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THE

APRIL 15, 2024

# THE NEW YORKER



# The New Yorker Magazine

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April 5, 2024

**Alex Barasch**

Culture editor

*You're reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. **Sign up to receive it in your in-box.***

**When I was a teen-ager**, the discovery of Anthony Minghella's "**The Talented Mr. Ripley**"—a 1999 adaptation of the Patricia Highsmith novel of the same name—left an indelible imprint on my brain. The charge between Jude Law's Dickie Greenleaf, a wealthy layabout who's decamped to Italy against his father's wishes, and Matt Damon's Tom Ripley, the eponymous, possibly sociopathic striver dispatched to bring him home, was unlike anything I'd yet seen on screen. The glamour of the Amalfi Coast, Dickie's impeccable tailoring, and the aim of Tom's deceptions—insinuating himself into Dickie's life and ultimately taking it, in more ways than one—made for a satisfying thriller with a rare sense of style. The ensuing forgeries, manipulations, and murders were, yes, significantly less aspirational than the clothes. But both the film and the Ripley novels I went on to devour understood the inherent appeal of a swindler who carries it off.



*Andrew Scott in “Ripley.”*  
Photograph by Lorenzo Sisti / Netflix

Now, it seems, such machinations are back in vogue: **“Purple Noon,”** René Clément’s deeply pleasurable riff on Highsmith, from 1960, is among the Alain Delon movies playing at Film Forum this month, and Steven Zaillian’s **“Ripley,”** out this week on Netflix, is the latest attempt to mine the books for something new. Andrew Scott, who stars as Tom, is one of our great living actors: witness his performance as the Priest in the second season of **“Fleabag,”** a perfect piece of television, and his one-man **“Vanya,”** a remarkable testament to his range, now in limited theatrical release in the U.S. Both are deft, often funny explorations of repressed or otherwise thwarted desire. **“Ripley,”** by contrast, is determinedly dour. The eight-part series forces viewers to feel the effort of every act, such that the sight of Tom tromping up and down stairs becomes a recurring motif: Zaillian seems more concerned with the stultifying logistics of Tom’s crimes than the rush of getting away with them. We see neither the seductiveness of Dickie’s position nor the complexities of his and Tom’s bond; the show is suffused with an air of paranoia and malice even before things start to go awry. The black-and-white cinematography and the heavy-handed allusions to Caravaggio—another killer on the run in Italy, albeit several centuries prior—only intensify the pretension. It’s a reasonably faithful adaptation in terms of plot—but, as Ripley himself knows,

if the intent is to win over your audience, the way you tell the story is more important than fidelity to the facts.

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## Spotlight



*Photograph courtesy Jamie Livingston estate*

### Classical Music

Jamie Livingston started “Some Photos of That Day,” a diary of daily Polaroids, when he was a student at Bard College, in 1979. For eighteen years, until his death, at the age of forty-one, he took a single snapshot each day—self-portraits, urban landscapes, candids with friends—long before Instagram made such documentation de rigueur and Merriam-Webster added “selfie” to its dictionary. The composer Luna Pearl Woolf and the librettist David Van Taylor structure **“Number Our Days: A Photographic Oratorio,”** a three-act piece inspired by Livingston’s project, as recollections from his friends in reverential, redolent, or bristly modes. The

première of the multimedia production, performed by the Choir of Trinity Wall Street and the *NOVUS NY* orchestra and directed by Ty Defoe, weaves vocal solos and choral commentary with projections of the Polaroids, like this one from October 28, 1983.—*Oussama Zahr* (PAC NYC; April 12-14.)

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## About Town

### Photography

Nobody photographed young women the way that **Francesca Woodman** did. The suppler she made their flesh look, the more ancient the aura. Sometimes she would shoot herself in poses that recalled Greek sculpture, or she'd pair naked bodies, often blurred or half-covered, with moldy buildings or squalid rooms. Her career ended, along with her life, before it had really gotten started—she killed herself at age twenty-two—and there is something mesmerizingly incomplete about the images she left behind. No single Woodman photograph is the best one; they all scrape the sides of some uncontrollable wildness. One of her friends called her “the kind of person you either loved or hated.” I’ll never meet her, but I love her.—*Jackson Arn* (Gagosian; through April 27.)

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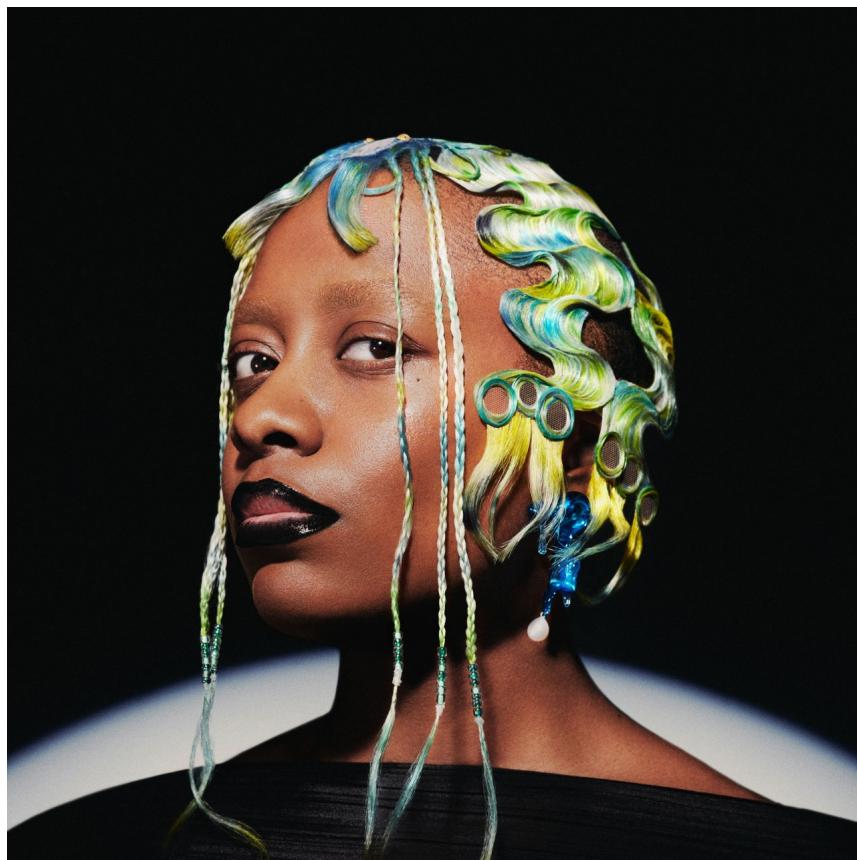
### Off Broadway

The Irish Rep’s Brian Friel season continues with a tender rendition of Friel’s “**Philadelphia, Here I Come!**,” from 1964, in which a young Irishman named Gar (David McElwee) and his inner self (A. J. Shively) while away the evening before Gar leaves for America. As the personification of Gar’s private mind—invisible to

his rigid father (Ciarán O'Reilly, also directing) and his already lost friends—Shively cracks jokes and capers gracefully, as reticent, real-world Gar tries to verify a few slippery recollections to take abroad. He's desperate to corroborate a particular memory he has of fishing as a boy, and this note-perfect production insures that we remember it for him: the piece's descriptive power leaves us feeling a swell of long-ago lake water, rolling cold under a dinghy's keel.—*Helen Shaw (Irish Repertory Theatre; through May 5.)*

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## Jazz



Photograph by Karolis Kaminskas

The jazz vocalist **Cécile McLorin Salvant** is among the most celebrated performers of the past fifteen years with the keen imagination to match a penetrating voice. Her work spans cabaret, show tunes, standards, and vaudeville, interpreting everything from Leonard Bernstein to Kate Bush, and she is often in conversation with the past—most recently on the 2023 album “Mélusine,” which uses folklore to probe a cross-cultural existence and includes lyrics

in French, English, Occitan, and Creole. In a world première of 92NY's hundred-and-fiftieth-anniversary commission "Book of Ayres," Salvant continues this conversation, learning from the influences of her influences, as she puts it, in pursuit of a new appreciation for folk songs that center her voice as a timeless instrument. Improvisers playing flute, synthesizers, theorbo, lute, harpsichord, bass, and percussion join the singer in a sweeping exploration of language and tradition.—*Sheldon Pearce* (92NY; April 13.)

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## Dance

In its fifty-fifth year, **Dance Theatre of Harlem** is looking good, fully recovered after a kind of midlife crisis. Robert Garland, its longtime resident choreographer, has become artistic director, and the programming for his first New York season is a snapshot of the company today. There's "Pas de Dix," a classical showpiece by George Balanchine, the troupe's godfather and Garland's lodestar, and there's Garland's own "Nyman String Quartet No. 2," which juxtaposes Balanchinian clarity with Harlem slang and swagger. In William Forsythe's "Blake Works IV," the dancers display their technique and sexiness to the falsetto brooding in songs by James Blake. And with the company première of "Take Me with You," by the Polish choreographer Robert Bondara, Garland suggests his taste in imports.—*Brian Seibert* (*City Center*; April 11-14.)

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## Photography



Photograph by Gordon Parks / Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

Gordon Parks became a staff photojournalist for *Life* magazine in 1948. In the quarter century that followed, he photographed Watts and Harlem, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Eldridge Cleaver and Stokely Carmichael. “**Gordon Parks: Born Black**” assembles some of his most striking images from these years. Though his crowd scenes have power and insight to spare, Parks may have been at his best in carefully balanced portraits of Black leaders staring down his camera: Ethel Sharrieff with the women’s corps of the Black Muslim movement, Cleaver and his wife almost melting the lens with their gazes. The exception that proves the rule is Muhammad Ali—even when shot in silhouetted profile, he’s

somehow looking straight at you.—J.A. (*Jack Shainman; through April 20.*)

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## Off Broadway

The 1st Irish Festival, presenting Irish and Irish-diaspora works across the city, includes the majestic solo show “**King**,” a Fishamble production visiting from Dublin, written by and starring Pat Kinevane and directed by Jim Cullen. We meet the mentally fragile Cork resident Luther—“the fists of me heart grips the bars of me ribs,” he says about going out in public—whose expressive outlets include nicking the census-taker’s notebook (Luther loves local gossip) and impersonating Elvis at karaoke. Kinevane is big, with a wrestler’s head and a boxer’s shoulders, and his particular gift lies in fracturing his character’s illusion and then putting it back together. He flirts sweetly with the audience, even as Luther confesses to great sadness, and occasionally takes odd, volcanic pauses, stopping his own monologue to give a whispering, fiery roar.—H.S. (*59E59; through April 14.*)

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## Movies

In the nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, one of New York’s main cinephile hives was the Kim’s Video store on St. Mark’s Place, where many notable future independent filmmakers worked, and where the owner, Yongman Kim, maintained a vast collection of some fifty thousand VHS tapes, including bootlegs of officially unavailable classics. Ashley Sabin and David Redmon’s fascinating documentary “**Kim’s Video**” details the store’s place in the city’s social and artistic life as well as its closing, in 2009: finding no other takers for the collection, Kim donated it to a small town in Sicily that had big plans for it. Redmon’s effort to repatriate it turns this historical documentary into a political thriller and an astounding hands-on heist film. (Much of the collection is

now available to rent at Alamo Drafthouse, in downtown Manhattan.)—*Richard Brody* (*In theatrical release.*)

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## Television

The latest project from Jerrod Carmichael—who publicly came out in his Emmy-winning 2022 standup special, “Rothaniel”—is the eight-part docuseries **“Jerrod Carmichael Reality Show,”** a startlingly open invitation into his post-closet life. The program, which features the hard-bodied comic in various states of undress, is a credit to exhibitionism. Carmichael has HBO’s cameras capture his day-to-day as he attempts to reconcile where he came from (a working-class, religious Black family in North Carolina) with who he aspires to be (a more considerate friend and partner, a son able to bridge the rift caused by his parents’ homophobia). Carmichael’s faith in the camera as a tool for frankness isn’t exactly persuasive; he says that it’s “dumb to lie” in front of a mechanical eye, then proceeds to do so more than once. But it may well work for him as an accountability aid, forcing him to have difficult conversations that he might otherwise avoid.—*Inkoo Kang* (*Reviewed on 3/29/24.*)

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

- [Bill Nye on the solar eclipse](#)
  - [“Spring” by Mary Oliver](#)
  - [A childhood spent at the Playboy Mansion](#)
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[Tables for Two](#)

## Hyper-Telegenic Noodles, at Okiboru House of Udon

*The beguilingly wide Himokawa udon noodles at this new East Village spot are already famous, thanks to fervent foodie TikTokers.*

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

April 5, 2024



*Himokawa udon noodles are sleek, slippery, and impervious to even the most patient engagement with chopsticks.*

*Photographs by Scott Semler for The New Yorker*

Even if you have trouble spotting Okiboru House of Udon's nondescript shopfront, chances are you won't miss the line winding halfway down the restaurant's East Village block. Okiboru doesn't take reservations or permit takeout—a prudent move, considering its cozy quarters (eighteen slender counter seats) and the fact that hype is a potent currency among its most fervent publicists, foodie TikTokers who know a ribbon of hyper-telegenic noodle when they see one.



*The Himokawa udon also comes in a hot soup, with applewood-smoked bacon tempura.*

If you are lucky enough to be ushered in (an aspiring diner in line told me he had been waiting for forty-five minutes), you may be tempted to start filming the moment you are seated. Three seconds is all it would take to capture and upload footage of the Altoid-like tablet that majestically blooms into a warm hand towel as soon as it is deposited in water. In three more, you can peruse the entirety of the menu, made up of three items (and one vegan alternative).

The signature dish here is the cold Himokawa udon. Served in a ceramic ring bowl that echoes in shape an oversized ring light that your fellow diner-cum-microinfluencer might use to document the blow-by-blow of ingestion, the noodles are beguilingly wide Möbius strips of silk: sleek, slippery, and impervious to even the most patient engagement with chopsticks. I recommend taking a bite with the readily supplied tongs (don't be cocky) before dunking it in the dipping sauce, not because the sauce isn't good (though it's a smidge too salty for my taste, it clings pleasingly to the noodles) but because the diaphanous, bouncy streamers of wheat are best slurped without distraction.



*Matcha-flavored dipping udon are traditionally shaped, with a slow unfurling of texture and flavor.*

“It’s New York City, how many times do you get to be surprised by food?” Justin Lim, Okiboru’s fifty-three-year-old co-owner said to me. A hankering for novelty had led him and his partner, Naoki Kyobashi, to establish an earlier Okiboru enterprise in 2022: a hugely popular, similarly minimalist noodle shop specializing in tsukemen, a lesser known relative of ramen. “Ramen is mainly about the broth; udon and tsukemen are all about noodles,” Lim said. “I should know, because it took me tedious years to learn how to make them.”



*Noodle sets are accompanied by tempura.*

The Himokawa udon also comes in a hot soup, but my favorite item was the least featured in the videos I'd seen: a comely mass of wriggly jade-colored worms that turned out to be matcha-flavored dipping udon. Nestled on a bed of crushed ice, the matcha udon is shaped traditionally, which makes the slow unfurling of its texture and flavor—an earthiness that begins slightly sweet, meanders into the surprising savory flavor of seaweed, and ends on a complicated, satisfying nuttiness—all the more refreshing. I also think it's the most telegenic of the noodles, but what do I know? I had already eaten most of it before I remembered to take a picture. (*Noodle sets, with tempura, \$24.*) ♦



*Jiayang Fan* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

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# The Talk of the Town

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- **[Waking Up to a New York City Earthquake](#)**

Our Local Correspondents | By Sarah Larson | After the most powerful quake in more than a century, the city was full of stories, arm-waving, and whispers of California.

- **[Mike Tyson Enters His Renaissance-Man Period](#)**

In This Corner | By Ben McGrath | The fifty-seven-year-old boxer, weed mogul, and actor—he stars in “Asphalt City” opposite Sean Penn—perspires, philosophizes, prepares for his fight with Jake Paul.

- **[Maya Hawke Goes Back to School](#)**

Hyphenate Dept. | By Rachel Syme | The “Stranger Things” actress, and college dropout, explains why she visited her brother at Brown before writing her new studio album, “Chaos Angel.”

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Sketchpad | By Emily Flake | Girl-Scout cookie surplus, skimpy-clothes anxiety? It must be spring!

[Comment](#)

## Joe Biden and U.S. Policy Toward Israel

After six months of war, has Israel's killing of World Central Kitchen aid workers compelled the President to do more to save lives in Gaza?

By [Evan Osnos](#)

April 6, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The matter of moral sympathy—who attracts it, who gives it, what action it inspires—can be cruelly fickle. Six months ago, Hamas-led militants killed some twelve hundred people in Israel and took

more than two hundred hostages, igniting a war in Gaza, in which Israel has killed some thirty-two thousand people. But it was Israel’s fatal attack on seven aid workers in Gaza, who were part of José Andrés’s World Central Kitchen—all but one of them non-Palestinians, including a dual U.S.-Canadian citizen—that compelled the Biden Administration to issue its strongest rebuke.

W.C.K. had built a makeshift jetty to bring food ashore in Gaza, where hundreds of thousands face the prospect of famine, because Israel had resisted calls to allow more aid in by land. The seven W.C.K. workers were travelling in a convoy of three cars, at least one of which was clearly marked with the organization’s logo, when they were hit by drone-fired missiles, even though the group had coördinated its mission with the Israel Defense Forces. The Israeli military called the strikes a “tragedy,” and blamed them on a drone operator who mistook a bag for a gun, and on officers who did not review details of the convoy’s plans. Two officers were dismissed, and others were reprimanded. But W.C.K. was unsatisfied; in a statement, it called for an “independent” investigation and for “systemic change” toward protecting the provision of humanitarian aid.

Andrés, a Spanish-born chef first known for creating popular restaurants in Washington, D.C., has put together an unusually high-profile relief group, which specializes in preparing local food for people in areas devastated by natural disasters and war. He is a supporter of President Biden, who called him on Tuesday to offer his sympathies. But later, in an interview with Reuters, Andrés urged the Administration to do more to end the war, saying that it is “complicated to understand” how the U.S. could send the “military to do humanitarian work,” while weapons it provides “are killing civilians.”

The attack laid bare the untenable contradictions in Biden’s policy toward Israel. He has called its bombing campaign “indiscriminate” and said that an invasion of Rafah, in southern Gaza, would cross a

“red line.” The Administration has air-dropped supplies into Gaza, even as it has furnished Israel with bombs, rockets, and other lethal aid, and pressed Congress to approve the sale of F-15 jets to the nation. In political terms, the contradictions have left Biden in no man’s land—more critical of Israel than its American supporters want, but not critical enough for Democrats and activists who have demanded that he pressure the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, to curb the suffering. “What the people of Israel must understand,” Senator Bernie Sanders, an important Biden ally, said last week, is that “they cannot continue to wage this immoral war against innocent people and expect taxpayers of the United States to support them.”

By Thursday, Biden’s frustrations had reached a breaking point. During a tense thirty-minute telephone call with Netanyahu, according to the White House, the President said that an “immediate ceasefire is essential,” described the “overall humanitarian situation” and strikes on aid workers as “unacceptable,” and warned, for the first time, that U.S. policy “will be determined by our assessment of Israel’s immediate action” to address those issues. The Administration did not specify any consequences, but officials had signalled before the call that Biden might slow or halt shipments of categories of arms. Hours later, the Israeli government announced new routes for relief supplies into Gaza, but Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the “real test is results.”

Pressure on Netanyahu to reach a ceasefire has grown in Israel, too. Amos Harel, the senior defense analyst at *Haaretz*, said that, half a year after the horrors of October 7th, “the biggest conclusion of all is: we had the sympathy of the world because of the atrocities, and we somehow managed to lose that, because of the way the war was handled.” In recent months, Israelis have mostly refrained from protesting the government, but last weekend tens of thousands of them staged the largest demonstrations since the war began; some

later tried to break through barriers near Netanyahu's residence in Jerusalem, in what police termed a "riot." The protesters blamed Netanyahu for security failures that allowed the worst terrorist attack in the nation's history, and demanded that he reach a ceasefire deal that could bring the hostages home. (Officially, Israel counts a hundred and thirty still held by Hamas, including at least thirty-four who have died.) On Wednesday, Benny Gantz, a member of Netanyahu's war cabinet, and his main rival, called for elections in September. Gantz stopped short of resigning, but he is an influential voice, and his decision, as one U.S. official put it, "breaks the seal."

For months, Biden sidestepped calls to place conditions on military aid. His resistance runs deep: he is viscerally attached to the idea of Israel, which he first visited in 1973, and withholding arms during a war could cost him the support of pro-Israel voters, at a moment when he is straining to rebuild a political coalition broad enough to defeat Donald Trump in November. Moreover, Hamas has threatened to mount further attacks akin to October 7th until the state of Israel is destroyed. But Netanyahu has often seemed intent on stringing Biden along, if not humiliating him. Most recently, as Blinken and other senior officials have shuttled around the Middle East to negotiate possible deals for a ceasefire, Netanyahu's top intelligence chiefs have not attended some rounds of talks, blunting the chance of an agreement. Whether Biden moves to withhold arms, and with what force, may well hinge on what Israel does in the days ahead.

The President's ultimatum earned him few immediate political points: Israel's critics derided it as too little, too late; Israel's supporters accused him of abandonment. But it has the potential to alter the future of a war that could yet break in multiple directions. Washington's primary goal has been to avert the spread of a larger conflict, but that risk increased last week, when Israeli planes bombed a building next to Iran's Embassy in Damascus, killing

seven Iranian security officials, including high-ranking commanders who Israel said had directed Hamas, Hezbollah, and other militias. Iran vowed retaliation.

The combination of issues converging at once was alarming, even by the standards of the Middle East. But Andrés was not giving up hope that moral sympathy will win in what he has come to see as “a war against humanity itself.” In such a war, he said, “humanity eventually will always prevail.” ♦



*Evan Osnos* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His most recent book is “*Wildland: The Making of America’s Fury*.”

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[Our Local Correspondents](#)

## Waking Up to a New York City Earthquake

*After the most powerful quake in more than a century, the city was full of stories, arm-waving, and whispers of California.*



By [Sarah Larson](#)

April 5, 2024



Photograph by Spencer Platt / Getty

The 4.8-magnitude earthquake that hit near Whitehouse Station, New Jersey, on Friday morning was, in many quarters of New York City, an anecdote generator of seismic intensity. The shaking woke

me up; I groggily confirmed my suspicions on X, where all the posts said, basically, “Was that an earthquake?” Minutes later, I was dressed and outdoors, recorder in pocket, to do what I do best: eavesdrop on my neighbors. It wasn’t hard. “Sarah!” the proprietor of a basement-level dry-cleaning establishment said. He was standing on the sidewalk, marvelling. “I heard the noise. *Took took took took!*” he said, loudly. He waved his arms as if he were shaking something—a gesture I would see many times. “I never heard anything like it. What’s that, what’s this noise? Nothing moved. Only the noise. Like a voice from the ground. *Took took took.*”

On First Avenue, know-it-alls were out in full effect, and clusters of strangers were invoking California.

“On the top floor it felt like a big truck,” a woman announced. “But as if it could actually move the building?”

“I was at my job on Sixteenth Street,” another woman said. “I’m from California. I was taught, especially in brick buildings, to go outside.” The group discussed building structures in the East and West Village. “All the tenement buildings, they’re all, like, done for, in any kind of earthquaking,” one woman said. The woman who’d come from her job had wanted to check on her dogs—they were fine—and to be near her kid and her home. “Next to a cast-iron bathtub!” a man said. They laughed.

At a café on Seventh Street, an older man was telling a story, arms waving, about an earthquake he’d experienced once, and a toilet crashing through a ceiling. This was also in California. A woman near me said, “4.8 is an *aftershock* in California.” Two college-age women in line behind me had just been in art class. “They were, like, ‘Oh, it’s the subway,’ ” one said. “The chairs were shaking. It just felt like when you’re on top of the subway—but much stronger—and our class is not above a subway. I thought it was a bomb.”

Nearby, a woman repeatedly shaking her arms as if trying to throttle somebody—a motion I'd come to recognize as the earthquake-anecdote gesture—concluded her account with, "And no one could give a flying fuck!" A shopkeeper in a prewar building told me he'd heard his door rattling but didn't feel a tremor; he thought it was construction outside. He explained that he was from Malaysia, where they don't have frequent earthquakes—that was more of a Taiwan thing. Back on Seventh Street, a guy who looked like a super was standing in front of a building, talking on his phone. "The building has collapsed!" he bellowed. "Ha-ha—I'm just joking!"

Meanwhile, updates were pouring in on my phone. When the quake hit, a friend in the Bronx had been standing on a chair, reaching for coffee in a cabinet; she made it down safely. On a group text with three friends, two in Los Angeles and one in Brooklyn, vibes were exchanged: we were fine, the New Yorkers sheepishly assured the Californians. My friend in Brooklyn shared a photo of his freaked-out tabby cat, wide-eyed and cowering behind a pair of sneakers. "I went to Macy's and immediately bonded with the woman at the counter," he texted. "She pointed to where she had been standing and said she didn't say anything to her boss because she was worried he'd think she was sick or drunk!"

"We're reading Anne of Green Gables, and last night we read the chapter where Anne accidentally gets her friend Diana drunk when she confuses currant wine for raspberry cordial," one of the L.A. friends wrote. "It's exciting to have two anecdotes of people who feel woozy/dizzy and don't know why!"

In Tompkins Square Park, cops near a cruiser were drinking iced coffee and smoking. Daffodils were blooming. Two young people in the skateboard lot told me they'd been on the subway from Williamsburg and didn't feel the tremors. "I felt like we missed out," one said. "It would've been cool to be skateboarding while it happened." I went to another café, where, an hour after the quake,

talk had broadened to other kinds of disasters—volcanoes, hurricanes, floods, some I couldn't discern. "We'll be experiencing more of those as the world falls apart," a barista said to his friend. "There's no standing under a doorframe, no 'Stop, drop, and roll'—you're just fucked." He turned to a customer. "Hi, can I help you?"

At Superiority Burger, newly open for lunch, anecdotes were flying, as were shaking arms to illustrate them. The chef, Brooks Headley, told me that his apartment building had shaken so hard that he thought the water tower on the roof had collapsed. He had experienced nothing like it, he said, except for an earthquake in Tokyo, which freaked him out, though no one else there had batted an eyelash. The nice young woman who brought me my grilled cheese sandwich had not felt the quake. She pointed to her baseball hat, which she'd put on early that morning. "It says 'earthquake' in Spanish," she told me. "I don't know if I brought this on or what." Why did she have a hat that says "earthquake" in Spanish?

"It's my friend's landscape-architecture firm in California," she said. "I haven't worn it in months." ♦



*Sarah Larson*, a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2007.

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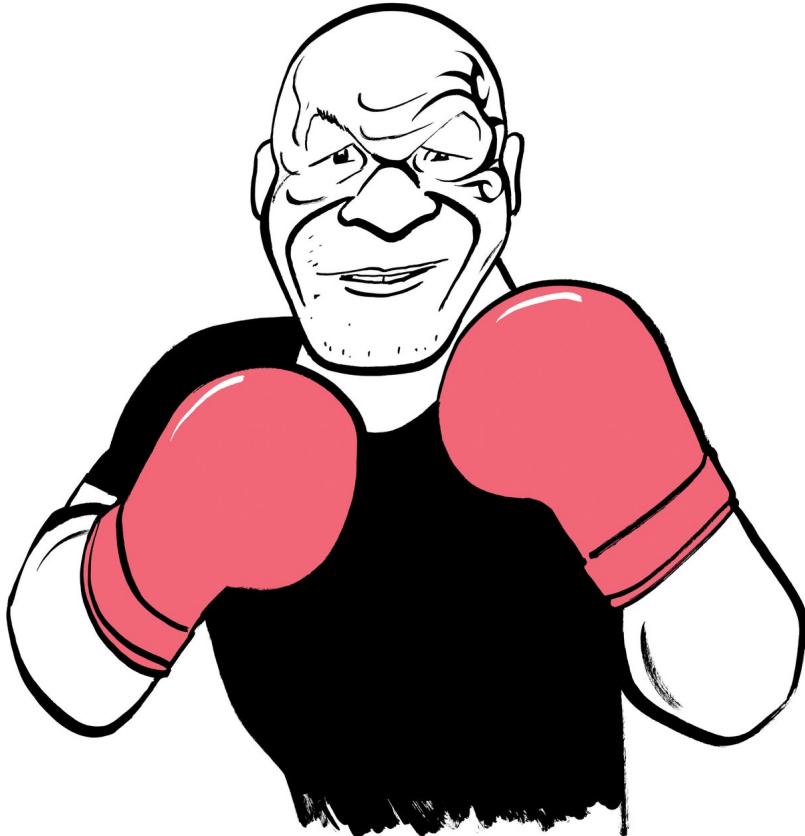
[In This Corner](#)

## Mike Tyson Enters His Renaissance-Man Period

The fifty-seven-year-old boxer, weed mogul, and actor—he stars in “Asphalt City” opposite Sean Penn—perspires, philosophizes, prepares for his fight with Jake Paul.

By [Ben McGrath](#)

April 6, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Mike Tyson on the cusp of fifty-eight is a marvel of self-reinvention: podcast host, thespian, weed dealer. For better or worse, he is also arguably still the most famous fighter in the world, and not merely in an emeritus sense. “Who else could sell out a stadium like that?” he asked recently, referring to AT&T

Stadium, the home of the Dallas Cowboys, where Tyson is scheduled to fight Jake Paul, a man three decades his junior, this July. “Name somebody. Please help me.” His scalp was glistening. “I was just working out, so forgive me for perspiring,” he said.

Paul, who gained renown as a YouTube celebrity and has only ten fights to his professional credit, was born in 1997, the same year that an over-the-hill-seeming Tyson was disqualified from a title bout for chomping on Evander Holyfield’s ears. Who, aghast at that spectacle, could have imagined the bizarro world that would follow? Not long ago, Tyson dined at Mar-a-Lago with his old friend Donald, a ringside fixture turned President and potential felon. “Beautiful,” Tyson recalled, of the experience. “I’ve known him since I was nineteen.” He added, “I hope he doesn’t go to prison.” Ask your local dispensary, meanwhile, if they carry Mike Bites: cannabis gummies in the shape of disfigured ears. Holyfield is a partner in the venture. “At first, he thought we were making fun of him, because he’s a very dignified guy,” Tyson said. “He found out the financial part of it, and he said, ‘Hey, I’m down with the program.’”

Tyson was speaking about all this, along with his performance in the new movie “Asphalt City,” in a house in Delray Beach, Florida, where his teen-age daughter, Milan, an aspiring tennis pro, is training while the family home in Nevada gets renovated. “We’re not here because we like the neighborhood,” Tyson said. “Trust me. Got to worry about alligators and shit!” He was recently startled by a six-footer. “For real, I thought it was a statue,” he went on. “They don’t move! Then, if you go closer, they take off so damn fast.”



*"We're thinking about getting out of the city and moving to a cute town with creepy people."*  
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

As an actor, Tyson may be best known for his good-humored cameos in the “Hangover” series, but he has begun branching out ever so slightly to portray characters other than himself. “Boxing is acting,” he said. “We want people to think we’re going to do this, and then we do that. It’s all illusion. Just like the camera business.” Two years ago, he appeared in the Bollywood film “Liger,” playing an M.M.A. fighter who dresses like a cowboy. He doesn’t speak much; he mainly kicks and punches. “Hey, listen, let me tell you this: the movie got smashed,” he said, alluding to its abysmal reviews. “The only one that got great ratings was me. Look it up!” In “Asphalt City,” which stars Sean Penn and Tye Sheridan as a pair of Brooklyn paramedics on the deadly night shift, Tyson plays Chief Burroughs, their unyielding boss. “He don’t take no shit,” Tyson said. “It’s not difficult for me to play a hard-ass.” His scenes are few, but he brings gravitas to them—in addition to a white beard that is jarring to contemplate in light of the upcoming fight, which will be streamed on Netflix. Muhammad Ali was thirty-nine when he hung up the gloves for good. George Foreman was forty-eight. Holyfield was nearly sixty, like Tyson, when he last stepped into a ring, in 2021, against the former U.F.C. light-heavyweight champion Vitor Belfort, with live commentary from Donald Trump. Holyfield didn’t last two minutes.

At the house in Delray Beach, Tyson kept perspiring and philosophizing. “Gratitude is my attitude, pretty much,” he said. “I was at the Miami Open last night. This gentleman was telling me about two heavyweights that I fought, and now they’re bodyguards in this club. And I was saying, ‘Wow, that’s pretty cool, because a guy like me is not supposed to be where I’m at.’ I thought I would be like my friends, working as a bouncer.” Tyson paused to mop his head with his shirt, briefly exposing a tattoo on his chest, of his daughter Exodus, who died at the age of four in a freak accident involving a treadmill. “I do really well,” he continued. “The money from this fight is not going to change my life, but I’m just stuck on the glory aspect of it. I don’t care about getting hurt. I don’t anticipate getting hurt. ‘He transformed boxing.’ ‘He’s smart now.’ That’s bullshit to me. This is what I do: I fight people.” ♦



*Ben McGrath* has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2003. His new book is “*Riverman: An American Odyssey*.”

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[Hyphenate Dept.](#)

## **Maya Hawke Goes Back to School**

The “Stranger Things” actress, and college dropout, explains why she visited her brother at Brown before writing her new studio album, “Chaos Angel.”

By [Rachel Syme](#)

April 8, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Two years ago, the singer and actor Maya Hawke spent a few weeks hanging around Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, where her younger brother, Levon, was a philosophy major. She was on hiatus from filming “Stranger Things”—the Netflix show on which she plays a band geek turned monster slayer—which prompted her to reflect on her lack of formal education. After graduating from St. Ann’s, an artsy private high school in Brooklyn, she enrolled at Juilliard but dropped out after a year, when her role in a “Little Women” miniseries clashed with the school’s ban on undergraduates working professionally during term. “I had a real chip on my shoulder about it,” she said, of bypassing college. “I was, like, ‘Oh, did I skip a *big* step? And does my skipping that step make me dumber, less smart, less deserving, or less interesting?’” At Brown, she’d crashed on her brother’s floor while cosplaying as a coed—slipping into seminars, lazing around the quad. Her conclusion? She wasn’t missing much. “That healed me,” she said. “It made me see what I actually like about my own life.”

Still, Hawke, who is twenty-five, feels some angst about leaping immediately into her career, perhaps because her parents are Ethan Hawke and Uma Thurman. In the past year, she has had roles in “Maestro” and “Asteroid City,” and in her father’s film “Wildcat,” in which she plays a young Flannery O’Connor. Hawke says that one way she processes the “big, big feelings” around her snowballing fame is by leaning into songwriting. Her third album, “Chaos Angel,” comes out on May 31st. On the track “Missing Out,” she sings, “I was born with my foot in the door / And my mind in the gutter and my guts on the floor.”

Hawke is tall, with the shaggy, sandy hair of a glam rocker and gangly limbs. She recently spent a day at Complete Music Studios, in Prospect Heights, where she practiced “Missing Out” with her band. Although she keeps an apartment near Union Square, she is rarely in New York these days; “Stranger Things” is shooting its

final season in Atlanta. She said that she was sad the series was ending but was looking forward to having more free time. “You don’t really have agency over your own life,” she said. “You, like, have to ask permission for *everything*.” Netflix had granted her a short window away from set to perform on the “*Tonight Show*.” The next day, she’d fly back to Georgia.

For the performance, she wanted to project what she called a “college vibe.” Stylists rolled racks of tweed pants and natty cardigans into the studio—ivory-tower drag for the band. Hawke, who had arrived wearing a black The Who T-shirt, wide-legged black pants, and black ballet flats, thumbed through pleated skirts. She lingered over a gray one before declaring it “maybe a little too boygenius.” She settled on a red plaid mini-kilt, which she paired with a white oxford shirt, frilly anklets, and tan lace-up boots.

“This is *very ‘Gilmore Girls,’*” she said. “I will say that the ruffles on the socks are potentially too out of control.”

“We can get you plain ones!” a stylist called out. A red varsity jacket with the words “Chaos Angel” in fuzzy letters appeared. Hawke slipped it on.

“The pièce de résistance!” she said, twirling. She explained the album title: “I just kept thinking of this angel who, like, cries salty tears and curses her maker, because she is, like, the Amelia Bedelia of angels. You know, always trying to do the right thing and just missing it.”

A small black Doodle mix ran into the room and flopped over for a belly rub. “Hi, Lucky,” Hawke said, bending down. “She was my mom’s dog, but we fought over her for years. And then my mom got a pug that was attacking her, so that’s how I won that battle.”

Just then, Hawke’s boyfriend, Christian Lee Hutson, who sometimes plays guitar in her band and produced her new album,

came in to show her his “Tonight Show” getup: navy blazer with an Argyle tie.

“Distinguished gentleman,” Hawke said, raising her eyebrows.

“You know, Maya, I’m planning to shave for this,” Hutson said, stroking his bushy blond beard.

“No, you are *not*,” she said, making an exaggerated frowny face.

“But my character is supposed to be in college,” Hutson said.

“Maybe he’s a professor’s assistant,” Hawke said, shrugging.  
“Keep the beard.”

The band retreated to a practice room to run through the song a few times. Hawke’s singing voice is smoky and warbly, like Brigitte Bardot crossed with a Disney princess. She has an awkward way of swinging her limbs as she croons. “My moves are very hands forward,” she said. “Like a spider monkey.” She credits her dad with her inability to stay still. “He needs his brain occupied,” she said. “I inherited that. I cannot just sit in my trailer and look at the wall. I have to make something every day.” She smiled and added, “I mean, there’s no two ways about it. I was deeply indoctrinated in the arts.” ♦



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

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## Signs of the New Season

*Girl Scout cookies surplus, skimpy-clothes anxiety? It must be spring!*

By [Emily Flake](#)

April 8, 2024

IN-BOX FLOODED WITH  
GIRL SCOUT COOKIE  
SALES PITCHES  
AAAGH - HOW MANY  
TREFOILS CAN  
ONE WOMAN  
EAT?



CREEPING WORRY  
THAT YOU WON'T  
FIT INTO LAST  
YEAR'S WARM-  
WEATHER OUTFITS

AM I  
GONNA  
HAVE  
TO BUY  
ALL NEW  
KICKY  
ROMPERS?



# SEASONAL DEPRESSION GIVING WAY TO THE REGULAR KIND

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HEY, I FEEL BET-  
OHHH, WAIT,  
NEVER MIND.



FEELS LIKE SUMMER  
WHILE STILL ALSO  
SOMEHOW BEING  
WINTER?

---

I GUESS A HIGH  
OF EIGHTY DEGREES  
PLUS PROJECTED  
SNOW WORKS  
OUT TO A  
SPRING -  
LIKE  
AVERAGE?



e.flake

*Emily Flake began cartooning for The New Yorker in 2008. Her most recent book is “That Was Awkward: The Art and Etiquette of the Awkward Hug.”*

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# Reporting & Essays

- **[Behind the Scenes of New York City’s “Trash Revolution”](#)**

Our Local Correspondents | By Eric Lach | Can a notoriously dirty city join the sanitary twenty-first century? Jessica Tisch, the commissioner of sanitation and a member of one of the country's wealthiest families, thinks it's possible.

- **[Maggie Rogers’s Journey from Viral Fame to Religious Studies](#)**

Onward and Upward with the Arts | By Amanda Petrusich | The singer-songwriter's sudden celebrity made her a kind of minister without training. So she went and got some.

- **[Battling Under a Canopy of Drones](#)**

A Reporter at Large | By Luke Mogelson | The commander of one of Ukraine's most skilled units sent his men on a dangerous mission that required them to elude a swarm of aerial threats.

- **[Park Chan-wook Gets the Picture He Wants](#)**

Profiles | By Jia Tolentino | With “The Sympathizer,” the director of “Oldboy” and “The Handmaiden” comes to American television.

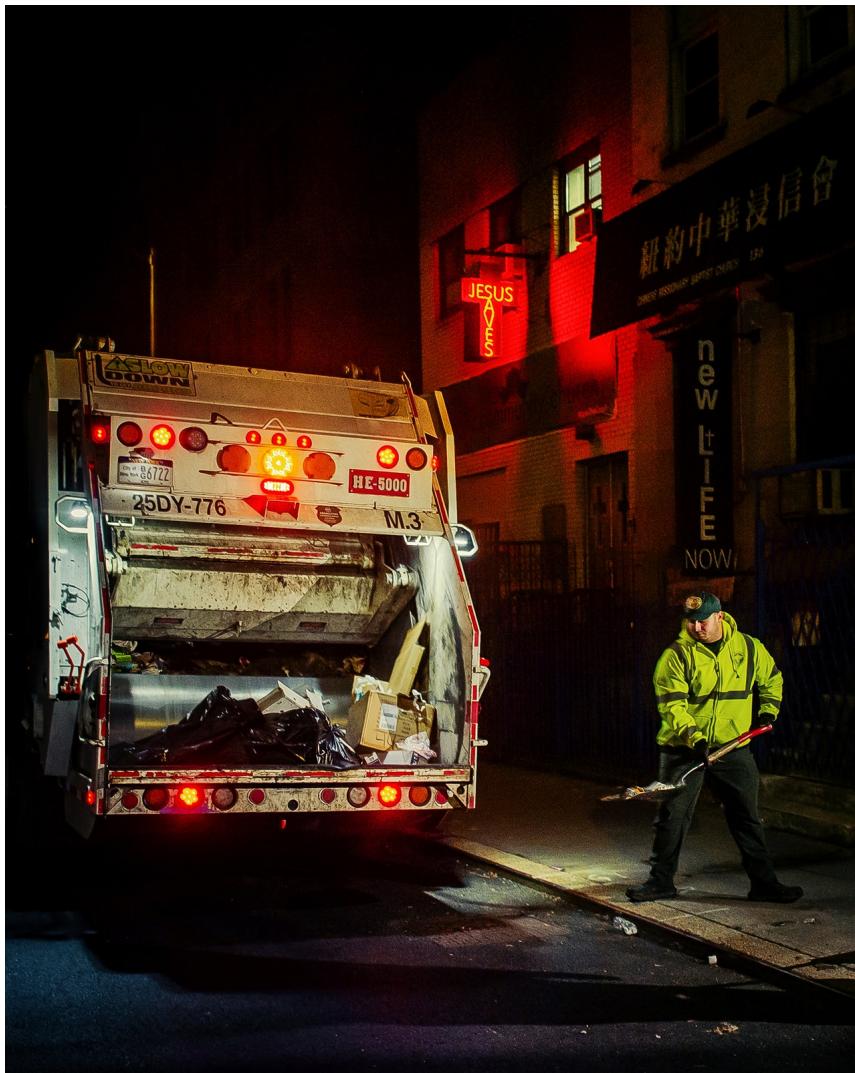
[Our Local Correspondents](#)

## The Ex-N.Y.P.D. Official Trying to Tame New York's Trash

The city has lived in filth for decades. Can Jessica Tisch, a scion of one of the country's richest families, finally clean up the streets?

By [Eric Lach](#)

April 8, 2024



*Last year, summonses for sanitation violations were up sixty-two per cent.  
Photographs by Dina Litovsky for The New Yorker*

Every night, black plastic garbage bags appear on the streets of New York City, like blackheads on a teen-ager's nose. A little more

than a third of each bag is food scraps: vegetable peels, moldy berries, unwanted tuna salad—organic matter that, in another city, might have been composted. About a sixth is material that should have been recycled: junk mail, plastic water bottles. The rest is what the Department of Sanitation calls “refuse.” This is the actual trash. Broken phone chargers. Cat litter. Expired pills. Nail clippings.

Two or three times a week, depending on the neighborhood, large white collection trucks make their rounds, each operated by two Department of Sanitation workers, who collect the bags. In the summer, the bags reek. In the winter, they’re frozen solid. When lifted, they often leak a dark, viscous juice whose smell can linger for days. Sanitation workers quickly learn that the liquid can be a distraction from other dangers in the bags. Wire hangers. Chicken bones. Things that puncture not just plastic bags but human skin and flesh.

Many bags can be carried in one hand, but outside large apartment buildings superintendents put out “sausage bags,” long, unwieldy monstrosities that typically require two sanitation workers to toss into the hopper, the open mouth at the rear of a collection truck. With the pull of a lever, a worker activates the hopper’s powerful hydraulic jaw, which chomps down on the trash and compacts it. Workers stand away from the truck while this is happening, as liquid and small metal objects sometimes fly out at high speeds.

Each collection truck can hold up to twelve tons of waste—about the weight of a school bus. When a truck is full, sanitation workers often drive it to a facility where the garbage is prepared for export. For fifty years, New York City sent residential trash to Staten Island, where Robert Moses built Fresh Kills, a landfill two and a half times the size of Central Park. Staten Islanders threatened to secede if the city didn’t shut it down. In 1993, Rudolph Giuliani won the mayoral race, with Staten Islanders delivering his margin of victory. Three years later, he unveiled a plan to close Fresh Kills.

The landfill was finally shuttered in 2001; the last materials dumped there were the remnants of the Twin Towers.

Today, New York City sends its garbage out of the city altogether, primarily via facilities known as marine-transfer stations. When the stations were being built, during Mike Bloomberg's and Bill de Blasio's mayoral administrations, hundreds of residents protested, fearing mess, smell, and exhaust fumes. Sanitation officials readily admit that the fight drained significant energy out of City Hall. De Blasio's aides used to wonder whether the furor over a station on East Ninety-first Street, on the Upper East Side, was what compelled their boss to work out at his old Y.M.C.A. in Park Slope, Brooklyn—at least a half-hour drive from Gracie Mansion, the mayor's residence. The Ninety-first Street station was built right next to a fitness center called Asphalt Green. “That was the closest gym to Gracie Mansion,” a former aide said.

The Department of Sanitation now has five marine-transfer stations, which largely go unnoticed. Many collection trucks in Brooklyn use the station on Hamilton Avenue, on the edge of Red Hook—a multilevel depot with tall harbor cranes behind it. Inside, nozzles on the ceiling emit a fine mist that dampens the trash, and a ventilation system deodorizes the air using a kind of military-grade Febreze. Sanitation workers sit in glass-walled command centers, or “fishbowls,” overseeing the operations. During shifts, a truck enters the station every few minutes and backs up to the edge of a large open pit, one level down, to unload.

A garbage truck tipping its load bears an uncanny resemblance to a person throwing up. Some of the trash bags have burst open, but others are curiously intact, and you can still make out a few pieces of furniture that never got a chance to be fully digested. Sanitation workers driving front-end loaders collect the trash in the pit and dump it into shipping containers, which each hold twenty-five tons of waste. After the containers are filled and sealed, they are taken through the back doors of the station, while loudspeakers ring out

with the sound of hawks screeching. “That’s by design,” Anthony Bianco, a sanitation chief, told me. It dissuades nearby seagulls from approaching.

Occasionally, a New Yorker will call 311, the city’s all-purpose help line, to report that they have mistakenly thrown out something of great value. If their trash hasn’t already gone in the pit, the caller is told to visit their local marine-transfer station, where the truck that collected their garbage will be tipped in front of them. The owner is given ninety minutes to wade through the muck to look for their discarded item, a protocol known as a Lost Valuables Search.

With surprising frequency, people find what they came for. New Yorkers have a way of recognizing their own garbage. “That’s my bag,” they’ll say, making a beeline toward a corner of the trash pile. Over the years, tax documents, false teeth, family heirlooms, and hard drives have been recovered. Last year, a woman called to say that she’d accidentally tossed out a diamond ring. Department officials told her that they could hold the truck that picked up her garbage. Then they described the procedure she’d have to follow. The woman told them to forget it.

Outside the Hamilton Avenue station, the shipping containers are loaded onto barges, where the trash becomes the property of Waste Management, Inc.—one of the companies to which the city government pays hundreds of millions of dollars a year for the municipal happiness that comes from trash being transported far, far away. Tugboats push the barges to Port Elizabeth, New Jersey, where the containers are transferred to freight trains, destined for a landfill in Virginia. Other New York City residential trash ends up in landfills in western New York, or in other states, such as South Carolina and Ohio. Or it gets incinerated in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, or upstate New York and turned into energy. This is how the city gets rid of twenty-four million pounds of waste each day—enough to fill more than two dozen Statues of Liberty.

In 2022, a few months after taking office as the city's commissioner of sanitation, Jessica Tisch began fixating on plastic garbage bags. The bags have been around since the nineteen-seventies, when Mayor John Lindsay pitched them as a modern alternative to Oscar the Grouch-style metal cans. They seem to have only made the city dirtier. "Bags just create more litter," Clare Miflin, a waste-reduction advocate, told me. "Rats rip them open. People throw garbage on them." And yet the bags have also become indelible aspects of the city's psyche. "I'll take Manhattan in a garbage bag," Lou Reed once sang. Sanitation officials have long known that there are better ways to take it.

In Buenos Aires and in Barcelona, people dispose of their residential trash in communal bins installed on sidewalks. In Singapore, some apartment buildings are equipped with pneumatic tubes that whoosh trash into large containers. In Chicago, residential waste goes in bins stored in back alleys. Such systems are part of a global leap forward in urban sanitary policy, known as containerization. But in New York, Tisch told me, "the way that we've managed the trash and recycling left on the curb every single day hadn't really changed in decades."

Last April, the Department of Sanitation published a report, titled "The Future of Trash," examining why the city was stuck in its garbage-bag era. At times, it reads like ripe source material for a reboot of "Escape from New York." Between parked cars, fire hydrants, bus stops, halal carts, Citi Bike racks, and dining sheds, there is little space left on the streets and sidewalks for a trash bag, let alone millions of bins. According to the report, containerizing the densest streets would require installing communal bins, which would mean getting rid of tens of thousands of parking spots. Few local issues are as intense as parking-space politics, Gale Brewer, an Upper West Side City Council member, told me. "I got an e-mail this morning," she said. "It read, 'I don't care about Israel and

Palestine, but what about the cars that haven't moved for alternate-side parking?" "

And yet "The Future of Trash" concludes that bags could be eliminated from many of the city's residential streets, without messing with parking, simply by telling people who live in houses and small apartment buildings that they couldn't put their waste out in bags anymore. On April 1, 2023, as a first step, Tisch implemented the first change to the city's waste-set-out times in decades. Residents would no longer be allowed to put garbage bags on the sidewalks before 8 P.M. (It was a small change, but an inconvenient one: putting the bags out so late would force many co-op boards and management companies to pay their building staff overtime.) Publicly, sanitation officials emphasized that the change would deter rats, by limiting the amount of time that bags sat outside. But the department was also quietly testing whether New Yorkers would containerize themselves, by giving them a nudge. The new rules had a carve out: if the trash was put in a lidded plastic bin, it could go out as early as 6 P.M. Bins soon began appearing on sidewalks all over town. "You never really saw containers on the streets of New York City until April 1st, and now there are lots of them," Tisch told me last summer. "There's about to be a whole lot more."

Tisch believes that she and her aides have developed a plan that will clean up New York City. It's a program they refer to, grandly, as the Trash Revolution. Bags off the sidewalks. Clean highways. Citywide organic-waste pickup. Beefed-up enforcement of sanitary laws. Tisch has committed her department to implementing these changes, along with other improvements that have eluded previous sanitation commissioners. "At the moment, in New York City, all the smartest people are focussed on garbage," one of Tisch's aides told me. "We're running the Manhattan Project of municipal government here."

Historically, the Department of Sanitation has been something of a neglected younger sibling among the city's uniformed agencies.

"We pick things up, we put things down, we drive the same route, and traverse the same streets," Garrett O'Reilly, who recently retired as the department's top uniformed official, told me. "Some people say that it's a thoughtless job. I know that it's not."

Sanitation veterans like to note that New Yorkers call on police officers and firefighters when there's an emergency, whereas they rely on sanitation workers every day. Yet the city employs thirty-six thousand uniformed police officers, eleven thousand firefighters, and roughly eight thousand sanitation workers. This still makes for the largest municipal sanitation force in the country. New York's Strongest, they call themselves.

Sanitation work is hazardous. The workers I spoke with mentioned serious injuries and respiratory issues they'd suffered as a result of the job. "I used to have allergies when I drove the broom," Robert Casanovas, a retired supervisor, said of his days driving a street sweeper. "I don't have them anymore." Sanitation workers cleaned up Ground Zero after 9/11, and a hundred and nineteen have since died from illnesses related to that effort. At the start of the pandemic, sanitation workers were forced to work shifts without masks or hand sanitizer. Thousands of department employees got sick, and nine of them died.

The pandemic was a full-blown operational crisis for the department. To help pay for the city's *COVID-19* response, de Blasio cut the nearly two-billion-dollar sanitation budget by more than a hundred million. Litter-basket maintenance was cut by sixty per cent, street-sweeping services by fifty. Between the spring and the summer of 2020, the 311 hotline was flooded with complaints about trash, from all five boroughs. Andrew Cuomo, the governor at the time, spoke at a press conference about how bad the city smelled: "Literally, people saying there is an odiferous

environment.” Kathryn Garcia, who was then the commissioner of sanitation, resigned in protest of the cuts.



*“What if we changed the name to Trail Mix.”*

Cartoon by John McNamee

This is the mess that Tisch inherited. (*New York* magazine proclaimed her first August on the job “Hot Garbage Month.”) But it was also a propitious time to become the sanitation commissioner, she told me, because city officials were finally acknowledging the severity of the situation. Tisch was appointed by Eric Adams, whose mayoral campaign, in 2021, was all about the new unease that New Yorkers felt on their streets. Part of this unease was about crime—that was the part that Adams, a former cop, talked about the most. But part of it was about trash. “The Mayor came to me with a goal,” Tisch said. “He likes to say—and it’s a good line—that New York streets need to look as good as New Yorkers do.” Given that Adams often wears custom-tailored suits and Ferragamo loafers, this is a high bar.

Tisch likes designer clothing, too, though you'll more often see her in Chanel. Garcia was known for wearing a department-issued windbreaker and blending in with the rank and file. Tisch, on the other hand, recently took a tour of rat-infested zones in Flatbush, Brooklyn, while wearing a thousand-dollar silk dress from Zadig&Voltaire's fall 2020 collection.

The sanitation commissioner comes from one of the richest families in the country. (They rank forty-third, according to *Forbes*.) Her father, James Tisch, is the C.E.O. of the Loews Corporation, a multibillion-dollar conglomerate whose holdings have included Loews Theatres, Loews Hotels, Lorillard Tobacco Company, the Bulova Watch Company, and CBS. Her mother, Merryl Tisch, was a top state education official for many years, and a prominent supporter of Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Senator Chuck Schumer. The family's name is etched all over the city: there's the Tisch School of the Arts, at New York University; the Tisch Cancer Institute, at Mount Sinai; and the Tisch Galleries, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Yet Jessica Tisch, who is forty-three, has known only government work. After receiving a B.A., a J.D., and an M.B.A. from Harvard, she took a job, in 2008, in the counterterrorism bureau of the New York Police Department. "My grandmother was incredibly supportive," she told me. "Everyone else was, like, 'Really?'" Tisch helped develop the N.Y.P.D.'s surveillance-camera networks and set up its officer body cameras. In 2019, de Blasio appointed her the commissioner of the city's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications, where she helped improve the city's Wi-Fi, oversaw the 311 system, and coördinated vaccine distribution during the pandemic. "One of the things that Jessie learned at N.Y.P.D. is all the ways that money, contract, or legal issues can completely fuck up a project," Ryan Merola, Tisch's chief of staff, told me. "She keeps a budget expert, a contracts expert, and a lawyer around her at all times." Adams and Tisch had

several mutual connections, including the former police commissioner William Bratton, whom they both consider a visionary. Bratton supported Adams's decision to appoint Tisch to Sanitation, as did Garcia, Bloomberg, and Schumer.

Many of Adams's appointments have gone awry—his former commissioner of buildings has pleaded not guilty to bribery charges, and his former commissioner of corrections stepped aside after failing to address the deadly conditions in the city's jails. Adams's own phones were seized as part of a federal investigation related to his campaign fund-raising. (He has not been accused of any wrongdoing.) Tisch has managed to skate above this turmoil so far. "As many faulty appointments as Eric has made," Bratton told me, "he's very fortunate that he's got people like Jessie to make up for all the characters."

At a ceremony on February 1st, Tisch unveiled what she called "a super weapon in the fight against filth." It's an automated side-loading garbage truck, which can lift bins by itself, so that sanitation workers can collect trash without breaking their backs. Other cities in the U.S. have mechanized trash trucks, but, according to city sanitation officials, no domestic manufacturer makes a model compact and quiet enough to drive down a Manhattan street. At the ceremony, the department showed off a prototype of a vehicle it had created from a mix of American and European parts. The truck hoisted bins into the air in front of a cheering crowd. The event climaxed with Adams emerging from the truck's cab, as "Empire State of Mind"—his personal theme song—played over loudspeakers. All this fanfare, one person commented on X, for "technology that places like Akron, Ohio have had since 1973."

The task of cleaning New York has traditionally been divided among various agencies. The Department of Transportation cleaned the highways, the Department of Consumer and Worker Protection enforced food-vender rules, the Economic Development

Corporation handled graffiti removal, and the N.Y.P.D. towed abandoned vehicles. But, for these agencies, cleanliness was generally a low priority. With Adams's blessing, Tisch has absorbed these responsibilities into her department. When Sanitation began removing graffiti, there was a backlog of a thousand requests; the department cleaned eight hundred locations in just one month. As part of a new joint effort with the N.Y.P.D., Sanitation has helped remove more than eleven thousand abandoned cars from the streets.

The Department of Sanitation also has its own law-enforcement arm, the Sanitation Police, which enforces city trash rules. In 2023, summonses for sanitation violations were up sixty-two per cent. After a snowstorm this January, the NYC Sanitation account posted a warning on X: "New York's Strongest will be out there en masse enforcing the basic rules intended to keep our sidewalks safe and passable." The department ended up issuing four thousand citations to property owners who didn't clear the snow from their sidewalks.

Residential waste accounts for only part of New York City's trash. Offices, restaurants, shops, industrial facilities, and other commercial enterprises produce another twenty million pounds a day, and must pay private waste haulers to cart it away. A few months ago, Tisch announced that commercial businesses would have to containerize their waste. The NYC Sanitation account has begun publicly shaming establishments that haven't complied. "MEMO TO @WALGREENS: Jamaica isn't your damn dumping ground," the account posted in mid-January. In another post, the account suggested that a Dollar Tree in Coney Island be called the "Two Hundred Dollars Each Day Tree," because "that's what they're racking up in NIGHTLY summonses for failing to follow the chain business containerization rules." To the Chick-fil-A on Fulton Street: "\$200 per day, every day (except Sunday)," the account wrote, with a smiling emoji.

Law enforcement, as a general concept, is the underpinning of Tisch’s work as the sanitation commissioner. The Trash Revolution is in many ways inspired by the CompStat Revolution, a set of data-driven reforms that Bratton introduced at the N.Y.P.D. in the nineties. Studies suggest that these reforms contributed to an overall decline in crime, but they also led to the stop-and-frisk era, in which police officers hassled millions of young Black and brown men in the city with little pretext. While campaigning for mayor, Adams said that he wanted every city agency to set up its own CompStat-style system.

On Thursday mornings, Tisch attends a meeting called Trash Dash. Whereas CompStat involves meetings about changes in crime stats—murders, shootings, and robberies—Trash Dash involves Sanitation brass grilling lower-ranked officers about missed collections, dirty conditions, and street-sweeping efficacies. As a uniformed agency, Sanitation has a chain of command similar to those in place at the N.Y.P.D. and the F.D.N.Y. (“It’s a paramilitary organization,” Casanovas, the retired supervisor, told me.) I recently attended a Trash Dash meeting on the eighth floor of the department’s headquarters, in lower Manhattan, where three- and four-star sanitation chiefs sat across the table from borough chiefs and district superintendents. Tisch was the only woman in the room. (Her department is more than ninety per cent male.) During a discussion of conditions in one part of Park Slope, she bolted out of her chair and made her way toward a screen displaying a map. “Tenth Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenue,” she said, indicating for an official controlling the screen to zoom in. “Five missed collections in a twenty-eight-day period—what is going on at that address?”

There was silence in the room. “That particular street, that’s the night recycling route,” a district superintendent said. “Uh . . . they’re saying it’s dark out.” Tisch rolled her eyes. The names of two sanitation workers were displayed on the screen. “I don’t care

if they're working at night or during the day," she said. "If you are having a chronic problem with a location, a chronic problem with individuals, stick supervision on them and write them up!"

On numerous occasions, Tisch has described "dreaming" of becoming the sanitation commissioner. Some have speculated that Tisch is using Sanitation as a step toward becoming the N.Y.P.D. commissioner, or as an entryway into electoral politics. With the latter, she'd be following in the footsteps of Garcia, who ran for mayor after resigning from her post. (She ultimately came in second in the Democratic primary, behind Adams.) "I heard that narrative myself," Tisch said, with a smile, when I mentioned the rumors about her eventually running for office. "I am largely a private person," she went on. "What I enjoy is doing the work of running agencies."

Tisch told me that, years from now, we will look back on this dirty city and its outdated sanitation policies in horror. "Do you remember when it was legal in New York City to dump your trash on the street in the middle of the day?" she imagines people saying. "Do you remember when it was normal for the Department of Sanitation to allow twenty per cent of that trash to sit there for twenty-four hours or more before it was collected?"

New York used to be unspeakably foul. At the turn of the twentieth century, according to one estimate, three million New York City residents each produced about a pound of garbage per day, plus ashes. Some of the trash consisted of things you might see today: soiled rags, oyster shells, fish heads. Other trash—wood shavings, pig organs—reflected the realities of the time. Much of this daily deluge of sludge and cinder was dumped in the harbor, an environmental calamity from which local marine life has never fully recovered. A lot also ended up on the street, where it got mixed in with decaying animal carcasses, manure, and urine. "The railroad avenues displayed great mounds and ridges of a black, unsightly substance to which science has not yet applied a name,"

an 1874 op-ed published in the *New-York Tribune* bemoaned. “Everywhere filth offended the eye and soiled the person of the unfortunate pedestrian.”

At the time, the Department of Sanitation was the Department of Street Cleaning, and Tammany Hall—the city’s dominant Democratic Party machine—distributed street-cleaning jobs as patronage spoils, installing flunkies who collected their wages without reporting for work. This changed when William Strong became mayor, in 1895. He appointed George E. Waring, Jr., a civil engineer and a former Union Army cavalry colonel, as his head of Street Cleaning. Waring told the Tammany freeloaders to report for duty or beat it. Almost half the department quit.

Waring imposed martial discipline on the remaining workers, many of whom were poor Italian immigrants. He dressed them in bright-white uniforms and pith helmets, and he established the department’s chain of command. At morning roll-call meetings, sweepers and cart men were put in teams and assigned to specific streets. “To a modern sensibility, some of Waring’s reforms sound like simple common sense,” Robin Nagle, an anthropologist in the school of liberal studies at N.Y.U., wrote in her 2013 book, “Picking Up.” “But in New York’s gaslight era they were almost revolutionary.”

Clean curbs, gleaming cobblestones, fresh breezes—when New Yorkers saw and smelled these things, they celebrated. Waring threw a parade, marching his uniformed workers down Fifth Avenue. “New York has long had a street department,” an editorial in *Harper’s* observed. “It was an original discovery of Colonel Waring’s that this could be made and used to clean the streets.”

Why is New York City such a difficult place to keep clean? Garbologists, anthropologists, and discard scholars have been debating this question for decades. It helps to think of New York City not as one big metropolis, Nagle told me, but as a network of

interconnected villages. The neighborhood of Washington Heights, in Manhattan, is different, in density and geography, than Elmhurst, in Queens, or Tottenville, in Staten Island. “Each one has to be served in a way that is uniform and fair, but they also require specific, unique details and logistical solutions,” Nagle said. “When you get to things like different ethnic enclaves, people have different habits, different relationships to consumption and to discard, to a sense of relationship with, ‘All right, I’m going to throw this thing away.’ ”

Throughout the city’s history, some have been tempted to write off New York as fundamentally dirty, or as somehow uncleanable. “The feeling among most experienced citizens of New-York in regard to the possibility of cleaning its streets properly is of resigned hopelessness,” the *Times* reported, back in 1881. But then came Waring. Tisch has a similar goal of changing cultural expectations about trash, but she’s relying on lessons she learned at the N.Y.P.D., rather than in the Union Army. “There can never be another Waring,” Nagle told me. “Waring solved the problem for the first time, and what he changed—those changes stuck. Will Tisch’s changes hold after she is no longer commissioner? We’ll see.”

Within the Department of Sanitation, there have been complaints about Tisch’s leadership style. Some former officials told me that she’s been barreling ahead with her reforms, ignoring the input of longtime staff, and installing loyal aides to top positions. In late November, I received an anonymous e-mail that made similar accusations. “We cannot write to you directly because anyone criticizing her at DSNY is blacklisted,” it said. (“We are fundamentally changing the way we approach cleanliness and sustainability in New York City,” the department said in a statement. “Whenever someone proposes new ways of doing things, their feedback—agreement or disagreement—is both welcome and considered.”)

Recently, I accompanied two sanitation workers, Nick Himariotis and Paul Unger, on a midnight collection route in the West Village. The West Village is a plum gig in the department. “This is just throwaway garbage that you get from Amazon,” Himariotis said, gesturing toward the curb. People in the West Village eat their food out of takeout containers. “You go to Chinatown, they still cook,” he went on. “You pick up a bag—you can’t even pick it up. Food is the worst. Heavy and sloppy.”

I asked the men how they felt about Tisch and her directives. Large city agencies are naturally resistant to change, new demands, and hard-driving bosses. “You probably would find it split down the middle between the workforce,” Unger told me. “People say don’t reinvent the wheel. I disagree.” He added, “We don’t want to see rats everywhere when we’re working.”

One morning in September, before dawn, I walked into a Department of Sanitation garage in South Brooklyn to meet with Lieutenant Anthony Rizzo, of the Sanitation Police. Rizzo’s squad specializes in cases of illegal dumping, a practice that has plagued New York since the days of the Dutch. (The city’s first street-cleaning law, from 1657, barred residents of New Amsterdam from tossing “tubbs of odour and nastiness” into the streets.) From his desk, Rizzo has access to the feeds of nearly three hundred surveillance cameras around the city, most of which were installed after Tisch entered office. Catching offenders used to involve days-long stakeouts, Rizzo said: “We had to actually catch them in the act.” With the cameras, he’s able to track culprits to their home addresses. His squad issued three hundred and thirty-two summonses last year.

Illegal dumping usually happens on the margins of town—on dead-end streets or lonely stretches of boulevard. Cemeteries are popular. “I think it’s disgusting,” Rizzo said. “That’s someone’s resting place.” Rizzo has nearly two decades on the job, and has worked cases involving construction and landscaping companies,

restaurants, electronics stores, and ordinary residents, who often dump yard waste. “We just caught a family in Queens,” Rizzo said. “Husband, wife, and two sons came. They broke their backs. They were dumping bags of dirt. Thirty, forty bags of dirt.”

The motivations of illegal dumpers vary widely. “Everybody here tries to be a major-case detective,” Rizzo said, of his squad. “I tell them all, ‘Don’t do it. You’ll fry your brain.’” New Yorkers often go to great lengths to illegally dump items that could legally be left out on a curb, like mattresses. If dumpers are caught, they’re fined at least four thousand dollars, and any vehicles used in the dumping are seized. On the day we met, Rizzo impounded a minivan that had been spotted, on multiple occasions, being driven by a man who was dumping dirt along the eastern shore of Staten Island. The owner of the minivan, a woman, said that the man who’d dumped the dirt was a friend who had borrowed the car without saying what he’d use it for. Her vehicle was seized shortly after she finished dropping her kids off at school.



*“Please tell me a story about a puppy who goes to Jupiter on her birthday to solve a mystery and is a mermaid, using an engaging and humorous tone, in approximately a thousand words, in the style of Ernest Hemingway.”*

*Cartoon by Hilary Allison*

The enforcement of illegal-dumping violations is part of a larger effort, by Tisch, to shift her department’s focus to what she calls “quality-of-life concerns.” This is the same language that Bratton, her mentor, used to make a case for broken-windows policing, a zero-tolerance approach to misdemeanors like vandalism. Rizzo told me that a lot of the people he cites are immigrants; there are

also many construction workers who are caught dumping debris on orders from their bosses. New York City may not be fundamentally dirty, but it is fundamentally unequal. Impounding people’s vehicles seems harsh. Yet Rizzo told me that dumping is rampant in working-class, outer-borough neighborhoods, where residents have long felt overlooked by the Department of Sanitation, and that many people have welcomed the surveillance cameras in the hope of getting relief from all the junk. “Finally, they are taking action here in the community,” Rafael Peña, a resident of the Bronx, told the *Hunts Point Express*. Even local officials who have been skeptical of heavy law enforcement have praised Tisch’s reforms. Antonio Reynoso, the Brooklyn borough president, has publicly slammed Adams for tolerating an increased use of stop-and-frisk by the N.Y.P.D. But he had positive things to say about the Trash Revolution. “This mayor, on trash, on garbage, is doing an amazing job,” he told me in November.

Last summer, Tisch made one of the most controversial decisions of her tenure when she sent the Sanitation Police to clear out Corona Plaza, in Queens, where an unlicensed Latin American street-food fair had sprouted up during the pandemic. “Corona Plaza symbolizes something that is very core to the American ideal,” a food influencer told the *Times*. But the fair had prompted complaints from the owners of local brick-and-mortar shops, who said that the area was getting crowded and dirty, and that they were losing business. The Sanitation Police told the unlicensed vendors to pack up, leading to rallies where demonstrators held up signs with phrases like “*También somos parte de la economía de esta ciudad*”—“We’re also part of the economy of this city.” When I asked Tisch about the incident, she gave me a matter-of-fact response. “I think we knew going in that it was going to be a politically charged thing,” she said. “But what was there before we went in was chaotic, unsafe, impassable.”

In September, the department installed giant dumpsters along a dozen blocks in West Harlem, as part of a pilot program in European-style communal containerization and mechanized collection. Some people in the neighborhood hated the bins. “You pay a certain amount of rent for, like, a pretty, cute neighborhood feeling,” an opera singer named Caroline Miller told the local-news site Gothamist. She questioned whether such bins would ever be installed on the Upper East Side. Meanwhile, Shaun Abreu, West Harlem’s City Council member, told me that he’d heard from longtime residents who liked the bins. Perhaps gentrifiers thought they were eyesores. But, as Abreu said, “are they any more eyesores than piles of trash on the street?” Between April and December of last year, the city saw its largest decrease in rat sightings in years. In West Harlem, sightings were down sixty-eight per cent. “You cannot walk through any neighborhood in the city without noticing the progress that we are making, without feeling that Trash Revolutionary fervor,” Tisch said at an October press conference. “To the status quo, that inertial obfuscator of progress, I issue a challenge—take a deep breath through your nose and admit that deep in your heart you know the truth, that the city finally, at long last, does not smell like trash every hour of every day.”

There are two kinds of people in the world of garbage: those who are focussed on picking up trash, like Tisch, and those who are focussed on where that trash goes. “We’ve all bought into this false optimism that it can be solved in collection,” Elizabeth Balkan, a top civilian official at the Department of Sanitation during the de Blasio administration, told me. Balkan said that there’s no such thing as throwing something “away”; someone always suffers the consequences of trash. A recent study in *Science* found that landfills emit methane—a potent greenhouse gas—at higher rates than previously known, contributing to climate change. In recent years, residents of upstate New York who live near landfills full of

New York City waste have filed multiple lawsuits, complaining of nausea, headaches, and a “never-ending odor event.”

These days, Balkan consults with businesses and governments looking to reduce waste, often by introducing pay-as-you-throw regimes or privatizing the collection of residential waste. She is one of many former department officials who now focus on environmental efforts. Benjamin Miller, who served as the director of policy planning at the Department of Sanitation under Mayor David Dinkins, is now an adviser with the Center for Zero Waste Design, an organization that aims to create more sustainable cities. Miller told me that Tisch has been too cavalier in making big policy and logistical changes without fully engaging community stakeholders. Some people in city government admire Tisch’s steamroller tendencies. But Miller thought she’d eventually run into trouble. “Who gives a fuck if they have the Mayor’s ear?” he said, of Tisch and her team. “That’ll take them as far as the first court case.”

Both Balkan and Miller criticized Tisch for cutting three million dollars in department funding for community composting programs after Adams ordered city agencies to tighten their budgets. The department had already begun rolling out its own program for collecting organic waste, instituting curbside pickup for residents and public schools and installing hundreds of orange organics bins on street corners. But the community composters felt like food-co-op members with a Whole Foods moving in down the block. “To not see the value this sector brings to N.Y.C., both practically and symbolically, is truly shortsighted,” Balkan said. Supporters of community composting have argued that the city’s current plan for organic-waste collection shouldn’t be called “composting.” Much of the organic material isn’t turned into soil; instead, it gets broken down into methane gas and burned for energy. In November and December, community composting groups protested outside City Hall. (“Composting Rules! Methane Gas Drools,” one sign read.)

One day, I rode with Tisch on a trash barge to Port Elizabeth. Only after we set off did Tisch ask an aide how long the trip to New Jersey would take. A hundred and forty minutes, the aide said. “A hundred and forty minutes?” Tisch yelled, in disbelief. Ed Whitmore, the owner of the tugboat pushing the barge, went to consult the captain, then returned. “Good news,” he said. With the tide moving the way it was, we could make the trip in about an hour. Soon, white spray was shooting off both sides of the barge as the tug chugged through the water, pushing a thousand tons of rotting cargo across the harbor.

“I have something I want to bend your ear on,” Whitmore told Tisch. (Before purchasing his tugboat company, in 2002, Whitmore worked in structured finance.) Once the barge arrived in New Jersey, the trash would be put on a freight train. He noted that “the whole system” of sending trash down the East Coast “is leveraged to the railroads, and the railroads’ capacity. We could put some of this waste on oceangoing barges and compete with the railroads.” Tisch nodded in contemplation. “I’ve planted my seed,” Whitmore said.

“Consider it planted,” Tisch replied.

Afterward, Tisch told me that New Yorkers don’t realize just how brittle something as basic as trash collection is. A few months after she took office, the national rail workers’ union almost went on strike. If that had happened, the city would have had six days before trash started piling up. “We talked about it every single day for a very long time,” Tisch said. “This is the essential service. If we don’t do our jobs for two or three days, it’s actually a public-health crisis.”

This might sound like an exaggeration, but I’d recently seen evidence of it. Harry Nespoli, the seventy-nine-year-old head of the Uniformed Sanitationmen’s Association, had given me an in-house magazine commemorating the union’s 1968 strike, which lasted

nine days. Garbage piled high in the streets, filling in the gaps between parked cars and blocking entrances to hospitals and schools. “Trash fires flared all over town,” *Time* reported. “Rats rummaged through pyramidal piles of refuse. Public-health authorities, warning of the danger of typhoid and other diseases, proclaimed the city’s first general health emergency since a 1931 polio epidemic.” When their strike was over, sanitation workers cleaned the mess up themselves.

Many people involved in waste management end up loving trash, in some weird way. Tisch doesn’t. “I really think, in this day and age, to be a good sanitation commissioner you have to hate trash,” she said. “The whole job is to make it not omnipresent. Make it go away. Make it so that people who are using the streets don’t see it at all hours of the day.” I asked her about getting people to produce less of it. She waved me off. She didn’t think it was her job to reduce garbage—just to remove it. “Trash service,” she said, “is the last all-you-can-use service in New York City.” ♦



*Eric Lach*, a staff writer, has contributed to the magazine since 2008. His column on life in New York City appears regularly on newyorker.com.

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[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)

## Maggie Rogers's Journey from Viral Fame to Religious Studies

The singer-songwriter's sudden celebrity made her a kind of minister without training. So she went and got some.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

April 8, 2024



*Rogers, whose third album comes out this month, went back to school for religious studies.*  
*Photograph by Fumi Nagasaka for The New Yorker*

In the fall of 2021, the singer and songwriter Maggie Rogers entered the graduate program at Harvard Divinity School. For anyone unacquainted with the particulars of the degree Rogers was pursuing—a master’s in religion and public life—it might have sounded as though she were abandoning burgeoning pop stardom to reinvent herself as a priest. “It’s a peace-and-justice program, it’s not a seminary,” Rogers told me over dinner in Cambridge, in early February. “I’m not from any particular religious tradition. I was not trained in any particular religious tradition.” Rogers, who is

twenty-nine, was trying to make her life feel more useful and less surreal. “I woke up one day and I was famous,” she said. “I was really burnt out. I was diagnosed with chronic fatigue. I thought I wanted to quit music. A lot of what I came here to do was to think about how to create a more sustainable structure around a creative practice.” This spring, Rogers will release her third album, “Don’t Forget Me,” a breezy collection of pop-rock songs that she wrote in consecutive order, during five kinetic, bountiful days last winter. It is, in many ways, the loosest and most elemental music she’s made.

In 2016, Rogers was “discovered”—though the word almost feels too intentional—by the polymath hitmaker Pharrell Williams, while she was attending New York University. Williams visited one of Rogers’s classes at the Clive Davis Institute of Recorded Music, a program within the Tisch School of the Arts; he was an artist-in-residence there, and she was a senior. The institute is the sort of place where, say, Questlove might teach a seven-week course on the Beastie Boys, and the Beastie Boys might show up on the final day. During Williams’s visit, Rogers played him an early version of “Alaska,” a song she’d written after going to Berlin and having “a really spiritual experience” with dance music. “Club culture, for an N.Y.U. freshman or sophomore, always meant tight dresses, a certain amount of money, the meatpacking district,” Rogers said. “I didn’t have clothes for that.” The scene in Berlin was different—less preening, more raw. “They said I had to wear sneakers or I wouldn’t get in,” Rogers recalled. Meanwhile, she was learning more about how to produce and manipulate rhythm, using both analog and electronic elements (drums, bass, synthesizers, outboard gear, programming software). “I had always thought that singing was the oldest and most primal way to connect,” she said. “When I discovered the connection people can have through rhythm, something really changed.”

“Alaska” is a brittle meditation on interpersonal dissonance. “You and I, there’s air in between,” Rogers sings on the chorus. That

tension is deftly mirrored in the song's sound. There's something earthy about Rogers's presence (she was brought up in rural Maryland, and played the harp and the banjo as a teen-ager), yet the song's production is spectral, icy, electronic. Rogers told me that she wrote "Alaska" in five minutes, which is how she often works: urgently and with deep focus, as though she were channelling a faint signal.

Williams's meeting with the class was filmed. Rogers was wearing jeans, a thrifted L. L. Bean shirt, and a necklace made from two elk vertebrae strung on cooking twine. She told Williams that she had previously made only folk music. Her professor, the producer and engineer Bob Power, interrupted: "But kind of postmodern stuff, too. It was not just boom-chicka-boom-chicka." She clarified her intentions for the track. "All I want to do is kind of combine that folk imagery and harmony and natural samples that I've been picking up while hiking over the last couple years with the sort of backbone and energy of dance music," she said. "We'll see if I'm successful." As the song started to play, Rogers seemed a little unsure of where to direct her gaze. The video is endearing: a young artist presenting her work and nervously awaiting judgment. It soon becomes clear that Williams is feeling it. When the track ends, he tells her that he has "zero, zero, zero notes," and then compares her individuality to that of the Wu-Tang Clan. "I can hear the journey," Williams tells her. "I've never heard anything that sounds like that. . . . That's a drug for me."

The full thirty-minute clip of the class, including Williams's responses to other students, was uploaded to his label's YouTube channel in March of that year; in June, a fan posted Rogers's portion to Reddit. It didn't take long for the clip to go viral. One of Rogers's childhood friends, Nora Neil, remembered Rogers calling to say that she was trending on Reddit. "I was at my grandmother's house," Neil recalled. "And I said, 'I unfortunately do not know

what that means.’ That first day, those first few hours, it was, like, ‘Whoa, what is this?’ . . . Her life really did change overnight.”

Rogers was one of the first pop stars to achieve fame by unintentionally captivating the Internet, and, strangely, she was also one of the last. These days, virality is not so much a lightning strike as a marketing scheme, reverse engineered by executives and masquerading as serendipity. A. & R. representatives often scout new talent by dissecting social-media numbers, as though music could be a “Moneyball”-style game of statistics. But in 2016 the online-to-IRL catapult was still unpredictable. It was exhilarating to watch the arc of its fling.

It helped that the distinctive sound of “Alaska”—a fusion of organic and synthesized—was beginning to take hold in independent music. For a brief moment, it seemed as though drum machine meets trail mix might be the next big vibe. A bidding war broke out among interested record labels. Rogers eventually signed with Capitol, where she was given her own imprint, Debay Sounds. In early 2017, she released an adventurous, genre-bending EP, “Now That the Light Is Fading,” which included an updated version of “Alaska.” She was invited to appear on the “Tonight Show” and “Saturday Night Live,” conspicuous bookings for an artist who had officially released only a handful of songs. Those early performances were magnetic. The first time I saw her live—in April, 2017, at Music Hall of Williamsburg, a six-hundred-and-fifty-person venue in Brooklyn—the room had the charged feel of a tent revival. Onstage, Rogers can be a little wild. Her movement is spontaneous, erratic; she can appear almost possessed. In the video for “Alaska,” she strides through a forest at dusk, wearing jeans and a baggy zippered sweatshirt, her hair down, no visible makeup, periodically twisting and jerking her body in a way that reminds me of both the best modern dancers and my toddler when she hears the Supremes.

Rogers told me that when she was in middle school she won an essay contest with a piece about watching other people have fun. “I fit in *enough*—I’ve always had amazing friends,” she said. “I don’t mean to self-aggrandize, like I’m some great weirdo. I think I’m a pretty normal dude.” She paused, and laughed. “But also, I’m pretty abnormal.” She described her favorite artists as “fearless freaks,” and said that she believes a little bit of estrangement can be a useful creative tool: “To make something real, sometimes it helps to know what it’s like to not be like everybody else.”

Rogers’s first full-length album, “Heard It in a Past Life,” came out in January, 2019, and débuted at No. 2 on the *Billboard* 200. The following year, she was up for Best New Artist at the Grammys. Speaking about it now, Rogers tends to emphasize that her time line was measured, nearly quaint by some standards—almost three years passed between her viral moment and the release of her first LP—but it’s clear that the pace and the scale of her success were nonetheless unnerving. On “Light On,” a single from “Heard It in a Past Life,” Rogers sings of feeling alienated, panicked:

Tried to slow it all down  
Crying in the bathroom, had to figure it out  
With everyone around me saying  
“You must be so happy now”

“I was so young, but I was also old compared with the age of people going through it now. I got to fully develop, go to college, fuck off, and think I was gonna be a journalist,” she told me. “I was in dumb bands playing in clubs and there’s no footage of it.” The experience of being thrust into celebrity meant, ironically, that she didn’t have time to make music. “I’d never been less of an artist than when I became a professional artist,” she said. “There was a really specific moment, in 2017 or 2018, where I was at camera blocking for what must have been my fourth or fifth or sixth late-night performance singing ‘Alaska.’ I had a massive panic attack. I was just, like, ‘What the fuck is my life?’ I felt like a show pony.”



*“It’s not so much that I want to be a real, live human boy as that I’d rather be anything than a terrifying, nightmare-inducing marionette.”*

*Cartoon by Liana Finck*

Rogers’s second album, “Surrender,” from 2022—a hungry, carnal pop record about yearning for transcendence—shares a title with her master’s thesis; her appearance at Coachella in April of that year fulfilled the degree’s public-presentation component. Rogers is now in the midst of a postgraduate fellowship, which will end in May. She’s using the time to adapt her thesis into a book, a process she has found similar, in one way, to songwriting. “You have to be specific about experience,” she said. The manuscript focusses on the idea of creativity as a form of religion, and stardom as a kind of default modern pulpit. “Early in my career, people were using religious language to describe my shows,” she said. *“Rolling Stone* published a piece in 2019 with the headline ‘Maggie Rogers: Festival Healer.’ The BBC published one that said ‘Billie Eilish is my cult leader. . . . Maggie is my God.’ ”

Headlines are overblown by design, but her audience’s devotion—something akin to worship—was real. The tumult of the Trump Administration and the pandemic meant that Rogers’s fans, like

everyone, were increasingly desperate for moral guidance. But Rogers was, too. “I was looking for answers, just the same as everybody else,” she said. “It was really jarring—people asking me for advice on suicide, or to perform marriages. I started to realize that there was this functional misalignment with the work that I had trained to do and the work that I was being asked to perform. I was put in this unconventional ministerial position without having undergone any of the training. Anyway, that’s how I made it to divinity school. What I ended up doing was developing a system for myself to hold these things. And then I went out and tested it.”

On a recent press tour in Britain, Rogers was reminded of how much more at ease she feels now. “I was being asked to do quippy promo stuff,” she said. “But that’s not who I am or what I do. The twenty-two-year-old version of me just wanted to be great at this thing. But I can’t improv with you—I can’t be the cool, funny girl.” She went on, “I wanted to have this life, and I was willing to do whatever I needed to do to support it. But then I learned that there had to be boundaries, because I’d walk away feeling like I’d betrayed myself.”

After our dinner, Rogers suggested that we visit the Emerson Chapel, a stately, wood-panelled room where she took a writing class with the author and conservationist Terry Tempest Williams. She zipped up a long parka, and we walked across Cambridge, propelled by a glacial wind. The campus was quiet. Rogers swiped us into the building. In 1838, the transcendentalist poet-philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered his Divinity School Address to a group of six graduates and their theology professors in the room. Emerson had resigned from his position as a Unitarian minister after growing frustrated by the way that Church doctrine cloistered the sacred and the profane. In his address, he suggested that God is present in everything. “He was basically, like, ‘What if the light outside was God?’” Rogers said. The room smelled of lemon oil. “I only feel ready for this *now*,” she said, of her career. “I feel O.K.

in the center of it. Finally.” We hung around, admiring the stained glass and the pipe organ, until a security guard appeared in the doorway and said that it was time to leave.

Rogers made “Don’t Forget Me” at Electric Lady, a recording studio on West Eighth Street, in Greenwich Village. One afternoon, she offered to give me a tour. The studio was built in 1970 for Jimi Hendrix, who died less than a month after it opened but remains its guiding spirit; in a portrait that hangs in a stairwell, he’s wearing some kind of exquisite jacket, four or five necklaces, a thin mustache. His eyes are cast downward. The air smells permanently of palo santo. On a coffee table were bowls of fresh fruit and jelly beans, and a copy of that morning’s *Times*. Rogers used to live on West Fourth Street. “I studied studios,” she said. “I would walk by every day and look at my reflection in the mirrored glass and be, like, ‘I wonder if I’ll ever get to record here.’ It was a place that I saw myself literally, physically reflected in, during a moment in my life where I was still really, really, really dreaming.”

Even though “Don’t Forget Me” wouldn’t be released for another month, Rogers was already working on songs for her next album. She speaks about songwriting as a full-body process. “When I’m writing, the first thing I do is take my shoes off. My hands get hot. It’s so fucking physical,” she said. The work also seems to require a kind of spiritual stillness. “It’s like a puzzle,” she said. “If you can keep your focus on it for long enough, it appears. It’s *right there*—but the second your brain moves it’s gone.” She often enters a kind of hyper-focussed state. “When I’m onstage, or when I’m making something, I’m not thinking about who I am or what I’m trying to do. Time gets really sinewy. It’s spidery and slow. There’s wonder. And it’s just special, and I’m *in it*, and my hands are up, and I’m figuring it out. And then I come out of it, and it doesn’t even ever feel like it was mine to begin with.”

Since “Heard It in a Past Life,” Rogers has mostly eschewed dance music for a fuller, more rock-and-roll-inflected sound. “Don’t

Forget Me” reminds me of the mid-seventies output of Linda Ronstadt and Carole King—burly, coltish, tender, fun. Rogers is no longer reliant on confessional first-person writing. “I was picturing a girl in her twenties on a road trip,” she said. “In my brain, this record takes place within the span of twenty-four or forty-eight hours. It felt like writing a movie, scene by scene.” One track, “Never Going Home,” is a rollicking, propulsive recounting of a night out, part Shania Twain, part Sheryl Crow: “We get to talking, but those lips aren’t your lips / We lean together, those hips aren’t your hips,” Rogers sings. She told me, “I’ve never lived that story, but I can picture a version of my life where I was going through a breakup and a friend was, like, ‘Shut the fuck up, we’re going out,’ and took me dancing and made me make out with some guy.” Inhabiting different characters enabled Rogers to be goofier, friskier, more mischievous. “So Sick of Dreaming” contains a chatty spoken interlude about getting stood up at a steak house which ends with “I mean, what a loser!” I told Rogers that there was a giddiness to her delivery on this album that I hadn’t heard before. “My friends all said, ‘This is the side of you that we see,’ ” she said.

Rogers wrote most of the record with the producer Ian Fitchuk. They met in Los Angeles in 2019, when Fitchuk was there for the Grammy Awards. (He was a co-writer and co-producer on Kacey Musgraves’s “Golden Hour,” which won both Album of the Year and Best Country Album.) Rogers was having dinner with the writer Lizzy Goodman, who, years earlier, had hired Rogers as an intern and tasked her with transcribing many of the hundreds of hours of interviews that later made up “Meet Me in the Bathroom,” Goodman’s oral history of the post-9/11 downtown rock scene. After dinner, Rogers and Goodman were going to see the Strokes. “I scared her when I said hi and introduced myself,” Fitchuk recalled. In November, 2022, Rogers sent him a D.M. “We hopped on the phone, and he said, ‘You haven’t captured your live performance on a record yet.’ And I was, like, ‘Yeah, that’s

completely true,’ ” she told me. “My record brain and my performance brain are binary. They’ve always felt like separate crafts to me, in a way. The spontaneity is the through line.”

She and Fitchuk booked studio time that December. “I didn’t have any songs written, there was no mood board, no color board, no feeling of ‘I need to document this thing in my life.’ Everything, *everything*, was a first take,” Rogers said. “I was playing instruments. Ian was playing instruments. I knew when something felt like me and when it didn’t. It was really instinctual.” She added, “We worked from ten to five. I went to dinner with my friends after.”

“Often, a song was fully formed in less than an hour, and then it was on to the next,” Fitchuk said. “I find that it’s easier to work with artists who have strong opinions,” he added. “It makes it easier to know when you’re on the right path.”

Despite the album’s effervescence, many of its tracks describe the protracted dissolution of a romantic relationship. “So much of this record is a breakup album,” Rogers said. “In the time since I made it, I actually *have* gone through a breakup.” That relationship, which Rogers said lasted five years, ended peacefully. “I’ve really grappled with that for the last couple months,” she said. “What does it mean? It wasn’t a premonition.” For now, Rogers described her heartache as falling in love backward. “You’re as on fire and awake to the world,” she said. “Music sounds better. Food sucks.” She added, “I’ve never been single, really. I’m in a grief season with it. But I also feel a sense of freedom.”

I told Rogers that I’d noticed a theme in her lyrics: the possibility of loving someone without possessiveness or panic. “Oh,” she said. “That’s cool. That’s how I feel about love.” She paused. “I think, in choosing someone, I want to be chosen back. You know? So much of this record is about mutual culpability.” She continued, “The art that means the most to me has some friction. To me, living a

beautiful life is so much about devotion, and devotion to art is about telling the truth. That's not always an easy story to tell, especially when it points back to 'I'm fucked up, too.' ”

In late February, Rogers performed at Carnegie Hall, as part of a benefit concert for Tibet House, a nonprofit created at the behest of the Dalai Lama, to protect Tibetan culture under Chinese occupation. The composer Philip Glass, a co-founder of the U.S. iteration of the organization, had sent Rogers a handwritten letter inviting her to participate. “I think you would enjoy it,” he had said.

Rogers told me that she was thinking about dressing “like Beethoven” for the event, and pulled up a selfie in which she was wearing black suit trousers paired with a white ruffled shirt, not unlike the infamous frilly blouse featured in the “Seinfeld” episode “The Puffy Shirt.” “I love clothes,” she told me later. “I love the world-building. That’s the childlike part of me. It’s also an environmental factor that helps me switch between my different brains. Putting the uniform on.” When she performed on the “Today” show shortly after “Heard It in a Past Life” came out, she wore a vintage T-shirt with a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt on it, tucked into high-waisted silk pants. “I was so terrified of being sexualized in any way that I kind of crushed my own sexuality in an effort to protect myself,” she said. Now her look alternates between vaguely professorial and something more glamorous. She has adopted a different hair style for each record, including long, surfer-girl waves for “Heard It in a Past Life” and a dramatic pixie cut for “Surrender.” These days, she wears her hair golden and shoulder-length. “It’s not, like, a pop-star thing,” she said, of the changes. “Anyone who’s known me for ten-plus years is, like, ‘Oh, we’re doing this again?’ I had a pixie cut in the sixth grade, in the eleventh grade, and my sophomore year of college.” I brought up a line from “Alaska.” (“Cut my hair so I could rock back and forth / Without thinking of you.”) “Thank you!” she said, laughing.

“I have receipts! To me, it’s about the externalization of an internal transition. It’s sort of the same way I’m not good at hiding the way I feel. I’ll tell you. Or you can just check out my haircut.”

At rehearsals the day before the Carnegie Hall show, Rogers met Joan Baez, who was also scheduled to perform. Rogers told me that she had long admired Baez and her “writer-bohemian” contemporaries, such as Patti Smith and Joni Mitchell. “That’s the lineage that I want to write into,” Rogers said. While the rock band Gogol Bordello ran through its set, Rogers, Baez, and the avant-garde musician Laurie Anderson danced wildly on the side of the stage. Baez was doing a kind of euphoric jig; Anderson launched into a “Saturday Night Fever”-style arm roll. Rogers moved freely, lightly up and down, a blissful bounce that looked more like levitation.

Later that afternoon, Rogers and Baez decided to sing Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” together onstage. Dylan wrote the song in 1962. It’s the most treacherous kind of breakup tune, a little bitter, a little devastated: “I’m a-thinking and a-wonderin’ walking down the road / I once loved a woman, a child, I’m told / I give her my heart but she wanted my soul / But don’t think twice, it’s all right.” Rogers called her parents and encouraged them to come up from Maryland for the concert.

The next evening began with a chanted prayer by Tibetan monks, followed by Anderson performing a version of her song “Walk the Dog,” infused with spoken koans: “We don’t know where we come from,” she intoned. “We don’t know what we are.” What followed was appealingly loose. There were some sound problems—at one point, Michael Riesman, of the Philip Glass Ensemble, performing a section of “Music in Twelve Parts,” abruptly stood up from his keyboard and strode toward the sound board, looking pissed—but the energy was pure. “I am here to read an Allen Ginsberg poem while wearing Fenty Beauty concealer,” the comedian Bowen Yang announced, before reciting “Who Be Kind To,” a lusty and ecstatic

piece from 1965. (“Desire given with meat hand and cock, desire taken with / mouth and ass, desire returned.”)

Rogers had nixed the Beethoven ensemble and was wearing a less aggressively collared shirt. She ran through an acoustic version of “Alaska,” backed by the Scorchio Quartet. It was followed by “Don’t Forget Me,” accompanied by the Patti Smith Band.

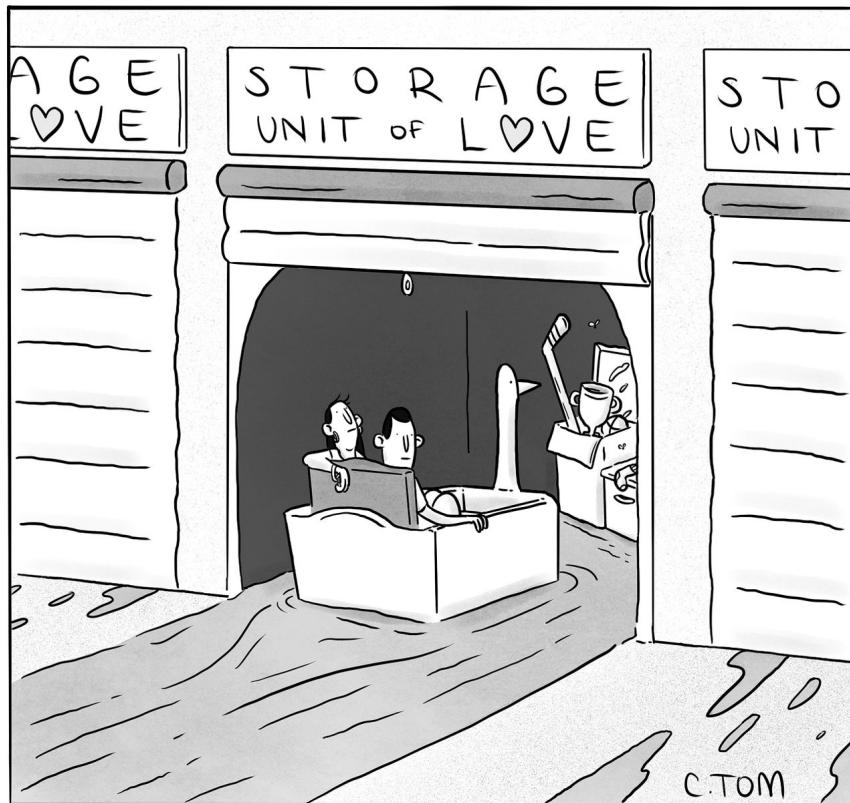
Rogers’s voice gets a little raw on the chorus:

So close the door and change the channel  
Give me something I can handle  
A good lover, or someone who’s nice to me  
Take my money, wreck my Sundays  
Love me til your next somebody  
Oh, but promise me that when it’s time to leave  
Don’t forget me

Soon after that, it was time for the duet. Dylan likely didn’t write “Don’t Think Twice” about Baez, though they were involved in the early sixties, breaking up for good in 1965, as Dylan’s career was taking off. “I think about her and Bob Dylan—it just makes me want to fucking wreck that dude,” Rogers told me. “That song—the more I play it, the more I’m, like, ‘This shit’s fucking sad.’ ‘Don’t Forget Me,’ too. Both are sad as shit. The idea that the baseline is just someone to be nice to me—fuck, man.” Baez’s voice is lower, heavier, and grittier these days; when Rogers joined in for harmonies, it felt like a butterfly landing on a tree branch. They swapped the song’s pronouns (“I once loved a boy, a child, I’m told,” they bellowed), which gave it a pleasantly vengeful feel. The crowd went nuts. Later on, offstage, Baez told Rogers, “You sang all the notes I would have sung.”

Beginning when she was nine, Rogers spent her summers at Wohelo, an all-girls camp founded in 1907, on Sebago Lake, in Maine. There is no electricity or running water in the cabins. One morning, she texted me some old, sepia-toned photos of the place:

girls in modest bathing costumes, rowing canoes. “I learned to write letters,” she said. “There were limits on technology in my life growing up that kept my inner kid safe for a long time.” For high school, she attended St. Andrew’s, a boarding school situated on more than two thousand bucolic, wooded acres in Middletown, Delaware. These traditional institutions—including, more recently, Harvard—are steeped in a sense of stoicism, seriousness, and erudition. They have had an undeniable aesthetic and spiritual influence on her. “It wasn’t until I saw ‘The Holdovers’ that I was, like, ‘I am *deeply* the product of this environment,’ ” Rogers told me. “I’m so obsessed with creating something that feels timeless but modern.”



Cartoon by Colin Tom

Rogers, by her own admission, can be intense. “I’m so fucking headstrong,” she told me one morning. We were eating fried eggs at Washington Square Diner, an old-school breakfast joint near N.Y.U. “I’m not wishy-washy in any way. People get scared of me. But the right people aren’t scared.” In conversation, Rogers is open, generous, and cerebral. But she is not prone to abiding

anity. (Once, when I was pestering her to describe her childhood, she stopped me, suggested that I could probably find most of the information I was looking for online, and then said, “This is a little bit like fact-check-y speed dating,” which did not feel like a celebration of my reportorial prowess.) “I’m fundamentally in the business of selling my own emotions,” she said. “There has to be some real humanity kept sacred.”

It’s easy to be skeptical of artists who suggest that no, really, they can take it or leave it—celebrity requires constant and effortful maintenance, after all—but I came to believe Rogers when she said that she was more interested in the process of making things than in whatever happens afterward. For years, I heard the single “Light On” as about love doomed by bad timing—a person asking, earnestly, What if there was a way for us to hold and care for one another, beyond the sometimes impossible confines of a traditional relationship? The chorus presents a kind of compromise:

If you keep reaching out  
Then I’ll keep coming back  
If you’re gone for good  
Then I’m okay with that  
If you leave the light on  
Then I’ll leave the light on

During my time with Rogers, I started to hear the song as a rejoinder to fame. The sort of attention that she commanded at the start of her career has been supplanted by a quieter, steadier sort of stardom, and she is now focussed, she said, on recognizing “that the cup is full, and not overflowing, and how nice that is.” Buttering a triangle of toast, she continued, “That’s even better—there’s no mess. I’m trying to have a good time, and make shit that I love with people I love. If that works, if it communicates or connects, awesome. If it doesn’t, eighty thousand other records came out that day. It’s O.K.!“ She went on, “On ‘Heard It in a Past Life,’ I was very commercially ambitious. On ‘Surrender,’ I was

very artistically ambitious. Now I'm in this era where it feels very personally ambitious, in the sense that I'm just trying to have the best time while I'm here."

Musically, a focus on pleasure seems to suit her. The songs on "Don't Forget Me" aren't quite as tonally striking as "Alaska," but they have an intoxicating ease: Rogers sounds unhurried, languid, free. I hear the single "So Sick of Dreaming" as a kind of modern companion piece to Linda Ronstadt's "When Will I Be Loved," a No. 1 country hit in 1975, written by the Everly Brothers. Both are refutations of selfish lovers, though "So Sick of Dreaming" contains a bolder declaration of independence. "I'm so sick of dreaming," Rogers sings. "Oh, I'm all that I'm needing."

I asked Rogers if she ever wished that her rise to fame had come about differently. She thought for a moment. "I wish that I had uploaded 'Alaska' myself," she said. "But, because of the way it happened, this deeply unguarded version of myself as a student is the version people first saw. My authenticity was full and center. I didn't have the chance to put on the mask." She has also had to contend with another very famous person being an inextricable piece of her origin story. "I was being asked about him every single day, and had to be, like, 'I don't know him. You've seen everything,'" she said. More recently, she and Williams have reconnected. "Pharrell and I are friends now. He's so cool—duh."

The experience of performing "Alaska" at Carnegie Hall, in front of people culled from various corners of her life—her parents, classmates from Harvard, old professors, her musical peers, Joan Baez—felt like an apotheosis. "I'm gonna get emotional talking about it," Rogers said, her eyes slowly filling with tears. "It's been almost ten years since I wrote that song. I was thinking about the person who I was when I wrote it, and thinking about where I am now. I think the girl who wrote that song would be really proud." She has been experiencing a lot of moments like this lately. In late March, she performed with Bruce Springsteen and the country

singer Zach Bryan at the Barclays Center. “Craziest shit in the entire world,” she said the next morning. “My hand is purple. I overenthusiastically tambourined and gave myself a bruise.”

Rogers recently bought an apartment in New York. It was on a list of three things (find an apartment, release a new album, finish the book) that she wants to do before she turns thirty, at the end of April. One afternoon, she and I decided to visit the Dream House, a site-specific “sound and light environment” conceived in the nineteen-sixties by the minimalist composer La Monte Young and his wife, the multimedia artist Marian Zazeela. The Dream House has been situated in a two-room, third-floor space in Tribeca since 1993. (Young, who is eighty-eight, lives downstairs; Zazeela died last month.) Inside, two atonal compositions (one by Young and one by the artist Jung Hee Choi) play on large speakers. Neither of the pieces gestures toward melody or rhythm, and, because of the way that the speakers are arranged, every movement, however slight—a breath, a blink—changes the shape of the sound. Zazeela’s lights give the room a cool, pinkish-purplish glow. If you’ve ever walked by a buzzing neon sign late at night and wondered what it would be like if you could squeeze your entire body inside and slowly dissociate from time and space—welcome to the Dream House.

Shoes are not allowed, and, given the volume, talking isn’t possible. If you arrive with a companion, you will have to figure out a subtle little gesture to indicate to each other that your insides have been rearranged and you are ready to depart. The space features thick white carpeting. A stick of incense is perpetually crumbling to ash. After a while, Rogers and I sort of loonily nodded at each other, and stumbled back onto the street. She asked me if I knew how long we’d been inside. Time felt elastic. I guessed that it had been fifteen minutes—thirty, tops—though it had actually been an hour. “Dude,” Rogers said.

Outside, it was bracingly cold. We wandered around until we found a tiny champagne bar, which felt like an appropriate coda. Inside, we toasted to the Dream House, to dreams, to dreaming. Rogers said she's trying to inch further away from the isolation of what she refers to as "first name, last name" pop stardom. It has been helpful to focus on music as an inherently communal practice, shared with her collaborators and her fans. "I had all these moments in the early years where I felt really alone," she said. "I was putting so much of it onto one leg. Now it's a tripod, and it's so much more sturdy." ♦



*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](#).”

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## Battling Under a Canopy of Drones

*The commander of one of Ukraine’s most skilled units sent his men on a dangerous mission that required them to outmaneuver a swarm of aerial threats.*

By [Luke Mogelson](#)

April 8, 2024



*“First-person view” drones, which the Ukrainians began experimenting with last year, are now also used by the Russians. The proliferation of these aircraft has rendered all front-line troop movements, especially in vehicles, vulnerable to precision strikes. Many drones have thermal cameras that can detect human bodies in the dark.*

*Photographs by Maxim Dondyuk for The New Yorker*

Members of Ukraine’s 1st Separate Assault Battalion describe themselves as firemen. Their job is to rapidly deploy to areas along the front that are in danger of collapse. Lately, their service has been in high demand: the front is burning. A large-scale counter-offensive last year failed to achieve meaningful victories, and since then Russia has been on the attack. One of its priorities appears to be Kupyansk, a city in northeastern Ukraine, some twenty miles from the Russian border. According to the Ukrainian military,

Russia has amassed forty thousand troops near the city, which it has been bombarding for months. In January, after Russian forces routed Ukrainian soldiers from an uninhabited settlement outside Kupyansk called Tabaivka, the 1st Separate Assault Battalion was directed to halt and, if possible, reverse the enemy's advance.

This piece was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

I embedded with the battalion three days later. The government had mandated an evacuation of Kupyansk in August, and, as my translator and I entered the city, its ghostly silence was punctuated by the sound of incoming and outgoing munitions. Huge craters gaped on the roadside; factories lay in ruins. Kupyansk sits on a hill that slopes down to the Oskil River. The main bridge had been destroyed, but a makeshift earthwork allowed vehicles to cross. Tank wreckage littered the mud, and smoke meant to thwart laser-guided missiles billowed from a cannister.

The front line was less than ten miles away, and the battalion had chosen a village between there and the Oskil for its temporary headquarters. About two hundred members of the unit would be participating in the mission; they had been on the ground for barely seventy-two hours but had already scouted the no man's land, established sniper positions, and begun shelling Tabaivka with artillery. The officers had not yet found a suitable location in which to base themselves and were working out of a box truck whose interior had been converted into a mobile operations center.

The commander sat at the head of a table, studying a map. His call sign was Perun—the name of a Zeus-like god from Slavic mythology—and he looked the part. He was tall and trim, with a razored scalp and a traditional Cossack mustache that drooped to his jaw. He'd served in the Army for five years in the early two-thousands, and was discharged when he was twenty-five. As a civilian, Perun built a lucrative business fabricating and installing doors with intercom systems, which are ubiquitous in Ukraine.

Many of his customers were in the Donbas, the eastern region where, in 2014, Russia incited and backed a separatist uprising. Perun continued to work there, regularly crossing separatist checkpoints in a van loaded with doors and welding equipment. He sometimes transported rifles and explosives, which he used to assassinate Russian agents and their local proxies. Perun said that he performed his guerrilla activities on his own, “unofficially,” without oversight from the Ukrainian government. “No one suspected me,” he recounted. “I was wearing overalls, and I had my tools.” His doors were so heavy that soldiers never bothered to look underneath them.

After Russia launched its full-scale invasion, in February, 2022, Perun joined a reconnaissance unit and assembled a small team that ambushed and sabotaged Russian forces behind the lines. He named the team the Wild Fields, a historical term for the Pontic-Caspian steppe. The Wild Fields earned a reputation for audacity and effectiveness, and was integrated into the 1st Separate Assault Battalion, which at the time was led by Dmytro Kotsiubailo, a twenty-seven-year-old who went by the call sign da Vinci.

Kotsiubailo was both the youngest battalion commander in the Ukrainian military and among its most celebrated. He was killed in March, 2023, outside Bakhmut, and subsequent internal disputes culminated in about half his former subordinates transferring to a different brigade. Perun was placed in charge of running the assault missions for those who remained.

Da Vinci’s death, like the fall of Bakhmut, a couple of months later, reflected a grim shift in the war, which has devolved into an attritional grind with catastrophic losses on both sides. It is unknown how many Ukrainian service members have been killed. President Volodymyr Zelensky has put the toll at thirty-one thousand, but that figure is risible—the real number is much higher. Perun attributed the stalemate and the soaring casualty numbers in part to the “recklessness” of Ukrainian commanders who lacked

“military cunning.” He criticized his country’s prevailing approach as too much like Russia’s: “generals drawing arrows on a map” and “throwing piles of people into frontal attacks.” He had little formal education in strategy—on paper, he was a lieutenant—but his exploits in the Donbas and with the Wild Fields had taught him the importance of guile and creativity in the face of a more powerful adversary. The plan that he had devised to retake Tabaivka would rely on both.

Most of the civilian population had fled the village where the battalion had based itself, leaving plenty of empty homes for the soldiers to commandeer. The day after I met Perun, the operations center was moved into a basement with a low concrete ceiling and a dirt floor. Bricks and refuse had been shoved aside, fluorescent tube lights installed, salvaged chairs and tables arrayed. Monitors showed aerial footage from surveillance drones, and various radios and landline telephones blinked in a corner. On the wall hung a flag with the Wild Fields insignia: an angel of death playing a flute while sitting atop three skulls, with a raven on his shoulder. “The raven represents our accumulated wisdom,” Perun told me. “The flute symbolizes the fact that we treat our work as an art. We derive a kind of joy from it—not from killing people but from the successful execution of our tasks.”

An eighty-six-inch digital interactive panel, fixed to an easel, displayed a satellite image of Tabaivka. On the southern and eastern margins of the map, several tree stands were circled in red: they belonged to the Russians. On the western margin, a series of blue triangles along an elevated ridge indicated Ukrainian trenches. Between the two lay the zone from which Ukrainian forces had retreated—a wide swath of wetland and scattered brush, with a few demolished farmhouses—divided into forty-two numbered squares, each a couple of acres in size. Although a Russian platoon of up to thirty soldiers now occupied this zone, the squares were blue, because Perun intended to make them Ukrainian again.

A road descending from the ridge cut straight through Tabaivka, and the conventional thing to do would have been to send some tanks or armored vehicles down it. Recent technological developments have made such brute assaults suicidal, however. Last year, the Ukrainians began experimenting with a new kind of drone, called an F.P.V., for “first-person view.” The name refers to the video goggles that the pilots wear, which resemble virtual-reality headsets. Paradoxically, the key innovation of F.P.V.s is their rudimentary design: they are smaller and lighter than commercial drones, making them quicker and more maneuverable, and they consist of cheap components, some of which can be 3-D-printed. Most F.P.V.s are sacrificed as kamikaze weapons, with payloads zip-tied to their frames. It is exceedingly difficult to shell mobile targets; F.P.V.s can just crash into them.

Although Ukraine introduced F.P.V.s to the war, Russia promptly grasped their utility and now mass-produces them. The proliferation of F.P.V.s has rendered all front-line troop movements, especially in vehicles, vulnerable to precision strikes. This outcome is emblematic of a vicious cycle in which Russia absorbs Ukrainian ingenuity and turns it back against Ukraine, spurring further lethal ingenuity. “They learn,” Perun said. “At the start of the war, we were killing them easily. But everything has changed.”

During the first few days that I spent with the battalion, five men were wounded and hospitalized after being spotted by drones. A sniper was attacked by a swarm of F.P.V.s that snagged and detonated in the tree branches above his foxhole, sparing him. The sniper told me that he’d heard the drones zipping down at high speeds, which led him to suppose that their pilots were novices: usually F.P.V.s descend slowly through the canopy, then accelerate at you.

Perun had decided that, instead of a mechanized blitz, a small number of his soldiers would infiltrate Tabaivka stealthily on foot. These men would then skirt the contested zone of blue squares,

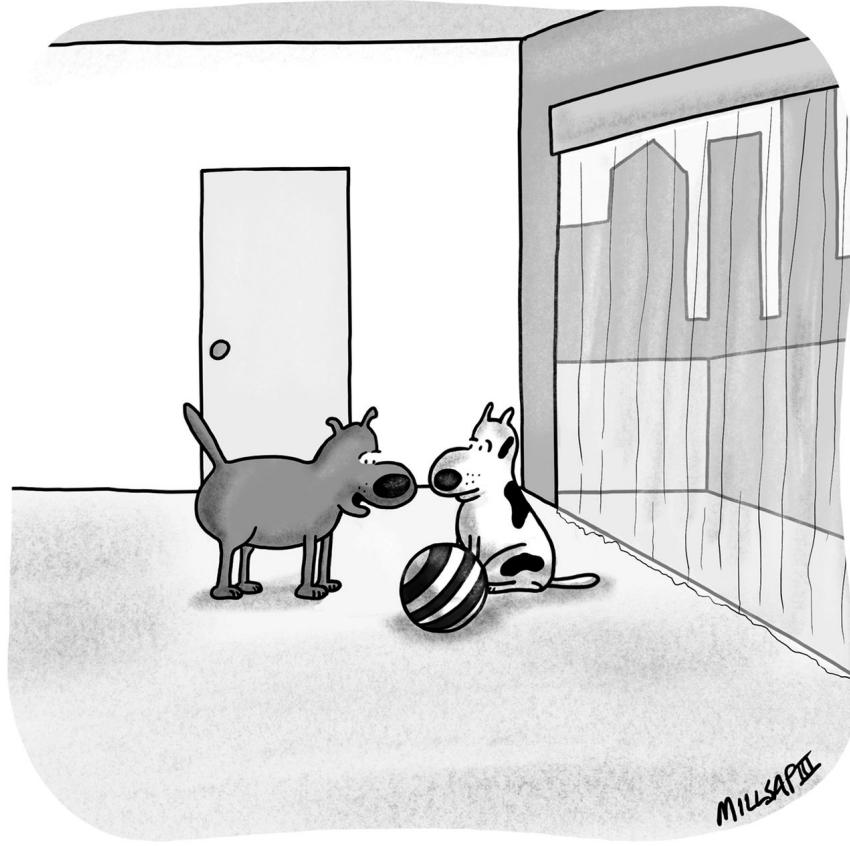
hook behind the Russian platoon, and trap it against the Ukrainians on the ridge. Because surveillance drones are now typically equipped with thermal cameras that register the heat signatures of human bodies, the cover of darkness would be insufficient for the team to elude detection. The mission was therefore contingent on weather that would prevent both Ukrainian and Russian drones from flying. “We need to do it blindly,” Perun explained. “We’re trying to use the element of surprise to appear where they’re not expecting us.”

Heavy snow was forecast for the coming days.

Perun knew that the Russians could dispatch reinforcements down the road that bisected Tabaivka, and he wanted to deprive them of that option ahead of the infiltration, by blowing up a small bridge over a creek. Such a job would normally fall to sappers, but Perun had at his disposal an electric land drone with all-terrain tires and a rocket launcher, as well as an F.P.V. controller and goggles. The device had been built in one of his company’s factories. I later visited the factory, which his twenty-three-year-old daughter, Yulia, managed. She showed me several rejected prototypes of the land drone, in a warehouse full of lathes, planers, mills, and other metalworking tools used for making intercom doors.

Outside the operations center, a soldier hitched a small trailer to the back of the land drone, which was a bit bigger than a Radio Flyer wagon, and loaded it with thirty antitank mines. The soldier was code-named Chub; two decades earlier, he’d served in the Army with Perun. Chub had gone on to become an electrical engineer, honing his faculty for all things mechanical and computational. When I asked his age, he said, “Forty-two years, three months, and one day.” He’d joined the battalion “a year and ten days ago,” and had been a reconnaissance soldier until he was wounded in Bakhmut. Now he walked with a limp. The land drone, which Chub had helped develop while recovering from his injury, included a flat platform on which he could ride to and from

Tabaivka. A pin in the hitch could be retracted via the controller, enabling Chub to deposit the mine-stacked trailer remotely. Later, in an apartment that he shared with Perun—and where I was also staying—I watched Chub rig up an antenna for the controller with wires, tape, and a fishing rod.



*"I don't know how this thing works, but it brings me an endless amount of joy."*

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

The antenna's range was less than a mile, meaning that Chub would have to sneak beyond the Ukrainian-held ridge to insure a stable connection. When I asked whether he was nervous about venturing into the no man's land with more than six hundred pounds of T.N.T., he answered in his typically logical fashion: "The main thing is not that you are not afraid—everyone is afraid. The ones who were not afraid were the first to be killed." The main thing was not to "break down because of fear."

Some days later, a monitor in the operations center relayed a live aerial feed of the land drone travelling up the road into Tabaivka. The electric motor was almost invisible on the thermal video: a

faint smudge that you would not have noticed unless you were looking for it. When Chub triggered a detonator lodged in one of the mines, an enormous cloud of flame roiled up from the now impassable bridge.

While Chub had been loading the trailer, a woman walking up the street, pushing a bicycle, had stopped to watch. Chub had stared at her until she'd continued on her way. "I suspect everyone," he told me. "Locals sometimes help the Russians."

In February, 2022, while Ukrainian forces scrambled to defend Kyiv from an armored Russian column bearing south from Belarus, other Russian contingents, approaching from the east, encountered less resistance. After the mayor of Kupyansk received a phone call from a Russian commander, he surrendered the city without a fight. (Ukraine later charged the mayor, in absentia, with treason.) Some residents of Kupyansk confronted Russian soldiers in the streets, but dissent was soon quashed; later investigations revealed executions and cases of torture. In the village where 1st Battalion was based, a small grocery store had stayed open throughout the Russian occupation. "It was hell," Lyuda, a forty-five-year-old cashier, told me. She excused herself and went into a back room; when she returned, I saw that she'd been crying. She described a tyrannical regime of arbitrary abuse and detention, murders, and constant dread exacerbated by an "informational vacuum." Without Internet or cell service, the only news source had been a single Russian radio station.

Six months into the occupation, the Ukrainian military stunned Russia with a lightning offensive in the Kharkiv region, liberating dozens of towns and cities, including Kupyansk. When the Russians withdrew from Lyuda's village, she believed that the worst was over. Her optimism had since turned to despair. The war was inching back. One night, Perun and Chub's apartment was shaken by a series of blasts, accompanied by bright flashes, and the next morning I found neighbors repairing broken doors and nailing

plywood over shattered windows. A kitchen had been levelled. A seventy-year-old retired farmer named Volodymyr, with gold teeth and plastic-framed glasses, was inspecting a front gate that had been blown off its hinges. He'd built the house himself, more than twenty years ago. "I love this land," Volodymyr told me. "I'll stay until they kill me."

Lyuda was less resolute. She'd sent her daughter away, and her husband was now fighting on the southern front. Her bags were packed: she was prepared to leave the moment the Russians broke through from Tabaivka. "If they come back, I think it will be another Bucha," she said, referring to mass killings that occurred outside Kyiv in 2022.

There was more at stake than just the village. If Russian forces reached the Oskil River, Ukrainian units to the east of Kupyansk would be imperilled. Eliminating a platoon in Tabaivka wouldn't stop the Russians, but it was a step toward putting them on the defensive. One of the tree stands circled in red on the map was believed to conceal hundreds of enemy troops, and the forthcoming assault would help interrupt their supply routes. Perun was determined to avoid a direct clash with those soldiers. In July, during the counter-offensive, he had been ordered to recapture similar terrain elsewhere on the front—and to do so immediately, without conducting proper reconnaissance or formulating a plan. "We were just hurled straight at them," one 1st Battalion officer recounted. "Like two freight trains colliding." A nine-hour firefight ensued. Eighteen members of the battalion were killed and many more were wounded.

According to the officer, the higher Ukrainian command was "always pushing us to work quicker, quicker," no matter the cost. While Perun was waiting for it to snow, he received daily phone calls from superiors who wanted to launch the mission regardless of the weather. "Colonels see war as an opportunity to become generals," he told me; generals were less interested in the welfare

of their troops than in “squabbles over military decorations.” Perun had no career ambitions in the Army, affording him a degree of independence. When I asked how he handled pressure from superiors, he said, “I smile and ignore them.” Of course, that was an oversimplification, and I had the sense that preserving the lives of his men required Perun to play two games of “military cunning” simultaneously: one against the enemy, the other against his own hierarchy.

We’d been in the village for almost a week when Perun summoned his officers and sergeants to the operations center. Time was running out. He was worried that if they delayed much longer they might be redeployed to another hot spot, wasting their meticulous preparations for Tabaivka. After going over some adjustments to the plan, Perun turned to a thirty-five-year-old junior lieutenant who stood in front of the interactive panel, peering at the map through prescription ballistic glasses.

“Do you agree?” Perun asked him.

The lieutenant, whose call sign was Sever, would lead the twelve-man team of *shturmoviki*, or “stormers,” spearheading the ground assault. Unlike Perun, nothing about Sever suggested his vocation. He was short, with a slight paunch, and so soft-spoken that you had to strain to hear him. A bandage was taped across his brow. The previous night, he’d been riding in the bed of a truck that had plowed into a crater. One of his men had broken a leg.

Sever pointed at a tree line circled in red. A three-hundred-yard gap separated it from the blue squares. “If we’re forced to fight them, I’ll need more people,” he said.

Perun scoffed, “You are proposing more people so that you can *attack* the tree line? This is a stupid idea, Sever, honestly.” He reminded the lieutenant that the objective was to flank the Russians in the blue squares without being noticed. The three-hundred-yard

gap was a natural buffer that neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces could traverse without exposing themselves to enemy fire. Perun chided Sever: “Imagine a machine gun opens up on you—what will you do?”

“Pull back a bit, and then kill the fucker.”

“In my experience, when the machine gun opens up, everyone will shit his pants and fall to the ground where he’s standing.”

Sever grinned and conceded, “One hundred per cent.”

“Let’s not repeat the mistake of moving big groups and getting them killed,” another officer said. “The smaller the group, the harder it will be to spot.”

“I would like to keep the plan as it is,” Perun told Sever. “But it’s up to you. If you want more guys, tell me how many and what you will do with them.”

Sever approached the interactive panel. He’d been fighting off and on for almost a decade, since Russian forces had first entered the Donbas. He had no wife or children; he’d mordantly joked to me, “I’m the ideal soldier.” He would rather have become an architect or a builder. “I always dreamed of making a bridge or a house, creating something useful,” he’d said. “Now I just destroy bridges and houses. I guess it’s my fate to leave destruction behind me.”

Most of the veterans in the battalion had been so close to death so many times that they seemed to have accepted its company, and this acceptance appeared to have fostered uncannily placid demeanors. Sever, though, was an extreme case. His movements were sluggish, his handshake limp, and a deep ruefulness informed his subdued speech. All this felt less symptomatic of inward calm than of profound fatigue and, perhaps, depression. Nevertheless, according to Perun, Sever was the battalion’s most aggressive

officer, often to the point of heedlessness. “When he asks for more people, I know what he wants to do,” Perun said. “So I try to cool him down.”

Sever turned from the map and shrugged. “Let’s leave it as it is,” he told Perun.

In the trench warfare of eastern Ukraine, assault units such as 1st Battalion move the line forward—then regular infantry units must hold and defend it. The soldiers who would assume responsibility for Tabaivka if 1st Battalion reclaimed it belonged to a brigade in the Territorial Defense Forces, or T.D.F. After Russia’s invasion, the T.D.F., a type of national guard, absorbed more than a hundred thousand civilian volunteers and reservists. Most were initially posted to checkpoints and other rearward duties in their native regions, but that changed as the Army hemorrhaged personnel. The T.D.F. brigade assigned to Tabaivka came from Lviv, in western Ukraine, and many of its members had enlisted at the war’s outset; presumably, few of them envisaged fighting two years later, seven hundred miles from home.

A few nights after the briefing in the operations center, Sever visited a house where twelve T.D.F. soldiers were lodging. During the mission, they would follow behind Sever and his stormers, digging trenches and foxholes and remaining in the positions that the team cleared. Sever called them “the anchor group.” When he entered the house, the men were crammed into a bedroom with a foldout couch and framed photographs of the family that once lived there. They had not yet unpacked, having just arrived. They were replacements for a previous anchor group whose members I had met the night before. Those men had told me that their commander had tricked them into volunteering for the mission by assuring them that they would be guarding a base. When I’d asked how they felt now that they knew the truth, their leader replied, “I have two young children and a pregnant wife—how do you think I feel?” Although they had been deployed in eastern Ukraine for the past

year, they were aghast at the prospect of flanking around a Russian platoon. “What these guys are doing is crazy,” one of them said. “Everything we’ve been through is nothing compared with this.” Another soldier was so anxious that he had trouble talking. At one point, he had to take a homeopathic sedative; a nurse had given him the medicine some months earlier, when he’d vomited in a morgue while identifying a comrade. The morning after I met the men, all twelve reported that they were ill or otherwise unfit to go to Tabaivka.

Sever had the substitutes gather around him, and explained to them what their role would entail. He emphasized that anyone who didn’t wish to participate should say so. “I won’t judge you,” he said. “I won’t curse you. I don’t demand anything now—but, when we cross the line, *then* I will make demands.” He went on, “If you hesitate, if you stumble, nothing good will happen. So we must work together. On my side, I promise that I will not abandon you, and I expect the same from you.”

Nobody spoke. Before Sever left, he said, “If we’re together, we have to fight together, for one another. There is no other option.”

Sever’s deputy, a sergeant called Casper, took over the meeting. Casper was gruffer, louder, and less stoic than Sever, as well as more ready to judge and to curse. He’d spent four days tutoring the previous anchor group—teaching them how to space their foxholes, move silently, hide from F.P.V.s—and his patience had waned. “The task will be hard, but it’s doable,” he told the new group. According to Casper, only a serious health ailment constituted a legitimate excuse to back out.

An older man with hunched shoulders and a hangdog expression, who’d been sitting mutely in the corner, announced that he had an eye condition. Another man claimed to have the flu. A third complained of a kidney disorder.

“I need to hear whether you can execute the mission or not,” Casper barked. “If you can’t, we won’t be able to execute ours. . . . So will you?”

“No, I can’t do such a mission,” one of the men, who looked more able-bodied than many in the group, said. He was a thirty-nine-year-old factory worker. Six months earlier, he had been picked up by conscription agents while walking to a bus stop. His issue was not physical, he admitted. “Once, we were ordered to attack,” he said. “I felt sick and just fell down.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

“Panic?” Casper asked.

“Yes. It’s happened twice.”

“Same with me,” Casper told him. “I’ve panicked and fallen down. But then I got up.” He went on, “I won’t lie to you, it’s going to be tough. But, fuck, not going because you’re scared? Don’t worry, when you get there you’ll be switched on.”

“I don’t want to be a burden to the group,” the draftee persisted.

Yet another soldier spoke up: there was a problem with his spine.

“What fucking problem?” Casper shouted. “Can you walk? If you can walk, you can do this. Tell me straight—are you weaseling out or not?”

The man appeared to be in his fifties. Whether or not he really had a problem with his spine, he looked dejected and perhaps ashamed.

“I won’t go,” he muttered.

In the end, Casper sent him back to his unit, along with the draftee. He shared more of Sever’s tolerance than I’d anticipated. He later told me, “Before the war, they were simple blue-collar workers, just like our guys. But ours get good training and these ones don’t.” A soldier in the first anchor group had told Casper that, during the counter-offensive, “our commander just pointed where to go and then disappeared—there were tanks in front of us, but he didn’t care.” After two-thirds of the battalion had been killed or wounded, the survivors were merged with another T.D.F. unit, which had suffered comparable losses. The men hardly knew their new superiors, or even one another. They had been sent to Casper without aid kits or proper winter clothing. “Their commanders don’t give a shit about them,” Casper said. “They’re on their own, so they’re fucked.”

Many members of 1st Battalion contended that leadership was the crucial factor differentiating the professionalism and esprit de corps of their unit from the ineptitude and demoralization of others. “The soldiers aren’t the problem—it’s how they’re being used,” Sever said. He and Casper cited Perun’s history of fighting alongside them as fundamental to his authority and to the trust that they placed in him. Perun told me it was occasionally incumbent on him to demonstrate that, “just as my guys make sacrifices, I am also

willing to make sacrifices.” During an assault this past autumn, Perun kicked a grenade away from several of his men. The explosion burst his eardrums, and he’d since received an implant and undergone surgery to graft tissue from the inside of his cheek onto the damaged membrane.

An exemplary command culture was not 1st Battalion’s only advantage; unlike the T.D.F., it was able to select its members. Sever and Casper recruited their stormers, from Ukraine’s national basic-training camps. Physical prowess, age, education, and even skills were less important than a display of heart. “But you never know until they go through it if it’s sincere,” Sever said. When I asked Casper how he picked candidates, he answered, “The eyes—if they’re true.”

The men Sever and Casper chose were not always whom you would expect. The morning of the mission, I went to the house where the stormers were staying. It was a little before 3 a.m.; in the kitchen, a forty-five-year-old soldier called Noah was swathing a sprained ankle with a compression wrap. He’d been a narcotics detective in Odesa until 2007, when he was accused of a variety of crimes, including falsifying official documents, dealing drugs, and unlawful imprisonment. When I first met him, he told me, “In those days, there wasn’t much difference between the gangsters and the cops.” His mistake had been antagonizing the local prosecutor’s office, which, according to Noah, was as corrupt as the police. He’d spent two and a half years in pretrial detention, then paid a bribe to be released. After another decade of delinquency—burglary, bank fraud, robbing cars—he’d joined a Catholic commune. He retained a monkish aspect: a shaved head, a bushy goatee, a wooden rosary.

Another stormer, Sanjek, entered the kitchen in long underwear and heated some water on the stove. He had also been in jail—though he wouldn’t tell me why. When I asked how long he’d been in for, he quipped, “Which time?”

Neither man considered himself especially patriotic. For Noah, service was redemptive: “I’ve done a lot of bad things in my life, and now I’m doing something good.” Sanjek had volunteered for the Army ten months earlier, after completing his most recent stint in prison. “Here and there is almost the same thing—it’s like a family,” he’d told me earlier. “The difference is that here I’m sure my friends will help me if I’m in trouble. There, they’ll check my pockets.”

Turning from the stove, he asked Noah, “How did you sleep?”

“Bad.”

“So you’re going to die.”

“We’ll see,” Noah said.

Sanjek asked for one of Noah’s “pills.” Some Ukrainian and Russian soldiers are known to consume amphetamines, but Perun enforced a strict prohibition against drugs and alcohol while the battalion was deployed. Casper had punched a T.D.F. member in the face for getting drunk, leaving him with a swollen jaw. Still, when Noah handed Sanjek two white caplets, I privately wondered if he was not quite as reformed as he’d claimed to be.

Noah explained that the pills were medication that induced constipation. The mission would last at least thirty-six hours, during which time there might not be an opportunity to defecate safely. (Another stormer told me that he took laxatives after returning from assaults, to counteract the effect.)

Sanjek nudged a heavyset soldier who was snoring on the couch: “Get up, the Russians aren’t going to kill themselves.”

The soldier was a thirty-three-year-old railroad worker called Kamin. He’d joined the battalion a year earlier, with four other

recruits. Three of them had been killed and the other medically discharged. This past fall, Kamin spent twenty days in the hospital after a Russian threw a grenade at him while he and Noah were retrieving dead comrades following a bloody firefight in October.

“Who stole my fucking belt?” he grumbled, stepping into camouflage pants. “What’s wrong with people?”

Soon, the rest of the stormers had congregated in the kitchen. Most of them were newcomers, and this would be their first assault. Their backpacks contained hundreds of rounds of ammunition, to refill the preloaded magazines on their flak jackets. For sustenance, each man brought two litres of water, a couple of Snickers bars, beef jerky, and cigarettes. They were not taking sleeping bags, because they would not sleep. The men would walk for miles and needed to be mindful of weight. They had gas masks, compasses, maps, cell phones, power banks, night-vision monoculars, thermal-imaging visors, and medical supplies. There would be no medevac option. If someone was wounded, he would have to wait until the following night to be hauled up the ridge. Each stormer carried at least eight hand grenades. Strapped onto their packs were shovels, which were wrapped in cloth so that they wouldn’t clank. Fixed-blade knives, attached to their vests, would help them hack open icy ground.

It was twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit outside. To reach the blue squares on the map, the stormers would have to cross a swamp that had not frozen solid. They had been issued knee-high rubber shells to cover their boots, but they were short a pair. Sever had simply tied plastic garbage bags around his feet. Officers were often the best-equipped members of other units I’d observed, but the lieutenant said that “it should be the opposite.”

Sanjek spritzed cologne around his neck gaiter. “Don’t forget your rifles,” Sever deadpanned as the team filed out of the house. A

pickup truck and two cargo vans were waiting on the street. Their tail-lights dwindled as they headed east.

It began snowing shortly after dawn. The stormers and the anchor group had made it to the Ukrainian trenches on the ridge and were waiting to infiltrate Tabaivka. In the operations center, a monitor on a table played aerial footage of the settlement from a surveillance drone. If Ukrainian drones could still fly, so could Russian ones. “How is the weather?” Perun asked the pilot over a Discord channel on a laptop.

“Workable.”

“We want it to be unworkable.”

“I’ll keep you posted.”

The pilot was a red-bearded bricklayer from the Carpathian Mountains called Boyko. He’d been working in the Netherlands when the war erupted and had rushed home to be with his family. He had three young children, which exempted him from service, but he had volunteered anyway. Drones both fascinated and disconcerted him. “People don’t realize how fast the technology is developing here,” he’d told me. His team had transformed an apartment into a workshop cluttered with wires, explosives, batteries, and circuit boards. In the living room, crates and Styrofoam boxes containing artisanal F.P.V.s were stacked from floor to ceiling. Boyko foresaw a bleak future—on and off the battlefield—in which “all these things being tested in this war will become powerful tools of oppression.” When he started using F.P.V.s, last summer, their maximum range was about two miles; now it was twelve. Still, whereas surveillance drones hover at high altitudes, F.P.V.s must swoop low to hit their targets, requiring tall antennas on the ground to maintain a connection with the controller. Antennas are like flagsticks for enemy drones, and

Boyko had already been the victim of an air strike in Tabaivka that nearly killed him.



*"It's wonderful. Wonderful's been done."*  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

As the snow intensified, the feed on the monitor started to glitch. Boyko reported that it was no longer possible to fly, and Sever and the stormers began descending the ridge toward the blue squares. “Maximum attention! Maximum caution!” Perun exhorted them from the operations center. Half a dozen of his officers sat in chairs, staring fixedly at the monitor, which was now blank. Perun was too restless to sit. He paced the basement and cracked his knuckles, switching his attention from the radio to the Discord channel to Signal messages on his phone.

Three Ukrainian machine gunners were spread out on the high terrain above Tabaivka, and three snipers were hidden below them; suddenly, one of the snipers spotted an enemy squad moving in the Russian-held trees to the east of the three-hundred-yard gap.

Perun, striding to the interactive panel, bellowed, “Azimuth!” He was asking how many degrees to the north or south the Russians were from the sniper’s position. Using a compass, the sniper took

the bearing and relayed the measurement to Perun. On the satellite map, Perun plotted a line along that angle from the sniper to the stand of trees, thereby obtaining a grid coördinate on which to call in artillery. He also plotted a line from the grid coördinate back to one of his machine gunners on the high ground. Although the machine gunner couldn't see the Russians, he could aim his weapon along the angle that Perun gave him. The sniper, through his scope, observed where the rounds made impact in the snow. Perun passed the information on to the machine gunner, who zeroed in on the Russian squad by lowering or raising his barrel accordingly.

It was disorienting to watch Perun orchestrate all this remotely and without video—"blindly," as he'd put it. The Russians, still oblivious of the stormers creeping through the swamp, were pounding the Ukrainian trenches on the ridge with artillery, and I knew that Tabaivka must be quaking with a ferocious cacophony of explosions and gunfire. In the stand of trees, wounded and frightened Russians were probably crying out. It was hard for me to correlate that reality with the scene in the basement, where officers were quietly sipping plastic cups of tea. Perun, however, acted exactly as if he were on the line, stridently hollering over the din of battle. He'd warned me that he would be yelling and using a lot of "bad words"—not from anger but deliberately, to impress on his men the urgency of his commands. When Boyko flew his drone too close to the stormers, who mistook it as Russian, Perun roared at him, "If you do that one more fucking time, I'll send you on the assault, so you can feel what it's like to have some asshole over your head!"; when someone accidentally left his radio on, Perun told him, "I will rip open your fucking mouth!"; and, when a machine gunner advised that the artillery should shift "a bit to the right," Perun responded, "Give me the *azimuth*, fucker! I'm going to stick that compass up your ass!"

Several soldiers later told me that Perun's harsh manner was helpful. According to Sever, "When you're stressed and afraid, you can go numb. Sometimes yelling like that is the only thing that can penetrate." In the field, the soldiers wore earpieces, so Perun was literally a voice in their heads.

By the afternoon, while the Russians remained focussed on the ridge, Sever and the other stormers had navigated around the blue squares without firing a shot. On the way, they'd taken two Russians prisoner. No sooner had the anchor group joined Sever's team on the far side of the squares than the snow abruptly stopped and drones were in the air again.

"Thank God," Perun said. "Just in time."

Now that the stormers had successfully bypassed the Russian platoon, Perun wanted them to hunker down for the night. They would assault the next day, in the light. "Dig as much as you can and cover yourselves with ponchos or branches, so that you won't be seen by thermal," he radioed Sever. "Dig like a mole if you don't want to die."

The T.D.F. soldiers were not complying. They were refusing to entrench themselves, objecting that the place Sever had chosen was too exposed. "Smack them with the fucking shovel," Perun told Sever. But the men remained obstinate, and when Perun attempted to contact them they did not answer. It was getting dark. Perun summoned a potbellied officer from the T.D.F. brigade to the operations center. "You are their commander," he told the man. "We'll do our job, and then we'll leave. The question is, how will *you* control your men?" Perun's contempt was palpable. He suggested that the officer go out himself, at least as far as the ridge, and offered him transportation in an armored vehicle. There was an element of shaming—Perun's staff was watching. On one of the basement walls, a couple of feet away from the officer, someone

had mounted a framed portrait of da Vinci, the renowned commander who had died in Bakhmut.

The officer declined Perun's proposal.

Sever found a compromise location for the anchor group. That night, he sent a soldier back to Perun, with the two Russian captives. I found them the next morning in a basement adjacent to the operations center, sitting on the floor with their hands bound behind their backs and tape over their eyes. A member of 1st Battalion was asking them questions and typing their responses into his phone. He was a thirty-one-year-old I.T. professional called Litsey. He'd lived in Kharkiv before the war, in the same building as Perun's daughter, Yulia, and the two men had met while Perun was renovating Yulia's apartment. Litsey told me that Perun had been "a completely different person" during peacetime—easygoing and affable. He added, "You would never have guessed that he was rich. He was driving around an old van full of construction materials."

Litsey was a signals-intelligence specialist. He had grown up in Severodonetsk—which Russian shelling had reduced to a wasteland, and which was now under Russian occupation—and he was more expressive of his hatred for Russians than were other members of the battalion, some of whom could be surprisingly magnanimous. ("They're human like we are," Perun said. "They love their wives, their children.") Of the two prisoners, Litsey had told me, "The only reason we're keeping them alive is so we can exchange them." However, in the basement he betrayed none of his enmity, speaking politely to the men as soon as they proved cooperative. At the end of the interrogation, he stuck cigarettes in their mouths and lit them.

I later interviewed the men myself, after their guard agreed to remove their blindfolds and let them sit in chairs. Both were named Alexei. They had been in the military for only a couple of months

and on the front for only a few days. They'd been sent on their own to a grid coördinate in Tabaivka, with a mandate to remain there until they were relieved. Carrying a litre and a half of water and two cans of smoked fish, they walked to the position using AlpineQuest, a Spanish navigation app designed for trekking. (Litsey later uploaded the AlpineQuest data from their phones onto the interactive panel, adding a number of enemy positions to the satellite map.) When the Alexeis arrived at their destination, there was no dugout or trench, and they had no shovels. They radioed their commander, who told them to dig with their hands. The first two nights, they slept on the forest floor, but when it started to snow they abandoned the position, walked to a half-collapsed house, and holed up in the basement. That's where Sever's team discovered them.

"I never wanted to kill anyone, and I haven't killed anyone," the older Alexei insisted. He was forty-three, with gray stubble and a buzz cut. He'd joined the Army for money—like most of his comrades, he said. He'd earned about five hundred dollars a month driving a taxi in his home town, outside Moscow. The military paid him more than four times that.

The younger Alexei, who was in his thirties, also claimed to be a victim of circumstance. He'd spent five years in prison for counterfeiting rubles, and shortly after his release he was arrested for fighting in a bar. His opponent turned out to be a detective, and Alexei was given a choice between enlisting and returning to jail. He'd never really considered the ethical dimensions of the war, but he said that he had "always been against authority—against Putin." He'd renounced Christianity and converted to paganism. "I believe in the old gods, like Perun," he said.

After the interviews, I stepped outside with the 1st Battalion soldier who'd been guarding the prisoners. "That's the first time during this war I've seen a live one," he said. He looked perturbed. "I

don't fucking get it. If Ukraine wanted to invade Russia, I'd rather go to jail instead."

According to the Alexeis, there were approximately twenty more Russians stationed in the blue squares. The majority were sheltering in an underground root cellar in the back yard of another farmhouse. Some of the men in the cellar were more senior fighters.

Boyko piloted his drone over the small, fenced-in property where the root cellar was situated. What had been a house was now a heap of rubble. Snow blanketed the yard, but it was possible to discern the hump of a slightly cresting roof with a stovepipe protruding from it. Boyko zoomed in on a trail of boot prints near what appeared to be the cellar door.

"Are they going to or from it?" Perun asked.

"Looks like he went to take a shit and came back," an officer posited.

Other tracks went from the cellar door, which was open, toward the three-hundred-yard gap between the blue squares and the Russian-held woods. "The enemy is definitely inside," Perun said into the radio. Six stormers were already hiding with Sever beneath some trees across a dirt road from the property. Perun told them to work in pairs: two men would make sure that the destroyed house was empty, two would toss multiple grenades through the cellar door, and two more would drop additional grenades down the stovepipe. Sever would remain in the trees in order to direct the action. The cellar, made of concrete, was big and deep, according to the Alexeis, and the Russians had likely augmented it with their own fortifications, so the stormers would need to use a lot of grenades—at least twenty, Perun said—and throw them down the stovepipe and through the entrance simultaneously, before the Russians could seal either portal or call for support. Speed was imperative, because

the yard lacked any cover or protection from Russian artillery and F.P.V.s.

“I understand everyone is exhausted,” Perun said. “But pull yourselves the fuck together. Let’s do this—one final push—and then we can all exhale!”

“Roger,” Sever said. From where he stood, he did not have a good view of the cellar, and he began to probe the outskirts of the property. We could see all his movements in the drone footage, which meant that he was dangerously visible. Perun grew agitated. “Fucking do this *now*,” he commanded. “Quicker! You’ve already tugged fate by the balls as it is! Enough, goddammit!”

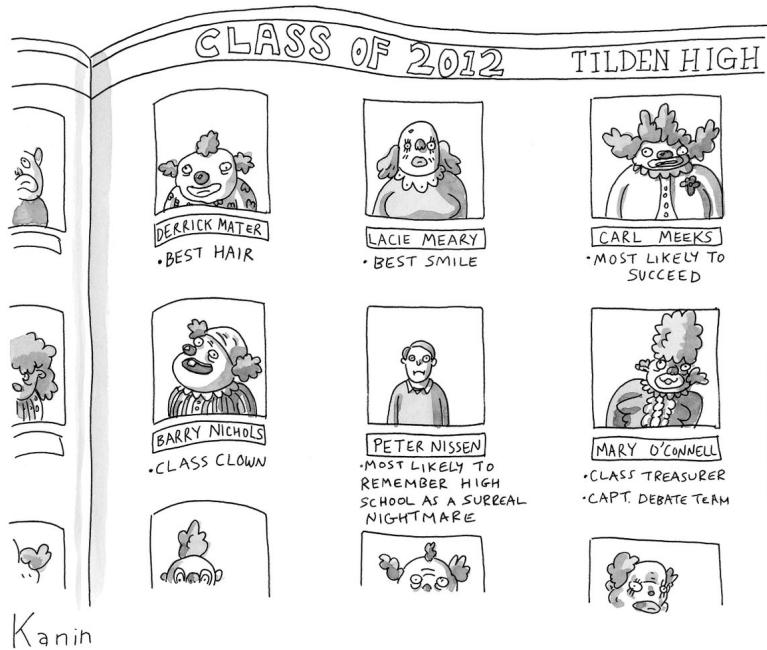
Earlier in the mission, Sever had been far enough away from Perun that most of their communications had been passed through a “repeater” stationed on the ridge, who relayed the messages back and forth. From the root cellar, however, no middleman was required. Perun, not realizing this, said to the repeater, “Tell Sever he must stay in the trees. Otherwise that asshole will try to go with them.”

“This asshole can hear you,” Sever replied.

“O.K., stay where you are, asshole.”

On the monitor, we watched the six stormers approach the property, in single file. Sanjek, the ex-con, went to the destroyed house with another soldier while the four others entered the yard. One of them was called Banker, because he had worked for a bank for thirteen years, rising from teller to manager. He was among the most experienced men on the team and had already been wounded by a Russian drone. When Banker arrived at the rear of the cellar, he noticed a narrow ventilation shaft that Perun had missed on the video feed. Banker tossed a single grenade through the shaft. “To

the other side!" Perun yelled. "Throw grenades in the entrance, so they don't come out!"



*Cartoon by Zachary Kanin*

Another pair advanced along the humped roof. On the way, one of them, a young soldier called Kyivstar—the name of Ukraine's main telecommunications network—dropped a grenade down the stovepipe. A dark geyser spurted up. Smoke was now drifting from the ventilation shaft. Because stovepipes and ventilation shafts typically channel air into root cellars through angled conduits behind interior walls, there was a decent chance that the two grenades had inflicted minimal damage—and now the Russians knew that they were under attack.

"Grenades! Grenades!" Perun screamed. "More!"

They needed to hit the cellar entrance. Kyivstar's companion had left him behind and was walking there alone. His call sign was Wolf. He was a welder from a rural village in western Ukraine who, when the war started, had been working in the Czech Republic, sending money home to his wife and their young son and daughter. He'd been with 1st Battalion for about a month, and this was his first mission. Sever hadn't intended to bring him to

Tabaivka, but Wolf was filling in for the soldier who'd broken his leg when their truck crashed into the crater. At the house, Wolf had struck me as the team's most timid member, sheepishly observing Sanjek and Noah's shenanigans. When the stormers were leaving for the operation, Banker had scolded Wolf for guzzling a tall can of energy drink, which would make him have to urinate. In the cargo van, right before Banker shut the door, Wolf had said, "Fuck, I forgot my ballistic glasses. Oh, well, whatever."

He was now doing something inexplicable. Instead of sneaking up to the cellar entrance, he was approaching it openly—revealing himself to anyone who might be watching from inside. "He was confused," Kyivstar later told me. "I was yelling at him, trying to get him to come back." He added, with frustration, "There was no need for him to go ahead by himself like that. It was like he was going there to die."

In the operations center, Perun yelled into the radio, "No! Don't cross in *front* of the entrance!" But Wolf couldn't hear him. He kept walking until he reached the open door. For several long seconds, everyone in the operations center watched as he stood there, motionless. Then he crumpled.

"They got him," Perun said, not loudly, and not over the radio.

He tried to reach Sever. When there was no response, he contacted the repeater on the ridge. "Repeat everything I say," he told him. "'Climb on top of the fucking thing and throw grenades in from above.'"

The stormers, however, knew something that Perun did not. Wolf had frozen because he'd been surprised to see, instead of a staircase descending straight into the cellar, a room a couple of yards long and then a second door, which was closed. The staircase was behind that. Wolf had been peering into the room when someone behind the second door shot him.

Kyivstar and Banker backed away from the entrance. Casper, the sergeant responsible for training the anchor group, was in the operations center that morning. Bending close to the monitor, he said of Wolf, “It looks like he’s wounded.”

“Then why isn’t he crawling?”

“I can’t watch this,” Casper said. He turned to leave the operations center but stopped midway. Dark splashes were bursting in the white yard, around the entrance, where Wolf lay.

Perun said, “The fuckers are throwing grenades from inside!”

Meanwhile, someone from across the three-hundred-yard gap was firing on the team. Bigger, darker splashes appeared much closer to Kyivstar and Banker. “A.G.S.,” Perun said, using the abbreviation for a Russian automatic grenade launcher. “Son of a bitch!”

He ordered the stormers to retreat, and asked Sever whether Wolf showed any signs of life. If he was still alive, they would be unable to shell the area.

“Sever can’t say for sure,” the repeater replied.

Boyko zoomed in on the body, which appeared to be lying in a fetal position. “Group decision,” Perun said to his staff. “What is his status? Casper?”

“He’s dead.”

“There’s no movement,” another soldier said.

The remaining stormers fled the property as more A.G.S. rounds exploded in it. Perun told them to get away and find cover. He needed to think about what to do next.

There were too many Ukrainians in the vicinity to try to destroy the root cellar with artillery, and since it was in a defilade, at the bottom of the ridge, Boyko couldn't reach it with an F.P.V. The cellar was also inaccessible to the land drone, because of the swamp. Ultimately, Perun decided to drop a number of antitank mines on the entrance with a heavy-duty six-rotor drone called a Vampire—and known to the Russians as Baba Yaga, after a witchlike character from Slavic folklore. The Alexeis had shared the radio frequencies and call signs used by their commanders, which Litsey had written on a whiteboard next to the interactive panel. After the Vampire dropped its payload, intercepts on the frequencies revealed that the Russians in the cellar had survived both the grenades and the mines, and that their unit was sending reinforcements.

For the rest of the day, a steady stream of small groups of Russian infantrymen—between two and six soldiers each—walked to Tabaivka from the east. Few made it across the three-hundred-yard gap. The snow had relented, and Boyko easily stalked the groups with the surveillance drone. Perun bounded between the panel and the radio, shouting himself hoarse, calculating azimuths, and correcting the aim of his stormers, snipers, and machine gunners. It was madness: Russians kept marching down the same paths, to the same spots where their comrades had just died. One 1st Battalion machine gunner later told me he had fired his weapon so much that it had kept him warm in his frigid dugout. He couldn't see the men he was killing. But since they kept reappearing in certain places, he memorized different branches below which he could point his barrel to hit specific coördinates up to a mile away.

Unlike the machine gunner, those of us in the operations center had a bird's-eye view of the Russians on the receiving end of the barrages: men running and stumbling as they fled the bullets and the shells, crawling after being shot or hit by shrapnel, hiding behind tree trunks and under bushes. At one point, the monitor

displayed six Russians hurrying up a road toward the safety of a dense forest. Two of them were helping along a limping soldier who had his arms draped over their shoulders; two others were dragging an injured or dead soldier across the snow on an improvised toboggan. Perun called in cluster munitions on them: a smoking warhead that scudded down, followed by a dozen impacts all around the group. Another 1st Battalion drone pilot was attacking Russians with F.P.V.s. Footage from one of them captured two infantrymen diving away, too late, in the split second before the F.P.V. detonated and its video feed cut out.

Above the monitor that showed this procession of carnage hung the flag with the angel of death playing his flute. I recalled the “joy” that Perun had mentioned. (During other conversations, he’d referred to the “aesthetic pleasure” of his work.) The Ukrainians in the basement derived obvious satisfaction from the Russian casualties, some of which elicited rapturous cheers. “Oh, look at them run!” Perun exclaimed, almost giddily, after one strike.

When night fell, Boyko switched on a thermal camera, and the black figures dying in the white snow became white figures on black. Sever and his team rotated out from Tabaivka at 2 a.m., while the Russians were preoccupied with their hopeless efforts to reach their marooned comrades in the root cellar. The stormers had been walking and digging and fighting for forty-eight hours.

The next morning, I went by the team’s house at around nine-thirty to find Sever in the kitchen, watching the drone feed on a TV. No one else was up. “They’re tired as dogs,” he said. “The cold exhausts you more than the lack of sleep.” While crossing the swamp during the infiltration, Sever had broken through the ice; the garbage bags around his feet had not prevented his socks from getting drenched. He’d smoked all his cigarettes on the first day. By the time they hiked back up the ridge, “everyone was hallucinating a little,” he said. Reaching one of the Ukrainian

machine gunners, Sever saw two purple halos glowing around the man's head.

I noticed that he was wearing a pair of rubber slippers with "WOLF" written across each strap. They were his dead subordinate's slippers. When I asked how the team was feeling about the loss, Sever said, "Like shit, but it's not the first time. We know tomorrow it could be us." He planned to call Wolf's wife. She would receive an official notification, but, until they recovered the body, Wolf would be classified as missing in action, and Sever wanted her to know the truth.

One by one, the rest of the team joined us. Banker moved stiffly, from lingering muscle cramps, and Sanjek's hands were swollen. He and Noah began grinding up a slab of beef for meatballs. In the afternoon, Casper made them all review the video of the assault on the root cellar. Nobody spoke as they watched Wolf collapse in front of the door. They didn't know why he'd acted so recklessly. "Maybe he wanted to do something courageous," Sanjek speculated.

During the next five days, the Vampire unleashed a deluge of heavy ordnance on the root cellar, including twenty-pound thermobaric bombs. But the subterranean structure held. According to intercepts, some of the Russians inside were badly injured, and they were out of food. Their unit continued to send reinforcements, who continued to be killed. Three more Russians were taken prisoner. Now and then, one of the men in the cellar would make a run for it. Each was mowed down. When a 1st Battalion sniper shot and wounded a Russian near the entrance, Litsey—whom Perun had left in charge of the operations center while he rested—ordered the sniper not to finish him. He wanted the Russians in the cellar to hear the soldier dying slowly and pleading for help. During a siege, Litsey told me, "it's important to lower their morale."

The temperature warmed and the snow melted. The world on the monitor was transfigured from a blank expanse to a colorful and variegated landscape teeming with detail. The room above the cellar had been razed, and the second door had been shattered; the Russians below had hung up sheets to prevent the Ukrainian drones from seeing down the stairs. Wolf's body lay amid the rubble. One afternoon, Boyko came by Perun's apartment to collect leaflets that Perun wanted him to drop around the entrance. The text on the leaflets guaranteed the safety of the Russians if they surrendered. "We invite you to exercise common sense," it said. "There is no need for you to die in a foreign country for someone else's interests." That night, several of the Russians, in a desperate dash, successfully escaped. Those who remained in the cellar were presumed to be too gravely wounded to pose a threat.

I left the village the next day. When I stopped by Sever's house to say goodbye, most of the men were out getting supplies. They would soon return to Tabaivka, to help the anchor group better fortify its trenches. Now that the blue squares were Ukrainian, 1st Battalion would stay with the T.D.F. members as long as possible, to insure that they did not retreat. That often happened, Sever said. During the firefight in October, Noah and Kamin had told me, the anchor-group soldiers had fled before the battle was over. One stormer had shot at their feet, to try to make them hold their ground.

I asked Sever whether he thought that the T.D.F. members might lose Tabaivka again, nullifying 1st Battalion's hard-earned gains. He shrugged resignedly.

"Maybe."

Kyivstar was upstairs, smoking by a window. He'd been to a market in Kupyansk that morning and bought a necklace with a silver cross. "For protection," he said. He was standing over a sleeping bag unrolled on a thin foam mat. It was Wolf's, as was a

winter coat hanging from a nail. The team had pooled some money, which it planned to send to his wife and children, but Kyivstar said that he was unsure what they were supposed to do with his belongings. Wolf's deployment bag was unzipped; inside, there were kneepads, gloves, and, though I didn't see them, somewhere among the gear was a pair of ballistic glasses.

In many ways, the 1st Separate Assault Battalion is an outlier. It was by far the most professional and effective unit that I have encountered in the Ukrainian military, and, not coincidentally, it was also the best equipped. Republican obstructionism in the U.S. Congress has left Ukraine critically short on weapons and ammunition, but Perun was generally supplied with the matériel that he needed to do his job. Nonetheless, the unit was running low on an indispensable resource: men. "It's getting harder and harder to find new soldiers, because not a lot of people are willing to do this work," Perun told me.

The challenge went beyond replacing casualties. After two years of war, all the veterans in the unit were exhausted. Perun, who neither drank nor smoked—and who had often spent his rare downtime in our apartment curling heavy dumbbells—was afflicted by a chronic cough that grew distressingly vicious as the operation progressed. By the time I left, he'd acquired a nebulizer machine with a mask, which he would hold to his mouth between bites while eating breakfast. Many soldiers had been wounded at least once; the intensity of assault missions, however, could be more psychically than physically taxing. "The worst thing is not the Russians," the officer who had lost eighteen comrades in a single day told me. "It's when guys you trust and have fought with start mentally flagging. They fade out like a candle."

With no end to the fighting in sight, and an increasingly perilous front line, Ukrainian soldiers can sometimes feel that the only choice available to them is one between death and desertion. A year ago, I embedded with an infantry unit in the Donbas which had lost

most of its men and been replenished with new draftees. Among the few soldiers who had been in the unit since the start of the invasion were two friends, code-named Odesa and Bison. Odesa had gone *awol* after much of his squad was killed in Kherson. He had spent two months at home, and then, nagged by guilt, rejoined the unit. He was killed after my article was published. By the time I met Bison, he had already been wounded and hospitalized three times; after Odesa died, he also went *awol*—and also returned to the front. I’d just arrived in Kyiv from Kupyansk when their former platoon leader texted me to say that now Bison had been killed, too. I replied that it seemed like all the best men were dying. The officer corrected me: “Everyone dies here. . . . The best, the worst. We remember the bright, strong personalities. Everyone else just fades into nothingness.”

He likened President Zelensky to Pinocchio for claiming that only thirty-one thousand Ukrainian soldiers had been killed. He also reminded me that the figure did not include those M.I.A., which constituted “a *huge* part of our losses.”

A few days later was February 24th, the second anniversary of the invasion, and relatives of missing soldiers had organized a demonstration in Kyiv. Given the threats posed by Russian cruise missiles and long-range kamikaze drones, public gatherings are avoided in the capital, but when I got there hundreds of people, mostly women, lined an avenue in front of St. Sophia’s Cathedral. One group held a banner that read “*free 4th tank brigade.*” A twenty-nine-year-old woman named Maryna Litovka had taken the train from Poltava, in central Ukraine, to be there. More than a year earlier, her father had disappeared from his position north of Bakhmut, along with five other soldiers. “The Army doesn’t know what happened to them,” she said. “This is told to a lot of families.” According to Litovka, a hundred and seventy men were missing from the 4th Tank Brigade alone. The Red Cross had been able to confirm only that twenty-three of them were in Russian

captivity. “I don’t know what’s harder, knowing that he died or waiting with some hope forever,” Litovka said.

Nearby, I met another daughter of a soldier, standing by herself with a cardboard sign on which she’d painted “*fight for them as they fight for us.*” Her father was in the Donbas, and she’d come to the demonstration because “a lot of people forget about the war, and we must remind them.”

The cleavage between the reality on the front and the daily lives of people in Kyiv or other cities in central and western Ukraine has grown more pronounced the longer the war has gone on. While conscription agents snatch men from factories, buses, and the streets of rural villages and towns, the draft is much less aggressively enforced in the capital, where the Ukrainian élite live. Bars there overflow with hipsters; cafés are crowded with young couples; concerts, art exhibits, and other cultural events lend the city a sense of comfortable, cosmopolitan normalcy. It is tempting to celebrate all this as a triumph of resilience, but for soldiers on the front it can be galling and alienating. “You feel a little sick to your stomach,” Sever told me. An influx of foreigners in Kyiv—from aid workers to entrepreneurs—accentuates the disconnect. In the popular neighborhood where I’d rented an Airbnb, luxury sedans and armored S.U.V.s were often parked outside chic hotels, and high-end restaurants catered to Western visitors.

Sever saw a parallel between contemporary Ukrainian society and the bitter estrangement that he and many of his comrades had experienced between 2014 and 2022, when most of the country went about its business with little concern for the simmering conflict in the Donbas. “They’re building a wall between the two worlds again,” he said.

Unsurprisingly, the discourse about the conflict changes depending on your proximity to the front. In Kyiv, it is still largely taboo to discuss negotiating with Russia, ceding parts of the Donbas, or

letting go of Crimea. But, as with every war, the men actually fighting are more earthbound and candid. Odesa and Bison's former platoon leader told me, "We're losing. Not badly, but steadily." In his view, if the West maintains its current level of assistance, Ukraine can hold out for a few more years; if the assistance diminishes, "we're screwed in a matter of one year"; if aid increases, "there will be a stalemate until we run out of soldiers."

Perun argued that, from a purely strategic standpoint, "you need to know when to stop and how to lose." Citing the Russian withdrawals from Kyiv and Kherson, he noted, "The Russians are better at this than we are." Unlike Russia, he went on, Ukraine is a democracy and therefore "negotiations can start only when society demands them," but the government—and, specifically, President Zelensky—had given Ukrainians unreasonable expectations and a distorted picture of the military situation. "Society does not know our problems," Perun said.

Even as these two worlds move further apart, the American debate over Ukraine tends to homogenize Ukrainians. Many Republicans have adopted Donald Trump's hostility toward the country, regurgitating Russian propaganda that vilifies and dehumanizes Ukrainian citizens. Liberals who consider themselves "pro-Ukrainian," meanwhile, tend to equate that stance with unconditionally promoting Zelensky's hard-line ambitions. The latter is perhaps inevitable, because most of the Ukrainians that Americans see and hear—on social media, on TV, at forums and conferences—also espouse those ambitions. In January, Ukraine's foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, appeared on ABC News and declared, in impeccable English, "Even if we run out of weapons, we will fight with shovels." Of course, the collective pronoun was figurative: *he* will not have to fight with a shovel—nor with a rifle, for that matter. For the Ukrainians who are fighting (overwhelmingly, lower-class manual laborers), the war is not only

terrifying and brutal, it is lonely. Many have lost confidence in their politicians, in their commanders, in their fellow-citizens, and now in their American allies.

And yet there remain units like the 1st Separate Assault Battalion. When I asked Sever how he felt about his countrymen who have avoided military service, he said, “I don’t care about them. I’m fighting for my own principles and my own guys. People are coming here, killing children, raping women—for me, I can’t imagine not resisting.”

Toward the end of the Tabaivka mission, the stormers retrieved Wolf’s remains. According to Noah, who helped carry the body up the ridge, the root cellar had fully collapsed and was surrounded by dead Russians. Two days later, Noah was hit by artillery and hospitalized with shrapnel wounds. Kyivstar and Bunker were also injured by shrapnel before they left the village; they are now recovering. The rest of 1st Battalion is waiting for the next fire that they will be sent to put out.

To date, half the blue squares in Tabaivka have been lost again.

Wolf’s death means that Sever and Casper will have to recruit another replacement—a task that neither man relishes. “It makes you want to cry,” Sever told me. The night before the apprehensive anchor-group members set off for Tabaivka, Casper had noted that two stormers in their fifties had participated in a number of dangerous 1st Battalion missions. “If they can do this, anyone can,” he’d insisted. I later told Casper that I couldn’t agree with him: most people could *not* do what he and Sever did. Casper reflected, then responded, “It’s a complicated question—can you or can’t you? Because if you answer honestly, no one can. But, if no one can, the Russians will come and put their dicks on our foreheads.”

The stormers in their fifties were no longer with the battalion. One had been wounded and the other had been killed. ♦



*Luke Mogelson*, a staff writer, won a National Magazine Award and the inaugural Sydney H. Schanberg Prize for his coverage of the Capitol insurrection. His book “*The Storm Is Here: An American Crucible*” was published in September, 2022.

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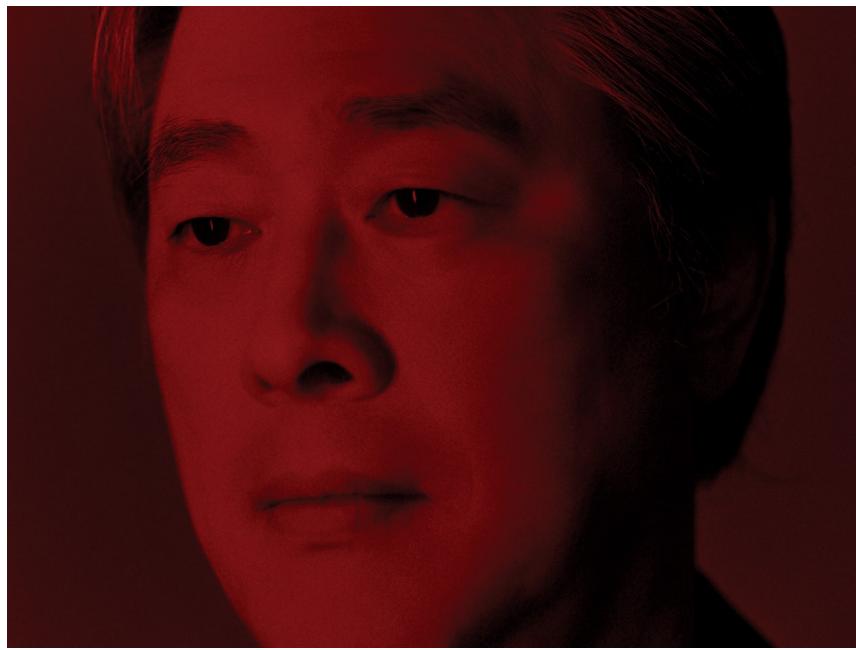
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## Park Chan-wook Gets the Picture He Wants

With “The Sympathizer,” the director of “Oldboy” and “The Handmaiden” comes to American television.

By [Jia Tolentino](#)

April 8, 2024



*Actors tend to describe working with Park as a pleasurable submission to the artist's hand.*

*Photograph by Hyea W. Kang for The New Yorker*

Last spring, I was in a white van rumbling down a road about fifty miles east of Bangkok, passing dusty awnings that hung over shops hawking cell phones and sneakers, when, abruptly, the vehicle stopped. The road was barricaded; the barricades were manned by soldiers in uniform. After a moment, I realized that the soldiers were actors and the barricades were props. We had reached the set of “The Sympathizer,” the director Park Chan-wook’s seven-episode HBO adaptation of the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Viet Thanh Nguyen. A producer hurried me out of the van and through a crowd of background actors playing Vietnamese villagers, wearing sun-bleached trousers and thin cotton dresses.

They were sitting on suitcases that carried, in the world of the show, their most important possessions—everything that they would try to take with them out of the country. Time had rewound to April, 1975, and Saigon was about to fall. It was ninety degrees out and densely humid. A directive crackled through a walkie-talkie, and the actors rose to their feet, pastel parasols springing into the air.

Park was sitting nearby, in a shaded corner that served, for the day, as video village, the spot on a film set where the production team gathers around monitors to review each take. At sixty, Park, who is Korean, has a mop of silver hair and an obscurely regal demeanor. He wore woven leather sandals and vented performance gear, as if he were about to go fishing. Nearly everyone referred to him as Director Park, following a Korean practice of using the title as an honorific. On set, at any given moment, you could hear Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, and English being spoken, but the action was mainly directed in English. Park understands and reads the language well, but he's not the type to risk miscommunication. His instructions were relayed to the cast and crew by Jaehuen Chung, a filmmaker who served as Park's interpreter.

The shot they were trying to get was relatively straightforward. A Citroën driven by the show's protagonist—a Communist double agent simply called the Captain—would push its way through the distress of the crowd. Working alongside Park was a co-producer named Jahye Lee, who had served as the script supervisor on his most recent film, the slow-burning noir romance “Decision to Leave.” She and Park were sharing a bag of salty tempeh snacks. Each time a new take began, they sat up straight in their director's chairs in perfect tandem.

Park has a gift for sumptuous spectacle underpinned by meticulous preparation. He storyboards his movies from start to finish before shooting begins, and presides over the details of his filmic universe like a clockmaker god. He has an unapologetically showy style that

draws on a promiscuous cinematic education—Akira Kurosawa and Kim Ki-young, Alfred Hitchcock and Robert Aldrich, forgotten B movies and contemporary genre films—and a conviction that everything is permissible and nearly anything is possible. His camera skitters, glides, flummoxes. How, you might find yourself wondering, while watching “Decision to Leave,” did he shoot a mountain from inside the eye of the dead man at its base?

Park called cut and moved one of the soldiers in the frame slightly to the right. Filming resumed, then he called cut again: one background actor, among dozens, needed to look up at the road earlier. There was a pause. “Just waiting for this cloud to move,” a beefy guy said into a walkie-talkie. The sky brightened. The Citroën rolled through the barricades once more—Episode 101, Scene 47, take four.

This was day eighty of production. All in all, the shoot for “The Sympathizer” would take a hundred and twenty days. While Park and his crew tried to get the Citroën scene right, a construction team of nearly two hundred people was building a more or less fully equipped replica of a reeducation camp, close to the Malaysian border. It would provide the setting for the show’s frame story: the Captain, after the war, has been imprisoned, and is narrating his journey between worlds—he ultimately makes it out of Vietnam, and heads to Los Angeles—to an unseen, unamused superior.

“The Sympathizer” is the product of a marriage between two eminent tastemakers, A24 and HBO. It was green-lighted three years ago, late in the era of so-called Peak TV, when cable networks and streaming services chased market dominance by throwing money at big-name talents who wanted to work on ambitious projects. HBO was the reigning power of this period. But, by the time of my visit to set, the network was at the center of new industry contractions. A year after “The Sympathizer” went forward, HBO’s parent company was bought by another network,

Discovery, known mostly for its reality shows. Discovery's C.E.O., David Zaslav, took on more than fifty billion dollars in debt to complete the deal, and soon began shelving movies for tax writeoffs. Across the industry, streamers turned off the development-money tap as executives became risk-averse. Profits weren't satisfying investors, and the prospect of a writers' strike loomed.



*"Get ready."*  
Cartoon by Kyle Bravo

"The Sympathizer," which features zero wealthy white people sniping at one another in luxury settings, was always a risky bet. The cast includes a handful of well-known actors—Sandra Oh, John Cho, David Duchovny—mostly in supporting roles. Its biggest star, Robert Downey, Jr., was reportedly paid two million dollars per episode to play four different parts: a C.I.A. agent, a conservative congressman, a professor with a fetish for "the Orient," and a filmmaker shooting a movie with a passing resemblance to "Apocalypse Now." But the events in the show are narrated from a distinctly Vietnamese perspective—the series opens by reminding viewers that, in Vietnam, the conflict is called the American War. At one point, an American college student asks the Captain, played by the young Vietnamese Australian actor Hoa Xuande, if he appreciated the efforts of protesters in the U.S. The

student proclaims that they were on “the side of the Vietnamese people.” The Captain says, “Which people? The people in the North or the people in the South?” The student, stymied, answers, “All of them, I guess.”

Park put on a big khaki hiking hat. Chung relayed another instruction: the Citroën should drive faster onto the bridge. Park told the show’s visual-effects supervisor that there should be stars on the car’s license plate, and that he wanted to digitally remove one of the buildings in the background. The sequence would culminate in the Captain desperately running to board a moving plane, surrounded by people carrying the wounded and the dead. By then, the sky, in Nguyen’s description, is a “meteorite shower of rockets and artillery shells . . . an apocalyptic light show that revealed the evacuees dashing for the concrete divider, stumbling and tripping along the way, suitcases forgotten, the thundering prop wash from the two remaining engines blowing little children off their feet.” To film the scene, the crew would affix the back half of an airplane to a truck, rig cranes with lighting to simulate phosphorus explosions, put up enormous fans to create whipping propeller winds.

“The craft is at as high a level as the art,” Alec Hammond, the production designer for the Thailand shoots, told me. “Take the evacuation—how do you get actors carrying people or dummies into a plane to carry all that real emotion? How do you put that set together in a way that it’ll move at fifteen miles per hour, that it’s safe, that you can reset between takes?” Park’s sets are notoriously calm; he wraps early more often than he asks people to stay late. Hammond told me that there is a surety to Park’s filmmaking that allows it to be efficient: “When he gets it, he knows it, he knows how he’s going to use it, and he can stop.”

There was a break. Video village was next to a bridge, which arched over a murky river. Next to the river was a tree, and someone had noticed a mottled python curled around one of its

branches. Burly guys from the crew gathered to look at the snake. Park ambled over, hands behind his back in an avuncular pose. His manner can resemble his movies—patient, intense, with no wasted motion. He craned his head in curiosity, trying to see the python, but couldn’t find it. Jahye Lee took a photo of the tree on her phone and zoomed in to show him. He saw the snake then, framed properly on the screen, and smiled.

When Viet Thanh Nguyen was writing “The Sympathizer,” which he began more than a decade ago, one of the influences on its style was “Oldboy,” Park’s best-known film. “Oldboy” was released in 2003 and prompted a new groundswell of interest in Asian cinema in the United States. It tells the story of Oh Dae-su, a man who is mysteriously imprisoned in a hotel room for fifteen years, then just as mysteriously released, after which he seeks bloody revenge on his captor. Nguyen saw the film when it reached the U.S., and he wondered if the novel he was writing, which would be his *début*, could conjure the energy of the movie’s most famous sequence: Oh, armed only with a hammer, fighting his way through a ghastly green hallway full of murderous thugs. That scene, a single, three-minute take, is framed like a sacred medieval tapestry, with Oh’s assailants wielding sticks and pipes the way knights might hold spears. Nguyen told me that he wanted his book “to tell a story in overpowering language,” and he saw a “distinct parallel in the sumptuousness and weirdness” of Park’s style. Another scene in “Oldboy” involves Oh eating a live octopus, tearing into the viscid, squelching tentacles with his teeth. (Choi Min-sik, the actor, ate four octopuses to get the shot; he is a Buddhist, and prayed in apology between takes.)

“Oldboy” provides the brutal tick-tock pleasures of a revenge movie only to deconstruct, sickeningly and expertly, the very notion of revenge. In the end, Oh finds his captor, a former classmate named Lee Woo-jin. Lee, on account of a grudge held since high school, not only imprisoned Oh but also manipulated

him, after his release, into unwittingly having sex with his own daughter. In an abject effort to persuade Lee not to reveal this to her, Oh barks like a dog, licks Lee's shoes, and cuts off his own tongue with scissors. ("If you want a peaceful rest, have a bath," Park told an interviewer, shortly after the movie was released.) Like most people who watch "Oldboy," Nguyen found this finale disturbing. But upon rewatching the movie he realized that his ambitions, too, required unsettling people, both stylistically and politically. With "The Sympathizer," Nguyen similarly tries to upend the reader's expectations—of a spy novel, an immigrant novel, a political novel. The Captain, disillusioned, ends up captured, back in Vietnam, believing in nothing. The book also shares with Park's films a pitch-dark, absurdist humor. Its epigraph is a quote from Nietzsche that begins, "Let us not become gloomy as soon as we hear the word 'torture.'" The Captain's first sexual experience involves masturbating into a raw squid meant for a family dinner.

"The Sympathizer" was turned down by thirteen publishers before being bought by the independent press Grove Atlantic. It sold twenty-two thousand copies in hardcover; then it won the Pulitzer and sold nearly half a million copies in paperback, at which point Hollywood got interested. But it's a tricky novel, as slippery as its protagonist, and getting an adaptation off the ground was a long process. Early on, a producer told Nguyen that the project was being pitched at a budget comparable to that of "Narcos," the Netflix series about Pablo Escobar, which reportedly cost around twenty-five million for its first season. The producer said, "We're hearing that, for that kind of money, we'd need someone on the scale of Keanu Reeves" as the star. "In retrospect," Nguyen told me, "that's really racist—not the producer, but what they were hearing. Pedro Pascal is a huge star now, but when 'Narcos' first started filming they didn't have any A-list actors."

Another producer, Niv Fichman, who was born in Tel Aviv and lives in Toronto, connected Nguyen with the Canadian actor and writer Don McKellar, who'd adapted José Saramago's "Blindness" as a feature film starring Julianne Moore. Working with non-Americans made adapting the book easier, Nguyen said, because they weren't "so hung up on their version of the Vietnam War." McKellar had once written a script with Park—an adaptation of "The Ax," a Donald Westlake novel about an unemployed man who begins murdering his competitors for prospective jobs—and he persuaded Park to come on board as the showrunner. But Park insisted that McKellar share the task: Park had done television once before, adapting the John le Carré novel "The Little Drummer Girl" for the BBC, and the shoot had been difficult, keeping him away from Korea for long enough that he grew homesick. Making television is a more bureaucratic process than filmmaking, involving more input from more people on more footage. For "The Sympathizer," Park would direct the first three of the show's seven episodes and turn the rest over to other directors. He knew "the enormous amount of work and negotiation and diplomacy involved," McKellar told me.

Park is a shrewd and skillful adapter of literature. "Oldboy" was based on a manga; his film "The Handmaiden," from 2016, was adapted from Sarah Waters's novel "Fingersmith." In both cases, Park made transformative story edits: he moved the plot of "Fingersmith" from Dickensian London to Japan-occupied Korea, and added the Sophoclean incest twist to "Oldboy." (Of the latter change, Park has said that he was less interested in why a man would be held prisoner for so long than in why the torturer would suddenly set the man free.) It was Park's idea to have Robert Downey, Jr., play four different characters: one man to symbolize all the banal horrors of the West. Nguyen told me that, in their first meeting, Park "had questions about the plotting, the characterizations, details that he'd have to think about as a director.

He had plot suggestions. I thought, Wow, I wish he had read this when it was still in manuscript.”

“I like to read every kind of fiction available, and I don’t go about distinguishing genre literature from non-genre literature,” Park told me. In 2009, he used Émile Zola’s “Thérèse Raquin” as the basis for a vampire movie, “Thirst.” He prefers books, he added, that “pull me out of the very ordinary life I live—the boring, dull life that is not exactly different from any other person.” In conversation, Park has a professorial manner and a philosophical bent. He said that he favors literature in translation—books about other countries, “exotic, strange, distinct work.” Then he paused. “At the same time, it is quite contradictory. Because I tend to discover that, at the end of the day, all of us are quite similar. And although I’m very ordinary, I feel empathy for the humanity that lives in that strange environment.”

Park seems attracted to a particular kind of moral inquiry: his films often center on protagonists who blindly take up a singular objective and then see that objective implode. “I am drawn to the character who acts on their resolve, but then, having arrived at their destination, finds that they have arrived at a completely different place than they had intended,” he said. “That’s essentially how life is, I think. And the tragedy is that we find out too late.”

“The Sympathizer” is Park’s most direct engagement with a major historical event. In taking on such a subject, he said, he had been wary of “only focussing on the subject matter,” of fixating on accuracy, of “looking to excavate a takeaway.” But Nguyen’s novel was multivalent enough that Park felt he could avoid this. Its central concerns—betrayals, divided loyalties, the myopia of ideological fervor—were universal, and so he could concentrate on finding a visual analogue for Nguyen’s prose, which is laced with irony and bitter humor and a sense of paradox. “Our Captain is convinced that he is a Communist, but he is drawn to America, and he has a tough time admitting this dilemma, even internally,” Park

said. He proceeded to parse the Captain’s political miseducation, pinpointing the incidents that dismantle the character’s loyalty to each side. Listening to him, I had the sense of a warm knife cutting cold butter into perfect squares.

Actors tend to describe working with Park as a pleasurable submission to the artist’s hand. Nicole Kidman, the star of “*Stoker*,” Park’s only English-language film, said, in 2013, that she was “one of his paint colors.” Florence Pugh, after filming “*The Little Drummer Girl*,” used the same metaphor: “You are part of a moving painting, and must trust the artist.” Downey told me that, on the set of “*The Sympathizer*,” Park’s influence was felt in every department, including costume and makeup—he described the director as “literally molding” the four characters that he plays. (Downey’s wife, Susan, a film producer who worked on the series, told me that Park and her husband would go to the makeup studio and “just play with the clay.”) Hoa Xuande said, of Park, “You hope that you can live within his frame to the best of your ability, to allow him to tell his visual story.”



*“How’d you like me to attempt your eggs before I mess up and just scramble them?”*  
Cartoon by Mads Horwath

Xuande and I were speaking during a day of filming in the Bangkok neighborhood of Samphanthawong, where the apartments

had a faintly French Quarter look. Thailand has never been formally colonized, and it had been hard to find locations with architecture resembling that of nearly perpetually occupied Vietnam. (The Vietnamese government didn't approve the production's request to shoot there in time, possibly on account of the source material; a Vietnamese publishing house translated "The Sympathizer" in 2016, but has not been able to secure permission to release it in the country.) The Captain is half white; Xuande is not, and for the role he wore blue-green contacts above his natural and utterly remarkable cheekbones. Craft services had put out a buffet of spicy Thai food for lunch. "I've never spoken this much Vietnamese in my life," Xuande told me. Conveniently, his family's way of speaking the language was stylistically arrested in the nineteen-seventies, when they immigrated to Australia. "It feels like I'm learning to rap," he said. "Getting the cadence and rhythm right. I'm saying things I never would have learned to say in Vietnamese, like 'dialectical materialism.' "

After lunch, Park, from his chair, orchestrated a fight scene that included the Captain, two of his subordinates, and a female spy. Through his interpreter, Chung, he adjusted the scene the way a Photoshopper might edit individual pixels, changing the placement of the Captain's fingers when the spy bit him, angling a knife that was held to the spy's mouth, telling the Captain to turn his eyes toward his subordinates a second earlier. As Park gave notes about exactly how much blood he wanted on the spy's face and where he wanted it, he opened a Tupperware of papaya wedges. More takes rolled. Chung murmured into the microphone, "We want a closeup on her throat. We want to see her swallow—we couldn't really read the swallow. Lower angle on the throat."

As a child, growing up in Seoul in the late sixties and seventies, Park watched Hollywood movies on the American Forces Korea Network, typically without subtitles and always in black-and-white. Korea, which was less than two decades removed from Japanese

occupation when Park was born, did not have color TV until the eighties. Park saw Westerns and James Bond movies and filled in the colors in his mind—spacious bluebird skies and rolling green hills of prairie grass, the scarlet flower pinned to Bond's black lapel. Before he learned English, he constructed the narratives through visual cues: expressions, camera angles, the movements of bodies. His father was a professor of architecture; his mother loved film. (Park's younger brother, Park Chan-kyong, is a multimedia artist.) The family was Catholic, and the iconography of the religion filled Park's head with images of sacred violence: blood and arrows, spiked wheels. In high school, a priest told his parents that Park would do well in seminary. After that, Park stopped going to church, and decided that he didn't believe in God.

Nonetheless, he went to a Jesuit college, Sogang University, in Seoul, where he became a philosophy major and joined the photography club and the film club. At a screening of Hitchcock's "Vertigo," he watched as James Stewart drove slowly behind Kim Novak, the two cars gliding through San Francisco, and felt the image transcend the medium: he wasn't watching a movie; he was dreaming Hitchcock's dream. He realized then that he wanted to be a director.

The film critic Kim Young-jin, a classmate, has said that Park, as an undergraduate in the early eighties, was a dishevelled chain-smoker who talked about things like Godard's "anti-bourgeois camera style." It was a time of political upheaval in Korea. Park Chung-hee, a general who had seized power in 1961, was assassinated in 1979. Another general, Chun Doo-hwan, took control and placed the country under military rule. In 1980, several hundred student protesters were beaten by government paratroopers, provoking a larger revolt that was also violently suppressed. Hundreds, possibly thousands, died. "Every day we had to deal with tear bombs on campus, or we would hear news of friends or of other students who had killed themselves by jumping

off a building, or we would hear of people being tortured by police,” Park has said. He believed in the cause of a free and democratic Korea but was not inclined to put himself in the path of a grenade. “I was weak and a coward and so couldn’t actively fight, and the brave ended up being the ones sacrificed to this intense violence,” he told an interviewer. “That was when I became interested in themes such as guilt, vengeance, and redemption.”

After completing his mandatory military service, Park worked as a production assistant and an assistant director on melodramas by young filmmakers, then took a job at a company that imported foreign films. Under the dictatorship, just twenty-five companies were allowed to make movies in Korea. But in June, 1987, after it was revealed that a student protester had been tortured to death, Chun Doo-hwan’s successor gave in to the pro-democracy movement, permitting the country’s first direct Presidential election. Censorship eased, allowing for independent film production, and electronics manufacturers began funding movies. A Korean New Wave took shape.

In the early nineties, a company called Dreambox financed Park’s first film, “The Moon Is . . . the Sun’s Dream,” a crime drama starring a Korean pop star. It bombed, and the only published review was ghostwritten by Park. He says that a critic friend was assigned to review the film and couldn’t bring himself to do it, so he offered to step in. “New, amazing talent has arrived,” he recalls writing. It took five years to get his second movie made. “Trio” centers on a criminal alliance forged by a suicidal saxophonist, a violent orphan, and an aspiring nun. Like his *début*, it is regarded by nearly everyone as being outside his real canon.

He began working as a critic for anyone who would have him, displaying a fondness for deep cuts and for pulp, writing admiring reviews of “Attack of the Killer Tomatoes” and “Alien 3.” He wrote scripts, too, but no one was interested in producing them. Then he resolved to make a commercially viable film. The result

was “Joint Security Area,” a thriller set in the Demilitarized Zone and released in 2000. It’s tonally idiosyncratic—part mystery, part morality play, and part dudes-rock comedy. Its hook, though, is simple and potent: four soldiers, two from the North and two from the South, become friends rather than killing one another, and then two of them end up dead. The movie opens with the investigation into their deaths, and the story of the soldiers is told in flashbacks. It became the highest-grossing movie in Korea, and it helped make Song Kang-ho—now perhaps the most famous Korean actor in the world—a star.

Park and Song became friends—the director and his actors were around the same age, and they would go out drinking after days on set. Song starred in Park’s next film, “*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*,” in 2002. It has a plot like a Rube Goldberg machine, one act of violence producing another: a deaf factory worker kidnaps a child and holds her for ransom so that he can buy his dying sister a kidney; his sister, learning about the kidnapping, kills herself; while the factory worker is burying his sister, the child drowns; the child’s father kills the factory worker, then he is murdered as well. “*Sympathy*,” which is part of a loose trilogy with Park’s following two movies, “*Oldboy*” and “*Lady Vengeance*,” is a procession of disturbing images. Four men spoon one another, masturbating together as they listen through a wall to the sister moaning in agony from her disease. Blood seeps out of the factory worker’s severed Achilles tendons as he dies in a river. “As I made it,” Park told his old classmate Kim Young-jin, “I was giggling from start to finish.”

I visited the Los Angeles set of “*The Sympathizer*” on a chilly, sunny morning, the kind where everyone wears a parka even though it’s fifty-five degrees. After the Captain reaches L.A., he receives instructions from his commander, the General, to kill a suspected mole, who’s called the Major. (The Captain is the actual mole.) That day, the crew was shooting a scene in which the Major,

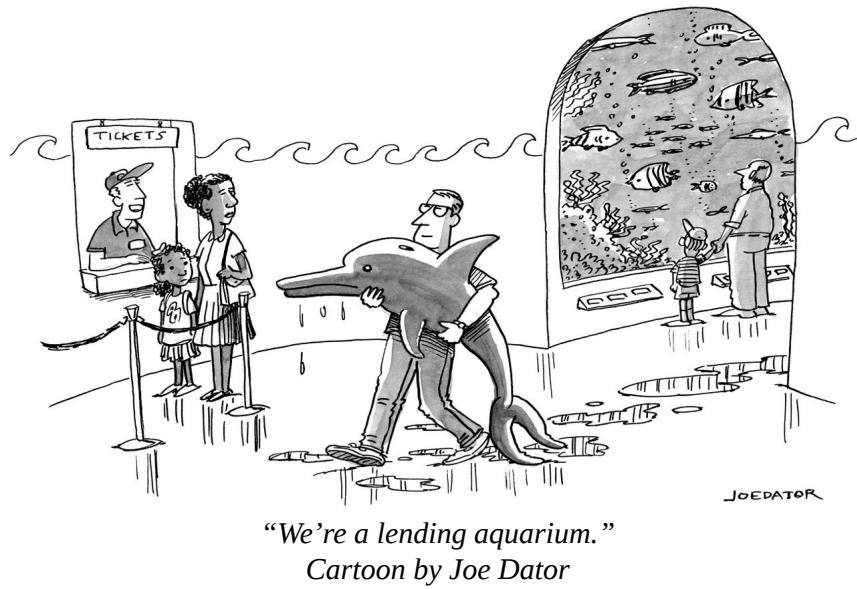
played by Phanxinê—a Vietnamese director who had never acted professionally before—tells the Captain how excited he is for the Fourth of July, blithely unaware of his impending execution. Park sat alert in his chair, focussed on the minutiae of the shot. Between takes, he sipped from a tiny cup of espresso and strolled around like a benevolent lord. A light-brown Cavapoo named Toby, who belonged to one of the producers, ran freely, at one point coming up to Director Park, who bent down and scratched behind Toby’s ears.

Park is widely heralded as one of the world’s great filmmakers, but his movies remain divisive. They are criticized for being gratuitously violent, or for favoring sensation over depth, or for having characters who don’t quite seem real. Park’s reputation was fixed, to a degree, by “Oldboy,” which became the first Korean film to win the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival, in 2004, thanks in part to lobbying by that year’s jury president, Quentin Tarantino. The movie was distributed on DVD in the U.S. by the company Tartan Asia Extreme—a sort of A24 of the aughts for message-board movie nerds interested in grindhouse Asian horror—and achieved huge popularity, though it was still passed around like a secret.

Park is married to a woman he met in college, whom he has described both as a “normal housewife” and as his most trusted script reader; they have a daughter. After “Oldboy,” he has said, he began to “repent having only created stories that pushed women to the periphery.” In 2001, he’d served on the jury for a short-film competition and had selected a work by the female screenwriter Chung Seo-kyung as the winner. “I remember thinking he was a very gentle person,” Chung, who is twelve years younger than Park, told me. “He remembers me being very bold and not using honorifics.” Park asked Chung to collaborate on his next film, “Lady Vengeance,” another movie about wrongful imprisonment and violent revenge, which culminates in a Grand Guignol

sequence where a group of parents slaughter the man who tortured and killed their kids.

Park, who maintains long-term relationships with collaborators—including his primary director of photography, his editor, and his music director—has co-written all his subsequent features with Chung. They start off by talking through the story, plotting it out. Afterward, she writes the first draft, and then they revise it together, sitting at one table, working on a single computer connected to two keyboards, rewriting each other’s words, as though playing a verbal game of table tennis, line by line. “We have the most conflict over the male characters,” Chung told me. “At first I refuse to give in, but then most of the time I let him win, because, when I see the final film, I often come to the realization that Director Park was right.”



In the films that have followed the “Vengeance” trilogy, sex has arguably been Park’s central subject. In “Thirst,” Song Kang-ho is a priest who altruistically contracts a disease in a clinical trial; it turns him into a vampire, and he becomes terrified by his own lust for flesh and blood. The film is often classified as erotic horror, though it is also Park’s truest comedy. (In one scene, Song hemorrhages blood through his ears and mouth while ponderously playing the kind of music-class recorder that one associates with

“Hot Cross Buns.”) Nicole Kidman’s character in “Stoker” is an icy, horny widow who, along with her daughter, played by Mia Wasikowska, is seduced by a gentlemanly psycho played by Matthew Goode. He wants to help Wasikowska reach her full potential, as a serial killer. Sex, in “Stoker,” is a subterranean river threatening to burst through the ground; in its most libidinous scene, Goode and Wasikowska play a Philip Glass duet on the piano. The movie has an unsettling sensory precision. One transition between shots, in which Kidman’s hair, brushed by Wasikowska, melts imperceptibly into a field of waving grass, is somehow as shocking in its wordless beauty as the “Oldboy” octopus is in its squelch.

In Park’s masterpiece, “The Handmaiden,” sex suffuses everything: ivory shoulders, satin ribbons, black ink, a ripe peach, a wine-colored lollipop. Sarah Waters’s story is about a lady and her maid who outrun, in twist after twist, the men who try to seduce and entrap them; Park was intrigued by the way it centered queerness but not discrimination. The movie contains many of Park’s trademarks—a reversal at the midpoint, washes of hyperreal green, a chamber of private violence, octopus stuff—and is the first to fully marry his intensity and his restraint. When he and Chung wrote it, she told me, their voices had melded so naturally that each was writing the kinds of things that the other person was supposed to be good at. She crafted a darkly funny scene in which a woman who is trying to stop another woman’s suicide almost kills her. Park wrote the line “I wish I had milk so I could breast-feed you,” uttered during sex.

Waters’s novel has just one sex scene, narrated twice. “The Handmaiden,” by contrast, is frequently explicit: it features sex toys, the sexual position known as scissoring—included at the insistence of a lesbian friend of Chung’s—and a shot of a woman’s face from the point of view of a receptive vagina. To some viewers, this all seemed suspect, given the pristinely conventional beauty of

the lead actresses, Kim Min-hee and Kim Tae-ri, and the inarguable maleness of the director. Park, when asked about this, pointed out that the story is about the violence of the male gaze—the women, long subjugated by men and pornography, find independence with each other. “When I first watched the film, I did think, Whoa, there’s a lot of sex here,” Waters told me. “My worry, as I was watching, was that, as in lots of traditional porn, a man would step into the women’s intimacies and take over. But that never happened. As in the book, the whole idea of that is played with, then subverted. Instead, the exploitative men destroy each other.”

“*The Handmaiden*” was a box-office success in Korea and got some of the best reviews of Park’s career. But several years passed before the completion of his next film. In the meantime, Park learned that, during the years he was working on “*The Handmaiden*,” he was one of many left-leaning Korean artists who’d been secretly blacklisted from receiving government support by the conservative Presidential administration of Park Geun-hye. (Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the late dictator Park Chung-hee, was removed from office in 2017, following charges of corruption.) Bong Joon-ho, the director of “*Parasite*” and a friend of Park’s, was also blacklisted. Park had at least one film rejected for funding. “Only after everything had come out did somebody who was involved with the funding process tell me they had to reject it because of the government,” he said later.

Despite Park’s international acclaim, the Korean Film Council, prior to 2022, had never submitted one of his movies as the country’s nominee for the Best International Feature Film Oscar. It finally did so with “*Decision to Leave*,” a movie that turns down the dial on both the violence of his early films and the sex of his later ones. It plays frequently like an homage to “*Vertigo*,” in which James Stewart’s character forces Kim Novak’s character to become someone she is not. In both movies, a detective chases a femme fatale who disappears halfway through, then reappears in new

circumstances; both feature scenes in stairwells, rooftop chases, a deadly fall from great heights. When critics mentioned this, Park replied that the resemblance was accidental. “The many films that I have watched throughout my life are all jumbled together in my subconscious,” he said.

The Oscar nominations were announced a couple of hours before I arrived on set in Los Angeles. “Decision to Leave” had been shut out completely. Later, I asked Park whether he cared about such things. “It would be hypocrisy to say that art is the only thing that matters,” he told me. “If you get an award, it might mean you have more power, more creative freedom, in your next project. It might mean you can have a bigger budget. Maybe you can have more freedom and a bigger budget, depending on how big the award is.” But Chung said that, of all the people she knows in Chungmuro, Korea’s version of Hollywood, Park cared the least about what others thought of him and his work. Also, she said, “he really doesn’t like the trouble of attending awards ceremonies.”

In May of 2023, after “The Sympathizer” had finished shooting, the Writers Guild of America went on strike, citing lower earnings in the streaming era and the prospect of A.I. replacing writers. Then the Screen Actors Guild followed suit, and Hollywood shut down for five months. Executives bemoaned the losses to the industry; strikers noted that the state of executive pay—Netflix doled out \$166 million in 2022, which, according to one estimate, was nearly triple the cost of the W.G.A.’s demands—suggested a set of priorities amid which art hardly stood a chance.

Both unions ultimately got most of what they wanted, but the message from executives afterward was plain: the industry, from that point forward, would more or less exclusively chase hits. Movie stars only, please, working with directors who could safely deliver something palatable to the mainstream. In TV production, a brief vogue for limited series was over—and the lip service that had been given to “diverse voices” mostly went quiet. “Certainly, if

you've been going to networks lately, there's a pushback on so-called quality television," Don McKellar told me. "There's definitely a push to be more accessible, whatever that means."

On a podcast early last year, Casey Bloys, HBO's chairman and C.E.O., said, "If you spend a lot of money on a show, it needs to do well." A show could do this by garnering a combination of ratings, awards, and buzz, he explained, but, if you were going to get only buzz, the show had to be "easy to say yes to." He brought up "My Brilliant Friend," the network's adaptation of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan quartet, which didn't get great ratings—it was in Italian—but was beloved by those who watched it. Bloys noted that the show was a co-production with several European companies, and so it didn't cost the network much money. An easy yes.

HBO declined to disclose the budget for "The Sympathizer," but its apparent expense seems like a holdover from a previous era. "It was certainly a big budget to me," McKellar said. He had worked hard to stay within it, he added. "That was one of the things that fell on my plate—cutting the budget, trying to trim, trying to be economical. Still trying to do that. But anyway." We were speaking in mid-February. Although "The Sympathizer" was scheduled to première just two months later, the first episode was not yet locked. During postproduction, as HBO executives watched rough cuts, Park and McKellar got network notes, which often amounted to an industry-standard query: Can we make this easier to understand, so that more people will watch it?

Park's work, though not short on sex, violence, or set pieces, tends toward intricacy, and Park does not slow things down to explain. "He will never repeat a piece of exposition, even if people are begging us to," McKellar said. "Even with English being a second language, he'll ask, 'Do we need this word? Do we need that word?'" When "The Sympathizer" was being written, people read the scripts in their own languages. Park kept tabs on the writers' room, run by McKellar during the pandemic, through Jaehuen

Chung, his interpreter, who sat quietly on Zoom, taking notes—a spy of his own. Once it was actually filmed, and subtitles were added to the multiple time lines and the twisty spy plot, the show seemed more complicated than before. Susan Downey told me, “The narrative complexity of the storytelling reads easier as a script.”

As the notes came in, Park insisted on understanding the reasoning behind each of them. “Why did they say that?” he’d ask McKellar. McKellar told me that he admired this quality in Park, even though it made his job harder; sometimes he found himself telling executives and producers, “Well, he’ll never allow that.” There was only so much they could alter in postproduction anyway. Park does not shoot much coverage—extra footage that might allow you to alter a scene. “There’s not a lot of latitude in the edit, which is not usual for television executives to see,” McKellar said.

Nguyen, who was witnessing a big-budget adaptation up close for the first time, compared the entertainment industry to the U.S. military. “Just as the Pentagon has billion-dollar bombers or whatever it has, Hollywood makes billion-dollar movies,” he told me. “And once you’re making art at this industrial scale, it is, in the end, this gigantic, corporate, collaborative enterprise—in which somebody like Park Chan-wook is incredibly important as a director and an auteur, but still, so many other factors are involved.”



In both the novel and the series, the Captain finds himself serving as a cultural consultant on a racist, romanticized Vietnam War movie called “The Hamlet.” (In the show, David Duchovny is very funny as its majestically self-serious star—as is John Cho as an Asian actor who’s made a career out of getting killed by a variety of famous white guys onscreen.) “The Sympathizer” also had Vietnamese cultural consultants on set, who monitored every take and gave feedback. The writers’ room was largely staffed by Asian women. More than a few times while reporting, I paused to absorb the rare pleasure of speaking mostly to other Asian people about a project with so much money and muscle behind it. Nguyen appreciated this, too, but remained skeptical about how much it mattered. “My work is not about representation within a corporate behemoth,” he said. “My work is about decolonization. These two things do not coincide.”

Nguyen has a steely quality that seems equally rooted in brashness and self-consciousness. He said he would be happy if the show led to Asian actors getting more roles, and if it expanded the possibilities of storytelling about Asian diasporas. But even if it did those things, he added, “it can leave the machinery running the way

it's always run, just with different faces involved." Nonetheless, he couldn't resist the draw of viewership. "A good novel or great novel would be lucky if it was read by tens of thousands of people," he told me. "Hundreds of thousands is extraordinary. But even a bad TV show can be watched by millions."

Seven weeks before "The Sympathizer" was set to première, I finally got a pre-lock cut of the show's first four episodes. The first episode dispenses backstory at a dizzying pace before reaching the terrible, tremendous evacuation. The Citroën rumbles over the bridge; a cigarette's burning ember turns into a rocket falling through a black sky. A bus, glowing with nauseous light, races toward the plane, carrying evacuees, who then sprint across a runway seen from above, like a chessboard, where they are scattered and maimed by bombs. The Captain crouches over a fallen body; he looks up at the airplane, the camera zooming with a shudder to track his gaze. Others in the crowd gesture at him to hurry, the hellish sky behind them orange-red. After he makes it onto the plane, an emergency light flashes red in the shell-shocked darkness, illuminating a baby's bare, limp foot. Park knows when to muster force for one of his "spectacles of ruination," as the critic Kim Young-jin puts it, and he knows when to pull away.

Television, though, may never be quite the right medium for a filmmaker who casts a spell that's not meant to be broken, and who rewards the viewer through destabilization and discomfort. In the novel, the ambivalence and elusiveness of the Captain has a whorling specificity to it; in the series, he often seems a little vague, or indistinct. As if in compensation, Robert Downey, Jr.—who told me that getting Park "to crack a smile or raise an eyebrow" became, in the course of filming, "a significant part of my motivation"—individuates each of his characters with a baroque pleasure, practically tap-dancing. The Captain's surreal American experience climaxes in a scene in which all four of Downey's characters surround him at a restaurant, laughing at the

absurd plenitude of their own power while seated on a red velvet banquette.

Shortly after I watched the first four episodes, I talked to Park on Zoom. It was 9 A.M. in Seoul, and he was in the office of his production company, sitting at a desk, in a black blazer, with three different beverages arrayed before him. I complimented him on the show, through his interpreter. “It’s a work in progress,” he said. “So I’m actually embarrassed that you’ve watched it.”

When I asked him about HBO’s desire to simplify the series during postproduction, he answered with a story about watching Hitchcock’s “North by Northwest” with his parents when he was young. That movie stars Cary Grant as an ad exec mistaken for a fictional man created by an American intelligence agency to distract an enemy spy. Park followed the movie just fine, but his father said that he didn’t understand it. “Hearing my dad, who I considered dear to my heart, say that had a big impact on me,” he told me. “I think it is important for the audience to be actively and creatively involved in the experience they’re having. I want them to think about what they’re watching as they’re watching it. But it all comes down to the matter of how far we can take it. I won’t say that I’ll cater to the audience to the point where they can text, or do something else while they’re watching—but I don’t want my audience to feel as my father did while watching ‘North by Northwest.’ ”

He thought for a second. Then he said, “I think the dilemma always ends up being this: Is it better for the audience to know what is happening right now at that very moment, or do we want them to understand a little bit later?”

The question struck me as a remarkable one during this era in Hollywood, when, although a handful of ambitious shows continue to get made, many others are being produced with the full knowledge, and even acceptance, that the audience will be texting

or scrolling on social media from start to finish. Executives want signposts as big as billboards—ideally, a new drama will, in its first five minutes, present viewers with a dead body; a clear, trauma-dependent backstory for the protagonist; and fully articulated narrative and thematic stakes for every plot point to come. Park's work is not esoteric, but the trust he has in viewers is not highly sought after right now. Park, for his part, sees an important kind of realism in his approach to storytelling. “If the audience knows what is happening as it is happening, the strength of this is that they can inhabit the character and what they are feeling,” he said. “But there is a strength to the audience learning a little bit later, because that’s how it is in our life. There are no people we understand immediately, no incident that we grasp entirely as it unfolds.”

Park has a tendency, in conversation, to offer a proposition and then consider its reverse, somewhat like the Captain. He does not think that there is a fundamental difference between TV and movies, but he recognizes different constraints and opportunities in each medium. With a feature, you risk losing richness and complexity for the sake of efficiency; with a TV series, he said, you can waste your time “like a millionaire wasting their abundant fortune.” It had been important to him to bring to “The Sympathizer” the same concentration he would bring to a film, and not to waste “one second, one minute, or even a frame,” he said. Then he paused again. “But when we’re talking about ‘Moby-Dick,’ the technique of catching a whale, the descriptions of all the different types of whales, the elaborate expression of what it is to dissect a whale—it is very long, but is it a waste? And when Balzac is describing a nineteenth-century pension system, it’s also very belabored, but is it a waste?”

These days, when Park isn’t filming, he takes photographs. Many of his pictures are of witty moments when an object or a scene seems to become something else. At his first solo exhibition, which was mounted in 2021, in Busan, one photo showed a “Star Wars”

sunshade spread across the dashboard of an empty car, so that the characters appear to be passengers. In another, closed-up patio umbrellas look like an army of vigilant ghosts. The practice challenges him to capture spontaneously the sort of striking images that he painstakingly arranges in his films.

He also relaxes by writing scripts. “Writing, to me, is resting,” he said. “Writers would get upset about this, but it’s significantly less stressful compared with shooting, where you chase after every minute, every second, while a hundred people watch over you.”

His mind remains on his unmade movies; he’s got a long list of todos. Next up is “The Ax,” the movie he initially wrote with McKellar, about the jobless serial killer. (Park has since moved the story to Korea.) There’s also a Western he’s been trying to shoot, about bandits who terrorize a small town under the cover of a thunderstorm, and a doctor and sheriff who go out for revenge. He wants to adapt a Japanese sci-fi novel called “Genocidal Organ,” about a man masterminding civil war. “It’s ultimately in the hands of the financiers,” he said. “Which is to say, I base my decisions about what projects to do next on the reality of the world.”

There are images that Park has been thinking about for a long time; sometimes he approaches his projects with an eye toward finally creating them. Back when he couldn’t get a movie made, in his twenties, he imagined a man sealing himself in a hole in the ground, covering his own body with earth and grass, and vanishing from the world without a trace. Three decades later, he turned this image into the last scene in “Decision to Leave.” The femme fatale digs a hole on the beach and waits inside it for the high tide to drown her. The detective comes looking for her, staggering desperately among the sharp black rocks on the sand, searching as the tide eddies and rushes, iridescent and churning, the light slowly vanishing from the pastel gradient of the sky. Park had one day to shoot the scene properly, with high tide falling at exactly the right moment during sunset. If he missed it, he’d have to wait months to

try again. But he got it; the movie's end is rapturous and orchestral. I asked him what other images he'd been carrying around in his head, hoping to find a way to get on film. "I have a few," he said. "But I'd rather not share. What if someone else takes it, and goes for it first?" ♦



*Jia Tolentino* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. In 2023, she won a National Magazine Award for Columns and Essays. Her first book, the essay collection “*Trick Mirror*,” was published in 2019.

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# Shouts & Murmurs

## • **Old-Fashioned Know-How**

Shouts & Murmurs | By Alexis Wilkinson | Kids today! You ever fought a forest fire that you yourself started? You ever had thirteen kids by seventeen different women?

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[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

## Old-Fashioned Know-How

By [Alexis Wilkinson](#)

April 8, 2024



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Listen, kid, when you've been through the things I've been through, you know some things about things. And those things . . . Well, they're the things that put things in perspective. That's the problem with kids these days: too many things, not enough good old-fashioned, homegrown, cage-free know-how. And, trust me, I know how.

While you get to ride to "school" in a graphene-coated e-limousine that runs on skim matcha lattes, I had to crawl on my belly over roads made of crushed glass. All this while dragging a giant phonograph that played my mother shouting "You're not good enough!" on a loop. Except I wasn't headed to school. I was headed to war. A war that I won single-handedly, because I lost the other hand on the way there. And even though I eventually lost all my

limbs, I grew them back through pure force of will. But you wouldn't know anything about that.

You ever fought a forest fire that you yourself started? You ever had thirteen kids by seventeen different women, created twenty-three different broken homes? Have you ever painted yourself black and white and snuck into the panda exhibit to teach the bears about the birds and the bees, only to be viciously attacked by both birds *and* bees? No? Never? Yeah, I didn't think so.

So, while you debate what gender of hot sauce goes better on your digital tofu burger, I spend my time doing my own research, printing all of it out on reams of paper, and then lighting it ablaze, burning my own house down. Why? So I can rebuild from the ground up! You wouldn't know how to build a house without Mommy or Daddy there to kiss it together for you. And that's just sad.

Back in my day, we didn't have "diversity" or "women." It was a true meritocracy! You ever been born Caucasian and become basically African American by sowing cotton seeds, one by one, for miles, with your fingers? Don't believe me? Just ask my best Black friend who I whispered slurs to all summer, until he started laughing with me. Plus, my daughter loves Black men. Checkmate, snowflake.

Because I'll tell you what you can't buy with your cryptocurrency: common sense, the deep sleep of decades of debilitating alcoholism, and the satisfaction of knowing that the government and your ex-wives can't come for you now because there is nothing left to take.

So call me what you want: a delusional dinosaur, a walking domestic incident, "Dad." I don't care. A lion doesn't yield to the "Please don't start with this again" of the nonbinary sheep! At the grand old age of forty-five, I'm the last freethinking human on this

scorched earth, and one day you're all gonna wish you'd listened to the things I yelled out from the back of this ambulance. ♦

*Alexis Wilkinson is a comedy writer based in Lexington, Kentucky.*

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# Fiction

## • “Finistère”

Fiction | By Kevin Barry | A man travelling alone in his morbid fifties does not talk to a girl in her teens without family or guardian in sight, especially not in this black romantic mood.

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Fiction

# Finistère

By [Kevin Barry](#)

April 8, 2024



*Illustration by Leonie Bos*

Listen to this story

*Kevin Barry reads.*

The big man was in a condition of thrilling remorse. He was brokenhearted again at fifty-five and loving it. He leaned against the rail on the top deck of the Cork-Roscoff ferry and shook

woefully from side to side his heavy, handsome ginger head and the cries of a seal pup rose softly from the hollows of his chest. Sylvia had been abandoned that morning in County Clare and would get over him before the leaves were off the trees; Cian John Wynn would never get over himself. He raised his head and wiped away the tears and watched Ireland recede into the afternoon haze and he prayed that it would stay there. He knew it would be a long time before he went home again.

It was early September in a fine spell. The day was calm and the Celtic Sea ran smoothly on streaks of white-gray lustre. He walked the deck in a bliss of painful nostalgia—the ferry felt as if it had sailed directly from the nineteen-eighties. There was the same old idiot noise of the arcade games from below, and Dexys Midnight Runners still played on the Tannoy, and a gaggle of French and Irish teen-agers in high-waisted denim worked up their flirtations in the giddy-making salt breeze—they had fifteen hours yet to Finistère.

### [Kevin Barry on boats and doomed romances.](#)

He descended the decks to escape the hormones. He had a widow's peak and a weakness for contemporary tweeds. He found a quiet corner at Le Café and took a red wine. His moods were swift and ever changing and the thrill of his escape fell away now on a quick grade to emptiness. A familiar void opened up within. He gave out to himself a little and then some more and in fact for a while he argued half seriously against his own existence. Then he gathered his resources somewhat. He drank slowly and judiciously. He tried to read his novel but the words would not fix on the page. Soon a slight girl of about fourteen or fifteen years sat at the table nearest to him. She flipped open a MacBook and scowled into it for a few moments and then looked vaguely in his direction.

“Wi-Fi’s bullshit,” she said.

“Ah, right,” he said.

“I mean, even the fucking Netflix won’t stream?”

He smiled sadly in understanding and returned to his Rachel Cusk but still the words swam and he became quite tense as the girl tapped at the keys and mumbled darkly and much too quickly.

### **Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

*[Listen to Kevin Barry read “Finistère”](#)*

“The gouging bastards,” she said. “What it is is they’re charging, like, a premium rate for a connection you can actually stream off, like fifteen fucking euros?”

A bit off, he thought. Some kind of spectrum. He tried not to engage but couldn’t help himself.

“What’s it you’re trying to watch?”

“ ‘World’s Toughest Prisons,’ ” she said. “Season 7 just dropped.”

He knew not to continue the conversation. A man travelling alone in his morbid fifties does not talk to a girl in her teens without family or guardian in sight, especially not in this black romantic mood and certainly not with a bottle of Château Despair on the go.

“What did you make of Season 6?” he said. “Like that Bosnia and Herzegovina ep?”

“Aw, man,” she said. “Those Slav cats get fucking medieval, yeah?”

For the first time she smiled and it was a wide-open and beautiful and death-defying smile.

•

He had been aware of Sylvia for some time as an aloof presence around the edges of openings and first nights. He knew that she was involved with design, with live poetry, and with a scheme to reintroduce the wolf to the province of Connacht. She was pale and tall and really very good-looking, superbly dressed, and forbiddingly difficult to flirt with. He had taken one demeaning scowl too many from her direction and was like a dog after a stick. He ran into her at the launch of a lounge chair in Galway in late April with just the right amount of booze under his belt and somehow he made her laugh. He knew then to swiftly make his exit and he looked back over his shoulder and smoldered ironically and she laughed again. He found that very moving. The situation took fully in May and was ecstatic in all the usual ways by early June. Mostly it was a lakeside romance back at her place in north Clare with dragonflies and sunlight through the reeds at dusk and all that. Little tractors fucking about on the line of the horizon—gorgeous. During those first weeks they talked extravagantly, constantly—there were gales and gales of talk—and they found delight and comfort in their shared positions, intrigue and interest in their disagreements; they talked busily over breakfast, all through the day, while they cooked, when they walked, at night after making love. Now and not the length of the season later he couldn't remember anything they'd talked about—he could not remember a single fucking word of it.

•

On the open sea the sun burned through a thin veil of cloud and the light on the water made a carnival glister. In the quiet corner of Le Café he turned his chair from the sea view and from the light.

“They get sniffy as motherfuckers about it,” the girl said.

“This is your parents?”

“Yeah,” she said. “They’re, like, We just don’t want you watching jail shit?”

“You should watch whatever you like whenever you like,” he said.

“Thank you,” she said.

“And never trust good taste.”

“Why not?”

“It’s herd opinion,” he said. “Good taste can be good taste only if a lot of people agree on it.”

“I’m with you, fella.”

“Anyway,” he said, “incarceration is a perfectly valid area of study. I mean, look at the way the world is headed?”

“Totally,” she said. “Like, we’re all going to end up someone’s bitch sooner rather than later?”

“I have absolutely no doubt about that,” he said. “We should be prepared for what’s coming.”

•

The more comfortable Sylvia grew with his presence in her house the less he slept, and the summer began to age disagreeably. The hours of darkness were short, the nights endless. He tossed and flopped in the bed like a great fat dying trout and he was apparently resolved to eat his own jaws. He convened all night with the dreary troops of his significant dead. He lay there honking stress and getting zero fucking cell repair while Sylvia beside him slept entirely without effort in a summer night shroud made of hemp. He listened to the even calm of her repose, almost breathless it seemed, and he watched her perfect profile as she lay on her back, hands

clasped at the belly as though arrayed for a burial, like some holy martyr, and he took this performance as a personal affront. He watched the new gray light creep along the edge of the picture window beneath the shade. There were odd pulses like worms at the base of his throat. There were strange olden words on his lips as he lay mumbling against the last of the night. Mostly he gave up on even the attempt at sleep and hobbled down the floating stairs like a man after coming through a war. He watched with unnameable dread as the unforgiving dawn approached with stealth across the stone-wall fields. He drew the curtains against the new morning and once more took up the laptop.

In the course of the love affair he had gone through five seasons of “Yellowstone” without regret and, in truth, by September he was not unaware that a new season of “World’s Toughest Prisons” was about to drop.

•

The girl wore baggy, indeterminable clothes in the penitent, contemporary style and in the hot-neon tones lately smuggled in tunnels from 1983. The sunlight through the café windows moved gaily and bounced. She blocked her eyes against the light and squinted hard.

“There’s a kind of weird energy off you,” she said.

“This is not an original observation,” he said.

“I imagine not,” she said. “And maybe you’re a tiny bit scary, actually?”

“Really?” he said. “You think so?”

“Could be it’s just the eyebrows,” she said.

“Now it gets personal,” he said.

“They are on the baroque side,” she said.

He turned to the window and checked his reflection against the sun’s glare.

“Another little part of me just died,” he said.

“Have another drink,” she said. “You’ve been counting the sips on that one.”

“O.K.,” he said. “You need supervision. Where are your folks?”

“ ‘Folks,’ ” she said, drawing the quote marks in the air. “I mean, I have to fucking dig it.”

•

In the wake of lovemaking Cian John Wynn was a sobbing, grateful mess and usually had to be consoled for several minutes. After two months with Sylvia this had begun to take its toll. She accused him of affectation, and worse. In the bed she now turned her back to him and flung accusations over her shoulder. Hoarsely he denied that he had ever been a tramp. On the Saturday of the August bank-holiday weekend she bit his chin in a way that went beyond playful. He left the house with the eyes of a small wounded deer and gunned his Tesla and vowed that he would never return. He was back at twenty past five the next morning roaring into her letter box. Surely as the seasons turned the relationship was on the old inevitable tilt—he tried to deny the sway of it. Now for a change he lay sleepless in the bushes outside. She let him back in the house by breakfast and he proposed over the shakshuka eggs. Tearfully Sylvia accepted at once. There were two of them in it. They clasped each other’s hands and stood trembling together in the brutalist kitchen extension. As August proceeded the vicinity took on a swampish jungle heat that was ominous as it drifted across the fields and somehow had the reek of the grave to it and

what was left of his sleep was dispersed to the four winds. Now he took fuckloads of pills against the sleeplessness and he got cranky as an old cat from them. Sylvia, in the meantime, was high and joyous on the buzz of the new engagement and she laughed a great deal in the evenings when she arrived back from her design project or the wolves or whatever the fuck she was up to. The laughter seemed out of character. Or at least there was something about the way she laughed. She always tossed her head back when she did so and now every time she did it he thought, A show pony. She's tossing her fucking head again like a fucking show pony. And there was the way she insisted on sharing whatever bullshit was making her laugh on her phone. She would approach gagging with laughter, almost folding up with it, and she'd say, "You've got to . . . You've just got to . . . This . . . This is going to destroy you, Cian. . . ."

"It's probably not really, Sylvia."

"No, seriously. . . . You've just got to . . ."

And he would beam in compliance at some dancing fucking cat or some episode of domestic slapstick in Athlone or someplace horrendous and think, Yeah, well, we might not actually see the Christmas out of this one.

•

The ferry surged against the swell and they made a sure progress for the Continent. The light thickened as the evening came down. The sea took on an inkiness. The sky was vast and lyric and impressive.

"Spectrum?" the girl said. "I'm on all the fucking spectrums."

"I know the way," he said.

“I mean, they haven’t put a name to it precisely but it’s generally agreed that I have a tendency to”—she did the air quotes again—“ ‘obliterate the social contract.’ ”

“Lovely,” he said.

“There have been an amount of referrals,” she said. “But you know what these people are like.”

“These people?”

“Oh, you know,” she said. “The therapists. Et cetera.”

“I don’t, actually,” he said. “I’ve never been.”

She let her jaw hang in a gesture of astonished collapse.

“You?” she said. “Have never been? To therapy?”

“I wouldn’t see the point of it,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because there’d only be a point to it if I was to fully engage and be entirely present in the process and truthful. I’d have to tell the person what was going on in my head at all times. And I couldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because they’d have me committed to a locked facility and they’d throw away the key.”

“Please don’t take my daddy away!” she cried.

“O.K.,” he said.

“Anyway, that’s not how therapy works,” she said. “Like, telling them everything in your head? Are you fucking crazy?”

•

He could not have expected the histrionics of that morning’s final breakup with Sylvia. He thought the situation would simply exhaust itself—he had exhausted many another before. Instead a mild grumbling about the consistency of the overnight oats suddenly escalated and they were both on their feet with the amps switched on. She accused him of the most heinous things—of being pat and flippant and blithe and of faking suicidal ideation for effect. He said in turn that he believed her character was essentially vampiric and that he could not be her sustenance. At that she climbed over the kitchen island and cornered him among the crockery and the pans and he told her that their time together had been a wonderful gift and she hit him on the ear with a box grater.

“Sylvia, really,” he said.

For a finish the guards were called and tawdry recitals of the situation were performed by both parties—you could put her on the fucking stage—and of course the guards turned on him and issued the usual stern injunctions.

“It all went filthy on me again,” he told the girl.

“More details,” she said.

“No,” he said. “Let’s just say I am technically at this moment under advisement not to reënter the townland of Ennistymon.”

•

The girl’s eyes were astonishingly bright. They burned with this strange frankness and with a sly ingenuity. There was something antique, too, something almost elfin, as per an encounter in the

forest gloom. Verbally dexterous, she maintained as carefully as she could her front—the hard lines of tension that showed in her neck betrayed that front. He felt that things might go either way for her yet. She looked up now with a flick of anxiety.

“O.K.,” she said. “The mama approaches.”

He picked up his novel as though to read and mimed a frown of concentration at the Cusk and took a sip of wine.

An efficient-looking woman in a no-nonsense fleece jacket appeared. She spoke low and urgently to the girl, who replied with hand flaps and little barks of reassurance. As the woman departed she seemed to rake a glance over him, seemed about to pause, but moved on again. As soon as she was out of sight—

“Let’s play secrets,” the girl said.

“Oh, let’s seriously not,” he said.

“I’ve never had sex,” she said.

“I should hope not,” he said. “You’re a child.”

“I’m nearly sixteen.”

“Leave it as long as you can,” he said. “At the end of the day, it’s nothing to get worked up about.”

“O.K.,” she said.

“And it tends to confuse situations.”

“Confuse how?”

“There’s a kind of unreal glow from it,” he said.

“A glow?”

“Yes,” he said. “And this may be a very negative view, but it’s what I believe—the glow of romantic love only lasts for about thirty . . . encounters.”

“You mean fucks?” the girl said.

“Yes,” he said. “You’ve an awful tongue in your head.”

“Thank you,” she said. “But how do you know thirty?”

“I’ve counted,” he said.

“And what happens after the glow?”

“After the glow,” he said, “it’s all just box sets and nonsense.”

“Box sets!” she said. “My ‘folks’ have some of those.”

“You’re unstoppable,” he said. “But do you know, by the way, what profanity is?”

“I’ve a feeling you’re going to tell me, Dad.”

“Profanity is a defensive use of language,” he said. “It’s a shield. So what are you defending yourself against?”

“What have you got?” she said.

•

What he’d got was too much love in his heart and too much love even yet to deliver. His capacities were in this way overburdened, he told the girl. An excess of feeling was the most terrible curse. He had sold himself to emotion young and never found the receipt. He was essentially in a type of eternal adolescence. He was susceptible

to a heated glance across the room—even still—and to the potency of cheap music. The world was full of these enticements if you knew where to look for them. He was too old for all of it now, he said, and please don't protest the fact. He wondered if he had not in some fundamental ways laid waste to his life. He was not a serious man, he said. And yes sometimes it all became very bleak, especially in the small hours, and sometimes, in truth, he could only see one way out.

“Suicide!” the girl sang.

“It’s not like it’s never crossed my mind,” he said. “But I don’t know. . . . There’s a kind of showiness about it that I would ultimately find gaudy.”

“Know what you’re saying,” the girl agreed.

“And generally speaking,” he said, “we must turn our eyes from death.”

“Yes, Father,” she said.

“It’s the sort of thing you’ll find will look after itself.”

“Got you,” she said. “So you just look away?”

“Until the last possible minute,” he said.

“O.K.,” she said. “But how will you tell that it’s the last possible minute? Or tell that it isn’t? I mean, could it even be right here, right now, on this fucking boat?”

He leaned forward a little and lowered his freckled patrician brow.

“You think you’re looking at the big fool who’s got all this figured out?”

•

Even with his hands still trembling in the Tesla that morning, even with Sylvia still raging among the bushes and the wildflower embankment, even with the guards still parked across the road and the squad car full to bursting with their broad unsalted-butter faces, even with all that going on he had decided to pay the little extra for a cabin with a sea view. He booked it on his phone and in fact the last-minute pricing wasn't so bad.

The ferry moved through the black murk of the night now and he lay unsleeping with the soft groans and the sawing of the sea. He turned on a lamp and picked up some literature and read that the ferry at capacity carried some fourteen hundred souls. They lay sleeping in the sardine-tin cabins all around and above and below him, their dreams echoing in the low drone of the air system. He turned off the light again and lay back with his eyes open. He knew that there was nothing good coming, and this was a tremendous relief. Unseen across the sea—miles yet but ever closer—the white and green cliff tops of Finistère were waiting.

•

Before they had parted at Le Café there was a last exchange of unusual candor. She told him that the recent meds had fucked up her sex drive and now if she was attracted to anything it was to duvets. He told her that once when he was about her age his sense of himself had got so loose and wild that his mother and father had to tie him down to the bed at home in Rooskey, County Roscommon, and with every justification.

“And look at me now,” he said.

•

He saw her once more in the morning. She passed along behind her parents as the passengers trailed down to the car decks. The parents both had the harried manner of long sufferance and both wore fleece jackets as matchers against their suffering. The girl turned to him as she passed by and screwed her eyes in to meet her nose and shook out her arms for a couple of seconds in a mad trembling as if electrified in a facility. He shrugged for her, What can you do? She gave a little wave back then and a smile that was almost shy and almost sweet.

He approached with a rippling heart the Tesla. He carried his broad shoulders square and proudly. There was a crackle of illicit energy from the big man. There was something kinetic, something labile in his air. His lips moved softly with old emotions as the ferry docked and he sat waiting behind the wheel. He recited the names of all those he had loved—this was a familiar and settling routine and he was a good while at it. The gangways then descended with a great clanking and the cars began to roll.

France appeared first as a blinding whiteness made of the low September morning sun and he felt once more in his life that he had been rescued. He drove patiently and slowly through the yards of the port until the ferry's traffic began to disperse, and the roads all opened up, and the morning, too.

He would drive fast now all day south and into the darkness and at the end of it there would be shellfish and cold white wine and the lovely cool dim of a single room, and maybe something just a little bit like sleep. ♦

*Kevin Barry* has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2010. His forthcoming novel is “*The Heart in Winter*. ”

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# The Critics

- **[The Warhol “Superstar” Candy Darling and the Fight to Be Seen](#)**

Books | By Hilton Als | The sui-generis trans actress inspired works by Warhol, Lou Reed, and others, yet never broke through to the mainstream herself. A new book captures the brilliant persona she created.

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

Books | “Cocktails with George and Martha,” “Cahokia Jazz,” “The Limits,” and “The Tower.”

- **[Stephen Breyer to the Supreme Court Majority: You’re Doing It Wrong](#)**

Books | By Louis Menand | In our system of government, the Constitution has the final say. But it doesn’t come with a user manual.

- **[The Truth Behind the Slouching Epidemic](#)**

Books | By Rebecca Mead | From the onset of the twentieth century, poor posture has been associated with poverty, bad health, and even civilizational decadence. But does the real problem lie elsewhere?

- **[In the Kitchen with the Grande Dame of Jewish Cooking](#)**

On and Off the Menu | By Hannah Goldfield | Any home cook who’s hosted a Passover Seder or a Rosh Hashanah dinner has likely consulted a recipe by Joan Nathan.

- **[The Unexpected Delight of “Sasquatch Sunset”](#)**

The Current Cinema | By Richard Brody | In David and Nathan Zellner’s other films, the action often feels fabricated to yield images of twee idiosyncrasy. There is no similar sense of contrivance here.

[Books](#)

## The Warhol “Superstar” Candy Darling and the Fight to Be Seen

The sui-generis trans actress inspired works by Warhol, Lou Reed, and others, yet never broke through to the mainstream herself. A new book captures the brilliant persona she created.

By [Hilton Als](#)

April 8, 2024



*Like Marilyn Monroe, Darling was a master at projecting energy in a two-dimensional medium.*  
*Photograph by Andy Warhol, “Candy Darling” © 2024 The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc. / Licensed by ARS*

If it wasn't love at first sight, it was certainly fascination. I spotted him one afternoon in the East Village. Pale-skinned and thin, in an oversized trenchcoat tightly cinched at the waist, he looked like no beauty I'd seen before. His large eyes were lined with kohl, and his lips were painted a moist pink. His shoulder-length hair, straight and full, was dyed a kind of ash blond (he let the darker roots show). And as I watched him walk past Gem Spa, where newspapers and egg creams were sold—this was in the early nineteen-eighties—I didn't think Bowie genderfuck so much as I thought Sue Lyon—not as Kubrick's Lolita but as the wild, lovesick girl in the film version of Tennessee Williams's "The Night of the Iguana," staunch and a little spoiled. As I followed him down Second Avenue to Third Street, where, as it turned out, we both lived, he was even more alluring to me than Sue Lyon, in part because I couldn't determine his sex right away, and I loved how that made me feel.

I had the same feeling when I first looked at photographs of Candy Darling, the trans actress, gender revolutionary, and Warhol fixture, who is the subject of Cynthia Carr's monumental biography "Candy Darling: Dreamer, Icon, Superstar" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In the images I saw of Candy, by Richard Avedon, Peter Hujar, Robert Mapplethorpe, Fred W. McDarrah, Gerard Malanga, Warhol, and others, she seemed to share something with that young man in the East Village (he and I became friends eventually). They moved through the world in a similar way, not experiencing, say, the jumpiness I felt at living down the street from the Hell's Angels, or the fear and apprehension that overtook me when I passed, let alone entered, a gay sex club. They didn't bother to meet the curious stares of passersby with a reproachful or baleful look. They were too caught up in the business of developing and finding ways to represent their various selves.

Candy Darling died, of cancer, in 1974, when she was just twenty-nine, a full decade before I moved to Manhattan, but so great was

her legend that there was still much to remember her by. Theatre folks recalled her inspired performances in works by playwrights ranging from Jackie Curtis to Tennessee Williams, while others had never missed a chance to see her in art-house movies by Warhol, Werner Schroeter, and Mario Monicelli, among others. Then, there were the still images. Like Marilyn Monroe—another brilliantly constructed persona—Darling was a master at projecting energy in a two-dimensional medium, by which I don't mean that Candy, who grew up in Massapequa Park, on Long Island, radiated physical joy, like Marilyn cavorting in the California surf. If anything, her energy was of a blondness turned inside out: no matter how much she smiled or gave come-hither looks, she was a melancholy urban creature, protected by a sense of irony that sometimes lit her from within or lit up the crummy hotel rooms and park benches where she posed. (In Laura Rubin's shots of Candy in Brighton Beach in 1971, she looks not windswept but uncomfortable.)

## What We're Reading

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For people of my generation and even the current one, however, a first awareness of Candy Darling most often comes from music. The Rolling Stones gave her and her friend Taffy Titz a shout-out in their 1967 song “Citadel”—“Candy and Taffy / Hope you both are well / Please come see me in the Citadel”—but it took a writer of Lou Reed’s strengths to frame Darling’s narrative of being and becoming, in songs that make us see and imagine her living self. Two of Reed’s most famous songs, “Candy Says” (1969) and

“Walk on the Wild Side” (1972), continue to introduce Candy to the larger audience she always craved. She didn’t especially care for rock—her head was filled with the sounds of an earlier era; she loved the musical bio-pic “The Eddy Duchin Story” (1956), starring Kim Novak, an idol of hers—but Reed’s paean to Darling in “Candy Says” is something else: an ode on the limiting and corrosive effects of wanting to live in a body other than one’s own, and what that can do to the heart and the imagination. Reed’s Velvet Underground bandmate Doug Yule sings in an almost whisper:

Candy says, “I’ve come to hate my body  
And all that it requires in this world.”  
Candy says, “I’d like to know completely  
What others so discreetly talk about.  
I’m gonna watch the bluebirds fly  
Over my shoulder  
I’m gonna watch them pass me by  
Maybe when I’m older  
What do you think I’d see  
If I could walk away from me?”

But the point of Darling’s life—a point she insisted on with the few people she was close to—was that you can’t walk away from yourself, no matter how difficult it is to be who you are. “Always be yourself,” Candy told a cousin, and it’s the story of how she became a self—or, more accurately, lived simultaneously in her real and her fantasy selves—that Carr tells in her book. “Candy Darling” is the first full-length biography of the trans star, and I can’t imagine a better or more honest writer for the task.

From the very beginning of the book, Carr, who wrote a powerful biography of another poetic outsider, “Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz” (2012), shows us how Darling’s story queers straight biography. “She began her life as a tortured effeminate boy because she wasn’t really a boy,” Carr writes. “She

was always a she, and I will be using she/her pronouns for her throughout.” By honoring Darling’s disconnection from her birth name (what some trans people call their “dead name”), Carr not only meets Darling on her own terms but insists that we do, too. “The word ‘trans’ implies a journey,” Carr writes, and the journey was a long and arduous one, driven and framed by romanticism and conviction.

Carr had to assemble her portrait of the young Candy from snippets, fragments, misremembered memories, and family shame. How did that child—born James Slattery—become this magnificent other? Partly by keeping things moving. “We don’t talk about *then*,” Darling said, in 1973, to an admiring young filmmaker, who’d mentioned having met her before. “Because it doesn’t matter who we *were*. Only who we *are*.”

To read about Candy’s early years, in Queens and Massapequa Park, is to long for her escape. Candy’s mother, the beautiful Theresa, known as Terry, already had a son, Warren, from a previous marriage, when she got together with John F. Slattery, whom friends called Jim. (Warren answered Carr’s questions only on condition that his last name not be published. He didn’t want his friends to know he was Candy Darling’s brother.) The family was living in Forest Hills, Queens, when James was born, on November 24, 1944. The Slatterys were not short on drama. Though the couple held down jobs—Terry as an office worker and, later, a bank teller, and Jim as a cashier for the New York Racing Association and a sometime bartender—and were eventually able to buy a house in North Merrick, on Long Island, the family’s emotional well-being was often rocked by Jim’s drinking, gambling, and violent rages, which were followed by the usual pleading and promises: *Please don’t leave, I’ll be better.* By 1957, Terry had had enough.

She divorced Jim and, with half the money from the sale of their home, got a place in suburban Massapequa Park, where Candy

attended middle school. She was very soon a target. “He fit in with the girls,” one of Candy’s early friends told Carr. “He gravitated to them. And he was always picked on. He was very effeminate.” But what’s a girl to do? Especially if her inner self—her true self—bears no resemblance to the body, let alone the social constructs, she has to live with? (Candy referred to her penis as her “flaw.”) She learns to lie, to obfuscate, to sidestep the violence that’s always headed her way. Did Candy even know then that it was possible to be trans? Carr makes the case that she didn’t. All she probably knew, at fourteen, at fifteen, was what she was: a woman.

In 1953, Christine Jorgensen, the trans performer and activist who became famous in the United States for having sex-reassignment surgery, moved to neighboring Massapequa to distance herself from her notoriety. Sometimes Candy would cross the park separating the two towns and walk back and forth in front of Jorgensen’s house, but she never rang the bell. Part of what makes Darling’s performances so evocative—especially in “The Death of Maria Malibran,” Werner Schroeter’s 1972 romantic movie about art and the female diva—is her loneliness. (Once, as a young adult, she and a friend, the performance artist Agosto Machado, passed a schoolyard where they saw a little boy sitting by himself, and Candy, who rarely talked about her past, said, “I know how he feels. He doesn’t have any friends and he doesn’t know why he’s being punished in this way.”)

What likely saved her was her ability to hope, even in the depths of that loneliness. (Hope was a name she used before she settled on Candy.) “Practically everyone has a little hope,” she wrote in a school essay in 1960. “From the teenage girl who wishes on the first star of the evening to the starlet who wishes for fame and success to the poor tortured creature who in a last plea for mercy cries out in anguish for death.” There were life rafts along the way, small boats filled with happiness she could sail away on for a while. After dropping out of high school in her junior year, Candy

enrolled at the DeVern School of Cosmetology, in nearby Baldwin, New York. In her journal, she wrote, “It isn’t like school at all. I always have someone to eat with. There is no ‘embarrassment.’” Eventually, Candy got a job at a friend’s beauty parlor; what she loved most was performing for other women in that all-female space. Impersonating Marilyn Monroe was a way of becoming herself, and in the early sixties she began transitioning. At first it was slow. A woman’s blouse tucked into her jeans, say. Though Candy had to lie to Jim, whom Terry remarried in 1962, she didn’t hide who she was from her mother for long; she couldn’t. When Terry told Candy she’d heard from a neighbor that “Jimmy” had been at the Hayloft, a gay bar in Baldwin, wearing women’s clothes, Candy went into her room and then emerged dressed as her true self. “I couldn’t hold my son back,” Terry said.

Nor could anyone else. Carr is a wonderful social historian, especially adept in her depiction of New York’s art and theatre scene in the years when Candy made her name. But, before making her name, she had to choose one. For a while, she was Candy Cane. (Monroe’s name in “Some Like It Hot” is Sugar Kane.) Eventually, Taffy Titz, who used to hang out with Candy in the West Village, said, “Come on, let’s go, Candy, darling,” so often that it stuck.

That was in the mid-sixties, and the streets were a trans girl’s home. Carr writes, “Those were the days but mostly nights when queens promenaded up and down Christopher Street to dish, to see what everyone was wearing, and to find out if anyone knew of a party.” As a “street queen,” Candy had no protection and no money; she occasionally tricked for cash. She was kicked out of one shitty hotel after another, lived with friends or acquaintances. She never had a permanent place of her own, besides her room in her mother’s home in Massapequa Park. (When she wanted to go to Long Island, she would say, all Joan Bennett-like, that she was going to her country home; she failed to mention that she had to arrive and leave at night, so the neighbors wouldn’t see her.) Still,

she was known as the most glamorous girl on the block. From Lou Reed's "Walk on the Wild Side":

Candy came from out on the Island  
In the back room she was everybody's darling  
But she never lost her head  
Even when she was giving head  
She says, "Hey, babe  
Take a walk on the wild side"

Unlike the other queens in the West Village, Candy didn't make her life a performance for all the world to see. Ladylike and demure, once she was onstage she played the truth of her character as she saw it. Her allure was given its first real showcase by Jackie Curtis, a brilliant, messy queen a few years younger than Candy, who'd grown up on the Lower East Side. (His grandmother owned a bar on Second Avenue called Slugger Ann's.) Frequenting the same social circles, Candy and Jackie began meeting up for late-night gab sessions in lousy diners, where Candy, wrapped in fake furs, would act out her favorite scenes from the movies she loved.

The twenty-year-old Jackie made a proposal: if Candy really wanted to be an actress, he would write a play for her, and he did. Titled "Glamour, Glory, and Gold: The Life and Legend of Nola Noonan, Goddess and Star," it opened Off Off Broadway in 1967, and was about a young actress's rise to stardom, and her fall. Candy didn't have the lead role, but she got excellent notices— notices that failed to mention that she was a trans woman, because Candy had pushed for her gender identity to be kept secret; she wanted to be reviewed as a woman. From Dan Sullivan, in the *Times*: "A skinny actress billed as Candy Darling also made an impression; hers was the first female impersonation of a female impersonator that I have ever seen." Ron Link, who directed "Glamour," said, "You didn't direct her like a normal actress. In other words you'd say to Candy, Here I want you to be like Lana in 'The Postman Always Rings Twice,' and then maybe the next

scene . . . you'd say, I want you to do what Joan Bennett did in 'Scarlet Street,' and then she'd get it immediately. So she did the play in segments as those ladies until it became her own."



*Cartoon by Sam Gross*

The late sixties were an exciting time to be in the theatre, and to be in the new New York, where, although gay people could still be arrested for their preferences, there was the Stonewall rebellion, and second-wave feminism, and queer artists and writers making work that spoke of their own world in code, while offering a critique of the “normal.” Candy wasn’t political, but she and Jackie, along with their friend the outstanding trans comedian Holly Woodlawn (who also features in “Walk on the Wild Side”), became symbols of the anarchy of the time: you can fuck with gender, all right, but first let’s ask the question “What is it?”

In Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett’s fantastic 1980 book, “POPism: The Warhol Sixties,” Warhol writes about how trans people—he calls them “drag queens,” as was common at the time—weren’t accepted into “mainstream freak circles” until the late sixties. Then, “just like drugs had come into the average person’s life, sexual blurs did, too, and people began identifying a little more with drag queens, seeing them more as ‘sexual radicals’ than as depressing losers.” Warhol was captivated by Candy from the get-go, and went to see her in a number of productions. Her freedom onstage no

doubt reminded him of the people who had improvised so brilliantly in his own early flicks, but this was a new era, and now he wanted to produce, so he put the director Paul Morrissey behind the camera.

The resulting film, “Flesh” (1968), holds up because of its cast. The beautiful, menacing, and sleepy-looking Joe Dallesandro plays a male hustler surrounded by a constellation of women, including Candy and Jackie, girlfriends who read movie magazines and sometimes talk to Geri, a go-go dancer, as she blows Dallesandro. (Jackie wasn’t in full drag then, sort of half in and half out, a singular boy-girl creature.) “Isn’t she wretched,” Candy says of Geri, in the most disdainful and refined of voices. “She’ll come to a bad end.” Some time later, she engages Geri in a bit of girl talk and comments on how nice it is that Geri’s tits move when she walks. “Things that move. I think things that move are beautiful.”

I remember first seeing “Flesh” at the Bleecker Street Cinema decades ago. Aside from the shock of hearing Candy’s voice for the first time (I had only seen still images at that point and was fascinated by her sometimes vindictive whisperiness; you could tell she had a core of toughness under her champagne-blond tresses and red lipstick), I was most struck by the poverty of “Flesh.” Not the way the film looked—cheapness was part of Warhol’s production style—but the poor rooms the characters lived in. They all seemed to be on some sort of hustle, disconnected even as they tried to connect: Brecht in Loisaida. It was like visiting my trans friend’s rooms on East Third Street: an old TV, junk on the floor, dirty windows, barbells, makeup.

It’s touching to learn, in Carr’s book and in other accounts of Darling, that she had bad teeth and couldn’t afford to get them fixed. (In those days, dental implants weren’t common, and Candy’s caps kept falling out. The writer Jane Wagner paid for replacements, as did Warhol, but Candy’s teeth were always a problem.) Sometimes she could get a nonpaying theatre gig; she

even worked as a barmaid for Jackie's grandmother at Slugger Ann's. "My grandmother did not know that Candy was no genetic female," Curtis told Warhol. "And she certainly did not know Candy would come to work in a slip! But having her there did draw in some new customers—a few fairies from the West Village who couldn't believe she really had a job." But she never earned much. And the twenty-five bucks Warhol paid for a scene wasn't going to help. Mostly, she relied on friends, such as the devoted Jeremiah Newton, who did much to keep her legend out there. (His contribution to James Rasin's 2009 documentary, "Beautiful Darling," is the tender heart of the film.) Candy always believed that the next gig was going to be her big break. From "POPism":

Candy suffered a big disappointment in '69. In fact, she never got over it. As soon as the news that the movie of [Gore Vidal's novel] "Myra Breckinridge" was going to be made appeared in the trade papers, Candy began writing letters to the studio and the producers and whoever else she could think of, telling them that she'd lived the complete life of Myra and that she knew even more about forties movies than Gore Vidal did. It was true. And they gave the part to Raquel Welch.

Poor Candy wrote begging them to please, please reconsider. . . . When she didn't hear anything back, something changed with Candy—it wasn't a change you would notice unless you knew her very well (after all, she was always giving some level of performance). But suddenly she had to face the fact that Hollywood had slammed the door on her. All her life she'd been rejected and rejected by everybody and everything, and all through it she'd held onto the fantasy that even if no place else in the world would take her in, that Hollywood would, because Hollywood was as unreal as she was; Hollywood would surely understand—somehow. So when she didn't get the part of Myra and she saw that Hollywood didn't want her, either, I saw her become bitter.

Warhol's writing about Candy is some of the most beautiful and trenchant he ever produced, in part because he was Candy, too: rejected and rejected and unreal to other people. At least, as a visual artist, Warhol could make his own world (and did). What he saw in Candy the performer was a person who worked brilliantly to create a persona but had no control over how that persona was used or not used. The hardest part of any performer's life is waiting to be chosen. And who would choose Candy?

There were some breaks. A short scene in "Klute" (1971), starring her friend Jane Fonda ("I wanted her in it so she would have some health insurance," Fonda told me once), and then, the same year, the largest part she'd ever have in a Warhol film: Candy, a rich and proper woman, in "Women in Revolt," directed by Morrissey. Originally titled "P.I.G.S." (an acronym for Politically Involved Girls), the film is a burlesque about feminism; all the women seeking their freedom from male oppression are trans. The actors—including Holly Woodlawn and Jackie Curtis—all play a version of themselves, of course, but Candy plays an idea of herself. (Woodlawn, in her 1991 memoir, "A Low Life in High Heels," relates how Darling wanted not just to be a movie star but to be a very particular kind of star—the most glamorous—even when the cameras weren't rolling.) In 1972, Candy played Violet, a loose woman whom all the men fall for, in Tennessee Williams's "Small Craft Warnings"—a show that got her from Off Off Broadway to Off Broadway. She had a starring role in a 1973 production of Tom Eyen's play "The White Whore and the Bit Player," which describes an actress's vacillation between thinking of herself as a whore and as a nun, violated and inviolate. The play is a comedy. The *Times* review, though, isn't funny. Mel Gussow wrote, "'Candy Darling in the role she was born to play,' reads the advertisement for Tom Eyen's 'The White Whore and the Bit Player.' Although one would question, on factual grounds, the word 'born,' this is a role suited to this female impersonator's talents and one that she has already played in one semblance or another."

Would the critical language about Candy's gender ever change? (Occasionally it did. Thomas Berger's lovely 1973 tribute in *Esquire*, "Candy Darling Is (Almost) All Girl," is among the most beautiful and complicated pieces about her to appear in her lifetime.) Like every actress before and since, Candy wondered, too, what would happen to her as she aged. Time was passing. And times were changing. (It's difficult now to watch Candy in blackface in some scenes in "The Death of Maria Malibran," which explores race as part of its examination of "authenticity.")

Carr, in her understanding text, admires Candy, but never glosses over her self-absorption, which, of course, was an aspect of her self-preservation. When talking about Candy's apolitical view of most things, Carr reminds us of what was going on in the world around her. Candy didn't attend a single Gay Pride march or rally, but what happened at a rally on June 24, 1973, says a lot about how the trans world was viewed at that time even by gay-rights activists. Sylvia Rivera, a co-founder of STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), was "the focal point of the day's main political disturbance," Arthur Bell reported in the *Village Voice*. Rivera, as she made her way to the stage, was beaten by the parade marshals; when she finally reached the mike, she declared that she was there on behalf of gay people who were mistreated in jail, as she had been. "I have had my nose broken," Rivera told the assembled. "I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation, and you all treat me this way? What the fuck's wrong with you all?"

What was "wrong" was being trans. (At the same rally, Jean O'Leary, of Lesbian Feminist Liberation, read a statement to the effect that men who impersonated women for profit were exploiting women.) The isolation that Candy had felt in any sort of community—in her birth family, at school, in show business—had left her not wanting to join any group as an adult. And who would have had her? "I feel like I'm living in a prison," she once wrote in

her diary. “There are so many things I may not experience. I cannot go swimming, can’t visit relatives, can’t go out without make-up, can’t wear certain clothes, can’t have a boyfriend, can’t get a job. I see so much of life I cannot have.” One wonders, too, if, as life was failing Candy, she sometimes failed others. So great was her belief in the fantasy of movies that maybe real people didn’t feel they could measure up. In a diary entry from the early seventies, she asked, “What famed blonde beauty—star of stage, screen, and nightclubs—finds it necessary to beg friends and even casual acquaintances to stay with her at night out of fear of being alone?” In another, she noted, “I have lived most of my life starving for affection. Spiritually and emotionally hungry. I lived my life through movie stars.”

Still, there was hope. Faith. By the late sixties, Candy had come across a copy of “Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures,” by the Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, and started taking it with her most places—through all those temporary homes and fly-by-night connections. “In Christian Science,” Carr tells us, “the material world is an illusion and illness comes from errant thinking.” In an interview with the writer Bob Colacello in 1972, Candy espoused some of Eddy’s teachings. “The body is a state of mind,” she said. “I think we get sick because other people get sick.”

What wasn’t a state of mind was the cancer that was diagnosed in 1973. Like many of her peers, Candy had reportedly been taking hormones to stimulate breast growth; those pills were probably the cause. Jeremiah Newton conjectured that Candy had hesitated to pursue gender-confirmation surgery because Christian Science disapproves of operations. “She felt she could will herself to become a woman,” Newton said. Candy’s will was her most salient feature. She could only be herself. When, in her last days, she was admitted to Cabrini Medical Center, she was put in the men’s ward—which didn’t keep her from wearing her marabou-feathered

dressing gown. Ultimately, after a friend intervened, she was given her own room. Holly and Jackie visited and got drunk. (At first, Jackie—suppressing the pain of seeing her that way—concluded that Candy was doing a number, that her time in the hospital was a performance.) Candy’s mother was there as much as her schedule allowed. Candy wanted to do one last photo shoot, so Peter Hujar came. His images of a perfectly made-up Candy in her hospital bed became famous; one even ended up on the cover of the trans musician Anohni’s 2005 album (with her band, then known as Antony and the Johnsons), “I Am a Bird Now.” In those photographs, I see Candy, and I see others, too, including my East Third Street friend, who died of AIDS some time before 2003, when Anohni recorded a definitive, fully embodied cover of “Candy Says.” ♦



*Hilton Als*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He published “*My Pinup*,” in November, 2022.

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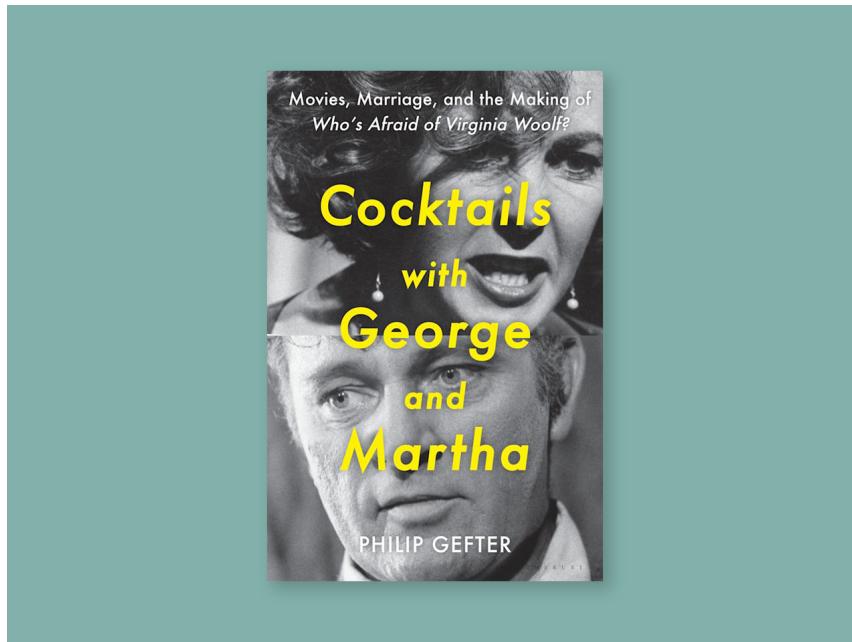
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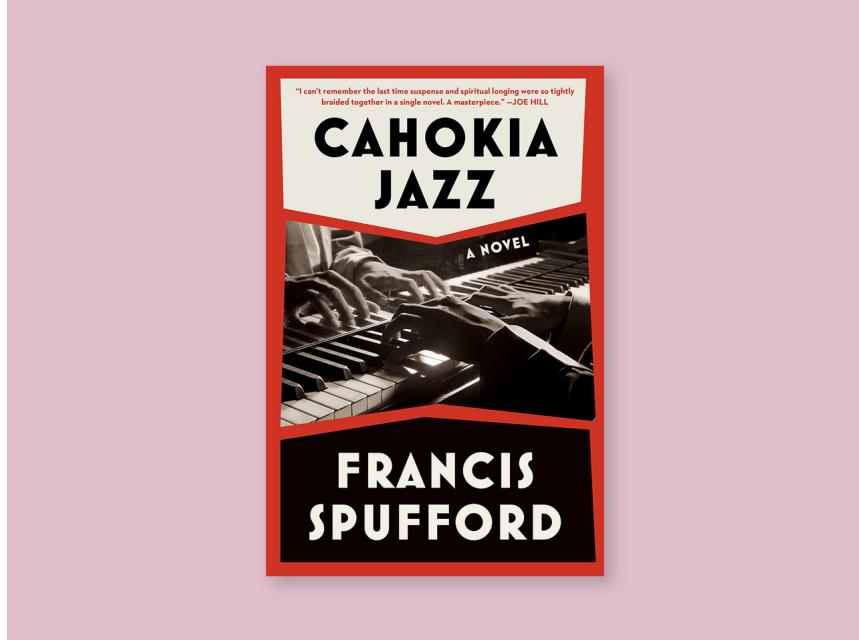
## Briefly Noted

“Cocktails with George and Martha,” “Cahokia Jazz,” “The Limits,” and “The Tower.”

April 8, 2024



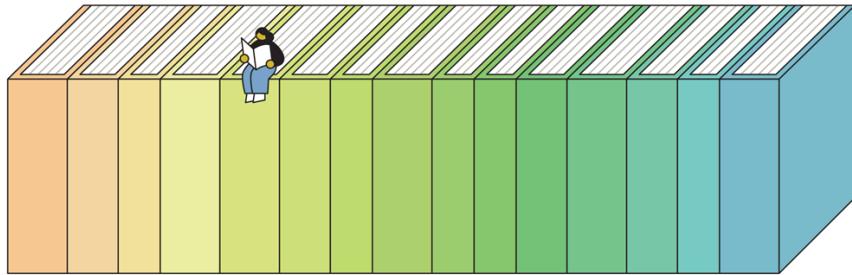
**Cocktails with George and Martha**, by *Philip Gefter* (*Bloomsbury*). When Edward Albee’s play “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” opened on Broadway, in 1962, it marked a watershed in American theatre, simultaneously entralling and appalling audiences with its excruciatingly intimate portrait of a dysfunctional marriage. Tracing the life of the play from its first draft through the film version, adapted by Mike Nichols in 1966, Gefter deftly blends social history, textual analysis, and Hollywood gossip to probe the story’s appeal. At the heart of his inquiry are three real-life relationships—between Albee and his longtime boyfriend, William Flanagan; between Nichols and Ernest Lehman, the film’s producer; and between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, the film’s stars—that illustrate the universality of Albee’s themes.



**Cahokia Jazz**, by *Francis Spufford* (Scribner). In this stylishly drawn mystery novel, the tropes of noir—among them a hardboiled detective with an artist’s soul, a powerful woman with a terrible secret, and a journalist chasing the story of a lifetime—appear in an alternative Jazz Age. Here, Native Americans did not succumb to smallpox, and the powerful and ancient Cahokia nation has joined the United States. This imagined America is studded with names borrowed from the real one: St. Louis might be a mere backwater, but T. S. Eliot is still among its locals. So, unfortunately, is the Klan, which is intent on wresting control of the city from its people and putting it under white, capitalist authority.

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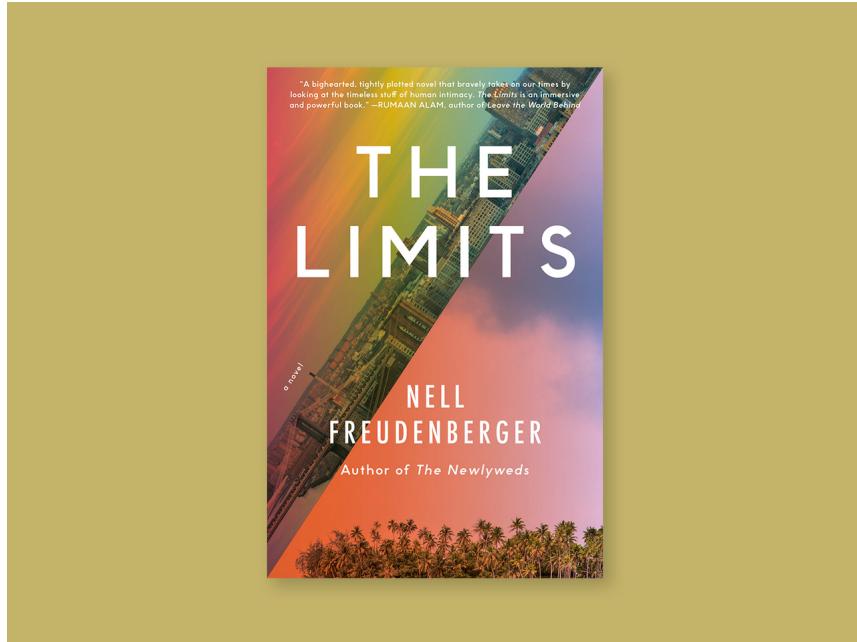
## What We're Reading



*Illustration by Rose Wong*

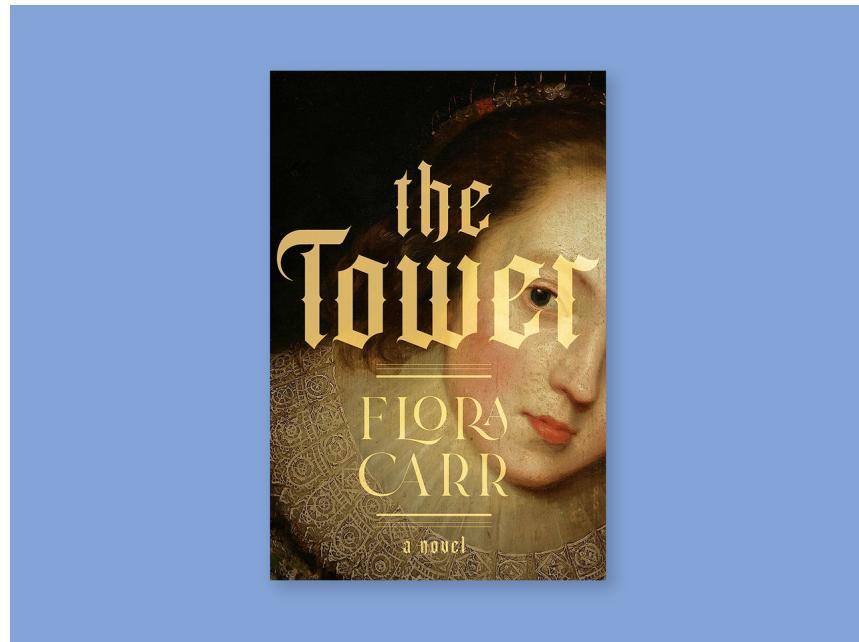
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**The Limits**, by Nell Freudenberger (*Knopf*). Set partly in New York City and partly in French Polynesia, this novel follows a family through the distress of 2020. Stephen, an overworked cardiologist, resides in New York with his new wife, who is pregnant. His ex-wife, Nathalie, a scientist, lives in Tahiti, where she studies deepwater-coral bleaching. Moving between these two worlds is their teen-age daughter, Pia, who has become attached to a Tahitian expert diver who works with her mother, and to his mission: to prevent mining companies from destroying the reefs, even if it might require violence. The novel's evocation of contemporary troubles—Trump, *Covid*, ecological devastation—

endows it with a sense of chaos that is at once limiting and liberating.



**The Tower**, by Flora Carr (Doubleday). Based on true events, this richly detailed novel takes place over the course of a year, in the late fifteen-sixties, on an island in Scotland. Mary, Queen of Scots, has been imprisoned by rebels and forced to leave her son, the future King James, with her enemies. She is pregnant with twins, having been raped by the man who became her third husband. After a miscarriage, she directs her remaining energy toward escape. Schemes ensue: could she jump from a tower window, seduce a visiting lord, or pose as a laundress? Her attending ladies, who are also imprisoned, are devoted to helping her reclaim the throne. Through her tale, Carr depicts the ways in which women can care for and exert power over one another.

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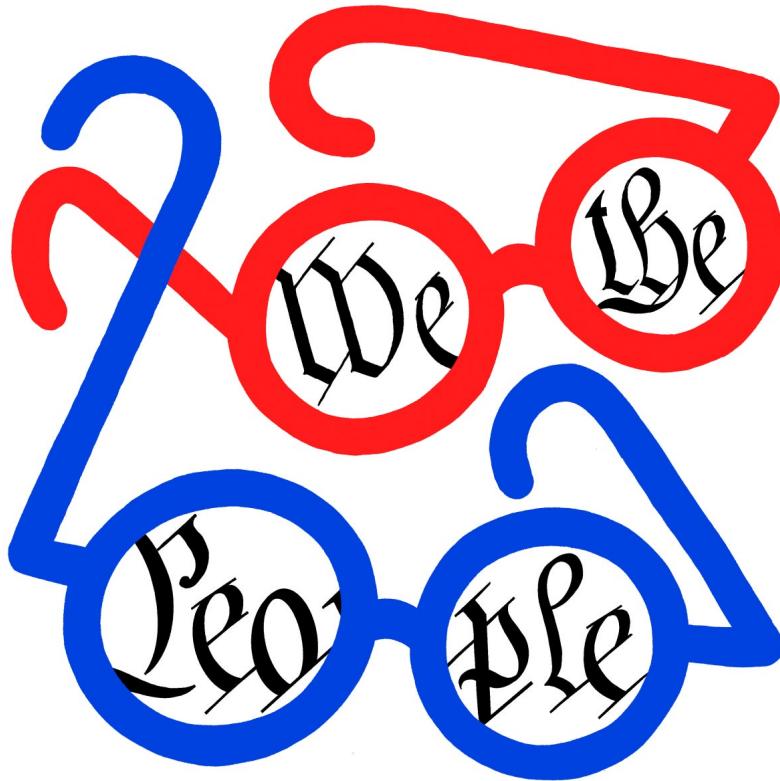
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# Stephen Breyer to the Supreme Court Majority: You're Doing It Wrong

In our system of government, the Constitution has the final say. But it doesn't come with a user manual.

By [Louis Menand](#)

April 8, 2024



*Even if all the Supreme Court Justices settled on the same method of interpretation, disagreement would be inevitable because they have different politics.*

*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

One day in 1993, [Stephen Breyer](#), then the chief judge of the Court of Appeals for the First Circuit, which sits in Boston, was riding his bicycle in Harvard Square when he was hit by a car. He was taken to Mount Auburn Hospital with broken ribs and a punctured lung. While he was recovering, he was visited by three White House

officials. They had flown up to interview him for a possible nomination to the United States Supreme Court.

The vetting went well enough, and Breyer was invited to Washington to meet the President, [Bill Clinton](#). Breyer's doctors advised against flying, so he took the train, in some discomfort. The meeting with Clinton did not go well. According to Jeffrey Toobin's "[The Nine](#)," a book about the Supreme Court, Clinton found Breyer "heartless." "I don't see enough humanity," he complained. "I want a judge with soul." Breyer was told to go home. They would call.

He knew that things had gone poorly. "There's only two people who aren't convinced I'm going to be on the Supreme Court," he told a fellow-judge. "One is me and the other is Clinton." He was right. The phone never rang. The seat went to [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#).

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Ginsburg was a cool customer, too, but she knew which buttons to push. In her interview with Clinton, she talked about the death of her mother and about helping her husband get through law school after he was stricken with testicular cancer. Clinton loved catch-in-the-throat stories like that. Ginsburg was confirmed by the Senate 96–3.

A year went by, there was another Supreme Court vacancy, and Breyer was again in the mix. His candidacy was pushed by Ted

Kennedy, with whom he had worked as the chief counsel of the Senate Judiciary Committee when Kennedy was its chair. Clinton really wanted to nominate his Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, but Babbitt faced opposition from senators in Western states, and Breyer seemed politically hypoallergenic.

So Breyer was chosen. Still, the White House did not do him any favors. Clinton's indecisiveness was an ongoing story in the press—it had taken him eighty-six days to pick Ginsburg—and the news coverage made it plain that Breyer was not his first or even his second choice. The White House counsel, Lloyd Cutler, told reporters that, of the candidates being considered, Breyer was “the one with the fewest problems.”

Clinton announced the selection without even waiting for Breyer to come down from Boston. When Breyer did show up, a few days later, he said, “I’m glad I didn’t bring my bicycle down.” Famous last words. In 2011, he broke his collarbone in another biking accident near his home in Cambridge, and in 2013 he fractured his right shoulder and underwent shoulder-replacement surgery after crashing his bicycle near the Korean War Veterans Memorial, on the National Mall. He was seventy-four. You have to give him credit. He gets right back on the horse.

Since his appointment to the Court, Breyer has published several books on his jurisprudential views. His latest is “[Reading the Constitution: Why I Chose Pragmatism, Not Textualism](#)” (Simon & Schuster). It sums up his frustration with the court that he just stepped down from.

Clinton was not the only person who read Breyer as a technocrat. People felt he lacked a quality that Clinton could apparently summon at will—empathy. “He’s always been smarter than most of those around him,” the Yale constitutional-law professor Akhil Amar explained to a reporter, “so he’s had to learn how to get along with other people.”

That was his reputation at Harvard Law School, too, where he taught administrative law for many years before becoming a judge. “Breyer’s basic social instincts are conservative,” a Harvard colleague, Morton Horwitz, told the *Times*. “His legal culture is more liberal, and his very flexible pragmatism will enable him to give things a gentle spin in a liberal direction. But he’s a person without deep roots of any kind. He won’t develop a vision. . . . The words ‘social justice’ would somewhat embarrass him.”

It’s true that Breyer has a professorial presentation. He is cosmopolitan and erudite. He travels to other countries and is interested in their legal systems; reporters like to drop the fact that he has read “À la Recherche du Temps Perdu,” in French, twice. He is also, for a judge, relatively wealthy. His wife, Joanna Hare, a clinical psychologist at Dana-Farber, is the daughter of an English viscount.

Before joining the Court, Breyer showed few signs of being a social-justice warrior. He has, like the President who appointed him, neoliberal inclinations. He was instrumental in creating sentencing guidelines for federal judges that he later conceded were too rigid. He wrote a book on regulatory reform. And one of his proudest legislative achievements was working with Kennedy to deregulate the airline industry.

But he has an admirable temperament. Toobin called him “the sunniest individual to serve on the Supreme Court in a great many years.” Seated on a bench next to a lot of intellectual loners—[Antonin Scalia](#), [Clarence Thomas](#), [David Souter](#), Ginsburg herself—Breyer became a consensus seeker, if not always a consensus builder. He believed in reasoned discourse.

He had also learned, from watching Kennedy do business in the Senate, that compromise is how you get things done in government, and he understood that on an ideologically divided court the power is in the middle. Being a split-the-difference

centrist, like his predecessor Lewis Powell, and like the Justice he was closest to, [Sandra Day O'Connor](#), suited his personality, too.

Breyer loved the job and was reluctant to announce his retirement, throwing liberals who feared another R.B.G. fiasco into a panic. He stepped down at the end of the 2021-22 term, in time for [President Joe Biden](#) to put one of Breyer's former clerks, [Ketanji Brown Jackson](#), on the Court. Breyer is now back where he started, as a professor of administrative law at Harvard. Happily for the law school, there are now many dedicated bike lanes in Cambridge.

Horwitz was not entirely right about what George H. W. Bush called “the vision thing.” Beneath Breyer’s pragmatic, let-us-reason-together persona is the soul of a Warren Court liberal. The Warren Court is where Breyer’s judicial career began. After graduating from Harvard Law School, in 1964, he clerked for Justice Arthur Goldberg. It was, he said, “a court with a mission.” The mission was to realize the promise of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

*Brown* is Breyer’s touchstone. He calls the decision “an affirmation of justice itself.” *Brown* was decided in 1954, and it governs only segregation in public schools. This is because the Fourteenth Amendment’s guarantee of “the equal protection of the laws,” the right under which *Brown* was decided, is a right that can be exercised only against states and their agencies. But Breyer understands *Brown* in a broader sense. He believes that the reasoning in *Brown* leads to the condemnation of any and all discrimination that is within the reach of government to eliminate.

Extending the spirit of *Brown* is what the 1964 Civil Rights Act was designed to do. The act was signed into law in July, just as Breyer was beginning his clerkship, and it did something that Congress had tried once before, in 1875: make it unlawful for public accommodations like hotels, theatres, and restaurants to discriminate on the basis of race. In 1883, in a blockbuster

decision, the Supreme Court had thrown out that earlier act as unconstitutional. It ruled that the government cannot tell private parties whom they must serve.

Title II of the Civil Rights Act once again prohibited discrimination in public accommodations on the basis of race, color, religion, or national origin. But how are privately owned businesses like restaurants within the reach of the state? In October, 1964, three months after the act was signed into law, that question came before the Court in two challenges to the constitutionality of Title II: *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. U.S.*, concerning a motel in Georgia that refused to serve Black travellers, and *Katzenbach v. McClung*, concerning a restaurant in Birmingham, Ollie's Barbecue, that refused to seat Black customers. (They could use a takeout window.)

The Court ruled that Congress gets its power to ban discrimination in public accommodations from the commerce clause in Article I of the Constitution. ("Congress shall have power . . . to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.") This holding required the Court to find that the Heart of Atlanta Motel and Ollie's Barbecue were, in fact, part of interstate commerce. And the Court so found.

Since the motel was patronized by people travelling from one state to another, and since the ingredients for some of the food served at Ollie's came from outside Alabama, the Court held that the motel and the restaurant were part of commerce "among the several states" and therefore within the power of Congress to regulate. The Court declared the 1883 ruling "inapposite and without precedential value," and the decision in both cases was unanimous. Breyer thinks that they were the most important rulings of his clerkship.

There was another case with far-reaching effects that was decided during Breyer's clerkship: *Griswold v. Connecticut*. The plaintiffs,

Estelle Griswold and C. Lee Buxton, opened a Planned Parenthood clinic in New Haven and were arrested for counselling married couples about birth-control devices, which were illegal under the state's anti-contraception law. Griswold and Buxton argued that, since the law was unconstitutional, they could not be prosecuted for advising women to break it. In a 7–2 decision, the Court agreed. What constitutional provision did the Connecticut law violate? The right to privacy.

Justice William O. Douglas wrote the opinion of the Court, and it is a classic of judicial inventiveness. Nowhere does the Constitution mention a right to privacy, but Douglas proposed that “specific guarantees in the Bill of Rights have penumbras, formed by emanations from those guarantees that help give them life and substance.” By this jurisprudential alchemy, the First, Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Ninth Amendments could be interpreted as defining a “zone of privacy” whose penumbra would extend to the marital bedroom.

Douglas concluded his opinion with an encomium to marriage. He got quite worked up about it. “Marriage is a coming together for better or for worse, hopefully enduring, and intimate to the degree of being sacred,” he wrote. “It is an association that promotes a way of life, not causes; a harmony in living, not political faiths; a bilateral loyalty, not commercial or social projects. Yet it is an association for as noble a purpose as any involved in our prior decisions.” Douglas was sixty-six. A year after Griswold, he divorced his twenty-six-year-old third wife, Joan Martin, to marry Cathleen Heffernan, who was twenty-two.

Griswold became a key precedent in two landmark cases: *Roe v. Wade*, decided in 1973, and *Obergefell v. Hodges*, the same-sex-marriage case, decided in 2015. “The right of privacy,” Harry Blackmun wrote for the Court in *Roe*, “is broad enough to encompass a woman’s decision whether or not to terminate her pregnancy.” In *Obergefell*, Anthony Kennedy, also writing for the

Court, quoted Douglas's reflections on marriage in their entirety and added some emanations of his own. In addition to a privacy right, he declared, constitutional liberties extend "to certain personal choices central to individual dignity and autonomy, including intimate choices that define personal identity and beliefs." (In a dissent, Scalia said that he would "hide my head in a bag" before putting his name to some of Kennedy's prose.)

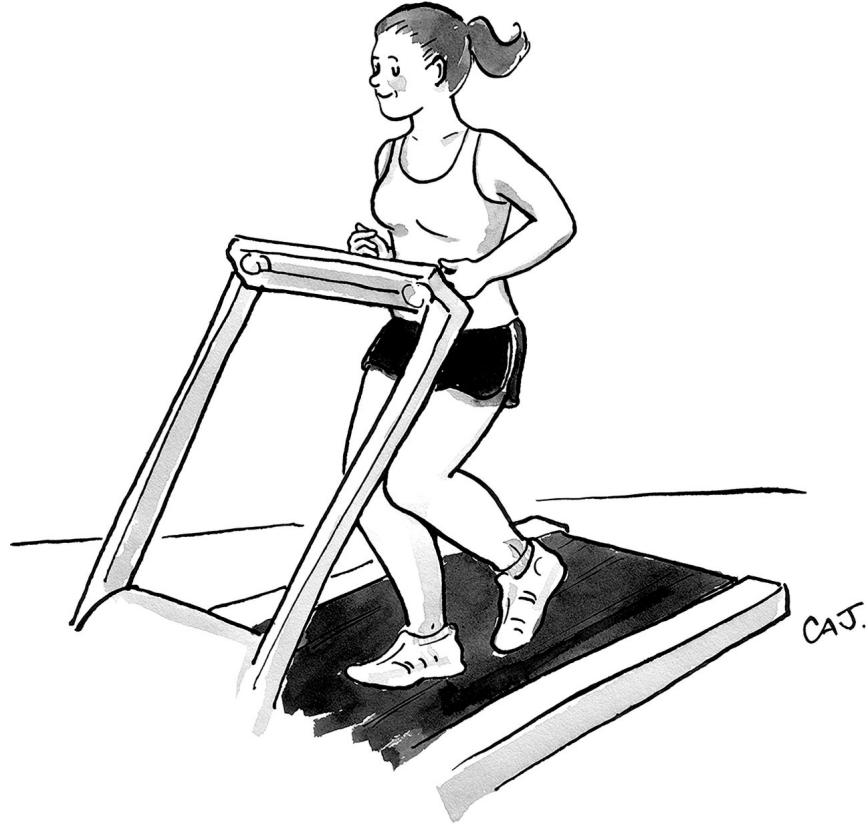
The shape of Breyer's Supreme Court career therefore has an emblematic significance, because it was bookended by two decisions that undid much of what the Warren Court achieved in *Heart of Atlanta* and *Griswold*. Breyer's first major dissent came in 1995, in *U.S. v. Lopez*, a commerce-clause case; his last was in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Organization*, the decision that overturned [Roe v. Wade](#).

*Lopez* turned on the constitutionality of the Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990, which made it a federal crime to possess a firearm in a school zone. In a 5–4 decision, the Court rejected the government's argument that the act was a legitimate exercise of Congress's power under the commerce clause. It was the first time since 1936 that the Court had struck down a federal law for exceeding the commerce-clause power.

Much of the New Deal was made possible by the commerce clause. In his dissent, Breyer noted that more than a hundred federal laws include the phrase "affecting commerce." How many was the Court bent on invalidating? Some, anyway. Five years later, in *U.S. v. Morrison*, the Court threw out provisions of the Violence Against Women Act on the ground of commerce-clause overreach.

Breyer's dissent in *Dobbs*, in 2022, was joined by [Elena Kagan](#) and [Sonia Sotomayor](#). The privacy right in *Roe* "does not stand alone," they wrote. "The Court has linked it for decades to other settled freedoms involving bodily integrity, familial relationships, and procreation. Most obviously, the right to terminate a pregnancy

arose straight out of the right to purchase and use contraception. . . . They are all part of the same constitutional fabric.” They wondered, again, how much the Court was prepared to unravel. In his concurrence, Thomas suggested that the Court might want to reconsider Griswold and Obergefell.



**COURTNEY: RAISED BY HAMSTERS**

*Cartoon by Carolita Johnson*

What happened? Breyer has an explanation, and he lays it out in the new book. He thinks it's all a matter of interpretation.

As Breyer points out, a majority of the Court now subscribes to the interpretive methods known as textualism and originalism.

Textualism and originalism tend to be run together as types of what used to be called “strict construction” (a term that seems to have fallen out of use). But there is a difference. Textualism is primarily a way of interpreting statutes, and originalism is a way of interpreting the Constitution.

Textualists ask what the words of a statute literally mean. Information like legislative history or social-science data is largely irrelevant. Textualists don't ask, "What would Congress have us do?" They just say, "What is the rule here?" and try to follow it.

Originalists, on the other hand, ask what the Framers would have them do. Originalists can consult the records of the Constitutional Convention (which are hardly comprehensive) and documents like the Federalist Papers (which is a collection of op-eds). But they claim to stick to the "original public understanding" of constitutional language—that is, what the words meant to the average voter in the eighteenth century. They do not invent rights that the Framers would not have recognized, as originalists think Douglas did in *Griswold*.

More recently, originalists have looked to something called "history and tradition," highly malleable terms—whose history? which tradition?—by which they tend to mean things as they were prior to circa 1964. Writing for the Court in *Dobbs*, Samuel Alito explained that the decision turned on "whether the right at issue in this case is rooted in our Nation's history and tradition." The constitutional right to abortion was then fifty years old. For women likely to rely on it, the right had existed for their entire lifetimes. But what mattered to the originalists was whether women could rely on it in the nineteenth century.

The use of race as a plus factor in college and university admissions is even older. The practice dates from the late nineteen-sixties, and has been ruled constitutional by the Supreme Court three times: in 1978, in 2003, and in 2016. But the majority had little trouble wiping it out last term, in [Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard](#). It is a bit brazen to be shouldering aside precedents under the banner of "tradition."

Breyer sums up textualism and originalism as attempts to make judicial reasoning a science and to make law a list of rules. In our

system of government, the Constitution is the big trump card. But it doesn't come with a user manual. The document is basically a list of clauses—the commerce clause (sixteen words), the equal-protection clause (fourteen words), and so on. And the Constitution gives the reason for a clause only twice: in the patent-and-copyright clause in Article I and in the right-to-bear-arms clause in the Second Amendment. (We could add the preamble, the “We the People” clause, which gives the rationale for having a written constitution in the first place, a novel idea in 1787.)

Some constitutional clauses, like the requirement that the President be native-born, are rules, but many, like the equal-protection clause (the only reference to equality in the entire document), are principles. They do not mark out bright lines separating the constitutionally permitted from the constitutionally forbidden.

Courts, however, are obliged to draw those lines. Judges cannot conclude that the law is a gray area. Textualists and originalists believe that their approach draws the line at the right place. Breyer thinks that the idea that there is a single right place, good for all time, is a delusion, and that his approach, which he calls “pragmatism,” is the one best suited to the design of the American legal system. Pragmatism makes the system “workable” (a word Breyer uses many times) because it does not box us into rigid doctrines and anachronistic meanings.

Pragmatist judges therefore look to the law's purposes, consequences, and values. They ask, “Why did the lawmakers write this? What are the real-world consequences for the way the Court interprets it? And what are the values that subtend the system of government that courts are a part of?” These are questions that literal readings can't answer.

An originalist like Scalia, for example, thinks that the “cruel and unusual punishment” clause in the Eighth Amendment makes unconstitutional only punishments that would have been considered

cruel and unusual in 1791, the year the amendment was ratified. In 1791, people were sentenced to death for theft. If we said that seems cruel and unusual today, Scalia would say, “Fine. Pass a law against it. But the Constitution does not forbid it.” When he was asked what punishment the Framers would have considered cruel and unusual, Scalia said, “Thumbscrews.”

To this, a pragmatist judge would say, “Then what is the point of having a constitution?” The words “cruel and unusual” were chosen by the Framers (in this case, James Madison, who drafted the Bill of Rights) because their meanings are not fixed. And that goes to the purpose of the clause. The Constitution does not prohibit cruel and unusual punishment because cruelty is bad and we’re against it. It prohibits punishment that most people would find excessive in order to preserve the public’s faith in the criminal-justice system. If we started executing people for stealing a loaf of bread today, the system would lose its legitimacy. Surely an originalist would agree that the Framers were big on legitimacy.

The same is true of many other clauses—for example, the free-speech clause in the First Amendment. Free speech is protected not because it’s a God-given right. It’s protected because, in a democracy, if you do not allow the losers to have their say, you cannot expect them to submit to the will of the winners. Free speech legitimizes majoritarian rule.

Breyer’s book is organized as a series of analyses of some twenty Supreme Court cases, most of which Breyer took part in during his time on the Court. Some are major cases, like *District of Columbia v. Heller*, in which the originalists found a right to possess a gun for self-defense in the Second Amendment, which says nothing about self-defense. (“Some have made the argument, bordering on the frivolous, that only those arms in existence in the eighteenth century are protected by the Second Amendment,” Scalia wrote in the Court’s opinion. Hmm. What happened to the Thumbscrews Doctrine?)

Other cases are perhaps less than major, like *Return Mail, Inc. v. United States Postal Service*, which answered the question of whether the federal government is a “person” capable of petitioning the Patent Trial and Appeal Board under the Leahy-Smith America Invents Act. (It is not.) Breyer explains how originalists and textualists decided each case and how he, as a pragmatist, decided them. His book is accessible, rather repetitive, and neither theoretical nor technical. It is addressed to non-lawyers.

It also seems weirdly naïve. Or maybe purposefully naïve. In most of the cases Breyer discusses, where there was disagreement on the Court it resulted not from differences in interpretive methods but from differences in politics. In almost every case, the originalists and textualists came down on the conservative side, restricting the powers of the federal government and expanding the powers of the states, and the pragmatists and “living constitutionalists” (another term that’s now largely avoided) came down on the liberal side.

What is naïve is to believe that the conservative Justices—which means, on the current Court, the six Justices appointed by Republican Presidents, though they are not always on the same page—would decide cases differently if they switched to another method of interpretation. Judicial reasoning doesn’t work that way. Judges pretty much know where they want to come out, and then they figure out a juridically respectable way of getting there.

Why would Breyer want to ignore, or seriously underestimate, the part that political ideology plays in Supreme Court decisions? The answer lies in an earlier book, “[The Authority of the Court and the Peril of Politics](#),” based on a lecture he delivered at Harvard in 2021. It’s all about legitimacy.

Legitimacy is why the Warren Court was on a mission in 1964. The Supreme Court’s reputation—you could say its mystique—is all that it has. It cannot tax or spend. Only Congress can do those things, and only the President can send in the Army. When

Southern school districts ignored Brown and refused to integrate, the Court was in danger of being exposed as a paper tiger. It was crucial, therefore, that everyone believe that the Justices were not making law, only finding it. The Constitution made them do it. That was the Court's claim to legitimacy.

Breyer thinks that the Court still operates this way. All Justices, he says in "The Authority of the Court," "studiously try to avoid deciding a case on the basis of ideology rather than law." The reason that "different political groups so strongly support some persons for appointment to the Court and so strongly oppose others" is that people "confuse perceived personal ideology (inferred from party affiliation or that of the nominating executive) and professed judicial philosophy."

But Presidents and Senate majorities certainly think they are appointing Justices who share their political beliefs, even when they profess to be simply looking for the most qualified jurist. Sometimes Presidents are wrong. Earl Warren, appointed by Dwight D. Eisenhower, no enthusiast of race-mixing, is a famous example. But that is not because Warren was apolitical. Warren was a Republican politician. He had been elected governor of California three times and had run for Vice-President on the ticket with Thomas E. Dewey, in 1948. For Warren, the political constituency that mattered when he became Chief Justice was not the President or Congress. It was the public.

He could see that, in the postwar era, public opinion was likely to favor expanded liberties—the United States was presenting itself, after all, as the leader of the free world—and although his court may sometimes have got a few paces ahead of public opinion, it was largely in step with the times. It was a liberal era. We are not living in a liberal era anymore, and the Court reflects this.

Politics is the art of governance. The Supreme Court is a branch of government, and is therefore a political body. Its decisions affect

public life. If by “political” we mean “partisan,” we are still talking about governance, because partisanship is loyalty to a political ideology, normally instantiated in a political party. Politics, therefore, cannot not be partisan. Partisanship is how politics works. Even when politicians say, “This is no time for politics,” they are saying it for partisan reasons. They are saying it because it is good for their side to say it.

What makes the Court different from other political actors is stare decisis, the tradition of respecting its earlier decisions, something Congress does not have to worry about. There is no rule against overturning a precedent, though. So why has the Court been traditionally reluctant to do so? Why does Thomas’s suggestion that it might be time to overrule *Griswold* and *Obergefell* seem so radical? It’s because the Court’s legitimacy is intimately tied to the perception that, in making its rulings, it looks only to what the Constitution says and what the Court has previously decided. When the Court overturns a case, it has to make it appear as though the decision was wrong as a matter of law.

This is why Breyer insists that it’s all a matter of legal forensics, of what interpretive lenses the Justices use. He wants to preserve the authority of the Court. He wants to prevent the Justices from being seen as the puppets of politicians.

His toughest moment on the Court, for this reason, must have been *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District*, decided in 2007. In that case, the Court struck down a Seattle policy of using race as a factor in assigning students to high schools with the aim of attaining rough racial balance.

It was the kind of policy that the Court had approved a number of times since *Brown*. Now, in an opinion by John Roberts, the Court declared that it had had enough. Roberts ended with a memorable line, no doubt saved up for the right occasion: “The way to stop

discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.”

After Roberts announced the Court’s opinion, on the last day of the term, Breyer delivered a speech from the bench. “Bristling with barely concealed anger,” according to an account by the legal scholar Lani Guinier, he accused the Court’s Republican appointees of voting their policy preferences. “It is not often in the law that so few have so quickly changed so much,” he said.

In 2019, Breyer’s speech from the bench was published as a pamphlet by Brookings. The title he gave it was “Breaking the Promise of Brown.” ♦



*Louis Menand* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His most recent book is “*The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War*.”

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## The Truth Behind the Slouching Epidemic

From the onset of the twentieth century, poor posture has been associated with poverty, bad health, and even civilizational decadence. But does the real problem lie elsewhere?

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

April 8, 2024



*Cures for the common slump often romanticize an ancestral past as a remedy for the ills of the present.*

*Illustration by Ines Pagniez*

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At the bottom right of my computer screen, just out of my direct line of vision, lurks an animated scold: a cartoon giraffe named Rafi. He is the playful icon of an app called Posture Pal, which works in concert with a wearer's AirPods to warn against slumping while sitting at a computer. So long as I keep my line of vision

trained on this text, Rafi stays discreetly out of sight. The minute I rest my chin in my hand in concentration, however—let alone sneak a glance at the iPhone that lies tantalizingly close to my keyboard—a baleful Rafi pops up, eyes wide, mouth down-turned. Sit up straight!

Rafi is actually less intrusive than the animated animal featured in another posture-correction desktop app, Nekoze. This one employs a computer’s camera to determine whether the user is slouching or slumping. If she is, an icon of a cat’s face pops up on her menu bar, accompanied by a surprisingly realistic meow. It’s a peculiar choice for a posture admonition: surely a meow could make a user look down at her ankles for a creature that wants feeding or petting, rather than stiffen her spine, eyes front? Then again, nobody would voluntarily install an icon of an angry drill sergeant on a personal computer.

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The association of animals with posture correction goes beyond an accident of digital cuteness. As Beth Linker explains in her book “[Slouch: Posture Panic in Modern America](#)” (Princeton), a long history of anxiety about the proximity between human and bestial nature has played out in this area of social science. Linker, a historian of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, argues that at the onset of the twentieth century the United States became gripped by what she characterizes as a poor-posture epidemic: a widespread social contagion of slumping that could, it was feared, have deleterious effects not just upon individual health but also

upon the body politic. Sitting up straight would help remedy all kinds of failings, physical and moral, and Linker traces the history of this concern: from the exchanges of nineteenth-century scientists, who first identified the possible ancestral causes of contemporary back pain, to the late-twentieth-century popularity of the Alexander Technique, Pilates, and hatha yoga. The epidemic's expression may have evolved, but even today it has hardly abated: on Goop, the wellness emporium, you can buy a foam roller to combat sitting-induced constriction of the waist and a plastic dome on which to therapeutically rock your pelvis. Sultry TikTok-ers demonstrate how to strap oneself into a corset-like garment that pins back the shoulders, while buff YouTube influencers explain how to appear inches taller by unfurling a tech-bent spine.

Linker makes no claim, she says, about the “realness of the epidemic or the degree to which poor posture is debilitating.” She’s not saying that Rafi and the Nekoze cat are wrong to harry me, or that your lower back doesn’t hurt. Rather, she sees the “past and present worries concerning posture as part of an enduring concern about so-called ‘diseases of civilization’”—grounded in a mythology of human ancestry that posits the hunter-gatherer as an ideal from which we have fallen.

The origins of posture science date to the latter half of the nineteenth century, when archeologists and natural scientists were starting to theorize the evolutionary relationship between *Homo sapiens* and other primates. There was debate as to which came first: upright walking or higher cognition, with the dominant view being that the evolution of the human brain preceded the development of bipedalism. This theory centered a relatively sophisticated mind as the defining attribute of our species, and thus was consistent with ancient hierarchical taxonomies that placed man, with his ability to reason, apart from and above the beasts. Some scientists wondered whether certain physical problems, like flat feet or scoliosis, were, in effect, the price of braininess. Linker

cites the observation of a professor of anatomy at the Art Institute of Chicago: “Man’s original sin consisted in his getting on his hind legs.”

Before long, there was a societal investment in the betterment of health through the improvement of posture. Among the most significant popularizers of posture science was Jessie Bancroft, who helped found the American Posture League in 1914. Linker offers a biographical sketch that sounds like the premise for an art-house historical drama: Bancroft was “a self-proclaimed invalid who grew up in a remote region of the upper Midwest,” where she came under the tutelage of one Anna Jenness-Miller, “an anti-corsetry reformer who held parlor classes on hygiene and recumbent exercises.” Like her mentor, Bancroft became a lecturer on health culture, eventually moving to New York City, where she served as the first assistant director of physical education in the public-school system. There, she introduced a standardized posture test that could be easily carried out by a teacher equipped with little more than a pole against which a student’s carriage might be compared. Students who failed the assessment—as much as sixty per cent of the public-school population—could be assigned corrective exercises.



*Cartoon by Seth Fleishman*

Bancroft and her posture peers were influenced by progressive-education advocates, including G. Stanley Hall, William James, and [John Dewey](#), who emphasized the importance of play and outdoor activity for children, but did not recommend militaristic drills and synchronized calisthenics, which were associated with Old World European conformity rather than American individualism. On the other hand, the embrace of individualism held its own postural perils. Among the bugbears of early posture

advocates was the “débutante slouch,” a fashionable stance associated with less restrictive garments in which the hips jut forward and the shoulders stoop. This way of standing was seen as an embodiment of high-class decadence. (In “[The Great Gatsby](#),” the first thing Nick Carraway notices about Jordan Baker is her failure to slouch—she has “an erect carriage which she accentuated by throwing her body backward at the shoulders like a young cadet”—though her posture is the only thing upright about her; she is also “incurably dishonest.”) The dissemination of the débutante slouch through displays in department stores and drawings in mail-order catalogues—both recent innovations that brought mass-produced fashion within reach of the middle class—amounted to a kind of social contagion in which “the fashionable slouch threatened to become a commodity in itself, a cost-free way to climb the social ladder.”

In America at the turn of the twentieth century, anxieties about posture inevitably collided with anxieties not just about class but also about race. Stooping was associated with poverty and with manual, industrialized labor—the conditions of working-class immigrants from European countries who, in their physical debasement, were positioned well below the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment. Linker argues that, in this environment, “posture served as a marker of social status similar to skin color.” At the same time, populations that had been colonized and enslaved were held up as posture paradigms for the élite to emulate: the American Posture League rewarded successful students with congratulatory pins that featured an image of an extremely upright Lenape man. The head-carrying customs associated with African women were also adopted as training exercises for white girls of privilege, although Linker notes that Bancroft and her peers recommended that young ladies learn to balance not baskets and basins, which signified functionality, but piles of flat, slippery books, markers of their own access to leisure and education. For Black Americans, posture was even more fraught: despite the

admiration granted to the posture of African women bearing loads atop their heads, community leaders like Dr. Algernon Jackson, who helped establish the National Negro Health Movement, criticized those Black youth who “too often slump along, stoop-shouldered and walk with a careless, lazy sort of dragging gait.” If slouching among privileged white Americans could indicate an enviable carelessness, it was seen as proof of indolence when adopted by the disadvantaged.

This being America, posture panic was swiftly commercialized, with a range of products marketed to appeal to the eighty per cent of the population whose carriage had been deemed inadequate by posture surveys. The footwear industry drafted orthopedic surgeons to consult on the design of shoes that would lessen foot and back pain without the stigma of corrective footwear: one brand, Trupedic, advertised itself as “a real anatomical shoe without the freak-show look.” The indefatigable Jessie Bancroft trained her sights on children’s clothing, endorsing a company that created a “Right-Posture” jacket, whose trim cut across the upper shoulders gave its schoolboy wearer little choice but to throw his shoulders back like Jordan Baker. Bancroft’s American Posture League endorsed girdles and corsets for women; similar garments were also adopted by men, who, by the early nineteen-fifties, were purchasing abdominal “bracers” by the millions.

It was in this era that what eventually proved to be the most contentious form of posture policing reached its height, when students entering college were required to submit to mandatory posture examinations, including the taking of nude or semi-nude photographs. For decades, incoming students had been evaluated for conditions such as scoliosis by means of a medical exam, which came to incorporate photography to create a visual record. Linker writes that for many male students, particularly those who had military training, undressing for the camera was no biggie. For female students, it was often a more disquieting undertaking.

[Sylvia Plath](#), who endured it in 1950, drew upon the experience in “[The Bell Jar](#),” whose protagonist, Esther Greenwood, discovers that undressing for her boyfriend is as uncomfortably exposing as “knowing . . . that a picture of you stark naked, both full view and side view, is going into the college gym files.” The practice of taking posture photographs was gradually abandoned by colleges, thanks in part to the rise of the women’s movement, which gave coeds a new language with which to express their discomfort. It might have been largely forgotten were it not for a 1995 article in the *Times Magazine*, which raised the alarming possibility that there still existed stashes of nude photographs of famous former students of the Ivy League and the Seven Sisters, such as [George H. W. Bush](#), [Bob Woodward](#), [Meryl Streep](#), and [Hillary Clinton](#). Many of the photographs in question were taken and held not by the institutions themselves but by the mid-century psychologist William Herbert Sheldon. Sheldon was best known for his later discredited theories of somatotypes, whereby he attributed personality characteristics to individuals based on whether their build was ectomorphic, endomorphic, or mesomorphic.

By the time the *Times* article was published, Sheldon was dead, and his theories, which were found to have been shot through with racial stereotyping, were buried. Many thousands of his photographs of Ivy League students remained in the National Anthropological Archives, at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, and, as the article observed, the danger of their ever being released, or even the mere fact of their existence, conferred “on some of the most overprivileged people in the world the one status distinction it seemed they’d forever be denied—victim.” The scandal prompted the archivists to shred thousands of Sheldon’s images that had been held in the institution’s own secure storerooms, in order to placate exactly the kind of high-status individuals who are used to getting their way. The result was the destruction of a large-scale historical record that might have been of incalculable use to current and future researchers. (Linker cites

as a parallel the Framingham Heart Study, which has been recording the cardiovascular health of residents of Framingham, Massachusetts, since 1948.) As it turned out, the hasty bonfire of the nudities did not, in fact, consume all the images retained in the Sheldon archive, providing Linker's story with a nasty sting in the tail: Sheldon had also made photographs at institutions such as the Oregon State Prison and the New York State Hospitals system, and those images, according to Linker, are still listed in the catalogue as intact.

Linker draws attention to an academic research project that was carried out in the nineteen-seventies. Gretchen Dieck, then a doctoral student at Yale, set out to use postural images taken at Smith College, cross-referenced with present-day self-reports by alumnae, to see whether the presence of spinal curvature in a teenage girl predicted back pain in later life. Although, in Linker's telling, Dieck went to scrupulous lengths to protect the subjects' anonymity, former Smith students were distressed to discover that the school still held the photographs, and it was ultimately obliged to destroy them. Before it did, though, Dieck was able to determine that, contrary to the decades-long drumbeat of the posture-correction establishment, a diagnosis of poor posture in youth didn't correlate strongly with future back pain; even scoliosis, which at the time was aggressively treated with metal braces, and sometimes with steel-rod implants, played a "relatively unimportant role in the development of spinal pain in the adult years." The findings brought into question all the allegedly predictive surveillance of posture, not to mention all the devices and treatments sold to Americans with the promise of averting future pain.

Linker is scathing about the way in which additional research to confirm or develop such findings has been foreclosed by the photographs' destruction. The result, she worries, is that the dubious narrative that slouching is bad for you has hardened even

further into conventional wisdom, stigmatizing bodies that may be less than perfectly upright but are nonetheless pain-free, in “a type of therapeutic reasoning that essentially makes the risk of disease or disability acquisition a disease state itself.”

Today, the descendants of Jessie Bancroft are figures like Esther Gokhale, a Bay Area acupuncturist and the creator of the Gokhale Method, who teaches “primal posture” courses to tech executives and whose recommendations are consonant with other fitness trends, such as barefoot running and “paleo” eating, that romanticize an ancestral past as a remedy for the ills of the present. The compulsory mass surveillance that ended when universities ceased the practice of posture photography has been replaced by voluntary individual surveillance, with the likes of Rafi the giraffe and the Nekoze cat monitoring a user’s vulnerability to “tech neck,” a newly named complaint brought on by excessive use of the kind of devices profitably developed by those paleo-eating, barefoot-running, yoga-practicing executives. Meanwhile, Linker reports, paleoanthropologists quietly working in places other than TikTok have begun to revise the popular idea that our ancient ancestors did not get aches and pains in their backs. Analysis of fossilized spines has revealed degenerative changes suggesting that “the first upright hominids to roam the earth likely experienced back pain, or would have been predisposed to such a condition if they had lived long enough.” Slouching, far from being a disease of civilization, then, seems to be something we’ve been prone to for as long as we have stood on our own two feet. ♦



*Rebecca Mead* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Her most recent book is “*Home/Land*.”

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[On and Off the Menu](#)

## In the Kitchen with the Grande Dame of Jewish Cooking

Any home cook who's hosted a Passover Seder or a Rosh Hashanah dinner has likely consulted a recipe by Joan Nathan.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

April 8, 2024



*Nathan's matzo balls are pleasingly dense, with an al-dente texture, like gnocchi.*  
*Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin*

A couple of years before my grandma Bev died, in 2016, I asked her to show me how she made her challah, one specialty in an

impressive culinary repertoire. She padded over to a cabinet in her kitchen and retrieved, to my great surprise, not a handwritten recipe but a yellowed clipping from a newspaper. At the time, I felt vaguely robbed of something, but in the years that followed I released my grip on the romance of the family recipe. I didn't make a copy of the clipping, or take particular note of any of my grandma's techniques. (Except one: when it came time to proof the dough, she tucked the mixing bowl into her bed and switched on the electric blanket.) What she passed on to me was intangible but arguably more important: a love of cooking and eating and hosting, especially in celebration of Jewish holidays. For everything else, I have Joan Nathan.

You could make the case that Nathan is a household name, as long as you're referring to a Jewish American household. If a Jewish home cook doesn't own a copy of "The Jewish Holiday Kitchen" (1979) or "Jewish Cooking in America" (1994), she has at least encountered Nathan's dozens of recipes in the *Times*, and perhaps attempted her latkes or brisket. Nathan has often been referred to as the Jewish Julia Child; as it happens, she knew Child, quite well. Both women, along with Madhur Jaffrey, worked with the late, legendary cookbook editor Judith Jones (also known for rescuing Anne Frank's diary from the reject pile at Doubleday). In 2002, Nathan, a longtime fixture of the social scene in Washington, D.C., hosted a ninetieth-birthday party for Child, the night before the Smithsonian opened an exhibit showcasing the contents of Child's iconic kitchen. It's a story included in Nathan's newest cookbook, "My Life in Recipes," which doubles as a detailed memoir. The party's menu included fresh corn with pesto butter, which was a hit with the guest of honor. "Julia loved the dish," Nathan writes. "She slathered the pesto on her corn and ate it with gusto."

The cover of "My Life in Recipes" features a photo of a large, homemade-looking challah—braided but slightly misshapen, and splitting at the seams—on a well-worn wooden cutting board, and

Nathan's fingers, poised to tear off the end of the loaf. "My kids said, 'Mom, this isn't a beautiful challah!'" she told me one Thursday morning a few weeks ago, in her kitchen in D.C. Nathan, who is eighty-one, with sturdy, angular features and a coif of dark curls, was more concerned with her hands. "So old!" she said. But her editor had reassured her, insisting, "Those are weathered hands, that have made a lot of challah." That morning, Nathan had prepared the dough for still more, a dome with a tacky surface now rising in a large bowl. Working carefully, she made two loaves, one a traditional six-strand plait, and the other in the style of pull-apart monkey bread, with round balls nestled together in a cake pan.

The importance of preserving culinary tradition was impressed on Nathan from an early age. In her home office, she keeps a treasured heirloom: an astonishingly detailed miniature kitchen—with a once functional electric stove—that her aunt Trudel packed in a shipping container when the family fled Germany for the U.S., in the nineteen-thirties, along with several leather-bound collections of recipes. One of these recipes—sweet-and-sour salmon, made with lemon, ginger, and brown sugar—is included in an early chapter of the new book, which starts with Nathan's childhood, inserting core memories (such as the time, at age thirteen, she met Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe at a friend's house in Larchmont, New York) among instructions for a savory noodle kugel like the one her mother made and a dessert of strawberries and cream beloved by Albert Einstein, whose family knew hers in Germany.

In 1969, after a Peace Corps volunteer she sat next to on a plane told her that Israel was the most fascinating place he'd ever visited, Nathan, then twenty-six, took a trip to Jerusalem that would determine the course of her life. She was so entranced—in no small part by the breadth of the cuisine, from Moroccan stuffed vegetables to Kurdish Aramaean soup—that she moved there, taking a job as a foreign press attaché for Jerusalem's then mayor, Teddy Kollek, leading V.I.P.s such as David Ben-Gurion and

Barbra Streisand on tours of the city. Nathan and a colleague had an idea to invite foreign journalists into private homes for cooking lessons; this inspired a book, “The Flavor of Jerusalem,” which collected recipes from Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cooks into a vivid, good-humored picture of the city’s diversity. (Golda Meir’s matzo balls were, by Nathan’s own admission, “very hard and inflexible, like her foreign policy,” but she included the recipe anyway.)

It’s a job, and a project, that it’s easy to imagine her undertaking, fuelled by her ferocious curiosity and almost aggressive charm. Nathan is a major-league gabber, the savviest of yentas: more than once, during the day I spent with her, she reached for her phone to cold-call whomever we were discussing, whether it was her son, David, a filmmaker in Los Angeles, or Glenn Roberts, the founder of the heirloom-grains company Anson Mills, who has enlisted Nathan’s help in developing recipes using ancient cover crops as part of a climate-recovery initiative. “Ask him if he’s heard back from Podesta,” she instructed me as she hustled around the kitchen, leaving Roberts on speakerphone.

Nathan met the man who would become her husband, Allan Gerson, in 1970, at the Western Wall. It was his career, as a lawyer for the Justice Department, that led them to D.C., where they raised three children, and where Nathan became a dinner-party doyenne, inviting Beltway power players for Shabbos on Friday nights. Alice Waters, recounting a series of charity events they planned together, was gobsmacked by her Rolodex. “She knew all the organizations. She knew all the people in Washington. She knew everybody who came to the *farmers’ market!* ” she said, laughing.

If Nathan had stumbled into her career in food, she became more than sure-footed over the decades, travelling widely to gather and develop recipes for newspapers, magazines, and cookbooks. She has catalogued the Jewish culinary diaspora and often explored beyond it: one of my favorites of her recipes is for a dish of collard

greens in oyster sauce, which she learned from a Chinese American chef in the Mississippi Delta. In the nineties, she made “Jewish Cooking in America” into a show of the same name on PBS, sponsored by Hebrew National and Lender’s Bagels. One episode featured Mandy Patinkin and his mother making vegetarian “chopped liver” out of peas, walnuts, and egg whites; another, called “What Is Kosher?,” guest-starred her friend Julia. “She’s the blueprint,” Jake Cohen, a thirty-year-old Jewish American cookbook author, told me. “You couldn’t get Seinfeld to say the word ‘Jewish,’ and she was dragging Julia Child through a supermarket looking for kosher food!”

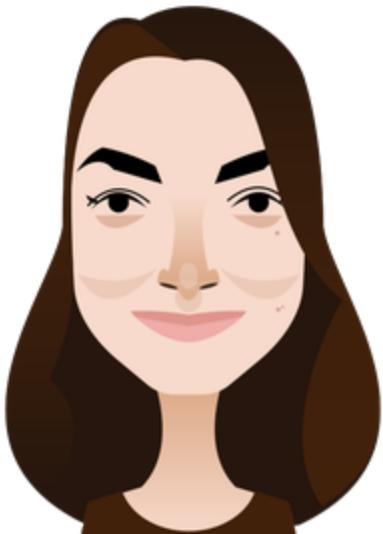
The monkey-bread challah Nathan was making was a recipe that she originally developed for “The Children’s Jewish Holiday Kitchen,” published in 1987; she was testing it now for an updated edition. She put both loaves in the top unit of her double wall oven and set about preparing lunch, hunting for cashews to make a tapenade with garlic and honey, a recipe that is particularly meaningful to her: it had been served at a lunch in Israel celebrating Gerson’s last birthday before he died, in 2019.

As we ate, she gestured out the window to the lawn, where, she explained, she sets up long tables for her annual Passover Seder. Her favorite part of the occasion, she told me, is a play put on by her children. “Let’s see—there’s God, there’s Moses,” she said, recounting the cast. (One year, she recalled, a confused guest had requested the part of Jesus.) Her menu, included in a chapter of the new book called “My Holiday Is Passover,” has come to reflect her adventures. She makes a Curaçaoan haroseth (the fruit-and-nut paste integral to the Seder plate) and a Sephardic dish called *huevos haminados*: eggs simmered overnight in a mixture of onion skins, tea leaves, coffee grounds, and cinnamon sticks, served with wilted spinach.

Last year, for my family’s Seder, I prepared, without intending to, all Joan Nathan recipes: a gefilte-fish terrine; baked salmon with

pomegranate sauce, which she learned from an Iraqi Jewish artist; brisket. I especially love Nathan’s matzo balls, which she makes with fresh ginger, fresh herbs, and nutmeg, and which are pleasingly dense. Many recipes include tricks for making them light as air (seltzer water, baking soda), but Nathan and I both prefer al-dente sinkers to fluffy floaters—a texture that bites back a bit, like gnocchi. At the end of our Seder, my father looked at me appraisingly and said with pleasure, “You’ve become a real *balabusta*,” Yiddish for “talented homemaker,” a designation I hadn’t quite realized I’d been craving.

As Nathan and I finished our lunch, and she cut into a wheel of goat cheese for dessert, it suddenly occurred to me: the challah! “Oh, my God!” she said, jumping up from the table and darting to the oven; we had lingered much longer than its baking time. One crisis—burned loaves—had been averted by another: the oven didn’t seem to be producing nearly enough heat. Maybe it would be great, we joked, slow-roasted. Nathan moved the bread to the bottom oven, which appeared to have hoarded all the warmth; within a few minutes, the top of each loaf had sped past the intended shade of golden brown to a deep, burnished bronze, just shy of scorched. “I’m so embarrassed,” she said. And yet, when it came time for me to leave, there were two challahs, redolent of nigella and anise. They weren’t beautiful, but they were delicious, torn into hunks and eaten alone, sliced for French toast the next morning, and blitzed into bread crumbs to coat pounded chicken thighs, for schnitzel—Nathan has a recipe, of course. ♦



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[The Current Cinema](#)

## The Unexpected Delight of “Sasquatch Sunset”

*In David and Nathan Zellner’s other films, the action often feels fabricated to yield images of twee idiosyncrasy. There is no similar sense of contrivance here.*

By [Richard Brody](#)

April 5, 2024



*The cast, which includes Riley Keough and Jesse Eisenberg, uses a mix of choreographic precision and uninhibited animal energy to portray their highly distinct characters.*

*Illustration by Tara Booth*

In movies as in life, never assume. One of the joys of being a film critic is encountering surprising work from filmmakers whose habits seemed all too ingrained. Greta Gerwig’s “Barbie,” a spectacular fantasy from a director whose previous films were realistic, is one such splendid surprise; another is Bruno Dumont’s “Li’l Quinquin,” a flamboyant three-hour-plus feature that marked a decisive break with his earlier, more dour work. “Sasquatch Sunset,” a new movie by the independent filmmakers David and Nathan Zellner, offers the same kind of unexpected delight. This scruffy but finely nuanced drama follows an unusual group of characters: four Sasquatches—mythical beings better known singly,

as Bigfoot—making their way through the forests of the Pacific Northwest in the course of a year. For the Zellners, the film’s sincere attention to the practicalities of its characters’ lives represents a major departure and a great advance. Their portrayal of the Sasquatches’ wanderings is a fictional form of cinematic anthropology, showing how the creatures cope with the elements, with the looming presence of humans, and with the deeper mysteries and energies of life—including the rising of consciousness itself.

The Zellners, who are brothers, have been working together for nearly three decades. They’ve built a career dramatizing near-absurdities, whether grim or merely eccentric, with earnest intensity. (They directed three episodes of “The Curse,” a satire of reality TV.) In their 2012 feature, “Kid-Thing,” a neglected child connects with a woman trapped at the bottom of a well. In “Kumiko, the Treasure Hunter,” a Japanese woman who believes that the movie “Fargo” is a documentary travels to America in search of that tale’s buried ransom money.

The brothers have long had mythic simians in view: in 2011, their short film “Sasquatch Birth Journal 2,” a clever four-minute goof depicting a female of the species giving birth unassisted, played at Sundance. Their work until now has depended on keeping straight faces while telling tall tales, but in “Sasquatch Sunset” they approach a still taller tale with a seriousness that drives out parody, and the movie thrums with palpable pleasure arising from their own sense of wonder and curiosity. They’ve previously bent reality to fit their fantasies; now, in trimming fantasy to resemble reality, they display a deepened artistic purpose.

The four Sasquatches don’t speak; they only grunt and howl, as if lurching toward language. They’re bearded and covered in brown-gray fur, which is sparser on their chests and stomachs; their skin is thick and wrinkled. These looks are achieved not by way of motion capture (as in the ongoing “Planet of the Apes” franchise) but with

costumes and makeup, which, amid tangles of fur and crusts of dirt, leave the performers' faces discernible. The Zellners recruited four notable actors—or, rather, three and a ringer—to endow these difficult mime-like parts with potent individual personalities. Riley Keough portrays the group's only female, who's raising a lively and inquisitive young Sasquatch, played by Christophe Zajac-Denek. The pensive and mild-mannered member of the group, played by Jesse Eisenberg, is subordinate to its apparently senior member, portrayed by the co-director Nathan Zellner. If not a famous actor, Zellner is certainly an experienced one (largely in the brothers' own films), and he brings psychodramatic authority to the role of the foursome's alpha male—essentially a Sasquatch directing Sasquatches, with the power and the peril that such leadership entails. (The four Sasquatches have no identifiable names; I'll call them by their respective actors' first names.)

The movie begins in springtime and quickly addresses the inevitable, showing Riley and Nathan brusquely hooking up. Jesse and Christophe, holding hands, look on in fascinated awe—Jesse perhaps teaching the young Christophe the birds and the bees—while the couple, out in the open, displays no shyness. The Zellners imagine Sasquatch sex at an intermediate stage between animals' functional reproduction and humans' governing morality—fraught with feeling but not with shame. The result of this liaison is the eternal drama: Riley, scratching her genitals and sniffing her hand, determines that she's pregnant, setting in motion the film's overarching plotline.

The movie depicts a wide spectrum of Sasquatch life—the need for shelter, the varieties of play, the pleasures and pitfalls of eating newly discovered flora and fauna, the experience of grief and the rituals that it spawns, the Promethean hazards of intellectual curiosity, the trouble sparked by lust. In doing so, it reveals admirable conceptual audacity, skirting the constant risk of silliness. It's often funny, but it's no comedy, except to the extent

that ordinary life is filled with incongruities and weird surprises. When funny things happen to the Sasquatches, the species' naïveté pushes the humor toward danger, as when Christophe kisses a turtle that then bites his tongue and won't let go, or when Nathan rages with horny delusions while standing in uneasy proximity to a cougar. The movie comes by its sweetness naturally, in the inherent cuteness of such ingenuousness—which is also the secret weapon of children and animals, of reality-TV celebrities (whether horrible bosses or selfish spouses), and even of documentary subjects (the rich and the famous who come off as ordinary people). In the Zellners' other films, the action seems fabricated to yield images of twee idiosyncrasy—a woman trudging through snowy fields while wrapped in a quilt, a pioneer unloading a miniature horse from a crate on a beach—but there's nothing contrived about the action or the images here, which feel like logical yet spontaneous discoveries about these four mysterious characters and their hidden world.

“Sasquatch Sunset” shows no humans but is haunted by the possibility of contact with them. Its neorealism demythologizes the cryptids, presenting them as just another endangered species whose fragile existence is made all the more poignant by its similarities to human society. (After a viewing of this movie, the nickname Bigfoot comes off like a slur.) The cast's blend of choreographic precision and uninhibited animal energy is at the core of this authenticity; the actors' mastery of their crudely expressive gestures conveys delicate emotions, and their grunts and hoots possess the dramatic flair and nuance of dialogue. What the movie offers, in effect, are baby pictures of the human race, and it respects the opacity of the primal experience that such infancy implies. Even as the film abounds in behavioral details, rendering its four protagonists' personalities in sharp outlines, it never presumes to know too much about them; the movie shows what Sasquatches are like without assuming what it's like to be a Sasquatch.

Though it's not established that Riley is Christophe's mother, she at least acts like a devoted one—he seems like an adolescent, but she's still nursing him, and she also plucks the bugs from his fur (and eats them). When the newborn comes, she caresses and nurses and (when necessary) rescues it; wandering with the group while carrying the baby, she exhibits a keen alertness to hidden dangers. The tenderhearted Jesse has an incipient mathematical mind—gazing at the stars, he tries to count them but has only two numerals ("euh" and "ah"). His thoughtfulness converges with his communal spirit: when he finds a nest with four eggs, he picks it up and exerts himself to discern whether there are enough of them for each Sasquatch in his group. This effort is quickly rendered obsolete when the gruff, hulking Nathan, whose appetites are matched by his arrogance, relieves him of the nest and eats the eggs himself, leaving Jesse to look forlornly at his empty hand.

That gesture is one of many psychologically resonant moments that endow "Sasquatch Sunset" with its outsized power; it suggests the dawn of human-style imagination, the capacity to inwardly evoke an absent object. The finest such touch involves Christophe, who takes a step of Sasquatch imagination that amounts to a giant leap for Sasquatchkind. When the trio can't find Nathan, Christophe searches for him in a distinctive way—he holds a hand in front of himself and, like a ventriloquist, has it talk to him in inchoate squeaks, to which he responds. It's a breathtaking dramatic metaphor for the birth of thought, the awareness of consciousness as something like an other that's also part of oneself.

With consciousness comes melancholy, which is induced for the Sasquatches by mounting clues of human proximity—a tree with a painted red "X," a paved road, a well-appointed but unpeopled campsite. The Sasquatches move from defiant contempt of these artifacts' strangeness (they mock and defile the road with piss and shit) to a growing recognition that the world they've discovered, complete with its rusting hulks of metal machinery and its

inhospitable expanses of asphalt, is inimical to their survival. It's only in a final shot of calculated theatricality that the Zellners tip their hands that the entire project is, after all, not just a work of fiction but a thoroughgoing fantasy. Here, they reveal the greatest danger that humans pose to Sasquatches: not the reasoned belief that they don't exist but the mythologizing certainty that they do. ♦



*Richard Brody* began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He writes about movies in his blog, *The Front Row*. He is the author of “*Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*.”

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[Poems](#)

# Stitch

By [Rae Armantrout](#)

April 8, 2024

*Read by the author.*

There's nothing so lovely  
as a prolonged vanishing.

This is true if you mean  
sunset in Iceland,

false if it's  
the memory-care facility  
by the abandoned shopping mall.

You can't think a thought  
and judge it  
all at once

so we invented juggling  
and the caesura,

the heartbeat's stitch  
in the ocean of time.

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*Rae Armantrout, a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, will publish her latest book, "Go Figure," this fall.*

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[Poems](#)

# Love Song, with Removed Cyst

By [Sharon Olds](#)

April 8, 2024

*Read by the author.*

Then we're lying on the bed, in our clothes, in the overcast,  
after he has had the cyst removed  
from his knuckle, now bulbous with lattice bandage.  
It was like a wisdom tooth growing up  
out of his joint, they cut it out  
and cut its long roots out.  
He lies on his side, I lie on my back,  
he keeps the hand elevated  
on my breast.  
Between us we have so many doctors now,  
maybe a dozen. He's asked me to tell him,  
again, what  
a simile is, and  
why I never use a metaphor—  
because for so long I had thought that they were  
crazy. But I am sane as a level,  
sane as the level bubble in its greenish  
indoor pool. I am sane as a scissors,  
sane as a sieve, sane as a scales,  
sane as a gyroscope, sane as  
an ellipsis, sane as orgasm,  
sane as every stage of it:  
aura, surge, thrust, first stage  
rocket, second stage rocket, third stage

rocket, fourth, rest, begin-again, fifth. He rests, he sleeps,  
the window shade beyond him is closed,  
its mild right-angle hills and valleys like  
ripples in water, little doll-house  
syncline anticline syncline. We talk about my  
not writing—my voice went woggle  
woggle as I said, “I need a friend,  
in you, about this,” and he said, “I’ll be  
your friend.” Now he dreams. I am sane as a friend,  
sane as a dream.

*Sharon Olds* is a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. Her most recent collection is “*Balladz*.”

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# Cartoon Caption Contest

## • **Cartoon Caption Contest**

Enter this week's contest | We provide a cartoon, you provide a caption.

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# Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Wednesday, April 3, 2024](#)**

Crossword | By Robyn Weintraub | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

**Crossword**

## The Crossword: Wednesday, April 3, 2024

A *beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

April 3, 2024



[Robyn Weintraub](#) has been constructing crossword puzzles since 2010. Her puzzles have appeared in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

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