ittoqqortoormiit have “the highest blood serum concentrations of PFASs in the circumpolar Arctic, as well as the highest concentrations in any non-occupationally exposed population worldwide,” according to *The Lancet Planetary Health*. The overwhelming majority of them consume thirteen times the level considered hazardous to human health, and have blood concentrations that exceed by several multiples the “severe risk” threshold for damage to their immune systems.

At the ends of the scientific papers, there is a line thanking the hunters of Ittoqqortoormiit for their samples. But several of them told me that they’d heard of PFAS only from the press. None of them seem to have been directly informed that they are the source of the data that they hear about in the news.

“I’ve eaten many, many kilos of polar bear—it’s the best meat,” Hammeken said. “Seal can be nice for a day, but not the day after. Musk ox is good for two or three days in a row. But polar-bear meat is good all the time. I could eat it every day of every month.”



“How much longer are you going to ponder the mystery of what makes it go?”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

“We can do wildlife research, and we can talk about all the results as much as we want—but, as soon as it has to do with human culture and the hunting quota and human health, we are not allowed to say anything,” a Danish scientist who was involved in these studies told me. “It has to come from the authorities in Nuuk.” The Greenlandic government released an informational document on PFAS in 2023 which amounts to a plea for the rest of the world to stop polluting the atmosphere and an invitation for Greenlanders mostly to carry on eating as they wish. “They’re not telling us the research,” Erling Madsen said. I asked why there was such a poor flow of information to the most affected population. “Who should they contact?” he said. The mayor is in Nuuk.

Ittoqqortoormiit used to have its own municipal government; Madsen was the last local mayor. But in 2009 Greenland’s government consolidated a number of economically challenged municipalities, and Nuuk absorbed the ones in the east. “The idea was to minimize the bureaucracy and the administrative costs, but it hasn’t helped,” the current mayor, Avaaraq Olsen, told me, at her office in Nuuk. The result is a district that is larger than the northeastern United States plus Delaware and Maryland and has twenty-four thousand residents, more than eighty per cent of whom live in Nuuk. No mayor since the consolidation has been able to speak the language of eastern Greenland. “I’m from a small town in south Greenland, so I have also, as a citizen, witnessed what happens when you centralize everything,” Olsen told me. “As a citizen, you feel like you are being degraded.”

In the first two years after the consolidation, “many people moved from here, because we lost a lot of jobs,” Madsen told me. Most went to Nuuk or to Denmark, leaving their wooden houses abandoned to the snow. There used to be a bar and a hot-dog stand, but they closed. The population collapsed—rapidly at first, then at a steady rate of a few per cent a year, to some three hundred and twenty people. “When I was mayor, we had around a hundred and sixty schoolchildren,” Madsen said. “Now we have fifty or sixty.”

One afternoon this spring, I came across a man who goes by Nunda sitting on a slab of concrete in front of his house, drinking soda and playing cards with his cousin, betting pennies per hand. Nunda called me over. He struggled to speak. Shortly before my trip, Ittoqqortoormiit had received its annual visit from a dentist, who had determined that Nunda's teeth were "kind of melting," as Nunda's daughter later put it, and removed what was left of them.

Nunda was born in Ittoqqortoormiit in 1967, and has lived there more or less since then. "My home sweet home," he said, bitterly. "My father was a great hunter, but that world is gone." I strained to hear him. He speaks in a husky whisper; his larynx was destroyed by alcohol and cigarettes, though he no longer drinks. Like many people in the village, Nunda spoke with mourning for the not so distant past. "To go hunting alone with my dogs, out in the sea ice —that was wonderful," he said. "It was my culture. Now everything is destroyed."

Nunda has three children. None of them lives with him. His eldest, Batheba, wanders around the village, crashing with cousins and friends. I met her while walking out on the sea ice. It was midday. She later told me that she had no memory of the encounter, because she'd been drunk.

Nunda still had a rifle. But he had none of the equipment required to go out on the water, in summer, or on the ice, during the rest of the year. In any event, he could move only with the help of a walker; he had heart and circulation issues, and his legs and feet were so swollen that he had difficulty putting on shoes. "I go to the hospital every day now," he said. Some years ago, he had a heart attack. "I am ill in my legs, my body, my brain."

Nunda lives about fifty metres from the hospital. But there is no doctor there—only one or two Danish nurses, depending on their rotations. Nunda said that a nurse had recently taken a sample of his blood and sent it to Denmark; the chain of custody had involved

a helicopter and at least two planes. “My illness is killing me slowly,” Nunda said. “I am getting worse and worse and worse every day.”

A few days after I spoke to Nunda, he had another heart attack, and was evacuated to Nuuk. Days earlier, he would have traded anything to visit the capital; now he worried that he might never see his family or his village again.

A month later, I found Nunda pushing his walker along Ittoqqortoormiit’s dusty road, on his way to the store. He told me that he was on a new heart medicine and that his legs had been drained of most of their excess fluid. He invited me to join him for a hunt that evening. We would go to a spot a little west of the village, overlooking Walrus Bay, where he could aim at seals. “I’m a good shooter,” he said. It was unclear how he intended to retrieve any dead or wounded animals before they sank.

A few hours later, Nunda, Batheba, and I set off. Nunda shuffled along with his walker—a half-dozen empty soda cans rattling in its tray—and clung to me when he slipped on sloping ground. I carried his rifle.

“I haven’t been here for two years,” Nunda said. “The ice is melting too fast now. And the weather is changing. A long time ago, we would know what was going to happen tomorrow or tonight. Not anymore. Now, with no warning, a storm can come.”

Batheba seemed eager to get away. She offered to take me to another seal-hunting spot, a little way down the road.

“I have never hunted a seal,” Batheba told me.

I asked if she had ever hunted anything.

She shrugged. “Mosquitoes?”

There are young people in Ittoqqortoormiit who have been educated in Denmark and could live and work wherever they like but “want nothing more in the world than to be here,” a visiting Danish social worker told me. The fjord is their home, the living, shifting backdrop to their adventures and shared experiences with family and friends. In winter, they skate on the ice, ride snowmobiles into the mountains, and hunt together as families, butchering and cooking animals, as their ancestors did for hundreds of years before them; in summer, they disappear into the fjord for weeks at a time, entire families crammed into speedboats with fuel, clothes, food, and rifles, to camp in the great vastness, passing glaciers and icebergs that nobody else on earth gets to see. But the town is also home to people with broken families, and to people with no money or access to boats, A.T.V.s, or dogsleds, and no desire or means to go out into the fjord. For them, life consists of unhappy homes and the short walks between them. There is no privacy, no reprieve; it is too dangerous to venture beyond the last line of houses without a rifle, which many people don’t have. I asked Batheba what she wanted for her future. “To leave this place,” she replied.

Batheba’s memories of her childhood are mostly an unhappy blur. Her father beat her mother, and he sometimes hit other people, too. (“Not every month,” Nunda said. “I tried to be a good man.”) When Batheba turned fifteen, she left the village to attend a school in western Greenland, since the one in Ittoqqortoormiit didn’t have a curriculum for anyone older than fourteen. From that point forward, “I never loved this place,” she said. “A lot of young people die here.” She went on, “Some of them die in boat accidents. Some commit suicide, some get murdered.” She frowned. “In a few days, I will be twenty-five.”

When Batheba was eighteen, a boy named Tim said he was in love with her. They had known each other since they were children, and she was also friends with Tim’s cousin, a girl named Nina. “I said, ‘Please, I don’t want to ruin our friendship,’ ” Batheba told me.

“He kissed me on the cheek and hugged me, and he started calling me his best friend.”

Batheba’s earliest memory of Tim is of him walking between his parents, holding their hands. “They were very happy, laughing,” she recalled. But when Tim was a bit older his father was arrested, for reasons that Tim never shared with her. Rather than facing time in jail, he died by suicide—the leading cause of death for young Greenlandic men. Soon afterward, Tim and his mother left Ittoqqortoormiit, eventually ending up in Denmark. “Then his mother died in Denmark,” Batheba told me. “I don’t know how. Some people say she was murdered, others say it was suicide. So he ended up alone.”

Tim was put in an orphanage in western Greenland, but he visited Ittoqqortoormiit during summers and at Christmastime, to see Batheba and Nina. When he aged out of the orphanage, he stayed on, because he had nothing to do and nowhere to go.

Nina fell in love with a young hunter named Karl, but in March, 2019, he drowned in the freezing bay. He was twenty-five. Eventually, the grief consumed Nina. In the early hours of New Year’s Day, 2021, she shot herself in the heart with a hunting rifle, pressing the trigger with her big toe.

“Nina’s death was a complete surprise,” Batheba told me. “Mostly, they commit suicide when it’s almost summer or almost winter. The weather, you know—it changes you.”

Batheba’s mother moved to Denmark, and eventually stopped calling. Batheba found solace only in Tim, who continued to return to Ittoqqortoormiit each summer. They drank together, and kicked around a soccer ball. They were in their early twenties, and had endured so much loss and loneliness that, as Tim put it, it felt as if their lives were mostly behind them. As the summer of 2023 came

to a close, and Tim was due to return to the orphanage, she walked him up the gravel road, past the soccer field, to the heliport.

“Can you do me a favor?” Batheba said.

“Anything, except one thing,” Tim replied.

“But I think this one thing is the only thing I want from you,” Batheba said.

Tim smiled and hugged her tight, and said goodbye. She pleaded with him to come back to her for Christmas. He walked to the helicopter, and flew away. Two months later, he hanged himself at the orphanage.

Tim’s body was transported back to Ittoqqortoormiit for burial. Batheba couldn’t bear to attend the ceremony. “I still haven’t put flowers on his grave,” she said. It had been two years since his death. “When it comes into my mind, it makes me drink more, and smoke weed to forget, and to not feel,” she said. She gestured toward the graveyard on the hill, which looms over the village. “I can’t find the courage to go up there, to light a candle for him. But someday, maybe.”

I asked Batheba if she had been able to find any help or happiness amid so much compounded grief.

“Sometimes I forget. Sometimes I think he is alive,” she said, quietly. “But then I am reminded during the summer that he’s not gonna come anymore—he’s already here.”

The next day, I met up with Batheba and her cousin Fransisca, and the three of us set off on a long walk in the direction of Walrus Bay. There is no other route beyond the town that is walkable without a rifle; the path is traversed by enough people on A.T.V.s carrying guns, each day, that it’s generally considered safe.

There is a spot where snowmelt pools at the base of the mountains. Many people go there to fill cans with drinking water. Batheba and Fransisca knelt on the rocks, put their lips to the water, and sipped until they were full. They picked up littered bullet casings of various calibres and turned them into whistles, blowing over the holes.

“Want to see him?” Batheba asked. She meant Tim’s grave. We walked back through the village and up the hill, to a small sea of white wooden crosses. She stopped at Lot 324. There was no name —only a photograph in a plastic folder. Tears streamed down her cheeks from behind her sunglasses. Nina was in the lot behind him, Nina’s boyfriend a few feet to the left.

As the town contracts, the graveyard expands. In front of Tim’s row was a line of empty graves, for this year’s expected dead: four full-size plots; two tiny ones, for infants or small children. They overlook the fjord, encroaching on the town as if to someday spill over the edge, like an avalanche, and swallow it.

It was the quiet part of summer, the best time to be a seal. There were still large floes to rest on, but they were too fragile to hold bears or humans.

I accompanied Hjelmer Hammeken’s brother Scoresby and Scoresby’s son in a speedboat to search for seals in open water. The son shot at one but missed; Scoresby raced over to where it had been, steering with one hand and gripping a loaded shotgun in the other, a cigarette between his lips. But they didn’t get another shot at it.

Scoresby scoured the tundra with his binoculars and spotted two musk oxen—hairy hummocks on the hill. He pointed the boat at the shoreline, then killed the engine and floated in.

Onshore, we crept up the hill, as softly as we could. When we were about eighty metres away, Scoresby stopped moving. He raised an old bolt-action rifle and stared at the musk oxen through the scope. The animals just stood there—huge horned beasts, nibbling grass and lichen and moss. For ten minutes, Scoresby kept staring. Then he turned around and frowned. “They are very skinny,” he said. Each hunter was allowed just two musk oxen during this period, and these weren’t worth it in meat. “I will tell all the hunters about them,” he said. “Isak—he is very old. Maybe he can get them.”

The most profitable quarry, these days, is the narwhal. Its skin, an Inuit delicacy known as *mattaq*, carries significant cultural meaning, and sells in Nuuk for thirty-five dollars a pound. In recent years, the annual narwhal quota for Ittoqqortoormiit has been seventeen. This past May, the hunters shot and butchered all seventeen in a single day.

Scientists estimate that the local narwhal population has fallen by ninety per cent since 1955. They expect that, at this rate, the narwhals of Scoresby Sound will be “near extirpated” by 2030. For the past six years, experts have urged the Greenlandic government to impose a local hunting quota of zero. But that is politically untenable; this year, soon after reaching the quota, hunters and their families held a protest to draw attention to their vanishing way of life. In response, the Greenlandic government allotted them an additional five narwhals—these, too, were killed in a day.

“We had almost a hundred years without a quota,” Erling Madsen, the hunting-control officer, told me. “It’s very, very difficult for a hunter to understand why we need it now, because they see a lot of animals”—hundreds more, they insist, than scientists have detected on monitoring expeditions in the fjord.

Hunters are not the only reason that narwhals are vanishing from Scoresby Sound. The animals are extremely sensitive to noise, and

under stress their heart rate can plunge to just three or four beats per minute, even as they swim away as hard as they can.

Scoresby Sound is no longer quiet in the summer. Expedition cruises start entering the fjord in June and continue until it begins to freeze over. Passengers pay tens of thousands of dollars to experience nature at its purest and to observe Ittoqqortoormiit's "idiosyncratic culture and way of life," as one tour operator put it—only to scare off narwhals and bring no substantive benefit to the town. Most ships dock a few hundred metres off Ittoqqortoormiit for a night. The next morning, passengers come ashore in Zodiac boats, nearly tripling the population of the village for a few hours—shuffling up and down the gravel streets, still wearing their life jackets. The expedition guides carry rifles as they walk from house to house. Sometimes the police have to intervene, urging guides to get tourists to stop following Inuit children around and taking pictures of them. "They treat it like a zoo," an officer told me.

When Erling Madsen was mayor, he hoped to save Ittoqqortoormiit through tourism. He understood the risk that this path would lead to the performance of cultural heritage overtaking the real thing. "We could make a polar-bear safari, because we know where they are in the summertime," he said.

For twenty years, Madsen has been calling for the construction of an airstrip on a relatively flat stretch of land between Ittoqqortoormiit and Cape Tobin—step one of many in making this a reality. But it hasn't happened. After the consolidation, Greenland's only domestic airline stopped flying to the gravel airfield forty kilometres northwest of the town. Ittoqqortoormiit was totally cut off from the rest of the country.

Avaaraq Olsen, the current mayor in Nuuk, has been trying to undo some of the worst effects of the consolidation, starting by appointing deputies in far-flung places. "We make all the wrong decisions because we are not aware of local needs," she told me.

“Many of the decisions taking place here, either political or on an administrative level, show that it’s a very long way to Ittoqqortoormiit from Nuuk.” (There is a growing independence movement in eastern Greenland—not just to form a new municipality, of about twenty-three hundred people, but to secede from western Greenland entirely.)

This September, as Ittoqqortoormiit celebrated its centennial, the Greenlandic government announced plans to build the airstrip next to Cape Tobin—a kind of birthday present, with funds from Denmark. But there’s a long, uncertain path between announcement and implementation, and the budget for it doesn’t add up. “If we get our airport, many people are ready to come back,” Madsen told me. An expert on Greenlandic politics in Nuuk wasn’t so sure. “We’ve done the airports in other such places, and it often doesn’t bring anything to the town,” he said. “It just enables people to move out much faster.”

Summer ended; darkness returned. The only police car in Ittoqqortoormiit tested the ice, and fell through. Three hungry polar bears arrived in the village—a mother and her cubs. They wouldn’t leave. Madsen has the skins, and soon they’ll be stretched over scaffolds in town, drying in the late-autumn winds.

A little more than a decade ago, the fjord nearly swallowed Hjelmer Hammeken. He had been out hunting with his dogs for ten days near the southeastern tip of the fjord. The weather was clear: as he set off across the sea ice toward home, he could see for miles in every direction.

The sled moved almost in silence atop a layer of fresh snow. Then, suddenly, it surged up and forward, caught on a powerful swell from below. It was late in the winter season—right when the ice should have been strongest. But through the snow Hammeken had not sensed that it was terrifyingly, abnormally thin. Another swell

came and went, cracking the ice into floes. He glanced back; there was a trail of open water.

The dogs were mystified—nothing like this had ever happened to them. Hammeken shouted to spread out, and pushed forward. To stop or turn back would mean death.

The swells beneath the sea ice lifted huge slabs into the air as if they were nothing, wrecking with each undulation the world that Hammeken believed he knew. For more than an hour, the dogs fought against the weight of the sled, stalling on the back slope of each swell, then scrambling down the front. Even thick ice was shattering. Everything was fragile; nothing was safe. But the dogs kept going, carrying their hunter forward—ice before them, water behind, outrunning the inevitable, all the way home. ♦

Ben Taub, a staff writer, is the recipient of the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. His 2018 reporting on Iraq won a National Magazine Award and a George Polk Award.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/one-of-the-greatest-polar-bear-hunters-confronts-a-vanishing-world>

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Can Trump's Peace Initiative Stop the Congo's Thirty-Year War?

The President declared a diplomatic triumph. The view from the ground is more complex.

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)

November 24, 2025



The hospital in Mweso, a frontline town in eastern Congo, accepts wounded fighters from all sides of the D.R.C.'s conflict, but it keeps rival factions in separate wards, to avoid violence.

Photographs by Moises Saman / Magnum for The New Yorker

When I visited the king of Bukumu, Mwami Butsitsi Kahembe IV Isaac, he was dressed in a crisp white caftan, with the skin of a leopard killed by his great-grandfather slung over his shoulders. A crown of matching fur sat on his head, and an ivory-tipped scepter announced his rank. The surroundings were less elegant. The king told me ruefully that his ancestral palace had been destroyed thirty years ago by combatants from the Hutu tribe, and that he had not yet found the resources to rebuild it. We met instead at his office in a compound at the edge of the city of Goma, in the eastern Congo. Mwami Isaac, as he is known, arrived in a chauffeur-driven Land Cruiser, escorted by three bodyguards carrying assault rifles.

It was a bright fall morning, but the sky was hazy with smoke from Mt. Nyiragongo, the volcano that loomed thousands of feet above. The Bukumu kingdom occupies about a hundred and thirty square miles in the province of North Kivu, and large portions of it are covered by black lava scree. Nyiragongo has erupted several times in recent decades. In 2021, lava consumed an entire neighborhood, killing dozens of the king's subjects and forcing thousands more to flee.

At the time of the eruption, Mwami Isaac was twenty-six, but already several years into his reign; he had taken the throne after studying political science at a university in Goma. "I rule over every aspect of my people's lives," he said. "They see me as the keeper of their traditions and as a symbol of unity, as well as the bridge between tradition and modernity." There were some traditions that Isaac had been unable to uphold. "The people believe that when the volcano erupts, the king is upset," he explained. His forebears had offered sacrifices, "including cows and sometimes virgin girls." With a cheeky smile, he said that modern human-rights laws forbade sacrificing virgins, so the volcano did what it wished.

In a waiting room outside the office, petitioners sat on benches, facing a wall decorated with photographs of Bukumu monarchs. The earliest shows Mwami Isaac's great-grandfather, wearing a belted military uniform enlivened with heavy gold medallions. In the most recent portrait, Isaac sits on an intricately carved throne with a distant look, as if surveying his domain.

The Bukumu kingdom is a small part of a vast country that has been riven for centuries by tribal disputes and colonial violence. As Isaac told it, his kingdom's history is rife with treachery, usurpation, and murder. His great-grandfather came to power during King Leopold II of Belgium's bloody occupation of Congo, and ruled for five decades. His succession was contested, though;

Isaac's grandfather and father both inherited the throne as children and were forced to vie for power with a relative who was twice appointed as regent. According to Isaac, the regent was a cruel and greedy man who killed his subjects, took their land, and allied himself with Congo's dictator, Joseph Mobutu. After the regent died, his son ruled unlawfully for twenty years before dying in an explosion. Isaac's father reclaimed the throne, but died when Isaac was two—shot by a rival in the office where we were sitting.



Map by Supriya Kalidas

In January, there was another tumultuous transfer of power in North Kivu. After years of fighting with Congolese government forces, a rebel army known as the M23 seized control of Goma and

a large swath of surrounding territory. A framed photograph on Mwami Isaac's desk showed him posed with the M23's military chief, General Sultani Makenga. With a laugh, Isaac told me, "I also have a photo of myself with President Tshisekedi"—the current leader of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "But I've put that photo away." Tshisekedi lives in the capital, Kinshasa, which sits nearly a thousand miles away, toward the Atlantic coast. The M23 fighters were heavily armed and close at hand; they were also backed by the neighboring state of Rwanda, whose border runs along the edge of Goma. "As king, I must obey the decisions of the state," Mwami Isaac said. "Now I must obey the M23, because here it is the government."

The fighting over Goma had been fierce; several thousand people died, including hundreds of civilians and government troops. But it was only the latest manifestation of a decades-long fight between the D.R.C. and Rwanda, which has grown to involve several other countries and scores of ethnic militias in the forests of eastern Congo. The governments involved have stoked the fighting with Romanian mercenaries, Russian fighter jets, and Chinese drones. "The only way to survive in this minefield is to stay neutral," Mwami Isaac said. But he acknowledged, "It's difficult to rule over seven hundred thousand people and stay apolitical. We try and maintain a balance."

The fighting in eastern Congo seldom makes the international news, except during extraordinary spasms of violence. This summer, though, there was a moment of renewed interest, when President Donald Trump announced that he had "stopped" the war—one of eight (or perhaps nine) conflicts that he claims to have resolved in his quest for a Nobel Peace Prize. Emissaries from Rwanda and the D.R.C. dutifully appeared in Washington, to be photographed shaking hands, making optimistic speeches, and signing agreements. In a parallel effort, the government of Qatar oversaw negotiations between the M23 rebels and the Congolese government. For months, the two initiatives plodded along, with

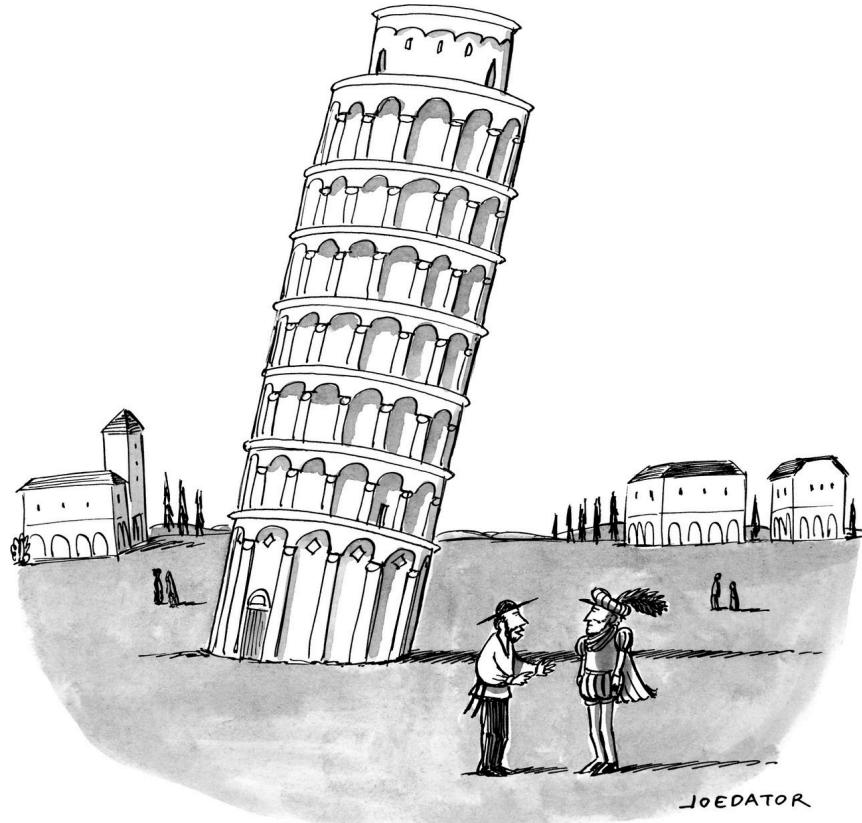
photo ops and declarations of good will. Meanwhile, the fighting kept up, and military leaders talked about more aggressive campaigns. In two visits that I made to Rwanda and eastern Congo this fall, the war seemed far too entrenched to be easily stopped. Many observers feared that it would grow until it stretched across the country to the capital.

In Goma, it's easy to see signs of conflict, but difficult to tell whether they were caused by recent battles or by earlier ones. The M23 incursion in January left buildings pocked with bullet holes; it also left hundreds of victims buried in an unmarked cemetery next to the city's airport. Their graves are set among older ones on acres of weeds and rocks.

The airport, surrounded by a security wall festooned with razor wire, was partly destroyed in the fighting, despite being guarded by one of the largest U.N. peacekeeping forces in the world. Intended as a regional "stabilization mission," the force includes ten thousand troops, spread between Goma and a few other locales. It is estimated to have cost twenty-seven billion dollars since its inception, in 1999—but, because it lacks an effective mandate to intervene to halt violence, it is considered all but irrelevant.

The presence of peacekeepers in eastern Congo can seem like the U.N.'s way of apologizing for failing to halt the Rwandan genocide, a singularly brutal conflict that is the wellspring of the current violence in the region. For three months in 1994, Hutu extremists, who represented the ethnic majority in Rwanda, conducted a monstrous slaughter of ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus. At least eight hundred thousand people died, many of them executed by drunk men who had been urged by the Hutu-led government to exterminate their neighbors. Victims were murdered with machetes, garden hoes, and clubs; their bodies were tossed into rivers, dumped in ditches, and hurled into wells and pit latrines. Churches offered sanctuary, until men arrived to murder the families inside. The killers referred to what they were doing as

“work” and to their victims as “cockroaches.” By the time it was over, Rwanda’s Tutsi population had been reduced by eighty-five per cent.



“Good news, sir—we’ve made some major improvements to the leaning, on-fire, rat-infested tower.”
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Throughout the violence, the U.N. resisted calls to intervene, and refused to describe what was happening as a genocide. So did the U.S. State Department. The task of halting the slaughter was left largely to the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a Tutsi guerrilla army led by an enigmatic thirty-six-year-old named Paul Kagame.

The R.P.F. eventually seized the capital, Kigali, and Kagame took control of the government. The killing wound down, but ethnic tensions remained. The same people who had organized the genocide led an exodus of Hutus across the border into the D.R.C., and as many as a million settled in camps around Goma. When a cholera epidemic broke out there, killing some fifty thousand people, the international relief community hastened to provide the Hutu refugees with food, shelter, and medical care. As Philip

Gourevitch wrote in “We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families,” his haunting book about the genocide, the outside world had largely ignored the extermination of the Tutsis, but it “responded to the mass flight of Hutus . . . with passionate intensity.”

It was perhaps inevitable that the war that had begun in Rwanda would continue in Congo. Though the Hutus in the camps were largely civilians, there were thousands among them who had participated in the mass killing, and their leaders quickly became a Hutu government in exile. They remained armed, and continued to conduct raids against the Tutsis across the border.

In 1996, Rwanda’s new government sent troops into the camps to root out the génocidaires. In a short and vicious campaign that became known as the First Congo War, Kagame’s army pursued the Hutu forces across the country, all the way to Kinshasa. In the capital, the Rwandans overthrew President Joseph Mobutu. In his place, they installed a local ally, Laurent-Désiré Kabila—a gold entrepreneur and a former Maoist rebel leader.

At first, Kabila ruled the D.R.C. in concert with the Rwandans. But before long he turned against his patrons, and they launched a new incursion to force him out. The Second Congo War, as it became known, divided the region: several African nations took sides with Kabila, while Uganda joined forces with Rwanda. The fighting dragged on for five years, until a peace agreement was signed in 2003. By then, Kabila had been shot dead by one of his soldiers, and his son Joseph had been handed control of the country.

While a succession of treaties and opaque power-sharing deals have determined who rules in Kinshasa, the violence in the eastern hinterlands has never stopped. Armed groups have proliferated in a complex web of alliances, defections, and betrayals. An estimated hundred and twenty militias are now active, propped up variously by governments around the region and by political factions within

the D.R.C. Among the most prominent forces are the M23, aligned with Rwanda, and the Wazalendo and the F.D.L.R., aligned with the Congolese government. Massacres are commonplace, and huge numbers of people have been killed by fighters, or by displacement, starvation, and disease. The estimated over-all death toll since the First Congo War broke out is between four and six million.

In Goma, three decades of humanitarian crisis have had a curious effect: a population boom. The city has grown from about a hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants to as many as two million, primarily owing to displacement by war from the surrounding countryside. The residents, victims and perpetrators alike, are generally busy trying to survive. The city sits alongside Lake Kivu, and men spend their days on the shoreline, waiting with sponges and water buckets for cars to wash. Others line up to serve as day laborers, filling sacks with sand transported by barge and then carrying them on their backs to delivery trucks. From the docks, ferries run to the city of Bukavu, a hundred and twenty miles down the shore. Bukavu, like Goma, fell to the M23 early this year.

Most of Goma is a warren of improvised housing, with tin shacks for the poorest and cinder-block huts for those a little better off. But the market streets are jammed with people buying and selling. Women in elegant African-print dresses carry burdens on their heads; men in cast-off Western clothes push wooden carts laden with potatoes and carrots. The atmosphere is noisy and sociable, a hubbub of music and conversation. Occasionally, jeeps full of M23 fighters push past, while the civilians pretend to ignore them. Like the king of Bukumu, the city's residents have largely adjusted to the M23, but they know that it's safer not to engage.

Along the lakeshore are the headquarters of relief agencies: U.N.H.C.R., I.C.R.C., War Child, Tearfund. Around town, you see plastic sheets and grain sacks stamped with the joined-hands emblem of U.S.A.I.D.—the world's largest aid agency, before it

was decimated by the Trump Administration. U.S.A.I.D.’s demise has removed the main source of rape kits, H.I.V. medications, and nutritional supplements for malnourished children, essential support for millions of people in eastern Congo.

At a hospital in Goma, the director, a jovial man in a doctor’s coat and blue Crocs, told me that he and his staff were handling about five rape cases every day. He believed that many more women were being attacked, but that not all of them had the means, or the courage, to come seek treatment. Rape is routinely used as a weapon of war in eastern Congo; U.N. investigators say that the incidence of sexual violence is among the worst in the world. The director said that most of the assaults took place on the outskirts of Goma and in the countryside beyond. Armed men invaded houses and raped women, often in front of their husbands, who were then killed. Other women were assaulted while they worked in the fields or fetched firewood. Sometimes they were gang-raped, or violated with foreign objects. The director said that the most difficult case he had dealt with recently was a woman who had a tree branch jammed into her vagina. She had survived, thanks to intensive surgery.

I asked who was committing this violence. Was it the F.D.L.R. militia, which is led by the remnants of the Hutu génocidaires? Or was it the M23? The director shrugged. The rapists attacked at night, and usually did not announce which group they belonged to. All he could say, as a doctor, was that there were more rapes now than before. At the hospital, he and his colleagues tested victims for H.I.V. and gave them clothes and “dignity kits,” containing soap, menstrual pads, and other essentials. In cases of severe trauma, they offered psychotherapy. But, since U.S.A.I.D. ended its support, they had been unable to supply rape kits to collect evidence. There were also no courts handling rape cases in Goma, so he and his team were the only outlet for any testimony that victims dared to provide.

One afternoon, I saw an elderly woman hoeing the ground in the unmarked cemetery across from Goma's airport. She introduced herself as Zabandora, and told me that she was planting soybeans. It was open land, and she lived nearby, she explained, waving toward a row of shacks. Two harvests a year gave her just enough to live on. During the recent fighting, she had stayed away and prayed, returning to her crops only when it was all over. At the graveyard, she found people burying relatives and told them that she usually planted there, between the headstones. They said that they would understand if she continued.

Goma has a few wealthier residents. On the lakeshore is a smattering of luxury hotels and opulent villas; the current style favors complex curving façades, wrought-iron verandas, and mirrored glass rising above the street. The M23 occupies several handsome buildings, including a well-guarded compound with landscaped gardens for its political leaders.

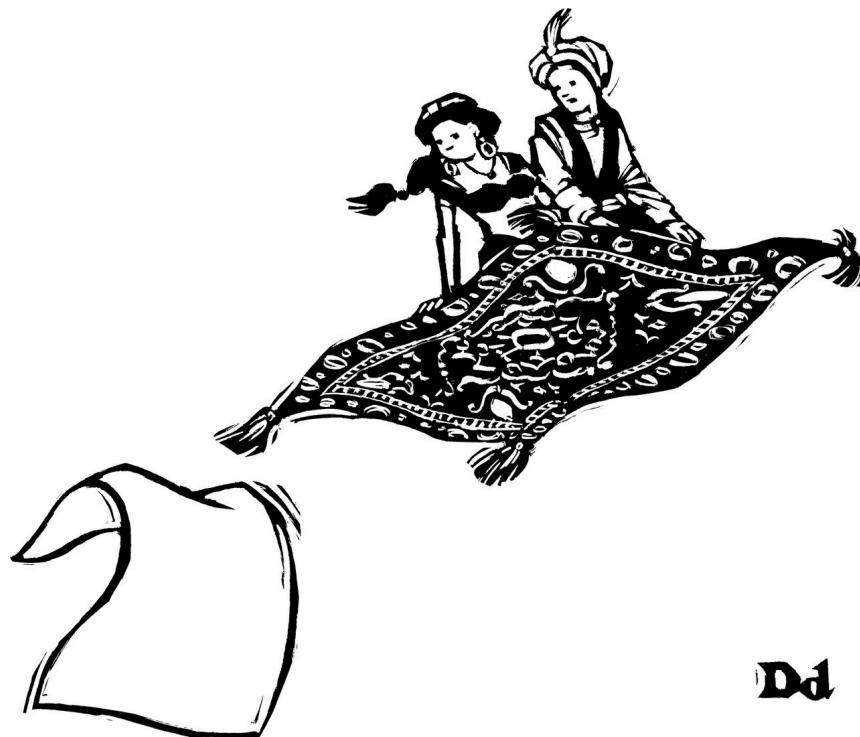
Despite Congo's widespread poverty, it is extraordinarily rich in natural resources. Near Goma, there are lucrative mines for gold and for coltan, which is crucial to manufacturing batteries and cellphones. Farther west is an enormous copper belt, much of which is in Chinese hands. In the D.R.C., who profits from the sale of resources has long depended on who holds political power, or who controls the territory.

In an earlier era, the area around Goma, a region of vast lakes and forests, was the ivory belt of equatorial Africa, and the target of slaving expeditions from the Arab world. Tippu Tip, a notorious trader in the nineteenth century, amassed some ten thousand slaves and a fortune in ivory, growing rich enough to once make a serious attempt to secure his own autonomous state in eastern Congo.

During the Berlin Conference of 1884-85, European colonial powers carved up Africa for their own use. Germany secured the lands that are now Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania; the sprawling

wilderness of Congo went to King Leopold II of Belgium. The colonists took up where Tippu Tip left off, plundering the forests for ivory and other resources. Although slavery was formally outlawed, the practice persisted with unusual brutality. Before the Belgians withdrew, in 1960, they extracted billions of dollars' worth of rubber and precious metals, at the cost of millions of Congolese lives. Like other colonists, they left only because a U.N. mandate forced them out, and they did not go quietly. Congo's first elected Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, who showed sympathies for Moscow, was executed in 1961, in an operation orchestrated by Belgium and the C.I.A.

The battle for control of land and resources in Congo fuels the current conflict, too. The militias at work in the east compete for money and influence, much of which comes through links to mining interests. They live off whatever can be extracted from the land—gold and coltan, cacao, charcoal made by burning down forests.



"The carpet pads aren't magic."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

Nearly all the militias are based around ethnicity. The F.D.L.R. is avowedly Hutu. The M23, founded in 2012, styles itself as a protector of the Tutsis. Congo's Tutsi population, estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, is a small minority in a country with more than a hundred million citizens, but a significant presence in North and South Kivu, where they are concentrated. The Tutsis are traditionally herders and tend to be richer than the Hutus, who are farmers; their relative wealth is a source of resentment. In Congo, Tutsis face widespread discrimination and bigoted invective. As a result of the 1994 genocide and the subsequent fighting, tensions between the tribes intensified—and so did Rwanda's interest in protecting Tutsis across the border. Although the Rwandan government denies being involved with the M23, it has persistently supplied direction, money, and manpower, along with drones and other technology; several thousand Rwandan soldiers participated in the siege of Goma.

The M23's most prominent representative in Goma is Bertrand Bisimwa, who leads its political wing. When I met him, he blithely dismissed the idea that the M23 was an occupying force. "We are Congolese citizens," he said. "We cannot be invaders of our own country." He denied accusations of war crimes, as well as reports that miners and farmers had been forced to bribe soldiers to use their own land. The money was merely a "security tax," he said. "We play the role of the state."

He lost his composure only when speaking about his enemies, whom he accused of being drug addicts and cannibals. "They are given a specific face as their enemy—the face of a Tutsi," he said. "The war we are waging is an existential war."

Around Goma, there are persistent rumors that the M23 is actually commanded by Rwanda's President, or perhaps its former defense secretary. During my visit, people seemed to defer to another leader: an ebullient figure named Corneille Nangaa. I met Nangaa one morning at a friend's villa on Lake Kivu. He was wearing a

sharply tailored dark suit, a Tesla baseball cap, and a blue shirt with a metal Hugo Boss insignia. He carried a walking stick carved from pale wood. As security men fanned out, Nangaa led me to a table on a fastidiously clipped lawn, where waiters brought an extravagant breakfast. More guards stood on a nearby dock, staring out to Lake Kivu.

Nangaa is the head of the Congo River Alliance, a large, ethnically mixed rebel group, but he spent much of his earlier career working for the Congolese government. In 2018, as the head of the national electoral commission, he oversaw one of the murkiest and most influential political deals in Congo's recent history.



King Mwami Butsitsi Kahembe IV Isaac rules a traditional domain near the Rwandan border, in an area that has seen vicious fighting. “The only way to survive in this minefield is to stay neutral,” he said.

At the time, Joseph Kabilo had been President of the D.R.C. for seventeen years, overseeing an administration known for its unfettered corruption. As the Presidential election approached, Kabilo was increasingly unpopular, and a viable opponent was found: Félix Tshisekedi, a thickset, pugnacious man who was the son of a prominent opposition leader. Tshisekedi ended up winning, but the election was so dubious that many observers assumed he had done so by cutting a power-sharing deal with Kabilo.

Nangaa handled the difficult negotiations around Kabilia's departure. It was Congo's first peaceful transfer of power in decades, but it didn't last. Within a few years, both Nangaa and Kabilia had fallen out with Tshisekedi and fled across the country to Goma, where they allied themselves with the M23. Kabilia has been visiting African capitals to build support for the militia, which he is rumored to be helping to fund with a huge fortune that he built while in power. This past September, Tshisekedi retaliated by having Kabilia tried in absentia and sentenced to death for war crimes and treason.

From our breakfast table, Nangaa gestured at forested hills that rose above the lake. "That's Rwanda, a country which has accomplished everything we have not," he said. I had heard the same sentiment from many others in the region. The D.R.C. is vastly larger than Rwanda, with nearly ten times its population and far more abundant natural resources, but it has proved incapable of securing peace or prosperity for its citizens. Rwanda, by contrast, has made enviable social and economic progress in the past few decades. People who live on the Congolese side of the border often cross into Rwanda to get mail and to do their banking. The M23 established its compound in Goma conveniently close to the crossing.

Nangaa complained that the Congolese government had thwarted free enterprise. He told me that, at the Berlin Conference, the colonialists intended the D.R.C. to become the Congo Free State—which, in his eccentric interpretation, was a libertarian paradise. "Our vision is to go back to that original idea, so that everyone can come and do business here," he said. "If Trump wants to come, he'll come and do business." Trump has said forthrightly that he expects the U.S. to get a portion of the D.R.C.'s mineral wealth in exchange for fostering talks; Gentry Beach, an American financier who is friends with Donald Trump, Jr., recently visited and reportedly spoke of taking over a major coltan mine.

Before the D.R.C. can become the Congo Free State, Nangaa said, “it first needs to create a state.” A country requires an effective army, police force, justice system, and administration—but, he said, “here it’s all corrupted.” With a solicitous look, he added, “Everyone can blame the West, but it values hard work. Here, the people don’t work.”

Nangaa argued that Tshisekedi had chronically mismanaged the country. In 2022, after a period of relative quiet, the M23 began clashing with the Congolese Army, a corrupt and largely ineffectual force. Tshisekedi invited troops from countries around the region to come fight for his regime, and hired mercenaries from Eastern Europe. In an arms-buying spree worth billions of dollars, he acquired Turkish attack drones and Russian warplanes. When that didn’t halt the M23, his government called up fighters throughout Congo to join the *Wazalendo*—a nationalist militia movement whose name means “the patriots.” Tshisekedi urged his supporters to fight “for our Congolese identity.” In a fit of paranoia, he also arrested dozens of generals he suspected of siding with the M23, along with influential Tutsis who were accused of espionage.

To fill out the ranks of the *Wazalendo*, Tshisekedi distributed weapons to ethnic militias and criminal gangs. Nangaa told me that, though the M23 controlled Goma, many *Wazalendo* remained active around the city. “Our boys are arresting them, even now, ten to twenty of them every night,” he said. (According to Human Rights Watch, the M23 is also killing them; scores of young men have been found shot dead.)

Nangaa assured me that the war would be won before long. “We have a project for the country,” he said. “We know what we want to do.” The D.R.C. had no roads through the countryside, he pointed out. “After creating the state, we must connect all the territories, to get the people together.” Once the various tribes were linked, it would “take away discrimination,” he said. “That is how we create

a nation. I have a dream, just like Martin Luther King said.”

Nangaa laughed, pleased with his formulation.

For the country to be reformed, Nangaa said, “Tshisekedi must be removed by force. He doesn’t have the capacity to understand what he has to do as head of state. What is important to him is to enjoy the red carpet.” Nangaa is unabashed about his own aspiration to be the D.R.C.’s next President. Over breakfast, I asked about his walking stick. “This?” he said, raising it aloft. “It gives me power.”

“What kind of power?” I asked.

“All kinds of power,” he said and smiled.

In June, when Trump announced that he had brought peace to eastern Congo, he described it as “a glorious triumph.” But the M23 had not agreed to disband. A militia spokesman told the Associated Press, “We are in Goma with the population, and we are not going to get out.”

A Western diplomat in the region told me that the M23 seemed to be attempting to set down permanent roots in North Kivu. They had upended the traditional system of justice, administered by tribal chiefs. After registries of property deeds were burned during the fighting, the M23 had simply handed out land to people it favored.

Taking Goma had given the M23 control of a vast arsenal left behind by the defeated Congolese Army—as much as a third of the country’s military equipment, the diplomat said. The militia had also acquired an estimated twelve thousand new troops, many of them captured government soldiers who were either enticed or forced to serve. “The M23 have never enjoyed this level of control before,” the diplomat said. “The risk for them is they now have fallen into the same trap as the D.R.C. government—having to administer the territory they control.”

If the M23's stewardship of North Kivu is a test case for running the country, it is not encouraging. Patrick Muyaya, the D.R.C.'s minister of communication, told me that electricity and banking services had lapsed in Goma, while the "ethnic cleansing of Hutus" had continued. In July, according to the U.N., M23 fighters massacred more than three hundred civilians in a group of frontline villages about forty miles from town. "Every day, there is killing," Muyaya said. "The people running that part of the country—the only thing they know is crime."

An hour's drive northwest of Goma, across a vast moonscape of black lava, is a shambolic roadside community called Sake. For several years before the fall of Goma, it was a frontline town in the fight between the M23 and government forces. Displaced people's tents, made from plastic sheeting supplied by N.G.O.s, are pitched alongside abandoned homesites, many of them burned to their foundations. The settlement is dug into jagged rock around a Catholic church, the Miséricorde Divine.

The priest, a burly man with wary eyes, explained that he had been appointed to Sake in 2023, when the *Wazalendo* were *entrenched there*. As the M23 moved in, he said, it captured several hundred Hutu refugees and forcibly trucked them away. The church was looted and burned, and the town became "like bush," he said, with almost no inhabitants remaining. "We had to start from zero again."

Gradually, people had returned, but they struggled to sustain themselves, and attacks continued. Some drivers for a relief agency had been kidnapped during a visit to the priest's compound, so no one stayed overnight at the church anymore. When I asked if he slept there, he retorted, "How could I leave? I'm the priest." But many of the civilians were packing up and heading to Goma. "They think it's an oasis of peace," he said wryly. Along with the threat of violence in Goma, there was a shortage of food, because the farmers who supplied the city had fled their land. The priest said that he was forty years old and had known nothing but conflict in

his life. With a disgusted look, he said, “I’m very tired of fighting, and I call upon the leaders to end it.”

The Presidents of Congo and Rwanda have spent much of the past year trading insults. Tshisekedi has likened Kagame to Hitler and declared, “One thing is responsible for this situation, and that is Rwandan aggression.” Kagame tends to be cutting, rather than blunt. When Tshisekedi threatened to send his air force to strike Rwanda, Kagame responded, “Tshisekedi is capable of everything except measuring the consequences of what he says.”

The son of Tutsi exiles to Uganda, Kagame served as an intelligence officer in the Ugandan Army before returning to lead the Rwandan Patriotic Front. As President, he has been the subject of both praise and condemnation abroad. He is a ruthless strategist capable of waging bloody wars, but he has also fostered a remarkable program to reintegrate tens of thousands of former génocidaires into Rwandan society. He has been accused of many authoritarian acts, including assassinating political opponents, but he has turned his country into a regional powerhouse, with a disciplined army that has been deployed to aid embattled allies. “Rwanda has made itself an amazingly efficient place to work and do business in—as long as you stay in your lane,” a former State Department official told me. “You want to root for them. But, on the other hand, they have been responsible for several decades of horrific actions inside D.R.C.”

I met Kagame in a boardroom at his Presidential office. Tall and rake-thin, he spoke with gnomic deliberation. When I asked about the peace process, he said, “It’s important to be optimistic. Otherwise, why would you get to work? But, realistically, the amount of pessimism is very significant.” He was dismissive of interventions from the “international community” in eastern Congo. “The U.N. has been involved in this problem for the last thirty years,” he said. “They have spent billions of dollars, on

peacekeeping missions, N.G.O.s, all kinds of things. What has come out of this effort?”

Gradually, he worked his way toward blaming the Congolese for the conflict in the east. “It’s not Rwanda that is the most affected by the problem,” he said. “There are complex problems that originate from colonial times, when borders were being drawn, and then there are matters of tribes and ethnic groups. Most of these are to be found in any other place. But they have been overcome by governance internally, even if this is to be assisted by external actors.” Finally, he said, “After all these years, Congo can’t find a formula where the first responsibility goes to domestic leaders. You can’t just keep all this blame game going on.”

Some critics have argued that the remaining F.D.L.R. Hutu militias, which may have as few as two thousand soldiers, pose a minimal threat to Rwanda. When I raised the idea, Kagame replied evenly, “When a hurricane is building up, we should work from the assumption that it might come our way.” He added, “Our interpretation is, what happened here is enough. We’re not going back.” People who accused Rwanda of aggression, he said, were “silencing the victim and, in the end, turning the victim into the perpetrator.”

Kagame suggested that I speak to his longtime aide James Kabarebe, who was as gruff as his boss was elliptical. An ex-soldier in his mid-sixties, Kabarebe has led Rwandan forces in every significant conflict since the genocide. When Kabila was installed as President of the D.R.C., Kabarebe became the head of Congo’s Army; then, after the two fell out, he led the fight to depose him. He now holds the cumbersome title of Rwanda’s “minister of state for foreign affairs in charge of regional cooperation.” After the fall of Goma, the U.S. government sanctioned Kabarebe, accusing him of aiding the M23 and of facilitating the illegal export of minerals from Congo.

In his office, Kabarebe claimed that his government did not support the M23, saying, “We have put their leaders in prison.” (He was referring to the former M23 warlord Laurent Nkunda, who is supposed to be in a Rwandan jail but is rumored to be living freely under government protection.) Yet he also suggested that Rwanda would be justified in supporting anyone who protected Tutsis. After the conflict of 1994, he said, “the international community assisted the genocidal forces to move into the D.R.C.” Since then, he argued, the border had posed an existential threat to Rwanda. “Having a genocidal army next door is suicidal,” he said. “This is not understood well in the West.”

Kabarebe contended that the Hutu militia posed a commercial threat, too. “We have a soldier posted along every metre of the border,” he said. “We do this to protect the mountain gorillas, which are the basis for our tourism industry.” Tourism, much of it built around wildlife, accounts for roughly ten per cent of Rwanda’s economy. Kabarebe said that since 2018 the militias had staged dozens of attacks in the parks where the gorillas live. At one point, mortar shells crashed down near a gorilla-research center established by Ellen DeGeneres. (As a Rwandan aide told me, “We can’t have that.”)

Outside observers say that the main reason for Rwanda’s interest in D.R.C. is to control its mineral wealth. Among other things, the Rwandans have been said to secretly transport niobium from a mine near Goma across the border and then export it. Rwanda’s annual gold exports have increased sixfold in eight years, to \$1.5 billion. Kabarebe vehemently disputed the accusations. “The mineral exploitation has nothing to do with the conflict with D.R.C.,” he insisted. “It’s about security. The minerals go as they go, but Rwanda has nothing to do with it.”

Kabarebe cited several cross-border attacks in 2022 as the impetus for the latest intervention. “President Kagame decided to take defensive measures to protect our border,” he said. “And then this

narrative began that Rwanda was an invader wanting the minerals of the D.R.C.” Western countries had applied sanctions to Rwanda, and to Kabarebe personally, but he described them as a minor irritant. “I’m used to it,” he said. “I am happy and comfortable here.”

The frontline town of Mweso is only sixty-two miles from Goma, but the trip takes six hours by Land Cruiser, along a road that has devolved into a cratered gantlet of rocks and mud. Near the halfway mark begins a ragged, ill-defined war zone, where the M23 prevails in roadside villages, but much of the surrounding wilderness is held by the *Wazalendo*.

The few settlements I passed through were dismally poor. People gazed sullenly at my truck, though a few excited children ran alongside, begging for money or a “stylo”—a pen to do their schoolwork. There were almost no other vehicles on the road, aside from a handful of green Army jeeps carrying M23 fighters.

The landscape, full of mountainsides riven by forests and terrace farms, provided a visible index of contested territory. An immense valley led to a line of blue mountains in the distance: Virunga National Park, where the mountain gorillas coexisted uneasily with F.D.L.R. Hutu fighters. The valley was once deeply forested, but its trees had been burned for charcoal, to provide income for militants and their families.

For about three hours, the track wound through a seemingly endless range of green hills populated by grazing cows—a kind of Congolese Switzerland. It was a single enormous farm, owned by the former President Joseph Kabilà, whose known land holdings are nearly twelve times the size of Manhattan. As I descended back into the forest, the road became rocky, and the crops turned to sugarcane and cassava. This was Hutu territory, where the M23 were interlopers.

Mweso was a bleak whistle-stop town, built around a main street—a mud wash, on the night I arrived—lined with ramshackle bars, phone-card kiosks, and car-repair shops. Mweso's electricity came from a patchwork of noisy diesel generators, and the restaurants were dirt-floored places that sold plates of fatty goat meat and boiled cassava mash. In the hills above the town, the M23 and a local Hutu militia that called itself the C.M.C. had established positions, from which they traded gunfire. The M23 held Mweso, but the C.M.C. carried out frequent raids into town to supply its fighters.



Hundreds of displaced people have taken shelter in a school in Mweso after fighting overtook their villages.

A Médecins Sans Frontières outpost sat behind a security wall, and a hundred yards down the road was a hospital, which M.S.F. helped fund and oversee. With nearly three hundred beds and four hundred and fifty staff members, it was the largest medical facility around, and one of the busiest.

The acting director, Alain Ntsirie Kubuya, told me that the hospital operated on a permanent emergency footing; malaria and other diseases were rampant, as was malnutrition, because the war had prevented people from planting crops. The hospital also took in about fifteen wounded patients a week, from all sides. Kubuya said that his staff had established an agreement with the leaders of the fighting factions: “We inform the occupiers of the zone that we are going to retrieve a wounded person.” The militias generally respected the M.S.F. as a neutral body, he said, but occasionally there was trouble.

A middle-aged man in an orange T-shirt that read “Happy International Nurses Day” introduced himself as Sifumungu Byenda Bisgod, the head of surgical nursing. A few days earlier, he and his team had informed the M23 that they were retrieving a wounded *Wazalendo* fighter from the field, but, when they reached a roadblock, the soldiers there pulled everyone out of the vehicles and wanted to execute the man. The crew argued back, and finally the soldiers relented. “This kind of thing happens about twice a week,” he said.

Bisgod said that there had been some early difficulties with putting rivals in the same ward, so now they kept the factions apart. Only nurses and doctors were allowed access to *Wazalendo* patients. “We tell them to keep a low profile and, once they are feeling better, not to go wandering around, as they are in an M23 zone,” Bisgod said. Some patients had gone into town, been recognized as *Wazalendo*, and been murdered on the spot. After a patient recovered, the

hospital crew informed the M23 that they had to “make a movement,” a euphemism for returning a fighter to his comrades. “We do this without going into too many details about who it is we are taking,” Bisgod said.

In the *Wazalendo* ward, seven or eight fighters lay in cots. The oldest was thirty-nine, the youngest seventeen. A few had lost limbs, and wore bloody bandages on the stumps. They looked wary, but, after Bisgod introduced me, a fighter named Tchayo agreed to talk. A stern young man in a blue T-shirt with his foot in a cast, he shared a bed with another man who had lost an arm.

Tchayo and four others in the room had been wounded in a firefight with the M23 three weeks earlier. One comrade had been killed. Afterward, local farmers had helped the survivors reach a spot where there was phone reception, and they had called the hospital to come pick them up.

Tchayo had been a primary-school teacher before he became a fighter for the C.M.C., nine years ago. He said that he had joined because “Tutsi people have been aggressing us. We are Hutus. They were bringing their animals to eat our crops.”

Tchayo acknowledged that there had been a genocide in Rwanda, “but they have taken their war here,” he said. He mentioned that Tutsi militants had committed a large-scale massacre in his area. “They use the genocide as an excuse,” he said. When I asked what he planned to do when he got better, he replied, “My goal is to go back and do my job, because the enemy has not returned to Rwanda. So I will return to the fight.”

UPCOMING SHOWS AT THE SMITHSONIAN



R. Chast

Cartoon by Roz Chast

In a ward about a hundred feet away, a government soldier whom I'll call Jean lay bandaged all over, breathing with the help of oxygen. Jean, thirty-nine, had been deployed in Sake when it fell to the M23. Along with hundreds of others, he had been taken prisoner and pressed into service for the militia. After two months of training, there was a graduation ceremony, in which more than seven thousand new fighters were paraded before senior leaders. "Makenga came," Jean said between wheezes. "Nangaa came." Afterward, the soldiers were deployed to the front lines. On the way, Jean's vehicle crashed, and he broke some bones and punctured a lung.

He explained that he had a wife and two children back home: “I don’t know anything about them since January.” Tears gathered on his cheeks. I asked how he felt about fighting for the M23. “It drove me crazy,” he replied softly. “You can see me crying. My unit was also my family.”

The malnutrition ward was filled with crying babies and distraught-looking parents. An emaciated man sat by a child stretched out semiconscious on a cot, where two other small children were receiving oxygen. The man wore a dirty jacket and rubber boots, and had unkempt hair. With eyes glistening, he gazed attentively at his child, who looked nearly dead of starvation. The doctor explained that the man and his family had been hiding in the forest for two months, because fighters had taken over their village. They had been surviving on roots, yams, and whatever else they could find. He had five children, but he had left the other four with his wife, to seek medical attention for the weakest one. I asked the doctor if the child could be saved. He said that he hoped so. What would the father do afterward? “He will go back to the forest, because the rest of his family is still there,” the doctor said.

In a filthy schoolhouse across the street, several hundred displaced people were camped out. A wizened community leader told me that they were from a village a few miles outside Mweso. Months earlier, they had fled during fighting between the rival militias. The M23 had ultimately been forced out, but when the villagers returned they discovered that fighters had burned their homes. “When they lose, they take it out on the civilians, and we are Hutu,” the leader explained. For now, he and the other able-bodied men and women were working as day laborers on local farms, earning the equivalent of about fifty cents a day. Were they safe now? I asked. “Here in town it is safe, but outside, in the farms, if the armed men see you, they kill you, even if you don’t have a gun,” he said. In his village, many people had been killed. “They threw them into the toilets,” he said.

As I was leaving Mweso, a pickup truck raced up in front of the hospital. A group of tough-looking young men clambered out and half carried one of their comrades out from the back. He was unsteady on his feet and had burns all over his torso and face. It seemed as if he had come straight from the battlefield. A Congolese man who was travelling with me whispered, “*Wazalendo*,” and suggested that we move along.

President Kagame’s emissary to the peace talks in the U.S. is Mauro De Lorenzo, an affable forty-nine-year-old who is fluent in five languages and conversant in several more. De Lorenzo grew up in Delaware and started visiting Rwanda in 1998, to research a Ph.D. thesis. He now holds citizenship there. When he speaks about Rwandans, he says “we.”

A few weeks into the new Trump Administration, Kagame sent De Lorenzo to Washington, to promote Rwanda’s interests. He quickly faced competition. Tshisekedi had written Trump a letter, gushing that his election had “ushered in the golden age for America,” and offering access to Congolese minerals in exchange for a security pact. De Lorenzo said that, when he arrived, “I found at least seven different lobbyists hired by different parts of the Congolese government. They were all sending out these proposals. I’ll exaggerate a bit: ‘We will give you twenty-four trillion dollars in Congolese minerals, and we’ll throw in a military base, and in exchange you will conduct a tactical nuclear strike on Kigali.’ ”

The Trump Administration had its own peculiarities. “You basically have the government of the United States and the White House, which are like these reinforced fortresses,” De Lorenzo said. “And then you have Mar-a-Lago, around which oscillates all sorts of asteroids, and where it’s not difficult for even low-level lobbyist types to gain access if they’re noticed on the terrace.” In mid-March, he said, “one of these asteroids finally collides with President Trump, and I heard that Massad Boulos was going to be the African envoy.”

Boulos, a Lebanese American transportation entrepreneur based in Nigeria, had no diplomatic experience, but he had a family link to the White House: his son is married to Tiffany Trump. De Lorenzo recalled that his appointment sent officials scrambling. “Insiders in Washington had been planning different things, and all that disappears—we now have this guy, an in-law,” he said. “Nobody knows what it means. Does it mean he talks to Trump every day? They don’t know. But it does mean he can talk to Presidents and other principals, people you could do business with.”

The pitch that De Lorenzo formulated cast Rwanda as a crucial player in the trade of resources from eastern Congo: “Look, this whole narrative that the war is about minerals—O.K., let’s assume there is interest in minerals, and that we’d like them to come from and go through Rwanda. And there should be nothing wrong with that. The problem is there has never been a state authority in eastern Congo. So let’s us be the place where people will invest in capital-intensive processing activities, which has traditionally eluded Africa.”

De Lorenzo’s conception is echoed in a plan, the Regional Economic Integration Framework, which is now a central feature of Trump’s peace deal. The accord, not so different in spirit from the colonial Berlin Conference, suggests that, rather than fight over the resources of eastern Congo, the various partisans should simply share them.

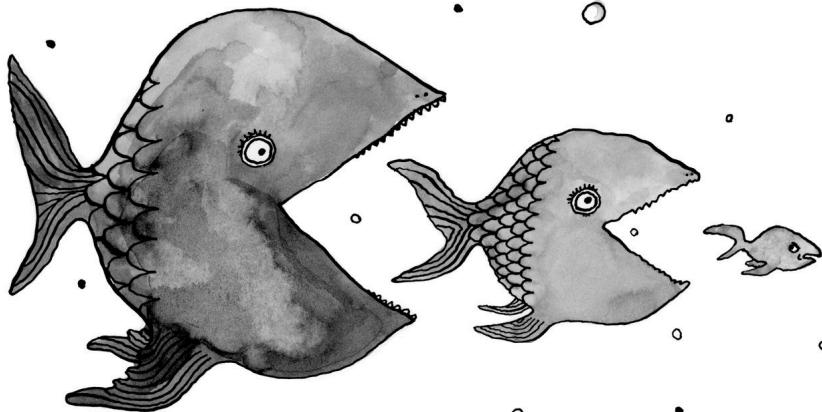
The Rwandans balked, but Qatar urged them to sign. The Qatars, along with their role as mediators, had a financial interest: they were already partners in a multibillion-dollar deal to turn Rwanda into a regional financial and logistics hub, and the minerals would provide enormous revenue. Rwanda also had experience in transporting and processing Congolese ores, which could help sell the deal to the U.S. A humanitarian expert in the region told me, “The fact is, everyone just wants to keep extracting from the D.R.C., and now President Trump does, too.” He went on, “With

Trump, there's what I call an immunity blanket, meaning 'You give me what I want, and I'll give you a pass on human rights.' ”

Last month, the negotiators gathered in Washington to endorse the framework, but at the last minute Tshisekedi ordered his envoy to withdraw, reportedly because Rwanda would not remove ninety per cent of its troops from eastern Congo. De Lorenzo suggested that some Republicans in D.C. were pleased by the hitch in Boulos's plan. “There's Schadenfreude there about him messing things up,” he said. Boulos, he added, was “the Rodney Dangerfield of the Trump Administration—just trying to get a little respect.” But Boulos was persistent, and De Lorenzo, like other observers I talked to, felt that he had no option but to place his faith in him. “I think the only way for the process to move forward is if the U.S. gets behind it,” he said.

In mid-November, Boulos made a series of hopeful announcements: representatives from Congo, Rwanda, and the M23 had initialled the Regional Economic Integration Framework, as part of an agreement that “charts a clear path toward a peace accord.”

The document was not in itself a peace deal; it was a set of eight protocols that an eventual deal should observe. First among them were a prisoner exchange and a mechanism to monitor a ceasefire. Even Boulos acknowledged that these steps would be difficult to implement. “This is not a light switch that you just switch on and off,” he told reporters.



"You two are terrible parents."
Cartoon by Liana Finck

Previous rounds of talks had also produced an agreement to exchange prisoners, but Tshisekedi had stalled. Corneille Nangaa, of the Congo River Alliance, told me that he believed many of the prisoners were already dead. Another agreement had called for militias to disarm, but, Nangaa predicted, "it will take decades to take away those guns."

Patrick Muyaya, the D.R.C.'s minister of communication, spoke warily about the peace initiative. "We are making some progress, though not at the speed we would like," he said. "For there to be real advances, we must insure that the M23 ceases to exist." Like the Rwandan officials I spoke with, Muyaya insisted that his side was trapped in a fight for survival. "The people have the right to defend themselves if armed men are attacking your mother, your sister," he said. "Of course, there are abuses. And the President is determined to bring those committing abuses to justice." He brushed off the idea that the Hutu militias posed a threat: "This is just an excuse used by Rwanda to keep on looting resources."

Outside observers say that the Wazalendo are growing more radical, and that anti-Tutsi sentiment is increasing. Yet they also note that the M23's depredations have only made such sentiments worse. The Western diplomat said that Rwanda had an urgent interest in halting the war. "As long as there is conflict, you will have young men growing up in eastern D.R.C. with destabilization of the *other* as their imperative in life, and you will have opposition politicians in Kinshasa who will exploit that for political gain," the diplomat said. But the incentives are complicated. Jason Stearns, an academic and a former U.N. investigator who has focussed on the conflict for decades, told me, "People want peace, but it's not really in the M23's interests. The same logic applies to Rwanda, but somewhat less so." If Rwanda disbands the M23 and withdraws its troops from Congo, it loses its ability to project influence across the border. It may also lose a source of revenue. The peace deal offers Rwanda rights to refine and sell Congolese tin and tantalum, but it does not offer gold, the most valuable commodity. "A very large part of Rwanda's economy relies on the D.R.C., and that could be a challenge in the future if they withdraw," Stearns said.

It is possible that Washington will threaten targeted sanctions to compel Rwanda to make an agreement. But, the Western diplomat said, "they need to insure that the deal they sign is actually upheld." The problem is that Tshisekedi is "incapable of upholding anything," he went on. There is no guarantee that the Wazalendo will abide by an agreement with the M23. And Congo's national army isn't strong enough to hold the eastern territory alone, or to defeat the M23. After years of stoking outrage at Rwanda, Tshisekedi may find it politically difficult to make concessions—but he also seems unlikely to step aside. "You'd have to strangle Tshisekedi to get him to leave," the diplomat said.

If the two sides can maintain a ceasefire, it will ease the crisis. But there will still be more than a hundred militias fighting for minerals and territory in eastern Congo. The diplomat mentioned one at work north of Goma: a vicious insurgent group whose leaders have

sworn fealty to *ISIS*, and whose fighters had a gruesome habit of decapitating villagers. The militants were attracted by the gold mines in the area—and their presence provided Uganda with an excuse to intervene there with its own army. Uganda exports more than three billion dollars in gold a year, most of which comes from one mine in eastern Congo.

For the peace process to succeed, it will have to reverse a psychology of plunder that has afflicted the region for hundreds of years. Many of the people I talked with in Congo wished fervently for a new way of life but seemed barely able to conceive of one. In the hospital in Mweso, I met Irakunda, a twenty-nine-year-old mother of four, who was lying on a bed with children arrayed around her. She wore a bright print dress, and had one foot outstretched and wrapped in a bandage. The Wazalendo had appeared in her village the day before, and she had hidden inside the school. When the fighters began looting, the villagers shouted at them, so they opened fire, and one of the bullets struck her. She recounted all this as if she were describing a natural disaster. When I asked what she thought of the war, she laughed at the question; the war was just a fact of life. Finally, she said, “It’s the reason we are all poor. I am losing, because some people are making war.” ♦

Jon Lee Anderson is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* who has covered conflicts throughout Africa and the Middle East. His books include “*To Lose a War: The Fall and Rise of the Taliban*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/can-trumps-peace-initiative-stop-the-congos-thirty-year-war>

Takes

- **[Edwidge Danticat on Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"](#)**

The mother in Kincaid's story is not only trying to tame a shrew; she is offering a template for survival.

- **[Ariel Levy on Emily Hahn's "The Big Smoke"](#)**

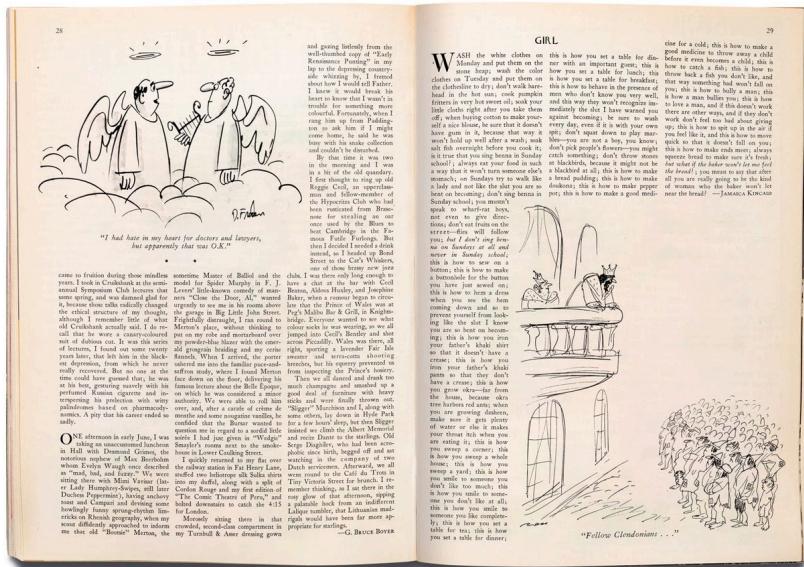
In 1969, the longtime foreign correspondent recalled a youthful adventure in which she moved to China, keen on becoming an opium addict.

Takes

Edwidge Danticat on Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl"

By [Edwidge Danticat](#)

November 23, 2025



June 26, 1978

As girls, we may find it difficult to picture our mothers—especially if they are stern Caribbean mothers—as anything other than the poised ladies they're so determined to mold us into. We struggle to imagine that they were ever little girls themselves, flying kites, climbing trees, playing hopscotch and marbles with their siblings. As mothers, some of us are so fearful for our daughters that we issue long lists of instructions that we hope will shield them from a hostile and menacing world. For mothers of Black girls, warnings about promiscuity are at the top of the list, to keep them from being considered “fast” and hypersexualized.

These tensions are brilliantly captured in Jamaica Kincaid's breathless, single-sentence short story “Girl,” first published in the June 26, 1978, issue of *The New Yorker*. It was Kincaid’s first piece of fiction in the magazine, to which she already regularly

contributed nonfiction, including many unsigned Talk of the Town pieces. In tight-knit communities like the one in Antigua where Kincaid—and, we assume, the mother and daughter in this story—grew up, reputation carries more weight than personal freedom, particularly for girls. The daughter, to whom a litany of instructions, or, rather, orders, are addressed, may yearn to sing *benna*, traditional Antiguan folk songs, in Sunday school, but she is likely better off, in her mother's and the community's perception, singing the traditional hymns of the Anglican Church. During my girlhood in Brooklyn, it was my father—who was a deacon in the Pentecostal church—who once told me that, of the four-hundred-plus members of the church we attended, there would always be at least one who was watching me. This was proved true when someone reported to my parents that I'd been seen eating sugarcane in the middle of Flatbush Avenue on a hot summer day. “Don’t eat fruits on the street,” the mother in “Girl” warns. “Flies will follow you.” Flies did not follow me, but someone’s gaze did, leading to a lengthy scolding from my mother.

“Girl,” as Kincaid acknowledged in a 2008 interview, is her most anthologized piece of writing. I first read it as a senior at Barnard College, not in this magazine but in an anthology of contemporary women writers. The story was taught both as a piece of “flash fiction” and, because of its refrain-like style, as a prose poem. I was not yet a mother then, and I read “Girl” as a daughter. I was grateful for the two moments in the story where the daughter speaks up to defend herself (“*but I don’t sing benna on Sundays*”), interruptions that allow her to be defiantly present in the way that daughters are in Kincaid’s later works, including her novels “Annie John,” “Lucy,” and “The Autobiography of My Mother.” In these books and others, the daughter never stops speaking, making one wonder what kinds of instructions, if any, she will pass on to her own children.

The mother, though, is not only trying to tame a shrew (“the slut you are so bent on becoming”); she is offering a template for

survival. When I was fifteen, my mother sent me to take cooking and etiquette classes from a Haitian neighbor in our building. That same woman taught embroidery to twentysomethings who were working on their trousseaux—frilly tablecloths and bedsheets for their future homes with their husbands. When I first read “Girl,” I thought of it as a trousseau of words. The mother’s advice addresses everything from personal grooming to cleaning house and gardening to how to behave with friends and strangers and how to make medicine both for a cold and “to throw away a child.” The daughter indicates with her rebuttals that she will pick and choose what to keep and what to ignore. The mother’s parting words concern “how to make ends meet,” which is, after all, one of life’s defining challenges, and how to choose bread, a kind of nourishment that someone else still controls: “always squeeze bread to make sure it’s fresh.” “*But what if the baker won’t let me feel the bread?*” the daughter wonders. To the mother, this is a rejection of all that came before. “You mean to say,” she exclaims, “that after all you are really going to be the kind of woman who the baker won’t let near the bread?” ♦

[Read the original story.](#)



Girl

“This is how to love a man, and if this doesn’t work there are other ways.”

Edwidge Danticat has contributed to The New Yorker since 1999. Her books include the essay collection “We’re Alone.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/takes/edwidge-danticat-on-jamaica-kincaids-girl>

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Takes

Ariel Levy on Emily Hahn's “The Big Smoke”



By [Ariel Levy](#)

November 23, 2025



February 15, 1969

“Though I had always wanted to be an opium addict, I can’t claim that as the reason I went to China.” Thus begins “The Big Smoke,” Emily Hahn’s account of her journey from peppy globe-trotter to sallow lotus-eater (and back again) in nineteen-thirties Shanghai. This insouciant kickoff leaves you curious why Hahn went to

China, of course, and why she was so keen on becoming an opium addict. More pressingly, it makes you wonder: Who is this lady? What else will this droll, naughty adventurer get up to?

Plenty. Along with fifty-two books, Hahn wrote more than two hundred articles for *The New Yorker*, over eight decades, about goings on in places as unlike as Rajasthan, Dar es Salaam, Hong Kong, and Rio de Janeiro. Her colleague Roger Angell described her, in an obituary from 1997, as “this magazine’s roving heroine” and “a woman deeply, almost domestically, at home in the world.” (Angell’s mother, Katharine White, was Hahn’s editor, and when he was a twelve-year-old “boy naturalist” on East Ninety-third Street Hahn gave him a macaque. “Don’t let her bite you,” she advised. “If she does, bite her right back.”)

There was never an emergency when Hahn was at the wheel. (She was beautiful, which never hurts, and came from a well-to-do family of German Jews in St. Louis.) Her writing made great use of offhandedness. She was on her way to Congo in 1935 “to forget that my heart was broken; it was the proper thing to do in the circumstances.” In a “Letter from Brazil” from 1960, she casually mentions that her host “woke up one morning to find his pajamas spotted with blood; he had been bitten by a vampire bat.” She roamed the world, seemingly without fetter. “It had become clear to me on the first day in China that I was going to stay forever, so I had plenty of time,” she writes in “The Big Smoke.”

Initially, she wandered Shanghai, “pausing here and there to let a rickshaw or a cart trundle by,” vaguely aware of a scent “something like burning caramel,” which announced the use of opium, the way the stench of marijuana now tells of toking up in New York. Hahn became personally acquainted with the substance at the home of a man she calls Pan Heh-ven, who was later revealed to be her paramour, the married Chinese artist and poet Zau Sinmay. Time floated away as their circle of opium smokers talked and talked

about art and literature and Chinese politics. (“That I knew nothing about politics didn’t put me off in the least,” Hahn recalls.)

With no sense of alarm, Hahn descends into dependence: her eyes leak, her skin turns jaundiced, and she stops going to the “night clubs, the cocktail and dinner parties beloved of foreign residents in Shanghai.” Inevitably, she finds herself reciting the addict’s creed: “I can stop any time.” But she doesn’t wish to stop, because “behind my drooping eyes, my mind seethed with exciting thoughts.”

The problem arises when opium starts interfering with Hahn’s wayfaring: it has become a mooring. “I couldn’t stay away from my opium tray, or Heh-ven’s, without beginning to feel homesick,” she writes—an unfamiliar, unwelcome feeling. She kicks the stuff with the help of a friend, who hypnotizes her and then keeps her away from her druggie boyfriend. Hahn’s description of detoxing: “I felt very guilty about everything in the world, but it was not agony. It was supportable.”

A child is another kind of anchor, and Hahn eventually had two of them, with the British officer Charles Boxer, who remained in Japanese internment in occupied Hong Kong when Hahn fled the island, in 1943. Motherhood seems not to have slowed her down much. After she returned to the United States with her two-year-old daughter—who spoke only Cantonese—Hahn discussed childhood anxiety with her pediatrician, a young doctor named Benjamin Spock. He asked if her daughter was ever happy. “When we go to Chinese restaurants,” Hahn replied, “where the waiters gather around to watch her eat with chopsticks. They talk to her, and she talks to them. Oh, she’s fine in Chinese restaurants.” Spock suggested that the girl might be reflecting the mother’s mood. Hahn dismissed him: “I’m perfectly all right. I’m just waiting for the war to finish, that’s all. Her father’s in prison camp.” ♦

Read the original story.



Adventures in Opium

Though I had always wanted to be an opium addict, I can't claim that as the reason I went to China.

Ariel Levy, a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2008, received a National Magazine Award in 2014 for her essay “[Thanksgiving in Mongolia](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/takes/ariel-levy-on-emily-hahns-the-big-smoke>

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Shouts & Murmurs

• **Weak Female Lead**

For some reason, I have been voted to be the leader of the uprising against Society in this dystopian Y.A. action movie, but I really just need to lie down.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

Weak Female Lead

By [Jennifer Kim](#)

November 24, 2025



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Hello! I am the weak female lead in this dystopian Y.A. action movie, and I really just need to lie down. Ever since we ran away from Society six days ago, my ankle's been acting weird. Not, like, broken-weird, but every time I step down it kind of makes this clicking noise? Wait, it just did it again. Did you hear that?

Our ragtag group of renegades knows that there's no turning back, now that the stakes are life or death. I've grown to trust many of them, except Chris. Maybe I'm reading into things, but he's never asked me a single question about myself, even though he's made an effort to talk to literally everyone else. Also, yesterday, I offered him a bite of my roasted rat and he didn't even say thank you. I just feel like he hates me. Do you think he hates me? . . .

Society's Guard has almost discovered us several times, and when we hid in that moldy basement—not the first one but the second one—I think I inhaled something bad. My face was close to the exposed wall and now my throat is scratchy? I'm a hypochondriac so it could totally be nothing, but it could also be cancer. . . .

Last night, we were captured by Society's Guard and betrayed by Chris, who gave up our safe-house coördinates in exchange for immunity and six cans of beans. Literally, why does he hate me?!

Now we are all in prison, waiting for the Pr0gRaM, which is a serum Society injects into our brains, to rid us of any freethinking, critical, individualistic impulses until we are all mindless, loyal drones. I jokingly asked one of the guards if he could just re-Pr0gRaM my brain to get rid of my A.D.H.D., and he laughed. Maybe I should try standup comedy? . . .

Huzzah! A resistance of misfits within Society's walls has broken us out of prison and now we have regrouped to fight another day. However, the two men I have been embroiled in a love triangle with this whole time have forced me to choose between them. Stressful! One is someone I've known my entire life. The other is someone I've known for five days and talked to twice. This choice is a hard one, and I am paralyzed with anxiety! Especially because one is blond and I don't do blonds. I will most likely date both men for as long as I can and then, ultimately, either take a cyanide pill or marry the one I like less.

Also, I haven't taken a shower in two weeks and I feel like I have a U.T.I. . . .

For some strange reason, I have been voted to be the leader of this final uprising against Society. I believe they have mistaken me for another brunette named Rebecca who is good at stuff like this. Regardless, I had to make a big speech in front of the entire

resistance to fire them up for battle, but public speaking is my greatest fear and I feel like I said some weird stuff! Like, I kept calling people “girlies,” and I feel like I shouldn’t have mentioned how scary Society’s new laser-your-eyeballs-out-of-your-head guns are. Morale is low, and I am spiralling that this is all my fault! . . .

The battle against Society is over and the resistance has won! We lost many men, even Chris, but their deaths, his especially, were necessary sacrifices for the greater movement. The evil leader of Society has surrendered, and, in a symbolic act, I shot and killed him in front of all of Society. I had never shot a gun before, so I first shot his knee, and then I shot his arm, and then I shot that same knee a couple more times by accident. He died very slowly and publicly and it was so awkward! . . .

It’s been a few months since the big battle, and life is peaceful, at last. There is no more war, no more repression, and no more poverty. Everything is great, and I have completely moved through the trauma of all the death I experienced. Even my love-triangle situation has been resolved. I married the one I like less! Do you think I made the wrong decision? ♦

Jennifer Kim is a comedy writer living in Los Angeles.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/weak-female-lead>

Fiction

• “The Golden Boy”

Bayazid had never quite given up the fantasy he nurtured in boyhood, of discovering himself a child of some minister or prince.

[Fiction](#)

The Golden Boy

By [Daniyal Mueenuddin](#)

November 23, 2025



Art work by Salman Toor / Courtesy the artist / Luhring Augustine / Thomas Dane Gallery

Bayazid never knew how he came to be a little boy alone in the streets of Rawalpindi. He had a memory more of forces than of people, a crowd, a hand, a hand no more. Yet the bazaars in those early nineteen-fifties were not so crowded as that, and Rawalpindi a town small enough that a lost little boy should be found. That was

a bitter day when he accepted years later that there might have been no hand, no desperate parent seeking him in the crowd. He might have been abandoned, not lost. Karim Khan, the owner of the tea-and-curry stall where his known history began, could tell him only that he had been sitting in front of the stall on a fine winter day, three or four years old, barefoot and clean, wearing just a shalwar kameez, holding a new pair of cheap plastic shoes tightly in his arms as if afraid they would be taken away, and scanning the crowds passing by. The shoes had caught Karim Khan's eye, not only because they were brand-new but because the children of the streets, those sparrows, ran barefoot always. In those early years following the great Indian Partition, families drifted about, mothers dead, fathers dead, murdered for religion's sake, for politics, unwelcome children without parents thrown on some relative's mercy. Karim Khan thought this must be one of those stories, Hindus stuck on the wrong side of the border and on the run, an unwanted child—though that didn't explain the shoes.

Karim Khan kept an eye on the boy all through the afternoon and evening, as he served customers by the light of a hissing pressure-gas lantern, dishing up dal or a meat curry that grew more delicious each year, for he never washed out the fire-blackened pots that sat over the coals, but replenished them with a double handful of lentils or meat, beef or mutton, whichever was cheaper, the mix of meat juices adding to the savor. The boy had a remarkable power of concentration, immobile all day and seeming quite unperturbed, but for the fierceness with which he held the shoes. He stood out even then as a person not to be treated lightly, as a being with resources of spirit if not of fortune. When Karim Khan finally approached him, the boy brushed him off, politely but firmly. He was waiting for his mother, who would soon be back, and must not move from this spot. Rebuffed, Karim Khan retreated to his cook fire, the evening crowd getting a quick bite before taking a bus from the nearby station up to the mountains or out to the plains, for the shop served mostly travellers. Finally, when the crowds had trickled

away, when pye-dogs began sniffing around under the charpoys in front of the food stall for a last chicken bone or scrap of dry bread, when the lights in the shops along the road faltered out and the cold came down from the Margalla Hills so that breath showed in a little cloud, Karim Khan went to the boy, and took his hand, and drew him away from the road and over by the fire.

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

“Come on, have a dish of my curry,” he told the boy. “You’re shivering, you’ll get sick. Sit here and eat, you can still keep watch.” The boy came along easily enough then, his will weakened by hunger, heavy-headed over food and then burrowing under a blanket that Karim Khan pulled over him, lying on a charpoy in the open-fronted veranda, asleep so quick. At dawn he was back by the road, and for that whole day too he watched, not crying but just resolute, knowing that of course they would come back, his mother and father. Admiring the boy’s remarkable tenacity, pitying him, Karim Khan fed him morning, midday, and evening with unsold chapatis and the leavings from customers’ half-eaten plates—which otherwise would be poured back into the general pot. That evening Karim Khan said to him firmly, “Come on, little man. I’m not rich enough to feed you on charity. From now on you clean up and carry out the plates and then we’ll see. Until your people come.” Earlier he had been to the nearby police station but, as he expected, found the duty officer there quite uninterested in a street boy’s troubles. In any case, the boy had struck his fancy, though no one would have accused that Pathan of being fanciful, with his wife back home in a Mardani hillside village awaiting money and three daughters there to feed, and this food stall his enterprise, and his pride too—he’d built it up from a little cart that he hawked around the train station.

Karim Khan, who was a good man, took the boy in and named him Bayazid, after a Sufi mystic who was known to him rather as a magician, *jaadu gar*—more fancy, indulging himself in poetry!—

and treated him not like a son, perhaps, but like a cherished apprentice, miniature serving boy, dishwasher, runner, paid in food and treated unsentimentally but fairly, hardly any use at first, then gradually indispensable. Yazid grew up to be exceptionally large for a Pakistani, six feet tall by the time he began shaving, and strong: big hands, big feet, a large head. He tended to be slovenly rather than unclean, ate enormously but without much discrimination, worked day and night slowly but implacably, and was a neighborhood pet as a little boy, and a person of accepted station by the time he was thirteen. He didn't banter or fling himself around, as teahouse boys often do—but had a humor that called forth smiles in return, and accepted all who accepted him, and damn the rest, and even them he forgave easily.

Most remarkably, Yazid had a long view of bettering himself, told to no one, an ambling bear moving to his own North. He taught himself to read, buying government-school grammars with his own money, encouraged and corrected by one of the regular customers, a schoolteacher who came in the afternoons for a cup of tea. To the extent that Karim Khan thought of such things, he accepted this as one of the boy's caprices, a distraction in any station that he might achieve, but better than going to the cinema or flying kites. At ten, Yazid would read aloud the Urdu newspaper to illiterate Karim Khan, choosing the stories that he knew his boss would like. At fourteen and fifteen, he could be found whenever he wasn't working reading gruesome stories of murder, or stories of thwarted love or lovers dying requited, bought secondhand from stalls and bound like magazines, with lurid pictures on the covers of fat-bummed girls and mustachioed men, lovers or enemies, kidnapped or eloping or on the lam, as only time and a hundred pages would tell. Yazid had charmed hands, became a master at making chapatis, hunkered cross-legged over the tandoor, slapping the flattened dough down into its orange glowing maw. He learned the technique of making naan, doing it so well that the shop became

known for it, the local housewives bringing pots to fill with dal and curry, a treat for their poor homes in the nearby alleys, and picking up a bundle of naan too, flecked with sesame seeds, oiled shiny, crisp and then soft inside, hot and wrapped in day-old newspapers. “Always your nose in a book,” the regulars said, and were rather proud of him as he handed over the goods and then resumed his reading, sitting under a lone bulb hanging from a wire.

The bazaar around the food stall had been established in British times, with some later office buildings of two and even three stories, a little park, and next to the park, the Sir Khawaja Nazimuddin Government High School, known simply as Nazimuddin College and acknowledged to be among the best in the city. The boys wore uniforms—blazer, straight-legged khaki pants, and pointed black shoes, even a blue-and-brown striped tie, which made them conspicuous at a time when most Pakistanis wore shalwar kameez. They would come to Karim Khan’s food stall in the morning for a rusk and tea, or in the afternoon after school for dal, shouting and making a clatter, very conscious of their uniforms and their élite status. These were the sons of the wealthier houses nearby, of business owners, proprietors of the larger shops, local ward politicians, wholesalers, members of a rising middle class defined at the higher reaches by the ownership of a car, and at the bottom by the necessity of making hard sacrifices to buy their sons’ uniforms and pay for extra tuition.

Sitting at the tandoor and pushing out piles of chapatis and naan, Yazid had ample time to study these fortunate creatures. Gradually he began to bend his attitude and his appearance toward theirs, not quite affecting to wear pant-shirt, which would make him ridiculous in the eyes of Karim Khan and his customers, but cutting off his long hair, which had been modelled on gangsters in the movies, taming his rich sideburns, ditto adopted from the movies, and generally toning down his naturally exuberant style, though his loose walk and large size and appetite would always set him apart.

Rarely leaving the food stall, Yazid nevertheless knew much about the world, for he was observant, and all sorts came through the bus station en route to their far destinations. Weary passengers dropped their bags and filled travel-starved bellies and afterward confided in the sympathetic serving boy, indiscreet because they would never see him again. Gradually, as he became familiar with the college boys, he understood that their views were rather narrower than his, and this gave him confidence. While they might have fine manners and live in proper houses, cosseted by their mothers and sisters, they were tame and didn't understand the unforgiving streets and city. He never presumed on his acquaintance with the college boys, always ready to step back into character as the fellow behind the tandoor, sparing himself from any rebuff by this discretion. Yet he observed them closely and bided his time. He wanted to make friends among them rather than among the boys like him who worked the shops and sold cheap trinkets to travellers and ran the scams around the gullies, gutter princes, loud and quick to dodge a slap, smoking cigarettes, shouting after the begging girls who floated around the bus stop unchaperoned.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Daniyal Mueenuddin read “The Golden Boy.”](#)

One spring when Yazid was seventeen or eighteen, the Nazimuddin College boys developed a passion for carrom board, poor man's billiards, played on a plywood square by knocking round wooden pucks into corner pockets with a plastic striker. The college boys would gather around a charpoy set in front of the food stall, playing for cups of tea or plates of biscuits, contemplating the next move with the seriousness of parliamentary debaters, discussing strategy. Yazid would serve the snacks they ordered, occasionally dropping in some humorous comment. Initially, they had a miniature board, which they carried to Karim Khan's stall, but when they banded together and bought a regulation-sized one, three feet to a side, Yazid offered to store it for them in the shop. He thus became the master of ceremonies, keeper of the board. He even found a rule

book in one of the secondhand bookstalls and so took on the role of umpire, his word on the finer points accepted as final. At night, alone, he would practice shots in his room, and so himself became an ace, rarely playing, because of his duties as a server, hard to get and therefore in demand, called when some outsider sat down and cleared the table of the locals. As he wiped out his opponent, Yazid would say, chewing the tip of his mustache in the corner of his mouth, “I’m feasting on him, just feasting on him,” and this became a catchall phrase for the college boys, used indiscriminately.

By the time summer came, when it was too hot to play out in front of the food stall, a little core had formed around Yazid. Center of operations for the carrom players shifted to Yazid’s shabby room, formerly a storeroom, looking onto a gully. For his first eight or nine years working for Karim Khan, Yazid slept rough on one of the charpoys lined up on a swept dirt apron in front of the stall, never even bothering to choose any particular spot but sleeping where he fell, cheerful under the stars, his clothes hung on nails in the filthy bathroom that leaked sewage out into a little grassy plot at the back of the building, his comb on a shelf, joined later by a shaver and soap to make foam. He hadn’t asked for the room. Karim Khan had told him one morning to clear the storeroom of the garbage lying there, empty Dalda ghee tins and piles of jute bags. Yazid had become too old, Karim Khan said, to be sprawled every morning in front of the stall, sleeping late as he often did and comfortably watching the street in front of him come to life as if in his own living room.

Now the room became a sort of clubhouse for the carrom players, so much so that several of the boys chipped in and had it whitewashed inside by a withered opium smoker who made a living in the neighborhood as a handyman. There were two charpoys, with a table that held the board squeezed between them, teacups crowded to the side, players sitting cross-legged. The great luxury was a secondhand ceiling fan, given to Yazid by a

neighborhood buddy, which made him the butt of his friends' jokes, who called it proof of his love of fine living. He also nailed pictures of actresses cut from the Sunday papers to the rough brick walls, although these were soon dust-covered and flyblown.

What the boys liked about this arrangement was that nothing was expected of them in that room. There were no rules, all came and went as they liked, sometimes one of them would be in a jam and would sleep there for a night or two. The college boys, who were mostly from respectable families, did not enjoy such freedom anywhere else. Yazid had the one indispensable quality for a man establishing a club: he was always at home, sitting on the veranda of the stall making naan and chapatis, or slumbering in his room, and even if he had gone off somewhere on an errand the room was never locked. Karim Khan had by now taken another little boy off the streets, this one of known parentage but with parents who asked no questions and gave him over to the business as a riddance. Yazid thus assumed an emeritus position, though he still made the naan and still dealt with the cash when Karim Khan wasn't present. The old man—by then he would have been over seventy, wiry and likely to live forever—would go off to his far home in Mardan for several weeks at a time, and when he returned Yazid would hand him every paisa that the shop had earned, keeping a notebook with any subtractions carefully noted—cigarettes, a trip to the cinema. He still took no salary but asked for money when he needed it, never taking much, a few times asking a lot, given over by Karim Khan without ever a question.

One afternoon, several of the boys had gone shares on a case of pilfered beer sold from the back gate of the Murree Brewery, a sideline for the brewery workers. Kamran Khokar, a senior boy whose father was a counsellor in the Rawalpindi wards, knew one of the brewery managers, in fact knew all sorts of tricks and could get his fellow-students into scrapes and then out of them unscathed. A junior-school student who served as Kamran's bullyboy and gofer brought the bottles in a gunnysack, the jute wet from being

stashed in a nearby icehouse that belonged to yet another student's father.

"Is it cold?" Kamran asked, pulling one of the bottles out of the sack and putting it against his face. "Oh, it better be cold!" He pinched the boy's cheek and slapped him gently. "You're lucky, anyway," he said indulgently. "It is cold."

Yazid loomed over the carrom board planning a shot, his thick fingers dusted with the talcum powder they used to slick the surface. Without looking up he said indifferently, "Take some money for the booze, it's in that vest hanging up there."

"There you go again," Kamran said, sitting down and putting the sack under a charpoy, pulling out bottles and handing them around. There were three other people in the room, the boy who brought the beer and two others of the core gang. "You drink on the house, we all know you're broke."

"I am the house," Yazid said complacently. He took a beer and popped the top off with a quick smack on the wooden charpoy leg, catching it neatly in the air and shooting it into the corner—one of his tricks.

"You're not a house," Kamran retorted. "You're a barrel. It costs the rest of us a fortune keeping you full."

"I've told you not to bring all that garbage. You guys with your bags of samosas and God knows what. This is a tea stall, remember? I eat free."

The younger boys grinned at Yazid's insouciance with the big square-headed school bully. Kamran walked with a swagger and played the same role in the school that his father played in his ward of the city, poking a finger in all the pies and pushing in wherever he could.



"This show is so good we've barely been able to get any laundry folded."

Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Soon a heavy fug of cigarette smoke hung over the players. They were betting for small stakes, Yazid winning, talking a bit of trash to his opponents, then cracking a shot.

Another boy came in, Zain, whose grandfather and then later his father owned the old British grocery in Rawalpindi, selling fancy produce and select foods to the civil servants and officers and diplomats stationed there, the family distinguished by this commerce with the wealthy and with foreigners and more worldly for it. Zain stood at the door, without entering, caught Yazid's eye, and nodded.

"Hey, mister, come in and slum around with us a bit," Yazid said affectionately, patting the charpoy beside him.

"I'll come back later. I brought you something."

He stepped into the room and put a bag of apples on the charpoy, then slipped back to his place by the door.

"From my father," he said. "We just got them in at the store."

“Look at him!” Kamran cooed. “He’s so shy. It’s adorable!”

Yazid and Zain had taken to spending time together, one of those odd couples, Yazid big and broad and hirsute, walking with his rolling gait, and Zain slight and fine and finicky, with small hands, small feet, a long straight nose, and curly hair worn a little long in the back as his single extravagance, even in this following the fashion rather than defining it. Zain brought Yazid serious books, histories and leftist political tracts, not like the romances and adventure stories that formed his usual literary diet, Zain’s father an old-school lefty from the days of the anti-British movement, despite—or because of—his regular interactions at the store with the Blimps and pukka sahibs and their wives. Yazid jokingly called Zain the Professor and took pride in the connection.

“Tell your friend to sit down and join us,” Kamran said. “Give him a beer, it’ll do him good. Tell him not to be so ladylike.”

“I can speak for myself,” Zain said sharply.

Zain did in fact seem too prim for the situation. Slipping in, he perched at the edge of a charpoy near the door, his legs crossed, then borrowed a penknife from Yazid and cut up apples and fanned out the slices on the palm of his hand to pass them around. The other boys all thought there must be something going on between him and Yazid, a common enough occurrence at an age and in circumstances where girls were quite unavailable and hormones in full raging flush, Pakistani boys and their boy crushes, all forgotten when they married a few years later.

“Leave him alone,” Yazid grunted. “Cut the bullshit and let’s play.”

“Playing with you is like shovelling money into a well,” Kamran grumbled. “I’d rather bullshit.”

“It’s a paisa a point, man. Nothing for the rich politician’s son! Anyway, it’s good luck, tossing coins in a well.”

“My coins and your luck, boy. I bring the booze, and then I pay for the privilege too.”

Boys came and went, Yazid playing or relinquishing the table if he lost, a freewheeling game. Only a few of the boys drank, the ones who knew they could slip past their parents at the end of the evening. Yazid kept up too, chugging bottles when challenged to by Kamran, the two of them rivals here as in other things—in carrom board, in cards, even in arm wrestling, the son of the ward boss ready to crack heads.

The quarrel began over nothing, as these things do. A couple of hours had passed, Yazid holding Zain back when he rose to leave. “Stick around, after a while we’ll have food. I’ve got some of that marrow-bone nihari coming from Hajji Noora’s place.” As he rarely troubled Karim Khan for money and so took hospitality from his college friends too often, whenever he had a windfall Yazid would spend the lot on a blowout for the crowd, clearing all his debts at once. That morning he had sold a big pile of the empty ghee tins that accumulated behind the tea stall, one of his perquisites.

Kamran continued to needle Zain, joking about the apples. Finally, he went too far.

“Tell your apple-cheek friend to cut up more of that nice fruit. I wish he’d brought some peaches. He’s a peach himself. He’s like an egg, actually. Allah, I can imagine what that tastes like. We’re all jealous, Yazid Bhai. I suppose you tap that pretty often.”

Whenever Yazid drank, his eyes, irritated from staring down into the tandoor’s radiation all day, became extraordinarily red. He gave Kamran a heavy look. “Shut up, Kamran. You’re drunk.”

“You shut up, tandoori boy. I suppose when you’re brought up in the street even a little priss like your Zain here seems a pretty classy fuck. Your mother must be proud.”

Yazid usually moved so deliberately that they called him the Python. Now, as if released from a spring, his enormous hand shot across the table and took Kamran by the throat and lifted him till he seemed to hover over the charpoy.

He was cool. “You should be careful what you say.”

“Let me down, you fat bastard.” Kamran could barely speak; he wheezed. Yazid plopped him down, then put his hands in his lap, awaiting events.

“Wait, I forgot!” Kamran said. He slapped himself on the forehead, miming. “You’re actually a real bastard! Poor Yazid. We all know you popped out of one of those railway whores after your saintly Karim Khan snuck over to the wrong side of the tracks.”

Still looking into Kamran’s face, quite impassive, Yazid reached calmly down with his right hand and took the penknife with which Zain had been peeling apples and held it between forefinger and thumb, put the blade close to Kamran’s face.

“How about I make you not so pretty?”

“You’re fucking kidding me,” Kamran gasped. The room had become very still.

Suddenly, as quickly as his hand had shot across the table, Yazid turned the knife downward and stabbed himself in the leg, burying the blade in his thigh. Rising slightly, flipping the bloodied knife into the corner, he took Kamran again by the throat and lifted him bodily and threw him out the door with a single hand, driving him into the ground like a ball thrown to bounce.

The other boys in the room had stood up and now fled out the door. A surprisingly small red stain inkblotted Yazid's tan shalwar where the knife had gone in.

"Why don't you buzz off, Kamran," Yazid said evenly. "We'll talk tomorrow. Forget about it."

"You're finished," Kamran spat, rolling onto his knees and then quickly twisting up, athletic. "I'm going to fuck you up."

Yazid studied his bloody leg. "We'll see," he said mildly.

Only Zain remained behind. Yazid watched the other boys hurrying away, then turned to him and grinned.

"Ouch! That really hurts."

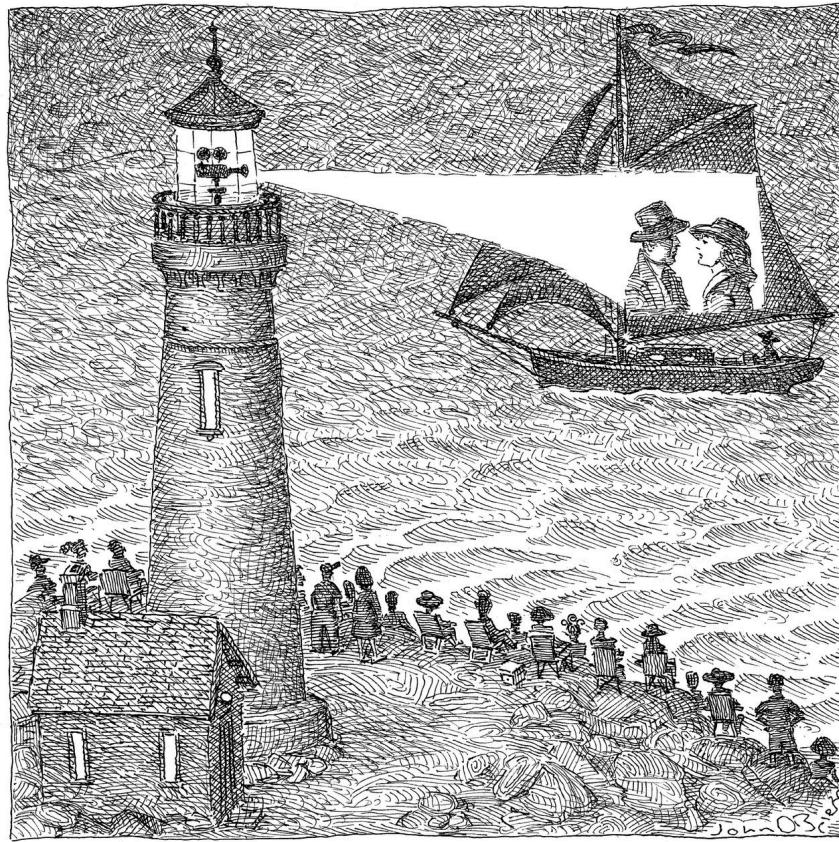
"Hurts!" Zain said. "You crazy person. You stabbed yourself."

"Better than stabbing him, I suppose."

"That's true. And now what?" He leaned down and peered at the bloody spot on Yazid's shalwar, a look of distaste on his face.

"Don't worry, this is nothing. I've cut myself worse than this butchering chickens. That blade wasn't even two inches long."

Zain took a handkerchief from his pocket and tore it into strips.



Cartoon by John O'Brien

“I’ll have to take off my shalwar for this,” Yazid joked. “Then you will be compromised.” He was slightly hysterical, giggly at the sight of the now copious blood.

The wound looked like a gill on a fish, a slim keyhole weeping bright capillary blood. Zain poured water over the wound and then helped Yazid tighten the handkerchief strips around his massive leg.

“What are you laughing at?” Zain asked.

“Me sitting here with my shalwar off and your flowered handkerchief around my leg.” Limping up, Yazid took another shalwar from the tin trunk under the bed, where he kept all his clothes.

When he had dressed, he said, “Now what? Shall we keep playing?”

“You’re still pretending, are you? I’ll go get some spirits and a proper bandage.”

“I’ll come with you.” Yazid didn’t want to be alone after the beer and the excitement.

“Absolutely not. Sit down, or, rather, lie down. You’re an idiot. I’ll be right back.” Turning at the door, smiling at Yazid, he said, “Thanks, by the way. And the good thing is, we’ll all remember this in thirty years. Now you’re a legend.”

After that, the two were best friends.

With the beer and the drunkenness and the verve that Yazid had shown in stabbing himself, and not wanting to draw attention to the episode, Kamran didn’t make a fuss. After a couple of weeks, he rejoined the carrom-board mafia, and Yazid made no comment.

Zain stopped coming to the matches, but instead would slip over at the first school recess and have an early bite with Yazid, always accepting his hospitality of naan and dal and curry without demur, his good manners and perhaps a kind of admiration for Yazid shown by his willingness to be indebted so often. If he found Yazid snoozing he would lean over him and push on his shoulder, rolling him about, and Yazid would groan, “Oh, God, you’re impossible. Lunchtime, is it? Where’s that bloody boy with my food.”

“You pasha! You used to be the serving boy here. What happened?”

These were happy days for Yazid. One of his bazaar friends, a taxi-driver, had taught him to drive, the friend generous to Yazid, as so many were, exactly because he took as easily as he gave and had no expectations and was excellent company. Yazid now passed this skill on to Zain, borrowing the taxi and driving him to the empty dirt tracks that spidered out into the scrubby plains around Rawalpindi. The boys made these excursions on the sly from Zain’s protective if unconventional father, who had plans for his only son

that extended to Government College in Lahore and a rich career—who knows?—in the civil service, or as a lawyer, or a doctor, certainly something more than a grocer. His son fooling about with a taxi would not have amused Malik Kamal Sahib, who was a real Awan Malik, that martial landowning race. He maintained a car himself, a temperamental but immaculately kept Morris Minor.

The first time Yazid went to Zain’s house marked also the first time that he had entered any respectable middle-class family’s dwelling, if a higgledy house built up on four floors deserves that name, with a cracked wooden gate painted pistachio green leading into a courtyard too small for the car, which stood in the narrow gully outside. Zain had invited Yazid several times, but Yazid put him off, afraid that he wouldn’t know how to behave, or that Malik Kamal might be offended to find his son entertaining a server from a tea shop. That afternoon, a Sunday, the boys had borrowed the taxi, and Zain had driven on the blacktop road for the first time. They took the new avenue running along the outskirts of Islamabad and then drove up toward Murree on the winding, climbing road that followed the old Mughal horse-and-palanquin track up to Kashmir from the Punjab plains.

In those days, just before the 1970 election, which soon gave Zulfikar Ali Bhutto pretext to seize power, Zain and even Yazid had grown intoxicated with Bhutto’s socialist rhetoric, a promise that a new era of unimaginable possibilities would soon emerge before their eyes, that élite power in Pakistan would be toppled, the poor raised up, the system remade. Zain parked the car under a banyan tree beside the Murree road, and they ate samosas prepared by Zain’s mother and drank tea from a thermos. Zain lay flat under the tree, with his head on a rolled-up coat, staring up through the branches and speaking of the future, of his plans, Government College in Lahore, if he was admitted.

Simultaneously shy and passionate, he spoke of his larger dreams, of making a significant life under this new dispensation if Bhutto

won, with the reconfigured socialist system that Bhutto had announced, real justice for everyone, land reform, equality, power in the hands of the people, the freedom of the vote. Yazid was thrilled by the moment, by the dry rustling of the wind through the leaves and by Zain's handsome, earnest face in profile as he talked.

"That's all very fine," Yazid said. "But I doubt it's for people like me. It's for you, your people, and that's good enough."

"No, it's exactly for people like you."

As they drove back into the city at dusk, Zain said, "I want to ask you a favor, Bayazid."

"Anything."

"I want you to have dinner tonight with me, at my house. I've asked my mother to cook something special."

"Another time. I need to dress properly and all that. Look at me, I've got samosa grease all over my shalwar leg."

"I insist. We'll stop and you can change in your room."

At Zain's house, Yazid perched at the edge of his seat and stood up every time Zain's mother came into the room, bringing first pomegranate sherbet, then food, several dishes served on a low table set in front of the sofa, and even a dessert, carrot halvah with clotted cream. The mother was small, with a very fair face, like a girl from the north, and a single dark mole above her lip, adoring toward Zain and immediately familiar with Yazid, calling him "child," urging him to eat more, then retiring to the kitchen for refills. Yazid had not seen Zain like this before, the boyish pride he took in his mother's attentions, and also his brusqueness with her, slightly embarrassed, impatient, cool in response to her tenderness. Malik Kamal had recently bought an elaborate radio, square as a troll and as large, with a blond wooden case and speakers covered

with tan cloth, a presence in the room. The boys listened to the news on Radio Pakistan and then to the BBC Urdu service, which was full of the upcoming election and spoke also of tensions in East Pakistan, of strikes, political rallies, upheaval, war clouds, all the elements that thrill young men at eighteen and twenty. Malik Kamal came in when the BBC broadcast began and sat down, nodding to the mother, who brought food for him also.

“Take a seat, young man,” he said to Yazid, and then, when Yazid continued to stand, he winked at Zain. “Come on, tell this fellow it’s O.K.”

“I cannot take a seat in front of you, Malik Sahib,” Yazid said.

Malik Kamal looked at him shrewdly. “You’re the one from Karim Khan’s stall, aren’t you? My son talks about you.” He made an impatient gesture, flapping his hand downward. “Come on, don’t annoy me. Sit and eat.”

They listened to the broadcast, and after it finished Malik Kamal switched off the set and turned to Yazid. “So what do you make of all this?”

“What can I say, Malik Sahib. You know the saying, whoever holds the whip owns the buffalo. This is maybe just about some new people grabbing the whip from the old ones.”

“And who’s the buffalo, then?”

“People like me, I suppose. Karim Khan says I’m a buffalo, and I have to admit that even I can see a resemblance.”

“And people like me?”

“No sir. You and yours are the new rising group, if you forgive my saying so.”

Malik Kamal laughed. “You’re a clever boy! I can see why my son speaks of you so often.” He stood up. “Anyway, any friend of my Zain is always welcome here. Perhaps in Mr. Bhutto’s new Pakistan you’ll be the one holding the whip before long.”

After that, Yazid regularly was asked to Zain’s house, the radio broadcasts providing a pretext and an occasion. The mother took him in, pitying his orphan status and appreciating his straightforward manners, neither servile nor presumptuous, but respectful and unembarrassed and warm. When Malik Kamal debated the new socialist politics with Zain, he would call on Yazid to back him up, and after some time Yazid allowed his humorous side to emerge, and even his rough but serviceable philosophy. He could call forth delighted laughter from that quite jolly little man. As Yazid discovered, Malik Kamal had developed liberal tastes while running his fancy-goods grocery shop and liked to play a bit of the radical, proud that he was educating his son for a great future, educating even his daughter, and willing to send her too for higher education.

Gradually Yazid began to understand the dynamic of the household, as if he had stepped into a wood and, in his wonder and appreciation, gradually perceived there a whole community of flowers and birds and shy woodland creatures. The mother’s brother lived on charity in the house, smoking endless cigarettes up in his room and rarely emerging, coming down to listen to the cricket scores, wearing pajamas and a threadbare robe, fingers yellow with nicotine, a hacking cough, lighting a cigarette with trembling hands as soon as he sat down. The old humbug would remonstrate against the British, how they should never have given up India, and thought of Lord’s Cricket Ground with the same reverence that Zain’s mother offered to the Holy Places. Yazid’s compendious memory included a remarkable store of cricket scores and batting averages and matches and catches and stumpings, all the minutiae that a quick-witted boy poring over the newspaper in a tea stall between customers might graze upon. It’s a good thing to

be in with the family dog—especially a snappish one—and soon Yazid and Uncle Rizwan had formed an exclusive little cricket club.

The family had only one inside servant, Mai Viro, an ancient crone with a bead of sweat perpetually on her upper lip, who washed and carried and ruled the household from the kitchen and might in her sleep have pedalled a generator to provide electricity, if that had been required. Ill-tempered, grumbling against Zain's mother, worshipping his father, she took a poisonous dislike to Yazid, be-damned that the family's status should be fouled by this jumped-up tea-stall boy treated as an equal. She would come into the room, squatting and flicking a filthy black rag reeking with disinfectant along the floor, and flick it a couple of times at Yazid too for good measure, before retreating into the corner to hear the Urdu broadcast. Yazid tried everything, courtly language and shameless bribes of delicacies lifted from the tea stall and even once a little mirror with a painted frame, but nothing would appease the old bat.

Finally, with a piercing note like a French horn rising up from the background of an orchestra, or like a deer that steps last of all and most shyly into a clearing, came Yasmin, Zain's younger sister, almost his twin. Yazid of course knew that his friend had a sister, and had seen her moving through the streets, his impression being mostly of a little froth of white, a white head covering, a girl so slight and floating that he had always assumed her to be much younger than Zain.

Because he had never had close contact with respectable girls or even with women, had rarely spoken to any female other than brusque customers coming to take away food, he was aloof from them, lumped all women and girls together, creatures whose movements and concerns were unfathomably foreign. At fifteen he lost his virginity in a backstreet brothel to a woman twenty years his senior, to her greedy hands, her body in his imagination carrying the lion reek of all the men who had possessed her, went

again in pain like a man suffering blinding toothache, and fought against returning into the arms of those brutes, and failed. One day, after a particularly unsavory experience, involving an ancient greasy madam and an attempt at blackmail, he swore never to go there again, and kept his resolution in the face of all temptation and crude desire.



"Apparently, this town is famous for its glutes."

Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Yazid would no more have associated Yasmin with this category of experience than he would compare shit on his shoe to a melody calling far away in the night, when he lay with his soul bared and receptive in his little room. For many weeks, into the spring, into the summer, he was aware of her occasionally flitting past the open door at the corner of his vision while he sat with Zain or Uncle Rizwan, listening to the news. Dimly he allowed that this other person also lived here, in his absence would own these rooms as much as any of the others. A young man would not ordinarily be invited into a house harboring a young girl. His status as an orphan,

a tea boy, both made his presence possible and humiliated him, for his presence could not be misconstrued, must be exceptional. He could not compromise Yasmin. His developing awareness of her therefore seemed to him illicit, a betrayal, and he began to avoid the house, until Zain took offense and ordered him back.

“What’s happened to your manners? My mother keeps asking if you’re upset with us for some reason. Come with me right now, the cricket starts in twenty minutes. Uncle Rizwan sent me especially.”

One afternoon, Yazid and Zain had gone to hear the great Zulfikar Ali Bhutto give a speech at Liaquat Bagh, a park where political rallies were held. Bhutto cupped the crowd in his hands and shook them and filled them with his invective, until finally the young blades who had been bused in from near and far lost all restraint and began throwing chairs and charging the police and were lathi-charged in return. The two boys happened to catch the attention of some zealous constable, and Zain received a cunning two-handed slicing blow from a cane whip, which cut the cloth on his back like a knife and left a stripe—the innocent always suffer in these circumstances, he and Yazid were in full retreat—a welt rising and blood seeping through, much more blood than might be expected. Zain added to his fine sensibilities a fainting aversion to pain and a spirit not equal to rough blows. He thought he’d been killed and had to be dragged by Yazid all through the bazaar and home.

When they reached Zain’s house, thankfully they found no one there. Malik Sahib and his wife had gone off to see relatives, for once taking Uncle Rizwan with them. Even Mai Viro, who haunted the place like a resident ghost, had disappeared somewhere. The boys crashed inside, Zain throwing himself face down on a sofa still wearing his bloodied shirt, and Yazid nosing about looking for bandages and disinfectant.

“Cabinet next to the stairs,” Zain croaked. “Third floor.”

Yazid had never before penetrated the sanctum beyond the living room. Tentatively he climbed the stairs, the house built around a shaft like an atrium, larger than he expected, dark and then open at the top, so that sparrows got in. On the second floor, passing a room, he saw Yasmin lying curled up on a bed, napping, back to him, feet bare and up on the bed, her little slippers tucked beneath. The bottoms of her feet glowed pale white. Yazid had never before seen her uncovered hair, which was long and black but had a reddish tinge. Later he would surmise that it was hennaed, to him a mysterious refinement. Silent, retreating, he went back to the stairway, down a few steps, and coughed, loud, a coughing fit.

Nothing. Then he heard Yasmin call, “Who’s that?”

“Excuse me, Bibi Jee. It’s Bayazid.”

He had frightened her. “Who? Yazid?”

“Nothing, Bibi. Just Zain has a little cut. I’ll go back now. If you can bring some disinfectant.”

She came out, putting on her dupatta, unperturbed now but brisk at this intrusion into the family quarters.

“Hello. How are you? Is everything O.K.?”

“It’s fine. If you can come.”

Yazid feared she would shriek when she saw all the blood. Instead, she was perfectly composed, helped Zain to remove his shirt, told him to lie down again, studied the wound, and said dismissively, “You’ll live, my dear.”

Zain sat up. “You heartless thing. I’m in agony.”

Yasmin laughed, the first time Yazid had heard this, for she had always been circumspect, self-effacing, slipping past and ghosting

up the stairs if she found him sitting in the living room with the cricket fans. He expected her to be shy and tinkling, and instead her laugh was broad, a bit husky even.

“You’re such a baby. Go on, lie down again. I’ll be right back.”

Yazid’s thoughts roamed. She had surprised him. Her reaction had been remarkably—how to put it?—normal. His only intimate experience of decent girls had been when Karim Khan invited him to each of his three daughters’ weddings. Treated as family, he sat across from the girls singing around the bride and groom and smelled their musk and cheap desi scent, village girls dressed up in bright colors, and felt happily invisible to them, who could marry only within their families and knew him as the orphan boy from the tea stall, a favorite of their father. Yasmin was so much cooler, quicker, more assured. Her notched chin expressed more strength and even stubbornness than her brother’s sensitive mien. Yazid had never permitted himself to look directly at her before, nor to consider her personality, for any such thoughts would be a betrayal of his friendship with Zain.

She returned with a bowl filled with hot water and a cloth, crouched down beside her brother, and dabbed at the wound, an angry ridge oozing drops of blood that looked as if a razor blade had scored soft leather.

“Come on, can’t you be gentler?” he hissed between clenched teeth as she applied the disinfectant. “I thought you wanted to be a doctor!”

“I’m in a hurry. If your papa sees this your career as a political activist will end before it even began. It’s an honorable wound, really. You’ve bled for your idol.”

“Don’t make fun of me.”

“Notice how your friend here is too smart for whipping.”

“That’s what comes from being brought up in the streets,” Yazid suggested. “I’m like one of those railway-station dogs. You can’t hit them with a stone if you try.”

Yasmin cocked an eye at him. “You look pretty well fed for a railway-station dog. I’d say you’re more one of those fancy bulldogs that aficionados raise on butter and milk mixed with sugar.”

“Not at all. Those are kept for fighting. Not for show. I’m not the fighting type.”

Yasmin laughed, easily brought to it. “You’re Karim Khan’s great pet and luxury. I can see why he’s never prospered much, keeping you in chicken curries.”

“Stop it,” Zain protested. “Poor fellow. He’s a hero, and you’re talking about chicken curries. He carried me out of there on his back, more or less.”

“Tell me all about your rally,” said Yasmin, who had finished wrapping a bandage around Zain’s chest, the wound stanchéd. Yazid held the knot with his blunt finger while she nimbly cinched it down. “I wish I could have been there.”

Confidence in his storytelling powers overcame the reserve Yazid felt in front of this pretty girl.

“I guess it began with those boys they bused in from the university in Peshawar. They were all standing together, and they started making a fuss just out of sheer craziness. Bhutto Sahib kept pushing and pushing until finally they couldn’t control themselves.”

“You mean your Comrade Bhutto. And you should all be calling each other comrade too.”

Yazid smiled, keeping company with his audience. “As you say. So, our Comrade Bhutto talked and he built it up and built it up for longer than you could imagine, soft and loud and taking it here and taking it there.

“Then out of nowhere he shouts, ‘We’ll smash it down, and we’ll break it down, and we’ll level it to the ground!’ and he was standing alone on that big stage with one of those tall microphones on a metal pole. He waits, and then he shouts again, ‘I swear to you. We’ll smash it all to pieces and we’ll make it new again!’ There’s perfect silence, then suddenly, roaring, ‘You’ll own the world, we’ll forge with fire a sword of steel from ice!’ And he slams the microphone down to the ground and the crowd just went completely wild.

“That’s when I started pulling your brother toward the gate. I knew what was coming. Those boys would have torn up anyone who got in their way then. Even I was about ready to start marching wherever that man told us to. I was ready to believe anything. . . .”

Yasmin interrupted him with amusement. “But tell me, bhai, what exactly is it that you believed in?”

“That we’d smash everything up and then we’d have it our way.”

“And then the police step in and slice and dice my brother here. Wind you up and then beat you down.”

Yazid relaxed, spread his big hands on his knees. “Anyway, my blood is already too cold for that. I was watching the exits the whole time.”

“Thank God for good sense. And you, my beloved brother, should stay away from all this. You’re not built for rioting in the streets.”

“I should go,” Yazid said. “Before Malik Sahib returns.”

“Not at all,” Yasmin said. “You’re the hero. I was just joking about my father being angry. He’ll be secretly proud that his son got a bit blooded. You should stay and bask in it.”



Cartoon by Paul Noth

Yazid felt confused, embarrassed. He couldn’t bear to be so close to Yasmin anymore. “No, I must beg leave. I promised Karim Khan I wouldn’t be late.”

Without rising Zain waved his hand. “All right, then. Come see me in the morning. Yasmin can let you out.”

Walking past the kitchen, which always smelled of spice and good food, Yazid thought of his ambling bulk and felt inadequate and experienced the loneliness that sometimes plagued him in the night. What right had he to be here?

At the door, he opened the catch and let himself out.

“Please, Bibi Jee, go in.”

“It’s nice,” she said, coming partway out the door. “The air smells like rain.”

“We can wish for rain,” Yazid suggested, uttering the first words that came into his head.

“You’re a good friend to my brother,” Yasmin said quietly.

“Please.” They both were embarrassed to be alone.

Yazid didn’t know how to end it. “I’ll go,” he blurted out, and as he walked he thought he heard her trilling laugh behind him and hated himself and wanted to slam his head against a pole or bend a piece of steel or run into the countryside and not stop.

Bayazid had never quite given up the fantasy he nurtured in boyhood, of discovering himself a child of some minister or prince. His romantic soul took refreshment from this impossibility, and his love for Yasmin could grow expansive and pure exactly because he looked at her from so very far away and yet could imagine, dream, that he would rise to her station. She was immaculate, each little curve, her dimple when she smiled, her fine gestures, the way she moved her fingers idly in her lap when she spoke with animation. Once when a strand of hair fell into her face while her hands were busy, she blew it back with a little puff from the corner of her mouth, blowing it up only to have it drift down again in a falling grace across her forehead, and this seemed to him adorable. Yazid went to Zain’s house only by invitation, and later, when he counted up the visits where Yasmin too had appeared and joined the conversation, there were not more than five or six of them, and it pained him that soon they all blurred together.

For many weeks he did not see her, keeping away as much as he could, until summoned by Zain, uncomfortable now while sitting

talking of politics or of cricket with Uncle Rizwan. When next he saw her up close, she had just returned from the bazaar on a day so hot that drops of sweat dimpled her slender forearms as she raised her dupatta to cover her hair.

Now in front of Uncle Rizwan she was demure, quite different from her quick teasing after the rally.

“As-salaam alaikum, Yazid Bhai. I hope you’re talking cricket and not politics.” Still, she had that impudent smile, amused by him.

Yazid had stood up when she came in and stood shifting from one foot to the other and looking unfocussed at a spot in the air.

“Look, they haven’t even brought you water,” she said, and went in the kitchen and made tea with her own hands. When she brought it, then he dared just for a moment to look into her face, as she handed him the cup. Nothing in his life had prepared him for her perfection.

He thought of her often, dreamed of her, the stories that he had read in those many romance novels now come to life, wishing that some mad chance should allow him to give his life for her or to worship her from a distance, but in sight of her. He was desperate and happy and shy, a tiny shivering piercing emotion inside him all the time. His throat ached when he thought of her, and at unexpected moments suddenly he would feel deep joy, gratitude. The world could not possibly be bigger than now.

One Sunday morning Yazid came to pick up Zain for a trip to Rawal Dam on the other side of Islamabad, where there were rowboats for rent. Always before he had visited in the afternoon or evening. The house had a different morning feel, fresher, the single mulberry tree in the courtyard fruiting, so that Mai Viro stood washing away the fallen fruit on the concrete slabs with a hose and a broom, her shalwar rolled up to her knees, hair uncovered.

“Hello, Auntie,” Yazid said.

“Hello, young man. When did I have the honor of becoming related to you?”

“I’m afraid no one’s related to me,” Yazid replied, cheerily deflecting her temper.

That morning for the first time Yazid wore pants and a white shirt, as the college boys did, and black pointed shoes, all new, the largest size in the little shop where the schoolboys bought their kit, the shoes cruelly laced.

“Those teddy-boy pants will split when you sit down in front of your tandoor,” Mai Viro said, sweeping ferociously at the water bubbling from the hose.

“Let’s hope not,” Yazid said blithely. “Is Zain Sahib up?”

“This is an early-rising house. The big Sahib’s already gone to the store. Shouldn’t you be at work too?”

“It’s my day off.”

“Well, then you’re luckier than me,” she said, and returned to sweeping.

Inside, the rooms were cool and a breeze seemed to blow through and into the atrium. He found Zain in the sitting room with the newspapers in front of him, still wearing a dhoti, and eating eggs with paratha.

“Come on,” he said. “Tuck in. I’ll go change. I’ll tell Viro to make you something.”

“For God’s sake, don’t! She’ll add a dose of rat poison as flavoring.”

“Yeah, we all worry about that, except the revered father. When they built that woman they injected her personality backward. The rest of us try to hide our bad temper, but she hides the good one.”

Yazid sat down, throwing out his legs comfortably. “That’s how you know she’s loyal. She doesn’t bother to try and win you over.”

“That’s a subtle thought. Anyway, give me twenty minutes. I need to look smart with you all dressed like a bridegroom!” He joked, making his only reference to Yazid’s attire, but it was a serious matter, the tea-stall boy putting on schoolboy clothes.

Yazid sat listening to the sounds of the echoing house. Sparrows that had flown down into the roofless atrium chirped noisily. Zain’s paratha, torn and dabbed with grease, looked delicious, and after satisfying himself that no one was around he got up and tore a piece off, sprinkled it with salt, and sat down, munching. He mustn’t wipe his hands on his new pants.

A rustling behind him, and he knew immediately that it was Yasmin. He pretended he didn’t know she was there, and she also stayed quiet for a long moment. Then she walked in and stood across from him, one hand touching the back of a sofa, the glass bangles on her wrist making a little chipping sound.

“Caught!” she said. “Go on, Yazid Bhai, chew and swallow. Don’t pretend you don’t have a mouthful of paratha.”

He had stood up, heart fluttering. “Waste not want not.”

“Will you have some tea?”

“Nothing, thank you.”

“At least let me get you some water. To wash down all that paratha.”



"I have nothing to wear . . . yet."

Cartoon by Amy Hwang

“It was just a scrap, not enough to need washing.”

“But then you’d have to say that. You’ve probably had two or three of them. I notice the plate’s nearly empty.”

“On my honor.”

She went to the kitchen and returned with a tray and jug of water and two glasses, poured herself one, and offered him one also.

“There you go,” she said. Again, they were embarrassed to be alone. Shy, after a moment she continued, “Have a good time at the lake.” Still she didn’t leave, but stood, her hand playing with a loose thread on the sofa. “Another time, I’d like to see it too.” Her voice raised at the end, as if asking a question. Putting her empty glass on a table, she disappeared into the atrium. He heard her chappals on the steps going up, clattering, noisy where usually she drifted silently.

Her glass glowed on the table after she left. The sparrows still were calling, and still that delicious breeze, the one that blew through this house and funnelled up the atrium, this house that included Uncle Rizwan and his cricket scores and Britisher humbug and the damp beautiful mother and the principled timid father and impossible brilliant difficult Zain and then Yasmin Yasmin Yasmin. And he couldn't help himself, though he knew he mustn't. He stood up—he had sat down again when Yasmin left the room, like a man shot, or whose legs go out from under him—and went over and took the glass that she had drunk from and put his lips exactly where hers had been.

And then he heard Mai Viro's voice.

"What's this! What's this!"

Yazid turned and faced her, the glass still clasped in his hand. She looked triumphant, impossibly old, her face settled down like a sack into her mouth.

"Nothing, Bibi. I was just putting the glass back."

"Don't lie," she seethed. "You're doing some magic with her glass, aren't you? Spit it out, what do you have in your mouth? You think I haven't been watching you? Just because Malik Sahib thinks there's no dirt in the gutter doesn't mean I do. I know about the gutter, it stinks and it sticks to your skin. Open your mouth and show me."

She thought he had some magic spell written on a paper in his mouth, to mix it with Yasmin's saliva. Hobbling over, she reached up with her bent crabbed hands and took him roughly by the face, barely able to reach high enough.

"Open it! Now! Or I'll scream."

He opened his mouth and she looked carefully, studied it. She wanted to put her fingers in there, and it seemed awful to think of her rooting around with those claws.

“You get in here, I’ll have you in my kitchen. I want to deal with you right now.”

He trailed her into the kitchen, then into the little room behind it where she took her afternoon rest on a greasy mat lying on the floor, with rags for pillows.

When she turned, he put his hands together as if in prayer. It all would come tumbling down now—he couldn’t bear it—for such an innocent trespass. Tears came to his eyes. “For God’s sake, Bibi. What have I done?” He reached out to touch her knee in supplication.

“Keep your hands off me. I know what you are, and I know what you’ll be. You should never have come into this house. Malik Sahib with his social this and social that, he’s proof that too much education makes an idiot. I’ve been waiting for this. Don’t tell me you weren’t doing some magic on that little girl. See these hands?” She held her cupped hands in his face, slightly shaking, her anger. “See? These hands brought up that girl. I fed her, I cleaned her, I bathed her. No one else in this house has any sense. And I’ll tell you another thing, I’d rather strangle her with these same hands than see a thing like you anywhere near her. I promise you, if ever you come again through those gates, I’ll say such things about you that you’ll not make that mistake a second time, and I’ll tar you and shame you forever. I’m an old woman, and I’ve served them all my life. They’ll believe me over you, no matter how much you’ve tricked them with your tongue and your made-up manners. Look at you, coming here with those pointed shoes and those pants like a college boy. You’ll never be that. Go away.” And she spat on the floor.

“Out!” She picked up a broom lying there and poked it at him, driving him. “Out!” And she poked and pushed him out the door and to the gate and stood there watching him, eyes blazing with righteousness and triumph.

When he stopped at the gate and turned, huge bulk of him, she looked him in the eyes and began screaming, “Thieves, robbers, I’ve been killed,” shrieking it now so loud that people would come running soon.

Unmanned, he turned and scooted away.

Where could he go? He hurried through the streets, turning left and right without thinking. It seemed to him that he might be pursued. He had forced his feet into the new shoes, which pinched at the front, and now they hurt terribly. Finally, he could walk no farther. Sitting down on a boulder, he removed the shoes, then also his new checkered socks. His big feet popped out, seeming to inflate as they pulled loose, twice the size that would again fit those pointed shapes. Even in his sorrow, he thought, *They’ll never make me wear that shit again.*

He remembered then the shoes he had held the day that Karim Khan found him, new shoes in a little boy’s arms, as much as he knew of his arrival on earth. They threw those away and I never saw them again, he mourned. He had never wept for that boy as he did now, for his new shoes, people hurrying past, this big man wearing pants too tight and barefoot, holding a pair of shoes clasped against his chest, back shaking, how sad he felt for himself, whatever name he once had—he must have had a name. Yazid. Bayazid. His pain ran its course and subsided, it was over. He stood up, began walking, barefoot. People looked sideways at him hobbling along. Finally, he flung the shoes that he’d bought with such a buoyant heart into an empty lot.

He had thought it must be late in the afternoon, but he found the lunchtime rush at the stall in full swing. “Come on, out of the way,” he told the boy whom he had taught to make the chapatis and naan. “Let me show you how it’s done!”

He set to work, and everything fell to hand and felt right, the balls of dough cupped in his palms, the play of them, the liveliness of the dough as he worked it, and the satisfying whack as he slapped the wet chapatis down into the seven-hundred-Fahrenheit mouth of the radiant tandoor. So many thousands of these tandoori rotis had passed through his hands, sometimes he dreamt that he’d fed half the country. That was his bounty, that was his gift. Sitting cross-legged with his back to the wall and surveying the twelve charpoys arranged out front all the way to the road, he felt himself sitting at the wheel of a bus, or even in the cockpit of an airplane, seen in a movie. This was his domain, undisputed. He would sit here four-square while they built their new Pakistan. Thank God the customers rolled in, and each one got a signature piece hot from his hands, no chapati allowed to cool, but thrown into the scrap bin if not taken right away. ♦

This is drawn from “[This Is Where the Serpent Lives.](#)”

Daniyal Mueenuddin is the author of the story collection “[In Other Rooms, Other Wonders](#). ” His second book is “[This Is Where the Serpent Lives](#). ”

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What Does “Capitalism” Really Mean, Anyway?

In a new global history, capitalism is an inescapable vibe—responsible for everything, everywhere, all at once.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

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In Sven Beckert’s colossal “Capitalism: A Global History,” the term “capitalism” functions to show that the world’s evils are not only evil in their own right but the franchises of a singularly evil phenomenon.

Photo illustration by Jack Smyth; Source photographs from Getty

In September, 1639, John Winthrop, the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, recorded in his journal a dreadful tale of Puritan true crime. One Robert Keayne had prospered as a London merchant before his immigration to Boston, where he did brisk custom as a shopkeeper and maintained a pious reputation as an “ancient professor of the gospel.” Now he stood trial for the “very evil” sale of “foreign commodities” at prices that exceeded the sum he had paid for them. For the sin of a standard retail markup, he faced excommunication.

A tearful Keayne bewailed his “covetous and corrupt heart” but claimed to have been misled. The situation, the magistrates conceded, was tricky. Profit-taking was not technically illegal, and the just appraisal of goods remained a redoubtable challenge despite the best efforts of wise men. Keayne’s sentence was commuted to a two-hundred-pound fine and a remedial sermon: Scripture showed that it was a “false principle” to believe “that a man might sell as dear as he can, and buy as cheap as he can.” Fourteen years later, Keayne devoted his final testament to a hundred-and-fifty-eight-page justification of his commercial activities as a service to his community and to God. He wanted his two hundred pounds back, to be pledged as a donation to Harvard.

Sven Beckert, a prize-winning professor of history at Harvard, opens his colossal “[Capitalism: A Global History](#)” (Penguin Press) with the observation that Keayne’s penchant for arbitrage now “appears unexceptional, even natural.” In the grand scheme of things, he continues, this attitude has only recently come into vogue, and he was motivated to inquire after its provenance by an “urgent sense that we need to understand this almost geological force shaping our lives.” There isn’t much of a market, Beckert has noticed, for the extended reconsideration of feudalism or of hunting and gathering, but “capitalism provokes visceral reactions.”

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Beckert identifies “two diametrically opposed stories”: capitalism either deserves credit for the rise in living standards and longevity or stands condemned as an “insatiable demon.” His book addresses “a deep frustration that so many of the stories we tell about capitalism are incomplete and sometimes just plain wrong.” He invites readers to study capitalism “with a sense of wonder, surprise, and astonishment—not because it is ‘good’ or ‘bad’ but because of its world-shaping power, and because understanding it is crucial to navigating our shared future.”

In the course of the next eleven hundred pages, this sales pitch starts to seem a little disingenuous. By the time Beckert arrives at our “neoliberal” era, he has given himself over to open lamentation: everything has been ruthlessly priced, “even human reproduction.” Dating apps have transformed love and sex into marketable goods; he resurrects “hookup culture,” a moral panic one no longer hears much about, as “a perfect supplement to the neoliberal age.” But for Beckert there’s a slippery slope between Keayne’s shop and the emerging market the historian sees for “recordings of our brain waves.” Capitalism “draws its energy,” he concludes, “by drilling ever deeper into our bodies, our minds, and our most intimate social relations—our very humanity.”

The endgame of capitalism, in his account, is a world where “almost nothing escaped commodification.” Beckert here refers to commodities in the loose, colloquial sense of “products that can be bought and sold,” but for the most part he uses the word as the

technical term for a tradable good, like grain or copper, that is standardized, fungible, and divisible into arbitrary quantities. “Capitalism: A Global History” is both a history of the commodity and an example of one. Its substance is homogenous, uniform, and interchangeable, as if it had been extruded page by page to meet the needs of procurers at any scale. Beckert has evidently assessed the consumer landscape—a sluggish demand for exegeses of feudalism, a frothy bubble for tracts that put capitalism in its place—and banked on product-market fit. He explicitly frames his own enterprise as a speculative “wager,” a bet that capitalism’s “history—all of it—might be understood, if not wholly contained, between two book covers.”

If his competitors’ merchandise is defective, it is because the attempt to tie capitalism to “any moncausal explanation, any fragment—an institution, a technology, a nation—does not explain much.” Beckert believes that capitalism cannot be reduced to a discrete essence. It has neither a fixed origin nor a fixed trajectory. It is compatible with a variety of forms of political and social life, and it is never the same from place to place or moment to moment. It is not the work of single actors but the nexus of all human action.

One might wonder, Beckert allows, whether it’s worth retaining a concept subject to so much drift. And yet he takes the fact that the word “capitalism” exists as an indication that it must refer to *something*. But how to provide a working definition while “eschewing static, essentializing, excessively abstract, or presentist approaches”? His solution is to return with one hand what he has taken away with the other. Capitalism has no transhistorical direction, but it nevertheless embodies a “unique logic”: the “tendency to grow, flow, and permeate all areas of activity was age-old, an essential, irreducible quality of capitalism.” Capitalism has no essence, except, actually, its “essence was a globe-spanning creep that produced a connected diversity.” It is the manifestation of ravenous appetite. What Beckert exemplifies here is how “capitalism” very often functions in the academic humanities: as a

way to show that the world’s evils—imperialism, colonialism, racism, sexism, inequality, exploitation, extraction, climate change, social media, dating apps, insomnia, a general feeling of unremitting pressure—are not only evil in their own right but the franchises of a singularly evil phenomenon.

Social-media sophisticates who offhandedly blame capitalism—or, more urbanely, “late capitalism”—for all that ails us might nevertheless hesitate to take their experience as a part of a story that runs through nineteen-eighties Japan, nineteen-seventies Sweden, nineteen-fifties Detroit, nineteenth-century Manchester, eighteenth-century Barbados, and seventeenth-century Java. That’s a challenge Beckert takes up. When he speaks of capitalism’s “connected diversity,” he is suggesting that any apparent differences are merely the local epiphenomena of capitalist cunning.

The book’s colonial-era prelude, he notes, precedes the coinage of “capitalism” by a few hundred years, but his story properly begins even earlier, with the twelfth-century Yemeni port of Aden. It was, he writes, “quite literally, a fortified node of capital, an island of capitalists” where Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu merchants linked the medieval Arab world with India. Their métier was neither production nor cultivation but acquisition and exchange.

Although trade itself, Beckert grants, was ancient, it had long been reined in by the norms and customs of local participants. In pre-capitalist societies, he continues, decent folk were apparently content to reap what they had sown—he reckons that “producing for one’s own use was timeless”—and it was the birthright of élites to expropriate any surplus. Considerable wealth may have accrued to these chieftains and warlords, but Beckert argues that, in contrast with the workings of capitalism, their “reshuffling of resources” was candid and legible. Even genocidal larceny, in his account, was carried out in harmony with the prevailing ethos of use: the nomadic conqueror Timur ransacked Central Asia, but he devoted

his plunder to the construction of “magnificent mosques and madrassas,” making his methods “essentially different from capital owners.” For Beckert, merchants like those of Aden, who used their resources only as a means to capture further resources, were a “categorically different” breed.

In the next few hundred years, these merchant communities expanded around the globe. Unlike earlier traders, who undertook arduous journeys to far-flung depots, such merchants stayed home and put “flexible, fungible capital” to work in the marketplace. Without ties to land or custom, they “embodied the logic of ever-continuing expansion,” guided by the “truly exotic principle” of accumulation for its own sake. These alien values entrenched themselves, Beckert writes, because capital wielded “a truly extraordinary development of self-mystification,” a power he compares to “rogue artificial intelligence.”

Long-distance traders exposed themselves to considerable risk; where neighbors might be bound by reciprocal obligations, foreigners weren’t. And so this burgeoning merchant class formed “tight-knit communities out of business necessity.” Some of them were able to leverage existing social infrastructure: the letters of Aden’s Jewish traders, Beckert reports, “show a sophisticated system for extending credit and sharing risk that was predicated largely on ties of kinship and personal repute.” Such professional strangers, whose primary loyalty was to the incorporeal realm of pure commerce, aroused “suspicion by commoners and elites alike.” Certainly there’s a long and distinguished tradition of associating Jewish arrivistes with entrepreneurialism, avarice, and clannishness. The “Jewish Question” was a preoccupation of [Karl Marx](#)’s (“What is the worldly religion of the Jew? *Huckstering*. What is his worldly God? *Money*”), and Jewry played an important role in the opening volume of the German scholar Werner Sombart’s vast study “Modern Capitalism,” which appeared in 1902 and was the first major book to grapple with something called

“capitalism” as such. Sombart, who saw a “racial predisposition” at work, would also coin the term “late capitalism.”

In Beckert’s view, the “arguably parasitical activity” of capital-rich traders in the quantitative service of “unprecedented accumulation” made them “seedlings of a qualitatively different world.” This new dawn arrived around the sixteenth century, when “economic life was on the verge of its most dramatic shape-shift since the advent of sedentary agriculture.” He dubs this period—when it became plausible to describe economic activity in planetary terms—the “great connecting.” What he sees emerging is what Immanuel Wallerstein, in the nineteen-seventies, called the “world system.” In Wallerstein’s scheme, a globalized economy, with a division of labor between a productive “core” and an exploited “periphery,” wasn’t just capitalism’s hothouse; it *was* capitalism.

World-systems theory was controversial. The institutional and economic structures of the “great connecting” era—colonial monopolies, charter operations, fiscal-military states, protectionism—have conventionally been gathered under the banner of mercantilism. Capitalism, in contrast, was thought to be about free markets. Beckert, following Wallerstein and the French historian Fernand Braudel, thinks otherwise. Markets had long been a durable feature of a variety of regimes. Capitalism, by contrast, is to be seen as a collusive, state-sponsored attempt to bring markets under control. Capitalists may have congratulated themselves on their ability to predict and hedge against uncertainty, but what they really did was insure that systemic risk was off-loaded to those at the margins.

As he did in his 2014 book, “[Empire of Cotton](#),” Beckert calls this post-feudalist turn “war capitalism,” using Barbados as a primary exhibit. The Caribbean island had “no family-centered subsistence production, no systems of mutual dependence”—nothing to prevent its transformation into “one giant sugar plantation” wholly administered by the planter class. The trade between the periphery

and the core was jury-rigged to favor the latter. In zones like Barbados, laborers were conscripted or enslaved to produce raw materials (sugar, cotton, silver) for export to the core at artificially suppressed prices. In zones like Britain, labor was relatively uncoerced, and stronger institutions protected higher-margin activities such as manufacturing and finance. For Wallerstein, these were the necessary and sufficient conditions to render capitalism a self-perpetuating machine.

Beckert has taken up the terms of analysis Wallerstein favored, and he is right to point out that the Caribbean was long neglected by Eurocentric historians. But mechanistic accounts, which leave no room for human agency, have gone out of fashion, and so Beckert distances himself from Wallerstein's model. Capitalism, for Beckert, is not “a process whose internal logic determines its eventual outcome”; instead, like “everything with a history, capitalism is made by people.”



As a social historian, Beckert has political and narrative commitments to “actor-centered” chronicles. He’s helped by his sometimes slippery definition of commodities. Where Wallerstein used the word literally, to refer to sugar, say, or iron, Beckert takes

the plantation economy as ground zero for the grand aspiration “to commodify everything.” This certainly sounds actor-centered, but it mostly functions as a cosmetic gloss on a story of structural inevitability. What happened in Barbados, he proposes, “prototyped the coming capitalist utopia of markets becoming the sole arbiter of human affairs.” And so the immense brutality of the Barbadian plantation, in his telling, prefigures contemporary “hookup culture.”

The desire to have it both ways—to genuflect to agency while casting structure as the man behind the curtain—extends to the way Beckert plays with the schemes of historical continuity and rupture. He uses variants of the words “radical” or “unprecedented” around two hundred times. It’s all part of his attempt to “denaturalize” capitalism, to insist that its persistence was not foreordained. Yet his metaphors for capitalism are drawn almost exclusively from the natural world: before it “broke through the canopy” as a tree, with “root, trunk, and leaves,” it appeared as a “sprout” and a “taproot”; when it is not a “predatory cuckoo,” depositing its eggs in the nests of other birds, it is an “almost geological force” of “tectonic” strength, not to mention a “riverbed,” a “torrent,” a “tsunami.”

Beckert tries to tame the sense of a conceptual free-for-all by partitioning the evolution of capitalism into periods of punctuated equilibrium. The effect is to reduce capitalism to the manic reinvention of the wheel. In the eighteenth century, for example, merchants pressed the peasantry of the Silesian countryside to increase linen production. This labor-mobilization strategy, Beckert observes, was at once “old”—in fact, “at the very heart of European feudalism”—and, by dint of its “scale, intensity, and focus,” a “radical innovation.” Beckert’s shape-shifting capitalism is relentlessly dynamic. As it exhausts the possibilities of one stage, it reengines itself for the next. By the middle of the eighteenth century, “a perfect storm gathered, and that unlikely convergence threw human history onto a fundamentally new course,” with the “unprecedented” growth of “industrial capitalism.” This process is

rinsed and repeated for “reconstructed capitalism,” and then “neoliberalism.” Capitalism is rendered as a prisoner of samsara, trapped in an endlessly destructive cycle of death and rebirth.

Treating capitalism in general, and industrialization in particular, as a political project obligates Beckert to minimize the role of technology. The Röchling family, a Saarland dynasty with diversified holdings in what Beckert calls the “abyss” of heavy industry, is mentioned more than a hundred times. James Watt, a pioneer of the steam engine, appears, in passing, on three occasions, introduced not as a successful inventor but as a tinkerer “funded by his sugar-trading family.”

The explosive growth of British cotton mills is customarily attributed to labor-saving innovation driven by high wages, but Beckert argues that “at its heart, the industry’s expansion was an example of import-substitution industrialization,” or the policy of using tariffs and subsidies to protect domestic industries from foreign competition. Britain did enforce aggressive textile tariffs starting in the seventeen-twenties. Yet it really was the arrival of technologies like the spinning jenny and the water frame, half a century later, that drove its dominance in textile manufacturing. The mid-twentieth-century strategy of “import-substitution industrialization” was a means for a developing country to try to compensate for a foreign competitor’s first-mover advantage. Britain *was* the first mover, however, and the fact that what happened in Lancashire happened in Lancashire and not in Guangdong is precisely the sort of thing books like this are supposed to explain.

Beckert’s habit of downplaying technology leads to some claims that are dubious on their face. How is it that the nineteenth century saw a nearly threefold increase in the number of clock-making workshops in the Black Forest? According to Beckert, “such intensification of manufacturing” arose “without significant technical or organizational change.” This would have come as a

surprise to the German manufacturer Erhard Junghans, who founded an eponymous clock-making firm in 1861 in his home town of Schramberg. With help from his brother, who had spent time working in modernized American workshops, he set out to use new methods of precision processing and design tooling to produce interchangeable parts. The firm steadily expanded into alarm clocks and pocket watches, and by the start of the next century it had become the world's largest producer of timepieces.

But Beckert doesn't want to acknowledge that the clock-making story had much to do with standardization, evidently because he wants to reserve that phenomenon for the twentieth century's "new, and yet uncharted, age" of "radically reconstructed capitalism." In his view, a version of capitalism in which an alliance of private enterprise and state power protected the interests of its titans was superseded by a regime that, for the first time, *really* protected the interests of its titans. The crucial difference was the ascent of the administrative class, which he considers "the most monumental turning point in the global history of capitalism."

Once more, the conceit that capitalism owes its endurance to its flexibility—to what Selina Meyer, the pandering politician in the TV series "Veep," advertised with the campaign slogan "Continuity with Change"—devolves into a shell game. The entrepreneurs of industrial capitalism, Beckert claims, had "very little sense of the cost and profit structures of their businesses." They didn't need to fixate on such numbers, because productivity "was not yet an important consideration." That would wait for a new specimen of calculating supervisors, conjured up by "reconstructed capitalism," who were suddenly "empowered with their newfangled statistics." In reality, major enterprises in the early nineteenth century kept exacting records on input prices, waste rates, and output rates. The culture of industrial measurement and efficiency that you find in [Charles Dickens](#) novels from the eighteen-forties and fifties wasn't just something the writer dreamed up.

Beckert treats the state with the same schematic looseness. In his book, the state is either nefarious or passive, complicit or compliant. [John D. Rockefeller](#)'s Standard Oil is mentioned as a "particularly radical example" of capital consolidation; tellingly, Beckert fails to mention that it was broken up by the vigorous antitrust movement. His pinhole view of both markets and states leaves little room for the more complicated, sometimes antagonistic interplay between them.

The same century that saw Standard Oil's dissolution also saw the emergence of modern regulatory institutions and, later, state-managed experiments in growth whose outcomes he barely mentions. In 1990, Beckert notes, almost thirty-eight per cent of the world's population lived on less than about two dollars per day; in 2022, only nine per cent did. One might have thought that China's stewardship of its country's hybrid economy, which lifted approximately eight hundred million people out of hardscrabble subsistence, had something to do with it. Beckert hastens to assure us that this development was mainly the result of the country's "anti-poverty measures."

Any effort to distill capitalism to a fixed essence, Beckert warns, will not explain very much. But to make the concept coextensive with dynamism itself—to depict capitalism, as he does, as an airborne toxic event, shapeless and ever expanding—is to explain nothing at all. The result is a work that is at once boundless in scope and dully inert. For Beckert, capitalism is an artificial realm constituted by coercion, where autonomy belongs solely to "age-old technologies and age-old knowledge." For all his talk of complexity, his "actor-centered history" allows for only two kinds of actor: those who obey the logic of accumulation and those who refuse it. Child labor in a Manchester factory is diabolical; child labor on a subsistence farm is helping out around the house. Outside capitalism, there is only "resistance," a term he wields with the subtlety of a hashtag. He scarcely distinguishes between a feudal lord's resistance to merchant rivals and an Indigenous

community's resistance to plantation slavery. When French investors tried to set up plantations in Senegal, native potentates rejected wage labor as a threat to their own system of hereditary servitude; a few pages later the episode proves among the moments Beckert hails as showing how people in the countryside "still exercised some control over their economic, and often political, lives."

This muddle stems from a deeper conceptual problem. "Capitalism subsumes other logics into its reproduction (for example, a deeply gendered organization of economic life), feeds on them, and at times even reinvigorates them," Beckert writes. "Capitalism rests on, and continuously produces, spaces of non-accumulation." The claim seems designed to defy refutation. So long as capitalism both draws upon and generates non-capitalist relations, the distinction between capitalist and non-capitalist forms of life collapses; any space of non-accumulation is just growing room for more capitalism. And if capitalism thrives on accumulation *and* non-accumulation, stability *and* crisis, the suspicion grows that we've been sold a story without a subject.

Beckert seems not unaware of the problem, which might explain his decision to open with the textbook figure of the devout Puritan. This is the familiar terrain of [Max Weber](#)'s "The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism," written in the wake of Werner Sombart's foray into modern capitalism. Sombart took capitalism as not merely a mode of production but a presiding spiritual temper. He appealed to an innate acquisitive instinct, or *Erwerbstrieb*, that he saw reflected in the entrepreneurial vigor of the Jewish diaspora—prompting Weber's complaint that Sombart was accounting for a historical variable by invoking a human constant.

Weber instead drafted the Calvinist community as a case study in how the "logic of accumulation" was internalized and spread. (The historian Yuri Slezkine dryly remarked that Weber's Protestants

“discovered a humorless, dignified way to be Jewish.”) Calvinists, who had once condemned the pursuit of profit, eventually embraced a vocation as rational actors driven by thrifty self-interest. Their faith in predestination left them in a state of chronic existential dread; although one’s fate was fixed, worldly success could be taken as a sign of divine favor. Robert Keayne, by the time he died, had already taken the first steps in this direction.

In 1911, Sombart returned with an even more categorical case for ethnic determinism. He now identified Jews as the natural vector of capitalist accumulation itself. Whereas the settled cultivator grew only what his family required, the ancient Hebrews—nomadic herders who had to count their flocks—had a perverse value system that elevated greed to the level of principle. As he put it, “Only in the shepherd’s calling could the view have become dominant that in economic activities the abstract quantity of commodities matters, not whether they are fit or sufficient for use.”

Beckert, not otherwise inclined to lavish praise on canonical European theorists, has unusually appreciative things to say about Sombart’s perceptiveness and prescience. In a paragraph about the “all-encompassing” bureaucracy of the technological state, Beckert is at pains to note that I.B.M. machinery helped Germany deport its Jews, and yet over the half-dozen times that Beckert approvingly quotes Sombart, it somehow never comes up that he threw in his lot with the Nazis. But, then, “Capitalism: A Global History” is effectively a planetary remake of Sombart’s own mammoth work, with the “acquisitive instinct” reformulated as a sort of Spirit, an omnipresent vibe responsible for everything, and thus for nothing. Beckert’s basic opposition, between those who are content with what they have and those who are not, floats free of time and history, issuing in a metaphysical vacuum. He can count on his reader to fill it in. ♦

Gideon Lewis-Kraus is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* covering technology, academia, and books, among other topics. He is the author of the memoir “*A Sense of Direction*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/capitalism-a-global-history-sven-beckert-book-review>

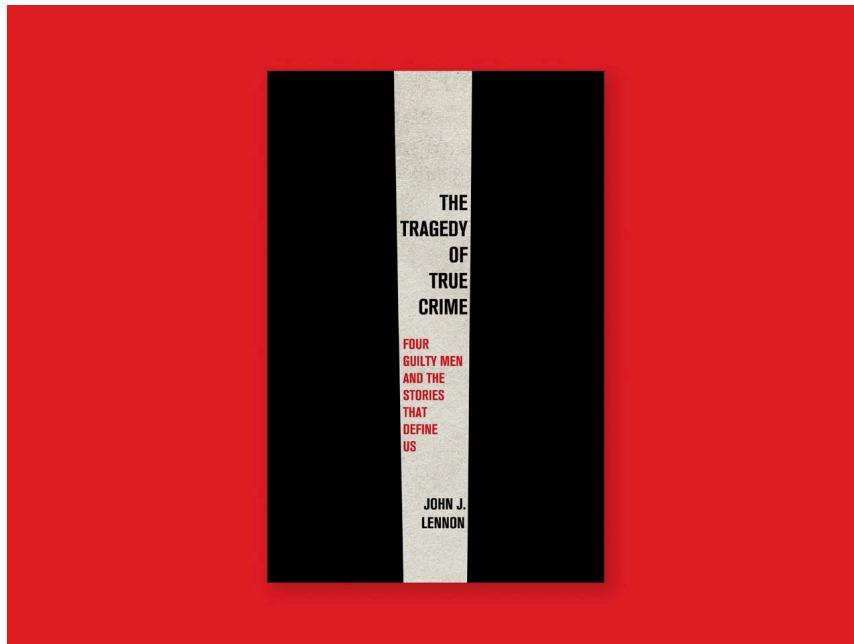
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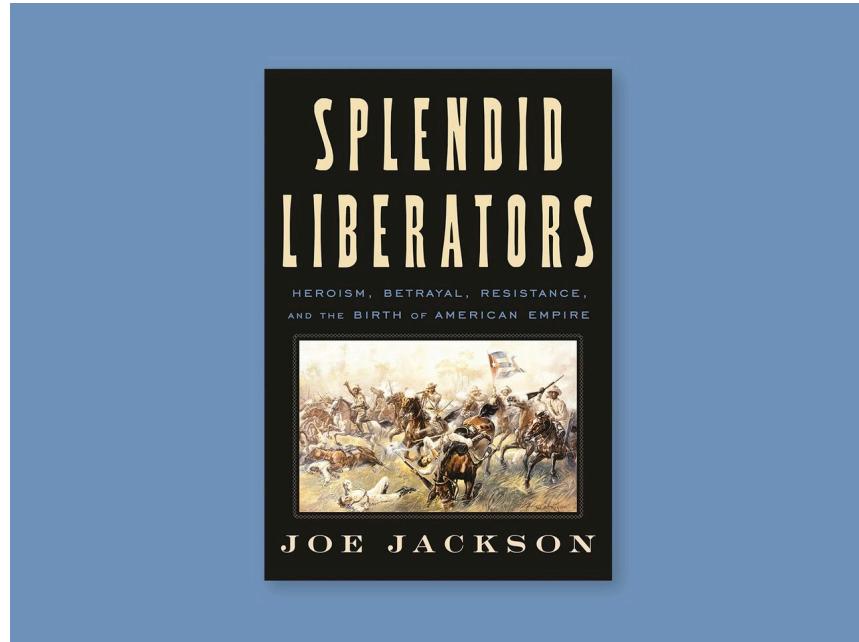
Briefly Noted

“*The Tragedy of True Crime*,” “*Splendid Liberators*,” “*The Land in Winter*,” and “*Flop Era*.”

November 24, 2025



The Tragedy of True Crime, by John J. Lennon (*Celadon*). Weaving autobiography with investigation, this book by an incarcerated writer considers prisoners whose stories have been grist for sensationalized true-crime depictions of murder. After starting with his own appearance on the television documentary series “True Evil,” he goes on to offer a counterpoint to that kind of media, situating the men he writes about within the context of their own lives—not excusing their crimes but closely detailing the circumstances that produced them. Lennon asks whether “illuminating human darkness” has the effect of encouraging punitive attitudes about criminal justice. Ultimately, he argues that the answer depends on who is doing the illuminating.



Splendid Liberators, by *Joe Jackson* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). In this exhaustively researched history, Jackson contends that the Spanish-American War of 1898 shaped the United States into an imperialist power much like the “European empires it disparaged.” As their nation contemplated its global position, Americans increasingly felt that it was their divine right to “uplift and civilize and Christianize” the world. The U.S. thus saw itself as a “savior” of Cuba and the Philippines, which had been controlled by Spain since 1521 and 1565, respectively. Jackson argues that this grandiose vision was used as a justification for brutality. “Death was the legacy” the war left behind, particularly in the Philippines, where more people perished in battle than “were killed or died of mistreatment during the three and a half centuries of Spanish rule.”

What We're Reading

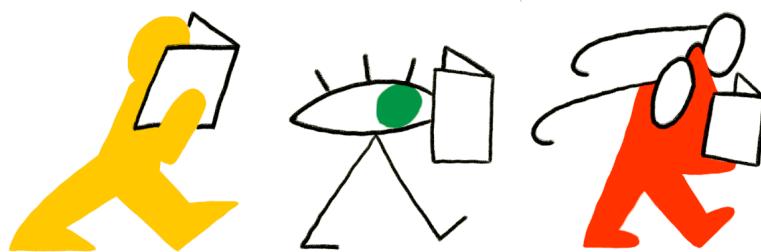
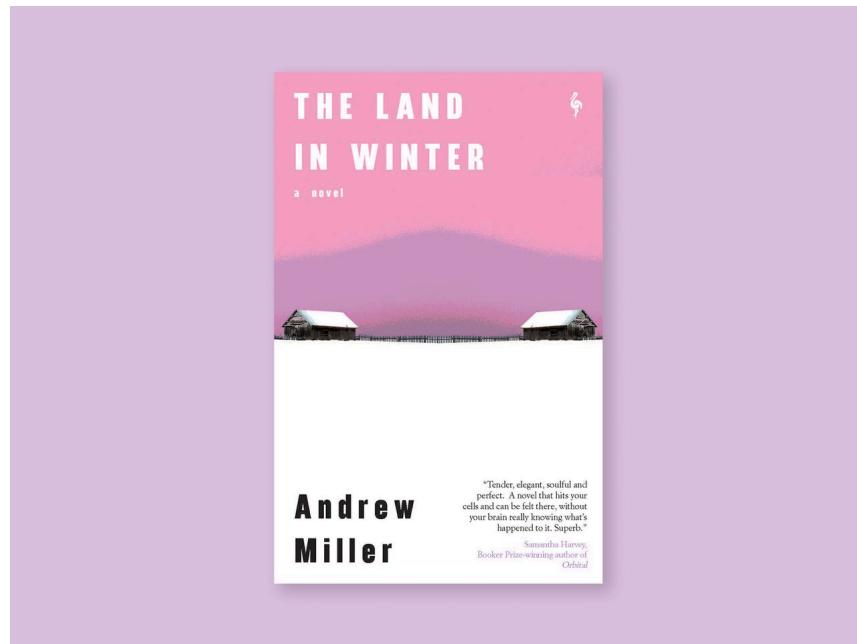


Illustration by Ben Hickey

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The Land in Winter, by *Andrew Miller* (*Europa*). This delicately written, deeply psychological novel, which was nominated for the Booker Prize, follows two neighboring married couples through a brutal English winter in 1962. The husbands, a doctor and an underexperienced farmer, are often befuddled by their countryside existences. The wives, both pregnant, engage in a bizarre friendship that serves as the book's dramatic engine. As the quartet's secrets and longings come to light, so, too, do traumas of the Second World War and the restless, uncomfortable dynamics of a modern age in transition. Miller's prose is gentle and luxurious, punctuated by striking imagery: snowflakes on the tongue are "stone-flavoured, the tips of the sky." He delights in interior tensions, and in the wrenching interplay between his characters and their cruel surroundings.



Flop Era, by *Lara Egger* (Pittsburgh). “Are these feelings / faux fur or genuine leather?” asks one of the poems in this enchanting collection, which exhibits a keen attunement to the ways seduction can become destruction, language can become meaning, and delusion can become belief. Animated by an irreverent zaniness, Egger’s poetry fuses elements drawn from contemporary idiom and from lyric tradition to render a surreal world that interrogates existential questions about desire and grief. “Truthfully, / I’m an imposter, deathly afraid / of heights,” she writes. “One way to explain sorrow / is to assume / god never looks down.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/the-tragedy-of-true-crime-splendid-liberators-the-land-in-winter-flop-era>

Books

Where Dante Guides Us

The Divine Comedy, the poet's tour of the Christian afterlife, is filled with strikingly modern touches—and a poetic energy rooted in the imperfectly human.

By [Claudia Roth Pierpont](#)

November 24, 2025



The work's main character—a poet named Dante—enters forbidden territories, explores the best and the worst of man, and tries to penetrate the mind of God.

Illustration by Cleon Peterson

During a stolen hour in the spring of 1944, when [Primo Levi](#) had been a slave laborer at Auschwitz for about three months, a French prisoner asked Levi to teach him some Italian. Levi, a young chemist from Turin, went on to become a major chronicler of life in the camps, but at the time he didn't believe that he had what it took to survive. He thought too much. He was hollow with hunger and painfully aware that his hands were covered in sores and that he

smelled. Worst of all, he felt that the things he'd seen would leave him dead inside even if he survived. It would have been natural to give up. He didn't initially understand why a part of the Divine Comedy came to mind in that furtive hour of teaching—it was hardly Italian Conversation 101—but Dante's story of the Greek warrior Ulysses began to spill out of him. He forgot many lines but persevered, sometimes translating into French, determined to make his fellow-prisoner understand, especially the speech in which Ulysses urges a worn-out group of sailors, finally safe ashore, to go back out to sea:

Consider well the seed that gave you birth:
You were not made to live your lives as brutes,
But to be followers of worth and knowledge.

Levi recalled that he seemed to be hearing the lines for the first time, and that they sounded like the voice of God. For a moment, he forgot where he was.

Dante's Ulysses is the same mythical figure as Homer's Odysseus, and Dante's portrait shares much of the character's familiar background: a hero of the Trojan War, he's known for his craftiness, shown most famously in his idea that the Trojans might just fall for the gift of an enormous wooden horse secretly packed with soldiers. It's after the Greeks have won the war, thanks largely to this brilliant ruse, that Homer and Dante radically diverge. In the Odyssey, Homer tells the story of Odysseus' long return home. The voyage is full of stops and hesitations, but he resists the greatest lures in order to return to wife and son, father and homeland. Going home: that's what the whole desperate voyage is about.

But it's possible that Dante knew a different version of the story. He didn't read Greek, and at the time he was writing, in the early fourteenth century, Homer had yet to be properly translated into Latin, let alone Italian. Then, too, any version with a happy

homecoming simply wasn't the story Dante needed to tell. His Ulysses is an adventurer with an insatiable appetite for knowledge and experience. Though his family is waiting at home, he chooses to remain at sea and to sail beyond the accepted limit of human navigation, the Strait of Gibraltar—remember, this was written nearly two hundred years before Columbus—into an empty ocean and dangers unknown. The speech he makes to the ragged remnant of his men, a portion of which appears above in Allen Mandelbaum's translation, is filled with pride and aspiration. Levi, like many others, found Ulysses' speech to be a sustaining example of the human spirit unshackled. And yet Ulysses brings about the death of all his men, who, having been persuaded, follow their leader and are drowned in a furious storm. More, the whirlwind that takes them under is no mere accident but the act of a wrathful God. The speech is a key reason that Dante's Ulysses is damned to a hell even worse than Levi's, because it is eternal.

The Divine Comedy, conceived as a guided tour of the Christian afterlife, is written in three volumes corresponding to the realms that greet all human souls after their brief embodiment on earth: Inferno (or Hell), Purgatory, and Paradise. The author, Dante Alighieri, born in Florence in 1265, is also its leading character—not a warrior as in the Homeric epics or their Latin successor, Virgil's *Aeneid*, but, rather, a poet, a flawed and introspective man whose fall into despair sets the drama in motion. Is Dante experiencing a crisis of faith? Or, in today's terms, a midlife crisis of direction? (He tells us that he is halfway through his life.) Is he having trouble imagining the epic poem that he aspires to write? All these problems, bound together, begin to be solved when Virgil appears in the dark wood where Dante finds himself, leading him past dangers that have blocked his path. Or, more precisely, the shade of Virgil appears, since he lived in the age of Emperor Augustus and has been dead for some thirteen hundred years.

What We're Reading

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The great Roman poet inspired Dante in many ways—in the Aeneid, Aeneas visits the Underworld to consult his father—and in the Divine Comedy Virgil is wise, kind, protective. He becomes like a father to the often bewildered younger poet, leading him from the mouth of Hell to its core, and then back up, through Purgatory and to the brink of Paradise. There, Virgil must cede his duty to another. As a pagan who died before the time of Christ, and was therefore incapable of true faith, he can't set foot in Paradise and must return to his assigned place in the divine scheme. He, too, it turns out—the dearest figure in Dante's vastly buzzing world, a sort of antique Polonius or Dumbledore—is doomed to pass eternity in a subdivision of Hell. There is no physical torture in this place, called Limbo, and the conversation is presumably exceptional. (Homer, Horace, and Ovid are among the other virtuous pagans we glancingly meet there.) But this is not to say that Virgil doesn't suffer from being denied salvation. For him, Limbo remains a “dark prison,” because it shuts out, forever and without hope, the light of God.

Even to Dante, the rules seem confusingly unfair. Hell, clearly the most violent of the realms, makes for the most exuberantly entertaining of the books, filled with action, fantastical monsters, and occasional farce. (One well-named devil, Malacoda—Evil Tail—summons his posse with enormous farts that “make a trumpet of his ass.”) Above all, it's filled with human stories. Dante—the character called Dante—moves through its nine ever-worsening

circles like a reporter, drawing tales out of miserable souls by promising to preserve their names and stories back on earth. He's the rarest of creatures, a living visitor, and he's taking mental notes. Virgil, in a strikingly modern touch, persuades a terrifying giant who serves as a sort of elevator system between infernal levels to let them down gently, telling him that Dante—Dante the writer—can make him famous.

Hell is nevertheless filled with bloody and horrific torments. In Dante's eyes, some sinners fully deserve what they get: corrupt clerics, for example—including a Pope—are jammed upside down into holes in the rocky earth, legs flailing and feet licked by fire. (There are a notable number of churchmen in Hell; also Florentines.) At other times, he pities the souls he meets and is chastised by Virgil for it. To feel pity is to question the judgment of God. For Satan has no power here; he himself suffers at Hell's lowest level, bound in ice. It is God who has sentenced unrepentant sinners to this place and designed ingenious torments to echo their crimes. So adulterous lovers are battered by fierce winds that whirl them around in each other's arms, mimicking the turbulent passion they did not control. Fortune-tellers—those who claimed to know what only God can know—have their heads twisted backward, so they can see nothing but what is behind them. And Ulysses, silver-tongued persuader of men, is encased in a tongue of flame. Yet, however justly these transgressors are condemned, they draw not only Dante's sympathy but ours, too, luring us into the uneasy position of doubting divine justice.

Going beyond boundaries, daring everything for knowledge, Dante's Ulysses has much in common with mankind's faulty prototype, Adam, whom Dante eagerly interrogates in Paradise. (Question: How long did you live in the Garden before biting the apple? Answer: About seven hours.) He also has much in common with Dante himself, in the poet's sheer gall in taking on this work: entering forbidden territories, exploring the worst and the best of man, trying to penetrate the mind of God. And, although he can't

let go of nagging qualms or dangerous questions, he gives the readers who are persuaded by his silver tongue fair warning. “Turn back if you would see your shores again,” Dante cautions us. “The seas I sail were never sailed before.”

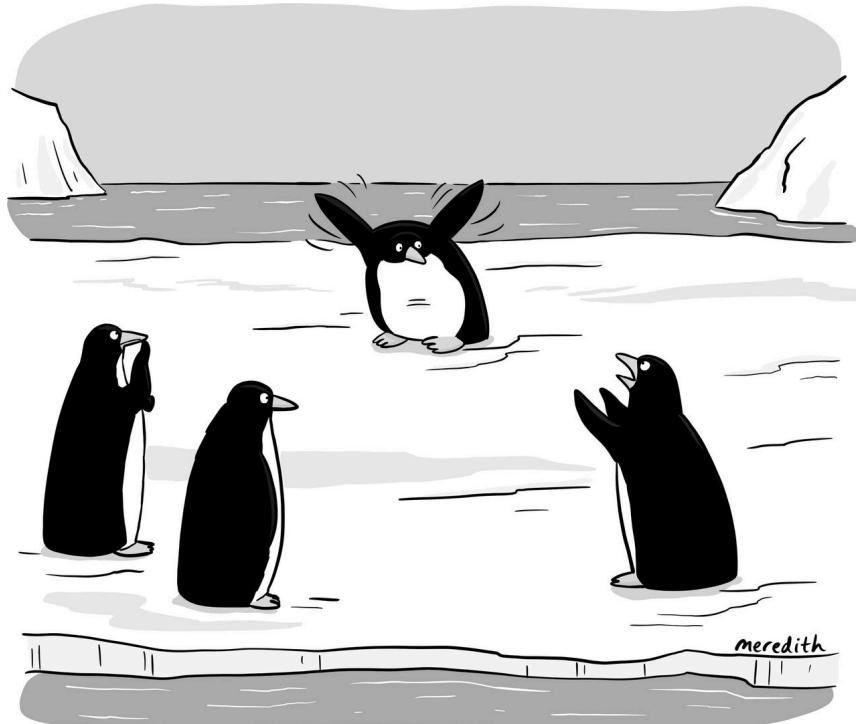
Homer was not one person, it is now generally agreed, but a slowly accumulating oral tradition given a name. Virgil’s Aeneid breaks off suddenly, apparently unfinished, and at his death the poet is said to have asked that the manuscript be burned. (Caesar Augustus intervened.) Dante Alighieri, the successor to these civilization-defining literary forces, was born to a family of moderate means in an Italian city torn by political violence and in an era when the rebirth of classical learning had barely begun. He was a contemporary and possibly an acquaintance of the great Florentine painter Giotto, whom he mentions in the Comedy for having seized attention from Cimabue—Giotto’s former master, who produced images of icon-like rigidity—much as Dante himself will overtake the writers of his youth. Here, in two different arts, is the moment when medieval severity gives way to physical and psychological nuance, when human figures stretch their limbs and take breath. Within a generation, Boccaccio would write that Dante had opened the way for the long-absent Muses to return to Italy.

He was ambitious from the start. Prue Shaw, in her new book, “[Dante: The Essential Commedia](#)” (Liveright), emphasizes the exceptional importance and nobility that Dante accords the vocation of the poet, and how, from early on, he believed his powers to be equal to those of the great poets of classical antiquity. His early writing reflected the popular style of the French troubadours, courtly poet-musicians who sang of their longing for a beautiful lady. In his case, the beloved was the unobtainable Beatrice Portinari, a wealthy banker’s daughter whom Dante claimed to have loved from their first meeting, when both were children—a bit of charming self-mythology—and steadily on until her untimely death, at twenty-four. It didn’t seem to matter that he saw her rarely or that both were married off to others for financial

and political reasons. The Divine Comedy has nothing to say about Dante's wife, or their four children. Beatrice was the love that fuelled his poems, which only became more spiritual after her death, when her very name—which suggests beatitude—becomes for him a form of prayer.

If poetry made Dante's life, politics overturned it. In 1300, in his mid-thirties, he served on a Florentine governing committee that exiled several leaders of two clashing political factions, in a bid for peace. The following year, while Dante was on a diplomatic mission to Rome, his own faction back home was ousted, and he was falsely accused of corruption. He found himself exiled from Florence in absentia and, in 1302, he was sentenced to burn at the stake should he ever return. For the rest of his life—nearly twenty years—he sought refuge in various Italian cities, with their unfamiliar dialects and local cultures, nursing both a bitterness and a longing that are felt in the epic work he undertook. He probably started writing it in about 1307, but he set the poem, very deliberately, before his exile—at Easter, 1300. He called it simply the Comedy, meaning a work that begins in darkness but, unlike a tragedy, ends in light. The adjective “Divine” was added by a printer more than two hundred years later, reflecting both the work's subject matter and its status.

Classical mythology, ancient and medieval history, Christian theology, astronomy, morality, Aristotelian philosophy, monks and nuns and whores and forgers and blasphemers and poets (Purgatory is full of poets): all are contained in a rhyme scheme of Dante's invention and in the Tuscan dialect that was the only home remaining to him. Three books comprising a hundred chapterlike cantos, the Latin-derived word a tribute to the poetry's deep musical origins.



"You're churning butter! No, you're a monkey! You're operating a loom! Come on, what is it?"
Cartoon by Meredith Southard

Fourteen thousand two hundred and thirty-three lines. Not in Latin, it must be emphasized, the language of erudition and prestige—the obvious choice for an epic work—but in a language that ordinary people spoke and that (as he said) even women could read.

Illiterates would have heard it recited; there are fourteenth-century tales of blacksmiths and garbage collectors rattling off passages by heart. But how many people, even then, could make out the references? The need for a supplemental commentary—footnotes—was recognized by one of the earliest Dante scholars, Dante's son Jacopo, soon after the poet's death, when the ink on *Paradise* was barely dry. By the end of the fourteenth century, the list of commentaries was long. To read what has accumulated now would be a career.

So how does one enter this overwhelming work? There is no single perfect or even agreed-upon English translation, although there are dozens of them. It's been adapted in prose, blank verse, and close imitations of terza rima, Dante's distinctive three-line scheme, in which the first and third line of every verse rhyme with each other, while the second line loops forward like a threaded needle to stitch

the rhyme of the next verse into place. And onward ad infinitum, creating a springing momentum that feels natural in Italian, with its plenitude of words that rhyme on the final syllable, but is impossible to capture without strain in English, a language that wearied translators describe as “rhyme-poor.” One must salute the translators who continue to devote stretches of their lives to this seven-hundred-year-old poem, pledging to a mad voyage of their own, determined to make readers understand the love that drives them. And one must not blame them if, in an age of shrunken attention spans, they become a bit desperate.

Shaw’s book takes a novel approach. “The Essential Commedia” isn’t a standard translation but a radically abridged version of the text, with chunks of the poem (in Italian and in Shaw’s translation) set like jewels into a running commentary made up of narrative bridges, historical context, interpretation, and occasional witty asides. It all fits into one volume and, though the original’s momentum is undone, Shaw—a first-rate British Dante scholar—provides a momentum of her own. If it’s a cheat, it’s also an open invitation to new readers. And it gets better as it goes along, since so much less assistance is needed in the packed storytelling of Inferno than in the theological vagaries of Paradise, which have been known to stop some readers cold. Shaw repeatedly clarifies the most “dense” and “taxing” paradisial discussions, from an explanation of the dark spots on the moon to an account of the moment of creation. Yet Shaw herself is nearly transparent. Try to speak of what she’s done and you speak only of Dante.

The poet Mary Jo Bang’s Divine Comedy—recently completed, after some twenty years, with the publication of [Paradiso](#) (Graywolf)—isn’t a standard translation, either. It’s closer to an improvisation, filled with references to movies and rock (and jazz) albums which veer far from the Italian and are meant to draw new readers by making Dante our contemporary. Led Zeppelin, Charles Mingus, Cyndi Lauper, and “The Wizard of Oz,” to name a few, contribute lyrics and phrases and appear in the scholarly (if

sometimes wryly po-faced) footnotes. Bang calls her work a “colloquial” version, and it can admittedly be jarring to hear Virgil sound like a slacker: “What’s up with you,” he asks Dante, who has just had a vision of the martyrdom of St. Stephen, “that you can’t keep it together?” Yet this may be something of the effect that Dante sought in using the common language that he loved in part for the way it changed. Bang does better with the grotesquerie of hellfire, where lowballing the tone can have a sharp, often comic edge. And she sometimes lands a line with stinging freshness. In the very fine traditional translation I usually reach for, by Robert and Jean Hollander, the demonic ferryman Charon warns “you wicked souls,” whom he is transporting to Hell, to “give up hope of ever seeing heaven.” And then there’s Bang: “Give it up, you scum-uncles,” Charon growls. “You’ll never see the sky again.”

Language may change, but people don’t, and the mirror Dante holds up has made him a constant contemporary. Purgatory, the middle realm, is a place where sinners who have repented—even right before dying, even if only in their thoughts—are sent to be cleansed before ascending to Paradise. It has no direct Biblical source but became Church doctrine in Dante’s time, providing hope to those who feared that they weren’t worthy of Paradise. Dante situates it on a mountain rising out of an empty sea. On its seven terraces, people suffer torments not for the sake of punishment but to be cured of their predilection for however many of the seven deadly sins—Pride, Envy, Lust, etc.—they’ve committed.

Depending on your nature, you may be able to skip a terrace or two. (Nobody skips Pride, so don’t bother pretending to be above it.) The lessons are harsh; the envious have their eyes sewn shut with iron wire. Still, in contrast with Hell, there is the promise of getting out; time passes. Prayers from pious souls on earth can shorten your sentence, and the Church was busy developing other sorts of pardons, too, for cash. A professor who currently teaches a course about Dante to prisoners says that Purgatory is their favorite part.

Some of the most defining writers of the modern age were fixated on the idea of Dante as a contemporary, and their recognition points up the poet’s unorthodoxies. To the circles of Hell, for example, he added a realm of sinners of his own invention—those who never make a true commitment to a cause, who live “without disgrace yet without praise” and are confined (plagued by wasps and stinging flies) with the angels who took no side when Lucifer made war on God. Dante had certainly hated this type in life; the shock here is how many of these indifferent souls there are. “I had not thought death had undone so many,” T. S. Eliot wrote, in “[The Waste Land](#),” using Dante’s realization to transpose a scene of medieval Hell to twentieth-century London, where crowds of commuters move dully through brown morning fog, their eyes fixed just beyond their feet as if they, too, will never see the sky again.

And just outside the gates of Purgatory, near the base of the mountain, Dante comes upon an old friend called Belacqua, lounging in the shade of a boulder. An indolent procrastinator, he explains that, because he waited to repent until his life was nearly over, he must now wait for as many years as he lived before purgation can begin. So, why move at all? Bang, showing a little trouble with the rules of Purgatory, and with math, projects that he will have to wait twenty-one thousand years, a period that [Samuel Beckett](#) would likely have found pleasing. Beckett was an assiduous reader of Dante and put Belacqua into his fiction many times, starting—in the story “Dante and the Lobster”—with Belacqua Shuah, a lazy young Dubliner who is studying Dante and learns firsthand about compassion for the damned. (“Why not piety and pity both, even down below?” he worries.) For Beckett, Belacqua was a key to our condition as much as Ulysses was for Primo Levi. He seems to walk straight into Beckett’s uncanny world, along with a small compendium of Dante’s other sorry souls—the ones half buried in mud, in excrement, in tombs, all

determined to speak—made recognizably modern by the omission of cause or purpose in their plight.

Dante's compassion for Virgil grows as they near the point where the older poet must leave the younger behind. In Purgatory, Dante has seen pagan souls who are saved—he will see more in Paradise—exceptions that make Virgil's fate even more inexplicably harsh. After persevering through all seven terraces, master and pupil emerge at the top of the mountain, which, in Dante's sacred geography, is the location of the Garden of Eden, the last cleansing stop before Paradise. Together, they watch a fully costumed procession of the Church Triumphant, with flying banners and choral hallelujahs—Dante turns to Virgil, who returns his look of amazement—culminating in a chariot carrying the long-sought Beatrice, veiled in white. Commentators often claim that Beatrice represents faith and Virgil reason; Virgil himself has warned that reason can't access the upper realms. It is Beatrice who will lead Dante there. Still, Dante is unprepared. Seeing Beatrice, he feels the rising flame of a very human love. He turns once more to tell Virgil about it—he has a quote from the Aeneid ready to convey the sensation—but Virgil is gone. And, in the Garden of Eden, where the woman he's yearned for stands before him and insists that everyone in this place is always happy, he can't stop weeping.

Dante's journey began, he tells us early on in Inferno, because the Virgin Mary wanted to save him from the dangers of the dark wood. We can't know for certain why he was singled out, but it can be inferred (from what he has a saint tell Beatrice) that the Virgin admired his poems, specifically the spiritually elevated love poems devoted to Beatrice. It is because of his art that he is led through Hell, Purgatory, and, finally, Paradise. He will see God's universe, and he will write a book that makes others see it, too. The show put on for him in the upper realm is spectacular: brilliant lights, aerial dancing, music, all spread across the moon and the planets, where he and Beatrice travel, going past the stars to God's own home in the empyrean. Dante is dazzled but, as readers have long noted, he

does not seem entirely comfortable. Spectacle is hard to make compelling in writing; so are long speeches about religion or astronomy. He prays to Apollo for inspiration, which seems theologically unsound and has tied centuries of scholars into knots. But it's Dante's lapses and struggles that infuse this rigidly triumphant final sphere with enlivening consciousness and tension. He asks too many questions: Why couldn't God forgive mankind without resorting to the Crucifixion? Why has a particular saint been chosen for a given task? One exasperated saint explains that the answers are beyond human comprehension, adding that when Dante returns to earth he should dissuade people from such questioning. This is one bit of heavenly advice he doesn't take.

Beatrice provides little of Virgil's reassuring warmth. However beautiful, she is unexpectedly stern, austere, and doctrine-driven; she's been referred to as Thomas Aquinas in drag. Given to phrases like "in my infallible opinion," she reminds Dante of a military leader. She's initially hard on him because the rules require that he confess his sinning ways—chiefly, it seems, in the matter of his interest in another woman after Beatrice's death (or possibly in other women, the Italian being judiciously unclear). But her mission has always been to keep him true to the higher path. If this devoutness doesn't come easy to him, that's the point, conveyed with surprising humor and accumulating force. By some Dantean law, Beatrice's physical beauty increases as the two move closer to God, and he can't look at anything but her. "Turn around and listen / Because Paradise isn't only in my eyes," she instructs. For Dante, though, the flesh has become the way to the spirit. His first sight of God is as a point of light reflected in those eyes.

By the time Dante began writing *Paradise*, in about 1317, he was in his early fifties and had been exiled from Florence for some fifteen years. (He'd lived for a welcome period under steady patronage in Verona but moved to Ravenna in his later years, at the invitation of its ruler.) There's reason to think that he would have further polished his final volume had he had more time, but it's also true

that his poetic energies were rooted in the imperfectly human, in the experience of daily life. At one point, he is told about his coming exile. “You will leave behind everything you love most dearly,” the prophecy begins (in Shaw’s translation):

You will experience how salty is the taste
of another man’s bread, and how hard a road it is
to go up and down another man’s stairs.

His first reaction is fear that, without a home and the protection of a government, he won’t have the courage to tell the truth about powerful figures and risk exposure to their revenge. But in Paradise he’s told he must speak anyway: “Open your mouth.” This is advice he takes. The Divine Comedy is a work of political courage, from its willing antagonism of the families of the damned who are named in Inferno to the greater targets of Paradise, where Dante clearly felt that he had nothing left to lose. Here, residents of Heaven, including Thomas Aquinas and St. Benedict, variously denounce the state of the Dominican, Franciscan, and Benedictine orders. St. Peter rails against the greed and the political intrigues of the contemporary Papacy, which have turned the Church into “a sewer of blood and stench.” The city of Florence is condemned, too: once a modest and well-mannered republic, it’s now corrupted by wealth and vulgar display. Except for Hell, it’s the place that Dante seems to hate most.

And, excepting Paradise, it’s the place he most wants to be. In a startlingly personal aside at the opening of a late canto, he speaks about the lean years he has spent writing the poem and his hopes for the completed work. He doesn’t speak of spreading knowledge of God’s magnificent and moral universe, although this has been his charge and remains an important goal. He doesn’t speak of literary immortality, although this, too, is certainly important (if covertly so, being the wrong kind of immortality). He speaks, instead, of contemporary fame, a triumph so resounding that the Florentines will publicly repent his cruel exile and ask him to

return, crowning him with laurel in the baptistery where he was christened. “I shall return a poet.”

He died in 1321, in Ravenna, and was laid to rest in a plain stone tomb. But other hopes came to pass, over the years, along with achievements and repercussions he could not have imagined.

Because of Dante, by the nineteenth century the Tuscan dialect had become the Italian language. The Popes began to claim him as their own. Politically, his thought was broad enough to be used in support of radically opposed ideas. The American abolitionist Charles Sumner cited Dante on the damnation of those who never fought for a cause; Teddy Roosevelt used the same passages to try to push the United States into the First World War. Mussolini twisted phrases from the poem to justify Fascist racial laws. For a man of his era—always a worrisome qualification—Dante seems remarkably free of prejudice against the Jewish people and religion, and there is a panoply of Old Testament figures in Paradise. He was harder on the Muslim religion, which he regarded as a schismatic breakaway from Christianity, a medieval position used by recent right-wing Italian politicians to champion a purely Christian Italian state. Bang, in her introduction to *Paradiso*, points to Dante’s political relevance in our own country at a time when partisan warfare is as destructive as in the era he decried. Politics may be as good a way as any to enter the poem. Come for the corrupt politicians boiling in pitch; stay for the poetry and the spellbinding stories.

Among the newly arrived souls on the shores of Purgatory, Dante meets another old friend, a musician, who greets him eagerly. No population numbers have been recorded, but it seems the middling souls consigned to pass through this place must make up the majority of human beings, we who regret our worst habits but not quite enough to change them before time runs out. Dante, fresh from Hell and feeling low, asks if his friend would be able to sing one of the love songs that used to soothe him. (No one seems to know the rules, yet; what’s allowed, how long the wait, how much

pain one has earned.) In response, the man begins to sing a poem of Dante's, with such ease that it seems he must have set it back at home. His voice is exceptionally sweet. And until the guard comes along, yelling and hurrying everybody on, we forget where we are, and there is nothing but the song. ♦

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/dante-the-essential-commedia-prue-shaw-book-review>

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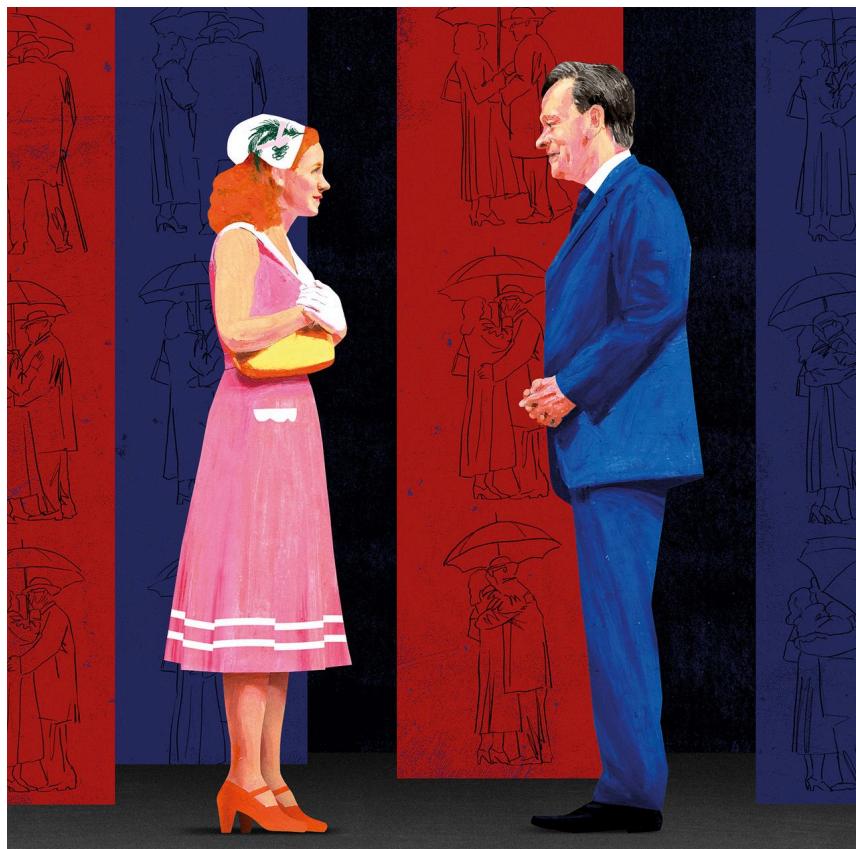
[The Theatre](#)

“This World of Tomorrow” and “Oedipus” Dramatize the Power of the Past

Tom Hanks plays a time-travelling tech titan, and Mark Strong and Lesley Manville star in a modern tragedy.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

November 20, 2025



*Kelli O’Hara and Hanks star as a couple who meet at the 1939 World’s Fair.
Illustration by Diego Mallo*

In “This World of Tomorrow,” a nostalgic time-travel romance by Tom Hanks and James Glossman, now at the Shed, the Oscar-winning actor (and novice playwright) plays Bert Allenberry, a tech titan dissatisfied with life in 2089. You can’t blame him: even though his existence looks glossy and smooth, every scene set in the future takes place in an office of some kind—“working remotely” must not have survived the sixth extinction.

We actually meet Bert and his girlfriend, Cyndee (Kerry Bishé), in the past, as they amble around the 1939 World's Fair, in Queens, which is represented by gliding L.E.D. columns showing pixelated images of, for example, the Lagoon of Nations. (Derek McLane designed both the set and the projections.) Bert's a boss with vague crises on his hands—he's worried about "Newtonian sequencing" and the "roadblock on our Vox-PAC." To help him unwind, thoughtful Cyndee has bought them a quarter-billion-dollar getaway from a boutique firm that can send super-wealthy tourists to a narrow slice of the past: a few hours in New York on June 8, 1939.

On Bert's first trip, he is transfixed by a gee-whiz sentence he hears on a ride: "The present is but an instant between an infinite past and a hurrying future." When Bert and Cyndee return to work in 2089—Cyndee is also Bert's top executive—he repeats the line to his business partner, M-Dash (Ruben Santiago-Hudson). A *hurrying future*. Bert *loves* that idea. Enchanted by the technologist optimism of the World's Fair, Bert returns, several times, alone. On each visit, he meets a local, the beautiful, quietly melancholy Carmen (Kelli O'Hara), and Cyndee is soon forgotten.

Since Bert observes the events of June 8th more than once, he learns exactly how to approach Carmen—by appealing to her precocious twelve-year-old niece (Kayli Carter). This behavior might seem creepy in a man without Hanks's courtly charm. Hanks, easy onstage, maintains the kind, sorrowful, listening quality that makes him riveting onscreen, but there's still something amiss in casting him as a lion of industry surprised by love. He and the exquisite O'Hara, who is twenty years younger and cool as three cucumbers, don't have much in the way of chemistry. (Both actors are so unmodern and elegant that at least they help us remember couples—Bogie and Bacall! Grant and Kerr!—who did.)

Hanks and Glossman borrowed the “hurrying future” line from a real General Motors attraction at the 1964 World’s Fair; the playwright Edward Reveaux wrote it for the voice-over in the *Futurama II* ride, a sort of showcase of predicted technologies. In other ways, too, the production seems like it was found in an archive rather than made today—the director, Kenny Leon, uses cinematic, old-timey underscoring (Justin Ellington did the sound design); the gender politics can be a little retro (why is Cyndee always bringing Bert coffee?); and then there’s the anachronistic lead himself. The plot certainly has plenty of Hollywood precedents, from “Somewhere in Time” to various episodes of “Star Trek”; as a theatre piece, it recalls the boulevard romances of the nineteen-twenties. But “This World of Tomorrow” is not a classic—it’s a clunker. The futuro jargon (“I’m continuing a system over-lay on the Inner-Structurals with no conclusions”) forms the worst of it, though the direction and the structure, too, are fatally clumsy.

To write “Tomorrow,” Hanks and Glossman adapted several of Hanks’s own short stories, primarily “The Past Is Important to Us,” which he had long hoped might become a movie. Much of the trouble stems from confusion about how a stage text needs to differ from a screenplay—in the number of locations, the allocation of secondary characters, and so on. And, frankly, Bert just isn’t a good enough part for Hanks. Ever since my afternoon at the Shed, I’ve been mentally casting him elsewhere. We should see his Stage Manager in “Our Town.” Or his Willy Loman.

I do recommend that short story, though, which provides some insight into the odd disjunctions of “Tomorrow.” It makes clear that billionaire Bert is a billionaire *cad* and that he’s concealing the reason for his trips from Cyndee—in the story, she’s his wife, the “fourth and youngest.” Bert’s sudden interest in Carmen seems like an intoxication with a shiny new thing, mirrored by the way the World’s Fair actually operates as a pageant of commodities. In casting the palpably lovable and decent Hanks, the team had to

pivot to a Bert who's also lovable and decent, but a whiff of that selfish ur-Bert from the story remains. "Their Future *then* was better than our Present is right now," Bert tells M-Dash, which is a heck of a thing to say about people in 1939. But Bert's got a girl to woo, and so the world—this poor, poor world—will have to take care of itself.

There's something almost Oedipal about the devotion that certain men have to women from the past. Is it notable that Bert is falling in love with a woman of a previous generation? What an undemanding fantasy Carmen is: an old-fashioned Greatest Generation stoic who's also young and has never heard of women's lib. What would Freud say about such a relationship? It's a puzzle. How lucky, then, that we can consult the mother of all such May-December romances, now that this fall's biggest transfer from the West End has arrived at Studio 54.

In Robert Icke's crackling "Oedipus," the director's rewrite of Sophocles' great tragedy, the bones remain the same: a prophecy tells Oedipus (Mark Strong), who seems to be a man of nearly boundless good fortune, that he has unknowingly killed his father and slept with his mother. In Icke's modern version, Oedipus is a candidate on Election Night, on tenterhooks as promising results pour in. Throughout, Icke ramps up the erotic energy between Oedipus and his queen—here political wife—Jocasta (Lesley Manville), even a little past the point of the romance-killing revelation that she's his mum. (You can buy merch in the lobby that says "Truth Is a Motherfucker," in case you were worrying about spoilers.)

Oedipus' *nox horribilis* takes place in his campaign headquarters—a series of impersonal white conference rooms designed by Hildegard Bechtler—as black-clad movers clean it out for the next tenant. (Icke draws attention to tragedy's cyclical nature; every ending is a beginning is an ending.) As the stage empties, Oedipus' family gathers to take his mind off the ballot returns: his wife

makes jokes about being roughly thirteen years older than he is; his daughter Antigone (Olivia Reis) brings her college-philosophy textbook with her, and she and her uncle Creon (John Carroll Lynch) discuss the riddle of the Sphinx; and Oedipus' apparent mother, Merope (a stunning Anne Reid), keeps badgering him for a word, worried about his last-minute campaign promise to reveal his birth certificate.

Meanwhile, a countdown clock in the background ticks toward the instant when the votes will be tabulated. In a marvellous bit of directorial peacocking, at the precise moment the clock hits 00:00:00, Oedipus finally learns everything he needs to know.

Strong, whose big-hearted Oedipus flashes into aggrieved petulance whenever he meets with even the slightest opposition, tightens his jaw to the cracking point, and this ought to be foreshadowing enough. But Icke cannot stop himself from alerting us to his script's cleverness by including a host of double entendres—"You'll be the death of me," Jocasta says, looking up at her husband adoringly—and flirting with the border between horror and farce. Icke's sensibility is defiantly icky: he has the accidentally incestuous couple fondle and kiss and fumble in each other's underwear. He does, though, eventually redirect the night back toward a more sincerely felt atmosphere of tragedy, handing an eleventh-hour monologue to Manville, who gives a long speech about a past that Jocasta hoped to have buried with a certain baby. Icke destabilizes the old Sophoclean calculus: what happened to Jocasta as a thirteen-year-old far surpasses anything that Oedipus will suffer. But, of course, it's his name up there on the marquee. Mothers never get the credit they deserve. ♦

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/this-world-of-tomorrow-theatre-review-oedipus-broadway>

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[On Television](#)

The Obliging Apocalypse of “Pluribus”

The new sci-fi drama from Vince Gilligan posits an end-of-humanity scenario that everyone other than its protagonist can agree on.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)

November 22, 2025



Even before her fellow-humans' contamination, Carol didn't seem to have much use for them.

Illustration by Agata Nowicka

Civilization outlasts humanity in the new sci-fi drama “Pluribus.” On the night that the world as we know it is destroyed, a novelist named Carol Sturka (played by Rhea Seehorn) sees cars and planes veer off course, an emergency room full of convulsing bodies, and her city, Albuquerque, on fire. The President dies under mysterious circumstances, and, more devastatingly for Carol, so does her live-in partner, Helen (Miriam Shor). Then, in less than an hour, the

apocalypse cleans up after itself. People stop convulsing. They put out the fires. Granted, they've been hijacked by an extraterrestrial virus—but, when they move to retrieve Helen's body and Carol tearfully protests, they listen. "We just want to help, Carol," they say, in unison. Not since "The Twilight Zone," when aliens arrived promising "to serve man," have the end times come in such obliging fashion.

"*Pluribus*" is Vince Gilligan's much anticipated follow-up to "*Breaking Bad*" and "*Better Call Saul*," in which Seehorn co-starred as the straitlaced lawyer Kim Wexler. The new series shares other elements with its predecessors, including the New Mexico backdrop, but for longtime Gilligan fans like myself it feels more like a callback to his first TV job, as a writer and eventual executive producer on the paranormal procedural "*The X-Files*." That show, which centered on the F.B.I. agents Mulder and Scully's investigations of unexplained phenomena, first revealed Gilligan's preoccupation and playfulness with notions of order and chaos. He made his directorial début with the episode "*Je Souhaite*," in which Mulder stumbles upon a genie and dutifully wishes for world peace —only for the smirking spirit to wipe out mankind. "*Pluribus*" turns on a version of the same trade-off: the destruction of our species, however ruinous for Carol, might just be the best thing for the rest of the planet.

As we learn in Episode 2, nearly a billion people died on the same day Helen did. Those who survived—all except Carol and a dozen others scattered around the globe—have been integrated into a single being, bound by a "psychic glue" that allows unfettered access to the thoughts and memories of the entire collective. When Carol speaks to anyone with the virus, she is technically speaking to pretty much everyone else on Earth. The word "I" approaches extinction, since the mass speaks as a "we." They differentiate themselves only for her comfort, beginning interactions with a cheerful download on the host she's addressing: "This individual went by Lawrence J. Kless, or Larry." Though Carol appears

inexplicably immune, they're amiable and keen to bring her into the fold as soon as they can figure out how. Their Stepford smiles take her back to the last time she was surrounded by upbeat strangers bent on changing her—as a teen-ager at a conversion camp. But her new keepers are welcoming of all sexualities; an uninfected Mauritian man named Koumba (Samba Schutte) notes that racism is also a nonissue. Carol's reflexive resistance in the face of a peaceful, practically frictionless society becomes the animating principle of the show: What if everyone else's paradise is your personal hell?

Even before her fellow-humans' contamination, Carol didn't seem to have much use for them. She spent her days churning out best-selling romances that she deemed "mindless crap" and harbored a corresponding contempt for her fans, hiding both her queerness and her more serious literary ambitions in a bid for broader appeal. A certified misanthrope, she makes no attempt to check in on friends or family after the initial catastrophe; Helen aside, it's not clear whether she has any. Most of the other survivors she meets have a loved one or two in tow—though it's hard to say how close those relatives are to their pre-viral selves—and a surprising openness to the new normal. Carol is assigned a liaison from the hive mind, Zosia (Karolina Wydra), an unfailingly polite and stubbornly uninteresting woman who uses the wealth of information at her disposal to try to mollify her unhappy charge.

In the early episodes, the mass is a potent metaphor for artificial intelligence. It is destructive but solicitous, well informed but dumb as hell. When Carol sarcastically tells Zosia that the only thing that would improve her situation is a grenade in her hand, they have one delivered to her home forthwith. Ever eager to please, they tell Carol that her writing and Shakespeare's are "equally wonderful." And they're just as happy to comply with baser desires. Koumba uses them like a concierge service, commandeering Air Force One to jet-set around the world, waited on all the while by a retinue of

babes in leopard print. Zosia says that they don't mind his sleaze: "For us, affection is always welcome." Gilligan has said that the show was conceived about a decade ago, before A.I. became a widely adopted consumer technology. Still, the end credits state, pointedly, "This show was made by humans."

Millions of offscreen casualties aside, it's clear that Gilligan is aiming for a lighter—and stranger—outing than his two previous series. (For all that "Pluribus" delights in eerie atmospherics, the Southwestern sunniness keeps things from getting too dark.) The uncanny scenarios he conjures are a source of humor, intrigue, and genuine unease. But the show never adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Carol makes for a maddeningly tunnel-visioned protagonist—one with a shocking lack of curiosity about the entity that's overtaken the Earth, or even about what the infected do all day when they're not offering to cater to her whims. Her one-note sullenness means that Seehorn, who was heartbreaking as the repressed Kim on "Saul," is squandered as the lead of her own show. The contentment and coöperativeness of the hive mind are similarly tough to dramatize.

The invaders' "biological imperative" to absorb everything around them is "Pluribus'" chief source of tension: Will Carol, who takes stabs at defiance but has none of the requisite skills, find a cure before she's subsumed? But the "joining," as Zosia calls it, could take weeks or even months, and the lack of narrative urgency is intensified by drawn-out sequences of time-consuming toil. In the pilot, Carol struggles to load Helen's collapsed body onto a truck bed to take her to the hospital; later, it's another arduous undertaking to dig a hole deep enough to bury her in their back yard. Such displays of trial and error were a revelation on "Breaking Bad," when Walter White's flailing sold the challenges that he faced in transforming himself from an unassuming chemistry teacher into a ruthless drug lord. (No one just *knows* how to get rid of a dead body.) On the new show, Carol, facing down layers of volcanic rock and a likely case of heatstroke, eventually

has to accept Zosia's help with Helen's burial. The concession should feel significant, not least because Zosia was sent by the collective for her resemblance to the love interest in Carol's novels: a fantasy to replace the real woman she'd lost. Yet Seehorn and Wydra's interactions are more stilted than charged.

I'm aware that this is the kind of series we should feel lucky to have at this disheartening juncture in television. One of the medium's great auteurs has created something wholly original and impressively unpredictable, with the mass gradually revealing vulnerabilities that feel truly unique in science fiction. But its otherworldliness also means that the show has difficulty developing Carol's relationship with Zosia—or anyone else—in a meaningful way. As the nine-part season chugs along, the entity becomes less of a character than a puzzle to solve. The A.I. analogy gives way to something much less satisfying: a horror story about what their version of living in harmony would really entail. Carol, blinkered though she may be, could have called that from the start. As she groused at the outset, "Nobody sane is that happy." ♦

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/pluribus-tv-review-apple-tv>

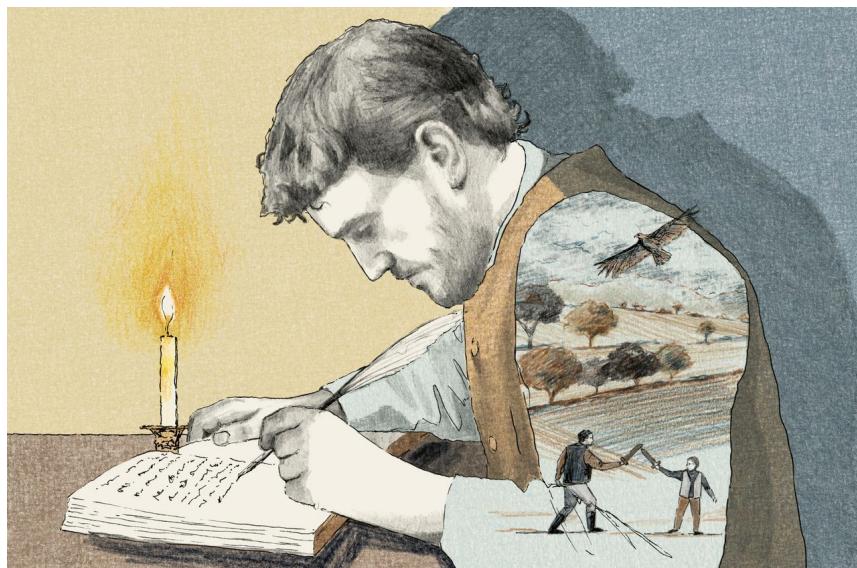
[The Current Cinema](#)

“Hamnet” Feels Elemental, but Is It Just Highly Effective Grief Porn?

In Chloé Zhao’s film, adapted from Maggie O’Farrell’s novel, the death of a child gives rise to the creation of a literary masterpiece.

By [Justin Chang](#)

November 21, 2025



Paul Mescal plays a grief-stricken Shakespeare in Chloé Zhao’s film.

Illustration by Zoë Barker

Two families, unconcerned with dignity. The Hathaways are farmers, in the English county of Warwickshire, with close ties to the land—some would say too close, at least in the case of Agnes, a young woman so eccentrically at one with nature that she is rumored to have been born of a forest witch. The Shakespeares are led by a glover, whose business has seen better days. His eldest son—William, of course, though he is not immediately identified as such—defrays his father’s debts by tutoring Agnes’s younger brothers in Latin, an arrangement that begets many reversals of fortune. Agnes and William fall in love; conceive a daughter, named Susanna; and marry, over the protests of their families. A few years later, Agnes bears twins, Hamnet and Judith, introducing

a note of dread: Agnes's dreams have shown two children, not three, standing at her deathbed. In more than one sense, the stage is set for tragedy.

What's in a name? Plenty. At the beginning of "Hamnet," a tempest of a movie from the director Chloé Zhao, we're told that, in sixteenth-century England, the monikers Hamlet and Hamnet were used interchangeably. The premise of the film—and of Maggie O'Farrell's novel of the same title, published in 2020—is that, after his son's death, in 1596, Shakespeare wrote "Hamlet" in a burst of raw, unexpurgated grief. It's a notion made for scholarly dispute: several other plays, including two comedies, "Much Ado About Nothing" and "As You Like It," came between the death of Hamnet and the creation of "Hamlet." Still, loss hews to no temporal logic but its own, and it would be foolish to hold O'Farrell's unabashed historical fantasy to a persnickety standard. The more trenchant critique, surely, is that the entwining of art and life has become a tiresome conceit, predicated on the bland notion that all great fiction must have an autobiographical component and a therapeutic aim.

Zhao's "Hamnet" does not exactly scrape the mold off these clichés, and that is fine and even fitting. If there be fungus of any kind, you can rest assured that the earthy Agnes (Jessie Buckley) will find a use for it. We first see her in a forest, curled up between the roots of a tree. Rising, she strides through the woods with a hawk on her arm and various mugwort-based remedies committed to memory. There has always been a native wildness to Buckley; in the psychological thriller "Beast" (2017), she was a creature of the Jersey coast, feral, urchinlike, perpetually smeared with mud. Here, she cuts a more serene woodland figure—pale of skin, dark of hair, and clad in rusty browns and reds. No wonder that, returning to her family's farmhouse, she immediately transfixes William (Paul Mescal), the Latin tutor, who spies this vision of freedom and loveliness from an upstairs window and looks boxed in by comparison. Zhao emphasizes his entrapment, shooting him

through glass—a studied choice, but one that contextualizes her interest in this particular story. Agnes, in her matter-of-fact harmony with the natural world, is like an Elizabethan ancestor of Zhao’s contemporary American protagonists: the melancholy Lakota horsemen of “Songs My Brothers Taught Me” (2016), a restless widow cast adrift in “Nomadland” (2020). The bookish William, meanwhile, is also recognizably a Zhao construct: as a new husband and father, struggling to write a play by candlelight, he is possessed by a stubborn sense of his vocation. No less than the gravely injured cowboy hero of “The Rider” (2017), brazenly chasing his rodeo dreams, William must do what he was born to do.

Zhao’s first three features were steeped in documentary realism, shot with a sturdy, windswept lyricism and abounding in nonprofessional actors. Then came her fourth picture, the clunky Marvel comic-book epic “Eternals” (2021)—a noble but self-evident failure, in which she channelled the visual and spiritual reveries of Terrence Malick, a longtime influence, in a vain attempt to transcend superhero-movie conventions. “Hamnet” is, inevitably, an improvement, though not exactly a return to form. It marks an unstable new mode for Zhao, a weave of subdued pastoral realism and forceful, sometimes pushy emotionalism. The movie whispers poetic sublimities in your ear one minute and tosses its prestige ambitions in your face the next.

The whiplash is disorienting, but, somewhat paradoxically, the characters’ romantic upheaval provides its own center of gravity. You are propelled alongside them as Agnes, sensing William’s creative and professional frustrations, packs him off to London to follow his dreams, hastening the pair’s descent into marital discontent and parental grief. Buckley is every inch the requisite force of nature, heaving and sweating up a storm as Agnes wrenches her children into this world, and moving swiftly from anguish to rage—a drained, defeated anger—as one of those children is yanked back out of it. Buckley and Mescal, both Irish

and both bountifully gifted, have done quieter, subtler work elsewhere, though I can't say that their histrionics miss the mark. What is "Hamnet," or "Hamlet," without a little ham?

O'Farrell's novel is subtitled "A Novel of the Plague." Its most gripping, least typical chapter describes an outbreak in breathlessly suspenseful detail, tracking the contagion from Alexandria, where a shipworker has a fateful encounter with a monkey's fleas, all the way to England and, eventually, the Shakespeares' doorstep. It's no surprise that the film dispenses with this; its focus is on the domestic claustrophobia that William escapes and Agnes sacrificially endures. Agnes finds some comfort from her supportive brother Bartholomew (Joe Alwyn) and, in time, her mother-in-law, Mary (Emily Watson), who initially disapproves of Agnes but comes around to a grudging respect, rooted in shared experiences of drudgery and loss. This is Zhao's first collaboration with the Polish cinematographer Łukasz Żal, who, in the Holocaust drama "The Zone of Interest" (2023), used an array of small hidden cameras to suggest the daily, routinized horrors of a Nazi family. "Hamnet" attempts nothing so technically virtuosic or historically queasy, and yet a not dissimilar air of home surveillance persists. Indoors, the Shakespeares are often shot unnaturally head on or in high-angled panoramas that diminish their stature. We could be studying them under glass.

Such intensity of focus may also explain why Zhao and O'Farrell have jettisoned the novel's nonsequential narrative structure, which shuttles, quite intricately, between two parallel time frames. The film, by contrast, moves cleanly from start to finish, forgoing any impulse toward Malickian nonlinearity. Even so, Zhao remains vividly under the spell of Malick the image-maker, and also Malick the intimate observer of the everyday. She has a great eye for sunlight, especially when filtered through a woodsy canopy of green, and in the family's happier moments she's exquisitely attentive to the joyful chaos of Hamnet (Jacobi Jupe) and Judith (Olivia Lynes) at play. At one point, the kids pretend to be the

Weird Sisters. Their father may be a fitful presence at home, but his work already has them under its spell.

But not Agnes. When Hamnet is gone, she increasingly resents her husband's absences. This manifests itself not in fits of fury but in a silent indifference to the work that keeps William away, and we sense that "Hamnet" means to deliver a feminist corrective to the myth of male genius. But it's a halfhearted rebuke; the movie does, in the end, give that genius its due, and with a compensatory haste that occasionally throws Mescal's performance off balance. During rehearsals, the distracted, tormented playwright forces a young star (Noah Jupe) to run his lines ragged; later, strolling moodily along the Thames, William adopts Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" soliloquy as his own. The play's clearly still the thing, but its invocations here seem facile in the face of a father's grief.

Shakespeare's creation comes to life more effectively onstage, and with Agnes there to witness it. Until now, she has avoided the Globe like, well, the plague, and the mere act of theatregoing strikes her as alien. There's a comic aspect to her confusion—chronic shushers will be triggered to the point of distraction—which only reveals the utterly guileless depth of Buckley's absorption in the role. Agnes's nescience encourages us to see "Hamlet"—staged here on a forest set that takes us back to the film's Edenic beginning—through fresh eyes. My own, I confess, were soon blurred by tears, brought on with such diluvial force as to both quench my skepticism and reawaken it. There is, for starters, the shameless deployment of Max Richter's "On the Nature of Daylight," a lush track that, from "Shutter Island" (2010) to "Arrival" (2016), has grown hoary with overuse. There is, too, the inherent kitsch in reducing one of the richest, most intellectually prismatic works in English literature to an instrument of healing. "Hamlet" has been many things for many centuries; here, it is chiefly the vessel for a parent's closure. The rigor of the text melts, thaws—and resolves itself into adieu. ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/hamnet-movie-review>

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“Do you still receive letters from the dead?”

- **“The terrible various”**

“This was the nature / of her humor.”

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Letter in April

By [Marie T. Martin](#)

November 24, 2025

Do you still receive letters from the dead? I'm writing you in the year after your death—without eyes, what do you see? Here, the blue bean shrub and glimmerweed grow, later revealing themselves, which sentences would have been important. Do you still write letters, I'm writing to myself the year I was born, a painted scroll unfurled in a parking lot, the calligraphy of tires. Have you gotten older, does the passing subway car see you, does the maple tree hold you in between? Promise me you'll stay awake, promise me a speech for the soul in an arrangement of white hawthorn and juniper. Promise me you'll wake. Promise me never to leave you.

—*Marie T. Martin (1982-2021)*

(Translated, from the German, by Kathleen Heil.)

Marie T. Martin, who died in 2021, was a writer of poetry, prose, and radio plays. “[Der Winter dauerte 24 Jahre](#),” a volume of her collected works, was published, in the original German, in 2024.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/letter-in-april-marie-t-martin-poem>

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The terrible various

By [Diane Seuss](#)

November 24, 2025

blossoming of
the trees she said

to herself
sloshing unshod

through the snow
water.

This was the nature
of her humor,

the wilderness
she aspired to.

Mostly it was a way
of seeing that did

not resort to sentence-
making. Note

the religious poses
of roadkill, for

instance,
at the instant

of their deaths most
terribly

holy and so to walk
the roads was

tantamount
to sloshing through

the gas stations
of the cross.

This is drawn from “Althea: Poems.”

Diane Seuss is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets. Her books include “Modern Poetry” and “frank: sonnets,” which received the 2022 Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2025/12/01/the-terrible-various-diane-seuss-poem>

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Today's theme: A place so nice . . .

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, November 24, 2025

Today's theme: A place so nice . . .



By [Will Nediger](#)

November 24, 2025

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[Will Nediger](#) is a crossword constructor from London, Ontario, who publishes puzzles independently under the name *Bewilderingly*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/puzzles-and-games-dept/crossword/2025/11/24>