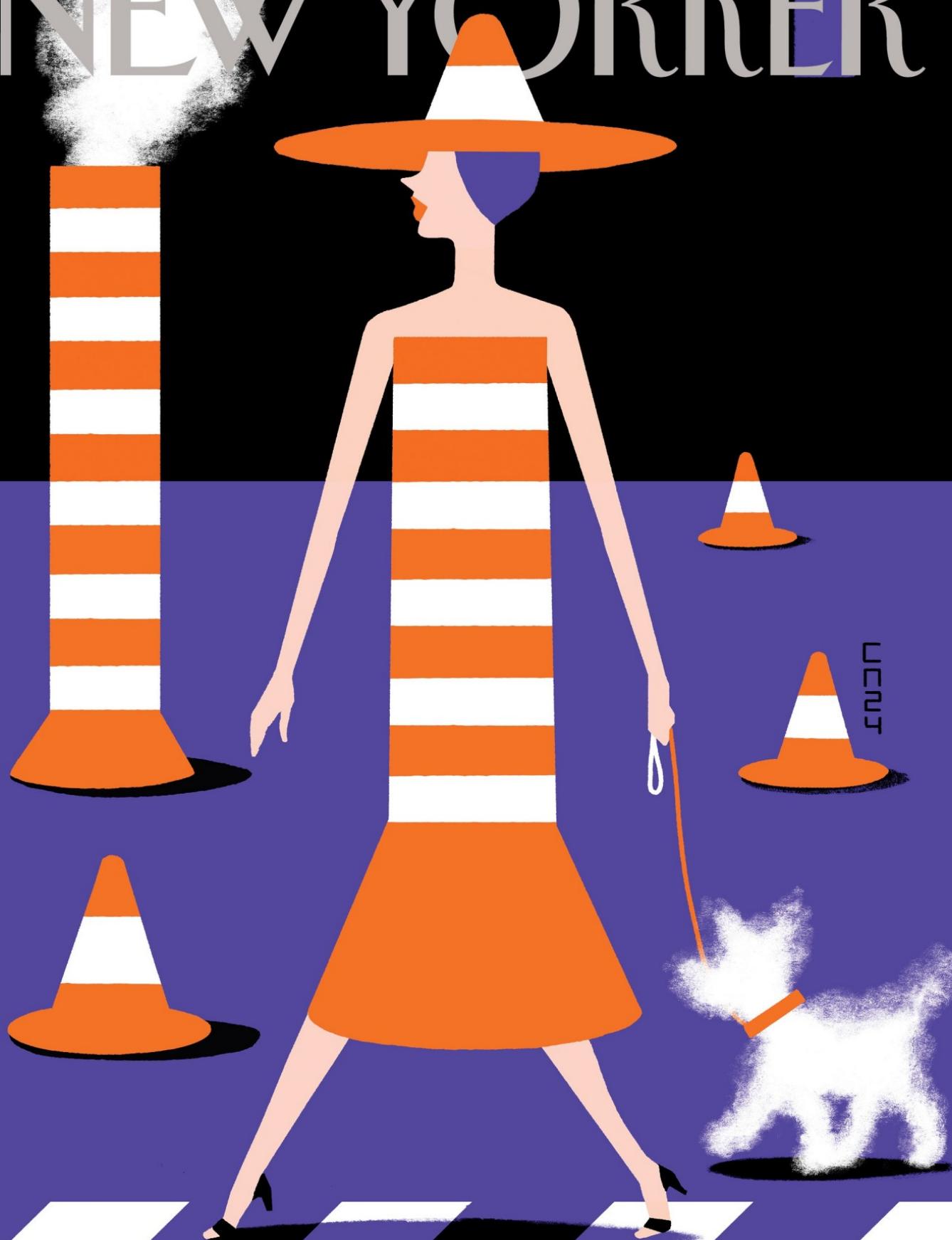


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Goings On

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Also: The influential aesthetic of “Africa’s Fashion Diaspora,” the return of Bright Eyes, the democratic Fall for Dance festival, and more.

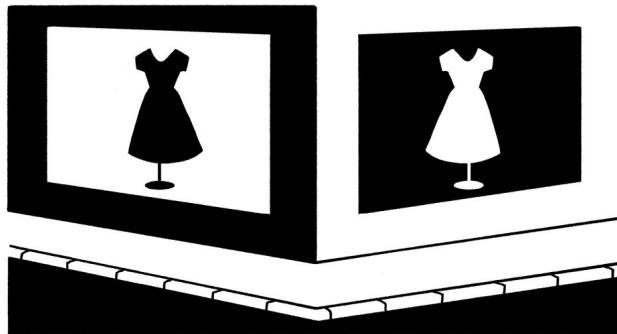
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September 13, 2024

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.](#)



On and Off the Avenue

Rachel Syme checks out some of the city’s trendiest piercing studios.

Like so many other mall rats of many generations, I first got my ears pierced at Claire’s, a kitschy accessories emporium for tweens and teens. I was fifteen and flush with babysitting tips; a gum-popping sales girl not much older than myself aimed a piercing gun at my lobes and fired at will. Now, thanks, in part, to Instagram and TikTok, the ear-stabbing landscape has evolved a great deal; these days, everyone seems to desire a “stack,” or an artful constellation of several earrings scattered around. Popular piercings of the moment are the “conch” (the indented crescent midway up the ear), the “rook” (the shelf of cartilage that runs across the ear’s upper half), the “cat flap” (a thin overhang of skin at the top of the ear),

and the “tragus” (the tough little nubbin close to the jawbone). These placements require a delicate hand and expertise, far beyond that of a teen-ager working steps from a Cinnabon.

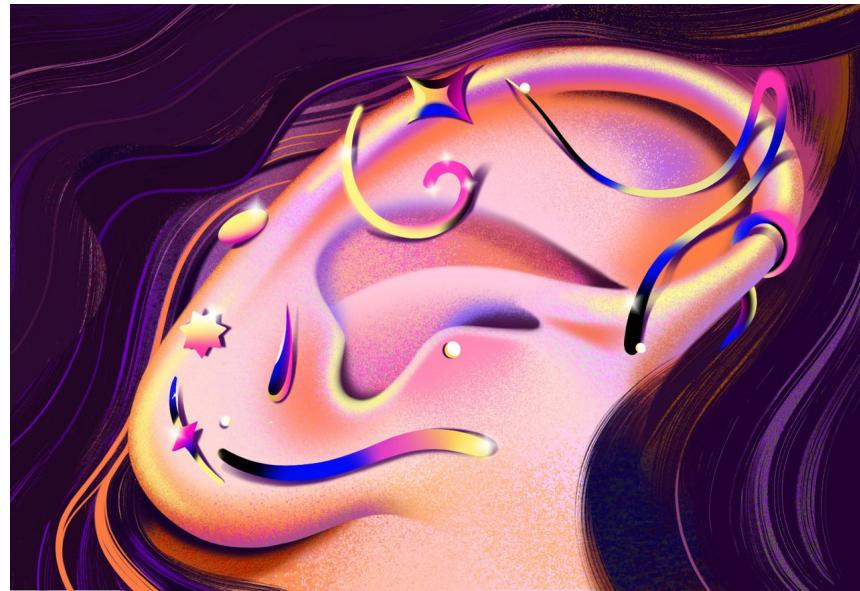


Illustration by Roche Cruchon

In 2019, the entrepreneurs Lisa Bubbers and Anna Harman launched **Studs**, which specializes in what Bubbers calls “Earscaping,” a term Studs has trademarked; they have twenty-seven piercing studios around the U.S., with four more opening this year. I visited the Nolita and meatpacking locations, and both were sardine-full, with long wait lists to get jabbed. With an Instagram-friendly aesthetic—bright-yellow jewelry pouches, neon signage—the brand is vying to become the Claire’s du jour, but for a slightly older clientele. (The average Studs customer, Bubbers told me, is twenty-seven and seeking a “second or third piercing.”) Studs offers needle-only piercings—as opposed to the imprecise gun method—and requires its employees to undergo a six-week apprenticeship. The shop’s signature is its Snakebite—two tiny studs right next to each other, anywhere on the ear—a procedure that has attracted several celebrities to Studs. (The brand’s publicist was quick to drop names such as Kaia Gerber, Usher, and Jennifer Lopez.)

Several skilled piercers, many with their own boutique studios, have lately become mini-celebrities themselves. Cassi Lopez, who owns **So Gold Studios**, in Williamsburg, has amassed more than a million TikTok followers. Adrian Castillo, a thirty-six-year-old veteran piercer from California with a laid-back, skaterish vibe, also has a large cult following (including, he said, several celebrities, but he won't pierce and tell). One recent afternoon, I went to see Castillo at his elegant new studio, **108 Ceremony**, in Greenpoint. I invited him to "curate" my right ear—to choose any placement, any piercing—and he suggested a small diamond stud in my antihelix, a fatty slab of cartilage near the upper ear. He deftly speared it with a thick needle; I felt a small squeeze, followed by an odd popping sound. Later, as my ear began to throb, I noticed that although Castillo was covered in tattoos, he had no piercings of his own. "I'm a wimp," he said, adding with a sly grin, "I mean, *I'm gentle*. But I don't trust anyone else to be."

Spotlight



Ensemble in cotton wax print and chiffon (detail), by Aisha Ayensu for Christie Brown, from 2016.

Photograph courtesy Museum at F.I.T.

In her work as a curator, Elizabeth Way has introduced us to a number of fashion makers, who, without her persistence and curiosity, would have escaped notice. In the important book “[Black Designers in American Fashion](#),” a collection edited by Way, from 2021, she wrote about the lost history of Black dressmakers in nineteenth-century Manhattan. As the associate curator of costume at the Museum at F.I.T.—headed by the brilliant and redoubtable Valerie Steele—Way has had access to history and ideas through clothing, and the latitude to examine ways in which garments are often the true markers of an epoch.

In Way’s new exhibition, “**Africa’s Fashion Diaspora**” (at the Museum at F.I.T. Sept. 18-Dec. 29), she demonstrates how the African diaspora, which extends from the continent to Brooklyn and the rest of the world, is associated with not so much a singular aesthetic as a different aesthetic, which has influenced European fashion and fashion makers but also painters like Kerry James Marshall, who has a deep understanding of how the outside expresses the inside. This wonderful survey includes such scintillating game changers as Madame Willi Posey—the mother of the artist Faith Ringgold—represented here by a flowing tunic from the early nineteen-seventies. Also on view is the work of the incredible innovator Ann Lowe, who created the wedding dress for a young woman named Jacqueline Bouvier, for her marriage to John F. Kennedy, then a U.S. congressman, on that long-ago morning in Rhode Island.—*Hilton Als*



About Town

Dance

The main attraction of the **Fall for Dance Festival** lies in its democratic approach to pricing (thirty dollars per ticket) and programming—the organizers cast a wide net. Each of five programs comprises three works. You’re almost guaranteed to enjoy something; the opposite is also true. The opener includes the first ever New York appearance by the National Ballet of Ukraine, in “Wartime Elegy,” a ballet by the New York-based Russian-Ukrainian choreographer Alexei Ratmansky (Sept. 18-19). In Program 3 (Sept. 24-25), the Chicago-based tap ensemble M.A.D.D. performs a tribute to Nina Simone, and Program 5 spotlights juggling, filtered through a mood of surrealist whimsy reminiscent of Pina Bausch, in a performance by the British group Gandini Juggling (Sept. 28-29).—*[Marina Harss](#)* (*City Center*; Sept. 18-29.)

Off Off Broadway

In Matt Freeman’s often frustrating comedy **“The Ask,”** directed by Jessi D. Hill, a young fund-raiser from the A.C.L.U. named Tanner (Colleen Litchfield) tries to woo back a runaway boomer donor, Greta (Betsy Aidem). A portentous photograph of a dinosaur hangs on Greta’s wall: she’s out of date, annoyed by shifting language, insisting on “service” for her dollar; Tanner is the next generation, awkwardly performing obeisance until the check clears. Freeman’s play isn’t a drama of ideas: there’s neither symmetrical engagement (Tanner can say only “I hear you”) nor any immediate stakes—if Tanner fails, Greta’s money will simply go to another liberal cause. It is, though, a distressing vision of the philanthropic left, as a tar pit where hurt feelings bog down even well-meaning attempts at collective progress.—*[Helen Shaw](#)* (*Wild Project*; through Sept. 28.)

Indie Rock



Photograph by Nik Freitas

Photograph by Nik Freitas

The Omaha band **Bright Eyes** sprang up in the late nineties as a disgruntled, sensitive outfit revolving around the bawling multi-instrumentalist Conor Oberst; it eventually took on the producer Mike Mogis and the arranger Nate Walcott. The group advanced beyond lo-fi emo angst with “*LIFTED . . .*” (2002) and “I’m Wide Awake, It’s Morning” (2005), which both embraced a more folk-focussed sound, but by 2011 the core members had split to pursue individual projects. In 2020, Bright Eyes finally returned from hiatus, with “Down in the Weeds, Where the World Once Was,” a record dwelling on transience. This month, the band gears up to release “Five Dice, All Threes,” which captures a group that seems both surprised and grateful to still be around.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Brooklyn Steel; Sept. 19.*)

Readings and Talks

In her verse-memoir “**Brown Girl Dreaming,**” Jacqueline Woodson remembers her youth. Ten years after its publication, we aren’t anywhere close to forgetting. The award-winning work, told through a mix of free verse and haiku, offers a poignant and nuanced look at a young person growing up Black in the nineteen-

sixties and seventies, finding herself through the art of writing. On Sept. 21, Symphony Space celebrates its decennial with conversations about the text and music by the blues-folk artist Toshi Reagon. Guests include an array of other brilliant women, such as the actress and producer Nicole Ari Parker, the writer Roxane Gay, and, of course, the dreamer herself.—*Jane Bua*

Off Broadway

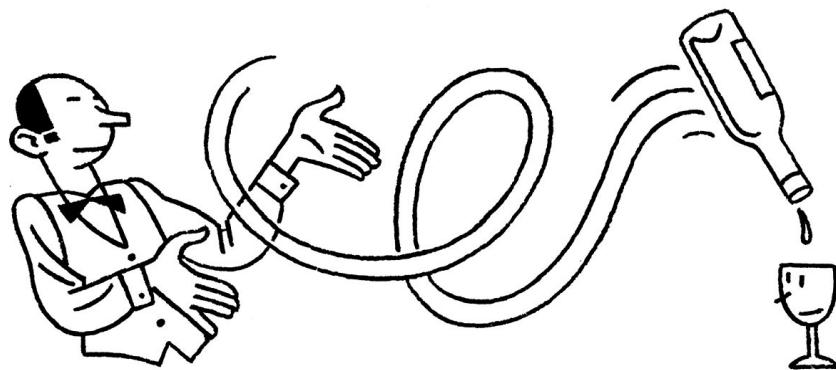


Photograph by Pia Johnson

S. Shakthidharan's multigenerational epic, “**Counting and Cracking**,” spans decades: in a time-jumping narrative, scenes happen as long ago as 1957, in Sri Lanka, or as recently as 2004, when a young Australian man—who doesn't speak his ancestral tongue, Tamil—learns his and his family's difficult history. The fleet nineteen-person production, directed by Eamon Flack, exhibits immense meta-theatrical playfulness: a Slip 'N Slide acts as a Sydney beach; a tart grandmother rebukes a chap for sitting onstage, until he explains that he's there to translate the scene into English. (She bops him anyway.) S. Shakthidharan and Flack, even while illustrating a civil war, demonstrate the noisy, hard-won delight of multiculturalism; the more languages we hear, the more the company seems to accelerate into dizzying joy.—*H.S. (N.Y.U. Skirball; through Sept. 22.)*

Movies

Robert Kolodny's faux documentary "**The Featherweight**," about the real-life boxer Willie Pep's effort, in 1964, to make a comeback at the age of forty-two, catches the tone of that era with an uncanny vividness. Willie (James Madio), a former champion and a local hero in Hartford, Conn., is desperate for income but too proud to take a regular job. His grown son (Keir Gilchrist) is battling addiction and causes trouble with Willie's new wife, Linda (Ruby Wolf), a much younger former actress who returns to work despite Willie's jealous rage. Meanwhile, the filmmakers, invited by Willie to film his life, end up documenting bad behavior and dodging the family's requests to keep it under wraps. The movie's performances are tangy, and the production design is enticing; the tale of bitter conflicts dispels any nostalgia.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*



Bar Tab

Jiayang Fan samples fancy cocktails near Union Square.



Illustration by Claire Merchlinsky

The formidably sleek Japanese cocktail lounge **Martiny's**, near Union Square, is not the place to go if you're short on time, flexibility, or a corporate expense account. Two friends found out the hard way one Thursday evening, when they were told that the wait would be two hours, and then, upon being seated, that they would need to vacate the premises within an hour and forty-five minutes. The establishment, occupying three cavernous stories of a former nineteenth-century carriage house, projects Old World opulence, and seems designed to impress a younger colleague or to woo a romantic interest woefully out of one's league. The staff conveys a regal discipline, a militaristic sense of order, evident especially in the exquisite attention to detail with which libations are made. (The hand of Takuma Watanabe, once the head bartender of the beloved speakeasy-style Angel's Share, and Martiny's founder, is readily apparent.) Behind the gleaming bar, two young men shook, swirled, and layered their creations with the dedication and agility of Olympic ribbon dancers who have inexplicably found themselves dressed as English butlers. The blue-cheese sake

Martini, tasting less pungent than one would expect, was stylized and voluptuous. The house classic, a sybaritic blend of whiskey, tomato water, grapefruit, lime, basil, and milk, called the Caprese, after the salad, pinkened the cheeks of the self-confessed lush among the friends after three sips. “Maybe it’s true what they say,” she mused out loud. “The best Martinis taste like stealth luxury and a well-composed American sonnet.” “No one has ever said that,” her acid-tongued companion replied. She wasn’t even drinking a Martini, he pointed out. And he wasn’t sure that she would be able to distinguish “unserious, overpriced aromatic water in shiny stemware” from a proper one.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Public goods for public good](#)
 - [The future of TV](#)
 - [Charles Bell’s version of “My Favorite Things”](#)
-

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By Sarah Larson | Jim Parsons, Katie Holmes, Zoey Deutch, and the rest of the Broadway-revival cast meet up in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where Thornton Wilder wrote the original play.

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The Presidential Campaign, After Philadelphia

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September 13, 2024

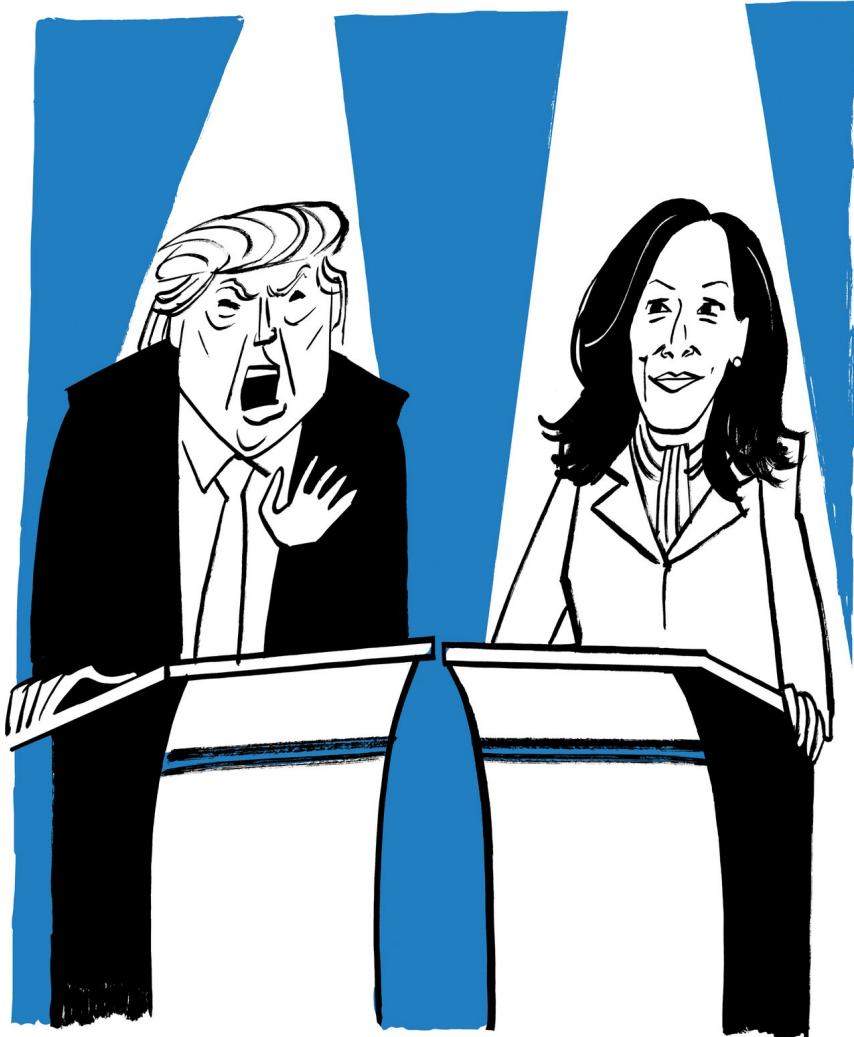


Illustration by João Fazenda

Just after Labor Day, as the lone scheduled Presidential debate between [Donald Trump](#) and [Kamala Harris](#) approached, the Vice-President seemed resolved to overprepare. Earlier in her career, her own aides had described her as a serial under-reader of memos; her

highest-profile television interview, a 2021 one-on-one about the border, with NBC’s Lester Holt, went so badly that she dodged others for more than a year. This time would be different.

Harris holed up at Pittsburgh’s Omni William Penn Hotel for a “debate camp”; on a replica debate stage, the superlawyer Karen Dunn ran the show, [Hillary Clinton](#)’s former aide Philippe Reines played Trump, and Harris went over her lines again and again. Days passed. Her polling momentum—she was ahead in most national polls—stalled. With the Democrats’ candidate temporarily out of the picture, the news cycle ran in odd directions—to Trump’s sudden support for marijuana decriminalization, and to the bizarre allegation levelled by some Republicans that in Springfield, Ohio, [Haitian immigrants](#) were eating people’s dogs and cats. Liberals got a little nervous. Less than sixty days remained until the election. Was all this rehearsal worth it, if the cost was so much time out of the game?

But readiness is usually an advantage, especially when your opponent is adamantly unready. By the end of Tuesday’s debate, at the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia, Harris had aced the test. (According to CNN’s instant poll, sixty-three per cent of viewers thought that she had won—the near-inverse of the margin following the June Presidential debate, which proved so damaging that it drove [Joe Biden](#) from the race.) Harris baited Trump into rants that reminded viewers of his basic instability. Her suggestion that voters pay attention to his rallies, and note how many attendees left early “out of exhaustion and boredom,” prompted the Republican to inveigh against the nonexistent pet-eating migrants; and a well-timed reminder that Trump had inherited a large fortune, during an exchange about Harris’s recent move to the center, distracted him from what otherwise might have been an effective attack on her flip-flopping.

The real tell about how the evening was going was that Trump’s language grew more abstract and Harris’s more vivid. During an

exchange about abortion, Trump spoke airily of “every legal scholar” who he claimed had backed the overturning of Roe, something, he said, that “everyone wanted.” Harris spoke of women bleeding in red-state hospital parking lots after being denied necessary medical care until the last minute, and of “twelve- or thirteen-year-old victims of incest being forced to carry a pregnancy to term.” She said, pointedly, “They don’t want that.” Did Trump finally, nearly a decade after he had promised a better version of Obamacare, have a plan to replace it? one of the moderators, Linsey Davis, asked. “I have concepts of a plan,” he said, and then added defensively, “I’m not President right now.”

The Harris of the past six weeks is a more adept and assured figure than the one whose position as an aging President’s No. 2 caused Democrats such panic just a few months ago. Can she win? She has repositioned herself by narrowing her focus—shedding her more expansively progressive policy proposals and largely ignoring the policy record of the Biden White House, so that she might be a more efficient anti-Trump. A question before the debate had been how she would distance herself from Biden’s unpopular record on inflation and immigration, but she mostly didn’t mention any of that, and Trump, far from his most effective, didn’t force her to. Her own proposals were interesting but slight: a six-thousand-dollar child tax credit and a twenty-five-thousand-dollar down payment for first-time home buyers. The CNN poll in which roughly two-thirds of viewers thought Harris had won the debate also found that just a third thought that she had won the exchanges on the economy.

Might voters want more? The political divide runs deep. Last month, just twenty-five per cent of Americans told Gallup that they were satisfied with the direction of the country; seventy-three per cent were dissatisfied. Part of the intrigue of this campaign, even before Biden dropped out, was in seeing which of the two major American political movements would run out of steam first: Trump’s *MAGA*, through a failure to achieve its policy aims, or

Obama's liberalism, through its successes. The Democrats have held the White House for twelve of the past sixteen years, and accomplished much of what they laid out in 2008: an expansion of public health insurance; a rebalancing of economic policy away from the very wealthy; the stewarding of a new, more diverse and more progressive leadership class. Is another big idea coming? Biden's one-term Presidency suggested a few, especially the green-energy revolution, but Harris, in her candidacy, has taken a pro-fracking stance and shied away from the climate banner. Since the trade debate so far has been dominated by Trump's extreme tariff proposals, which Harris opposes, it has been hard to tell whether she would continue Biden's turn toward economic nationalism. "We're not going back" has been Harris's rallying cry. Fine, some voters may think, but then where are we going?

It seems a little clearer, after Tuesday night, that the programmatic questions will take a back seat to the existential ones posed by a second Trump term, at least until after the election. The Harris campaign's mission is to guarantee reproductive rights and an equal role for women in society, to protect the sanctity of elections, to defend the administrative state against activists and billionaires insistent on eroding it, and to insure that democracies around the globe don't succumb to dictatorship. That's not enough? For the big and exuberant crowds of Democrats at her rallies this summer, it has been. In the 2020 primaries, Harris struggled when voters and journalists asked her for a transformative vision. Now she has remade herself as a counterpuncher. By the end of the debate, the airtime statistics seemed to offer a model of how the Democrats would like the final stages of the race to go: Trump was on camera far longer than Harris, but the more he talked the better she did. ♦



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

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The Boards

“Our Town” ’s Town

Jim Parsons, Katie Holmes, Zoey Deutch, and the rest of the Broadway-revival cast meet up in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where Thornton Wilder wrote the original play.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

September 16, 2024

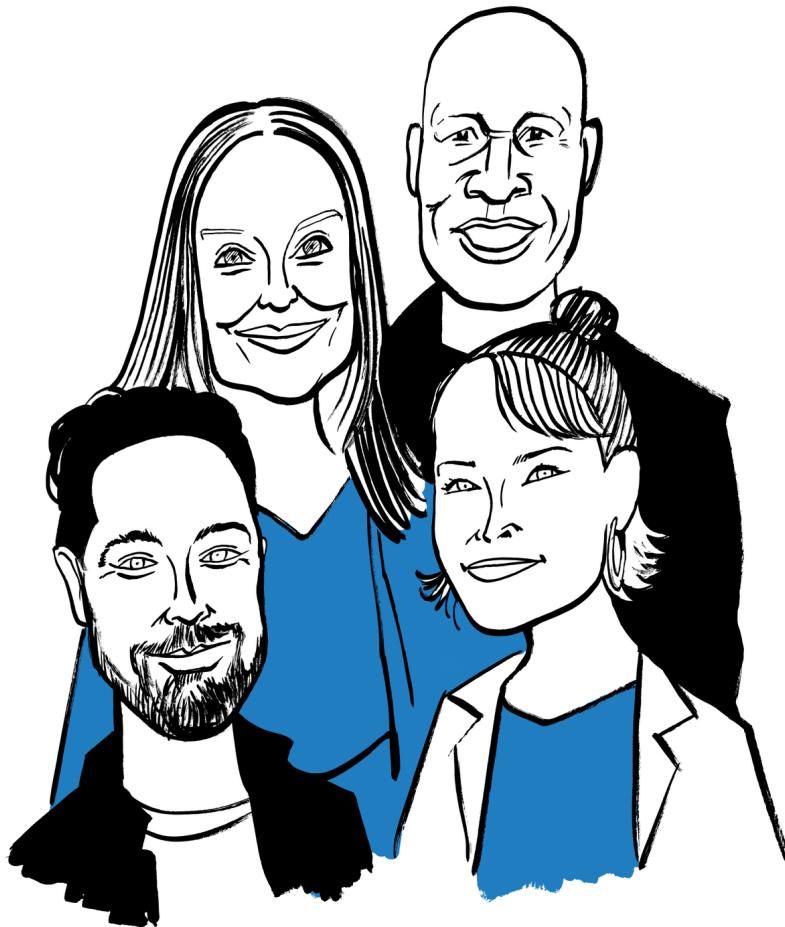


Illustration by João Fazenda

On a cloudy afternoon in Peterborough, New Hampshire, apron-wearing workers emerged from a green nineteen-fifties lunch car, stood behind a banner that read “The Peterboro Diner Welcomes

You to Grover's Corners," and said things like "The beautiful people are coming!" and "Geez, Louise!" Two charter buses arrived and out they came: Jim Parsons, Katie Holmes, Ephraim Sykes, Zoey Deutch, Richard Thomas, and two dozen other cast and crew members of the new Broadway revival of Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," which begins previews this week.

"Welcome, welcome!" the diner's owner, Melanie Neily, said. The visitors, after a five-hour drive, gamely greeted their hosts and proceeded inside for lunch; they resembled regular tourists, except for the slightly suspicious glamour of Deutch (Emily Webb) and Holmes (Mrs. Webb), who both wore fashionable sunglasses and bright-marigold tops, and for the hero's welcome that Neily, a "Waltons" fan, gave to a gracious Richard Thomas (Mr. Webb). Inside, Parsons (the Stage Manager) and Julie Halston (Mrs. Soames), settled into a booth, and a video of "Our Town" with Paul Newman played above the counter. It was the cast's first meeting, and the director, Kenny Leon, wanted it to be memorable.

Wilder wrote some of "Our Town" in Peterborough, at the MacDowell Colony, and the town has proudly claimed it since its première, in 1938. Leon's production, advertised as "an 'Our Town' for our time," has a diverse cast—many actors of color, a deaf Howie Newsome (John McGinty), a gay Stage Manager—and is set in a kind of Grover's Corners of the mind. "You take 1938 and run it into 2024, creating a fantastical place called *now*," Leon said, swooping his hands together. Leon, who is Black, is sixty-eight, trim, bald, and high-energy. "I think that these people in this play are twenty spirits from every time and place in American history, and they're coming here urgently to tell us this one lesson that we need to know," he said. He used to hate the play—"All I saw was, there's white folk, there's a small town, they talk in a certain way . . . they have a ladder in the middle of it"—but in 2010, in Atlanta, "I put people from various cultures in it, and I'm saying, 'Wow, this play is better than I thought.' " In 2017, after Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico, he and Scarlett Johansson organized a

benefit reading of the play in Atlanta, with local actors and Marvel actors (Ruffalo, Evans, Downey, Jr.). “We raised half a million dollars, gave it to the people. It was beautiful. That’s when I really, really opened my eyes, and that production let me see how it really was the best American play that I’ve ever read.”

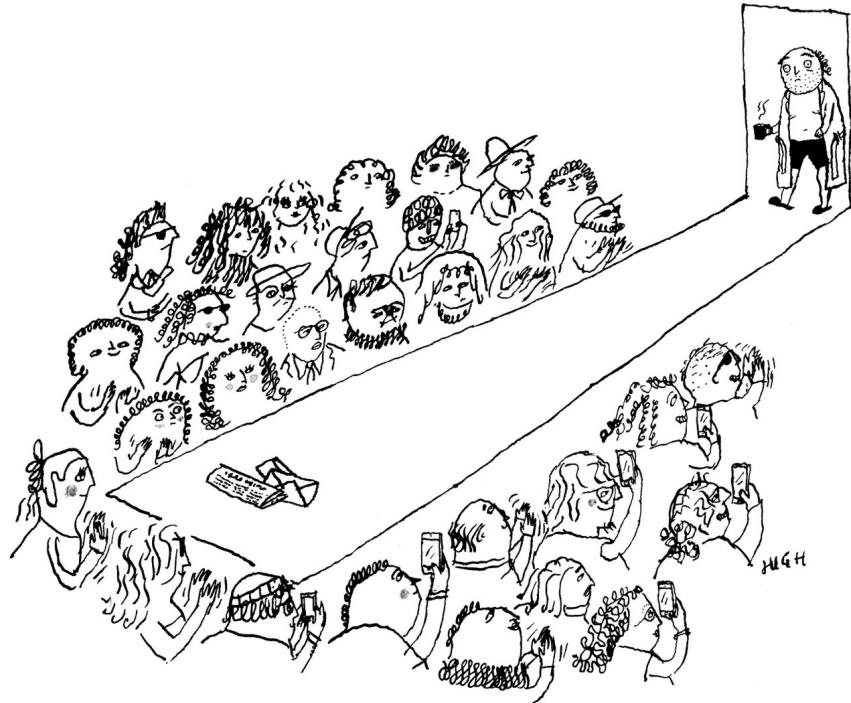
After lunch, the local actor-director Gus Kaikkonen led the group on a tour of downtown Peterborough that evoked “Our Town” ’s opening monologue (“Here’s the Town Hall and Post Office combined; jail’s in the basement”), minus the hollyhocks. “We used to have one stoplight here, and now there are two,” he said. Some details had a documentary quality: Emily and George’s school (“Still exists, on High Street”), the Gibbs and Webb houses (“Big old Victorian houses next door to each other. . . . Wilder didn’t say this one or that one, because he was being cagey about Peterborough”), their first-date drugstore (Wilder was a regular). Others were *sui generis*. “This used to be the Baptist Church,” Kaikkonen said. “Then it was a marionette opera theatre, run by a wonderful guy. It caught on fire, the whole place burned down, and he lost all of his marionettes, except maybe six that he managed to throw out a window.” (Only Escamillo, from “Carmen,” was saved.)

The group headed to the bus, for a table read at MacDowell; Kaikkonen told everybody to look out for the cemetery en route, and for Howie Newsome’s house and barns. Holmes, who had popped into a bookstore, boarded the bus and said, “I love this town.”

“Oh, yeah? You want to move here?” Leon said.

“Maybe!” Holmes said. “I’ve already made friends.”

At MacDowell, the group tramped along a forested path to Wilder’s stone cabin.



Cartoon by Roland High

“Such a luxury to be in the woods!” Deutch said. “I love to be in the woods by myself,” Holmes said. Inside, everyone admired the “tombstones”—wooden tablets signed by each visiting artist, including Wilder in 1937. Then the Gibbs and Webb families, plus Parsons, posed for photographs in front of the cabin, some introducing themselves first. Hagan Oliveras, who plays young Wally Webb, scrambled over belatedly.

“My son!” Holmes said.

“I was taking pictures of frogs!” Oliveras said. Holmes put her arm around him.

At the table read, in the main hall, Leon offered inspiring remarks (“If there’s a God, she’s, like, ‘You know what? . . . There is nothing richer than a real moment with anyone’ ”) and encouraged the actors to be themselves. “If you are a Black person, be a Black person,” he said, to laughter and applause. The table read began.

“This play is called ‘Our Town,’ ” Parsons read. He looked up. “Too gay?” More laughter.

“I think you should lean into your identity,” Leon said. ♦



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

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[Heels and Hipsters](#)

Billy Corgan on Heels vs. Baby Faces, and the Case of Donald Trump

The Smashing Pumpkins front man and wrestling impresario ponders why Kim Gordon made fun of the band (snobbishness) and worries about being “constrained by wokeness.”

By [John Seabrook](#)

September 16, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

At Paquita, a tea shop in the West Village, Billy Corgan, the Smashing Pumpkins' fifty-seven-year-old front man and main songwriter, asked if there was a *pu-erh*, a fermented Chinese tea, that he could try. "I'm a tea snob," he said. In Paris recently he had a *pu-erh* that had been fermented for sixty years. "It was like I was drinking pure earth!"

The server suggested a sticky-rice *pu-erh*. Corgan tipped the brim of the Cubs baseball cap that sat atop his gleaming pate. "I'll try that," he said.

The artist's entourage on that sunny morning included his two children, Augustus and Clementine, eight and six, and the Pumpkins' tour manager, who sat close by. The kids were travelling with the Pumpkins on the band's stadium tour with Green Day, the headliner. "My son asked me yesterday, 'Is Green Day bigger than you?'" Corgan recalled. "I said, 'Yeah, they're probably bigger, but there's not a lot of bands in the world that are bigger than Daddy's band.'

"When I was growing up, my father was very bitter about his missed musical opportunities," he went on. "He would point at musicians on television and say, 'That should be me—you're the reason that I'm not on TV.' I heard that a hundred times. So I don't want my kids to see me like a has-been. I don't want to be saying, 'Daddy played there once' and 'Daddy was on the cover of this magazine when he had hair.' I want my son to look at me onstage now."

Being in New York put Corgan in mind of the slights the band suffered from local hipsters in the nineties, when the Pumpkins established themselves as alt-rock stars with the albums "Siamese Dream" and "Mellon Collie and the Infinite Sadness." "The New York hipsters would make fun of us," he said. "And what were they making fun of? That we cared too much about our music. We worked too hard. What does it mean to tell someone they are trying

too hard when they have fucking nothing? You would encounter snobs like Kim Gordon. Well, I didn't grow up in the same social strata she grew up in. It's easy for her to pass judgment on people like us."

The sticky-rice *pu-erh* wasn't earthy enough for Corgan, who is an earthy guy. A confessional vein runs through both his lyrics and his conversation. As a latchkey kid in Chicago in the seventies, he watched a lot of confessional TV on unsupervised afternoons: "Phil Donahue and Oprah were both local. Chicago was the hub of daytime TV." On weekends, he watched professional-wrestling shows, "which had a lot to do with the way I see the world. Good guys and bad guys"—in wrestling parlance, "baby faces" and "heels." The baby face "goes through a lot of stuff," Corgan said, "but ultimately he is going to persevere, because the values of the noble hero are greater than the skullduggery of the heel." (Or, if you will, the hipster.) The moment when the heel begs for mercy before getting his comeuppance is known as "showing ass," Corgan explained.

So deep is Corgan's immersion in pro wrestling that he now owns the National Wrestling Alliance, a once prominent "league" that has been all but eclipsed by World Wrestling Entertainment. He devotes a lot of time to writing scenarios for baby faces and heels but is frustrated by modern wrestlers' unwillingness to show ass. They "want all the advantages of being a heel with the upside of being a baby face," he said, adding, "Heels generate a lot of heat. But if you're not willing to show ass in that critical moment—that's what people pay for." Showing ass doesn't help the wrestlers' personal brand on social media, though, where "you see the heel walking his dog."

As a wrestling impresario, Corgan also feels "constrained by wokeness," he said. "We're in this weird straitjacket where we have to dance around the heel's greatest weapons, because the heel isn't allowed to say the horrible thing that would get you cancelled. In a

movie, it's O.K. for the character to kill the uncle, but if the character said the thing to the uncle that would get him cancelled, he couldn't be in the movie." He took a beat. "But murder is O.K."

He pondered the case of Donald Trump, a verifiable heel, who says cancel-worthy stuff every day. Why, he wondered, can't the modern heel be more like him? "People have tried," he said. "There actually was a guy who worked the wrestling version of Trump. And it made so many people uncomfortable."

Does Corgan wrestle?

"No, I want nothing to do with it. Too dangerous. I did a thing at the Hammerstein Ballroom where I came out and hit somebody with a guitar, and they hit me with a phone in the back of the head, full force. I got a concussion." ♦



John Seabrook has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1989 and became a staff writer in 1993. He has published four books, including, most recently, "[The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory](#)".

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Dept. of Dead Languages

The Best New Book Written Entirely in Latin You'll Try to Read This Year

Why Donatien Grau, an adviser at the Louvre, decided to write “*De Civitate Angelorum*,” a book about Los Angeles, the Roman way.

By [Fergus McIntosh](#)

September 16, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Number of Latin speakers in the Roman Empire: *multitudo*.

Number of native Latin speakers in the world today: *nil*. Number of Latin speakers in the back yard of a Chelsea bar one recent sticky evening: *unus*.

Donatien Grau, an adviser on contemporary programming at the Louvre, was in town from Paris to do a reading from his book “*De Civitate Angelorum*,” a treatise on Los Angeles written entirely in Latin. He wore an intellectual’s patterned scarf and a too-heavy blue blazer, and was fortifying himself with a pre-reading iced tea.

The Louvre is not known for contemporary art, but after Laurence des Cars took over as the head of the museum a few years ago, she brought in Grau, who had previously worked for her at the Musée d’Orsay. “What we wanted to do is for contemporary to be not the opposite of heritage, but actually be a *take* on heritage,” Grau said. “Laurence says, ‘The Louvre is not a place for contemporary art, it’s a contemporary place for art.’ ” Grau sees himself as an emissary. “When I converse with artists, I come not as someone from the present,” he said, “but as someone whose principal activity is in history.”

In 2018, Grau was curating an exhibition about Plato at the Getty Villa, in Los Angeles, when he had an idea. “For Jean Paul Getty, the United States were the new Roman Empire, and the Pacific Palisades were the new Amalfi Coast,” he said. “The way the villa was received, in the seventies—it was very strongly criticized as being, you know, Miami. But a lot of scholars, they spoke to archeologists who said that it actually was a fairly accurate rendition of what a Roman villa would have been.” He mopped his brow. “So I thought, What if I do this silly thing and write a book on L.A. in Latin?”

The project soon turned serious. A numismatist by training, Grau took inspiration from fourth- and fifth-century Latin literary texts. An art-house publisher in Paris agreed to print a few hundred copies. For a title, he borrowed from St. Augustine’s “*City of God*” (“*De Civitate Dei*”), written when the Roman Empire was in its decline. “In the late fourth century, a number of writers and aristocrats and members of the élite thought that their time was

over,” he said. “Christianity had arrived, and would erase the heritage of paganism.”

He wondered: Could Los Angeles be at a similar juncture? Perhaps writing in Latin would help him decide. “Latin was, of course, an imperial language,” he said. “And now it’s a non-hegemonic language. Whereas English is an imperial language that still has that sense of hegemony.” He went on, “We have to accept the foreignness of Latin in order to be able to understand it again.”

Ten minutes later, a few dozen people were crowding into 192 Books, on Tenth Avenue, to hear Grau declaim in a dead language. Alexandre Singh, a Franco-Indian artist with an English accent, was waiting for Grau outside. “I think perhaps one in four will understand what they’re hearing tonight,” he said. “If you speak Spanish or Italian, you’ll get the general gist.”

Inside, friends and *amatores linguae Latinae* were gathered. The painter Francesco Clemente, dressed in a cream suit with matching panama hat, was in the front row; Liz Diller, the architect, perched on a pile of books at the back.

After everyone had settled, Grau began: “*In ultima terra Civitas Angelorum locata est. Nam inter solitudines et mare, montes et caelum, silvas et urbem, posita est.*” So far so good: The City of Angels is at the end of the earth, amid deserts and sea, mountains and sky, forests and sprawl. The next bit was trickier: The city is diverse (“*Civitas varia est*”), crossed by raised freeways (“*viae altae liberae*”), prone to earthquakes (“*motus terrae*”); everyone always thinks that they’re young and happy (“*Omnes semper se iuvenes ac beatos esse putant*”). Some people frowned in concentration; others looked out the window. Occasionally, Grau slipped in a familiar name—Venice Beach, Topanga, the Oscars—to grateful chuckles. The last section was about David Hockney. “*Ad civitatem pictor e Britannia venit,*” Grau intoned: A painter came from Britain.

Afterward, fans waited for Grau to finish stacking chairs. “Oddly, I could follow certain parts,” Aisha Butt, who works for the Guggenheim, said. “I think I ended my Latin education at sixteen, but there are little parts you keep.”

For some, it was more about vibes. “He read it without one hint of irony,” Ernesto Estrella, a poet and a philologist, said. “It was beautiful. He read it as if everybody would understand everything, and that makes you understand.”

Phong Bui, the publisher of the *Brooklyn Rail*, was joining Grau for a celebratory dinner. “It’s an activation of Donatien’s ‘thinking without the banister’—that famous Hannah Arendt term.” He smiled. “That multitude of references connecting America with the old Roman Empire. America is a reluctant empire.” Grau emerged, bound for the after-party. Next stop on the book tour: Los Angeles. ♦

Fergus McIntosh is the head research editor at *The New Yorker* and runs the magazine’s fact-checking department.

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[Sketchpad](#)

White Men Can't Accessorize

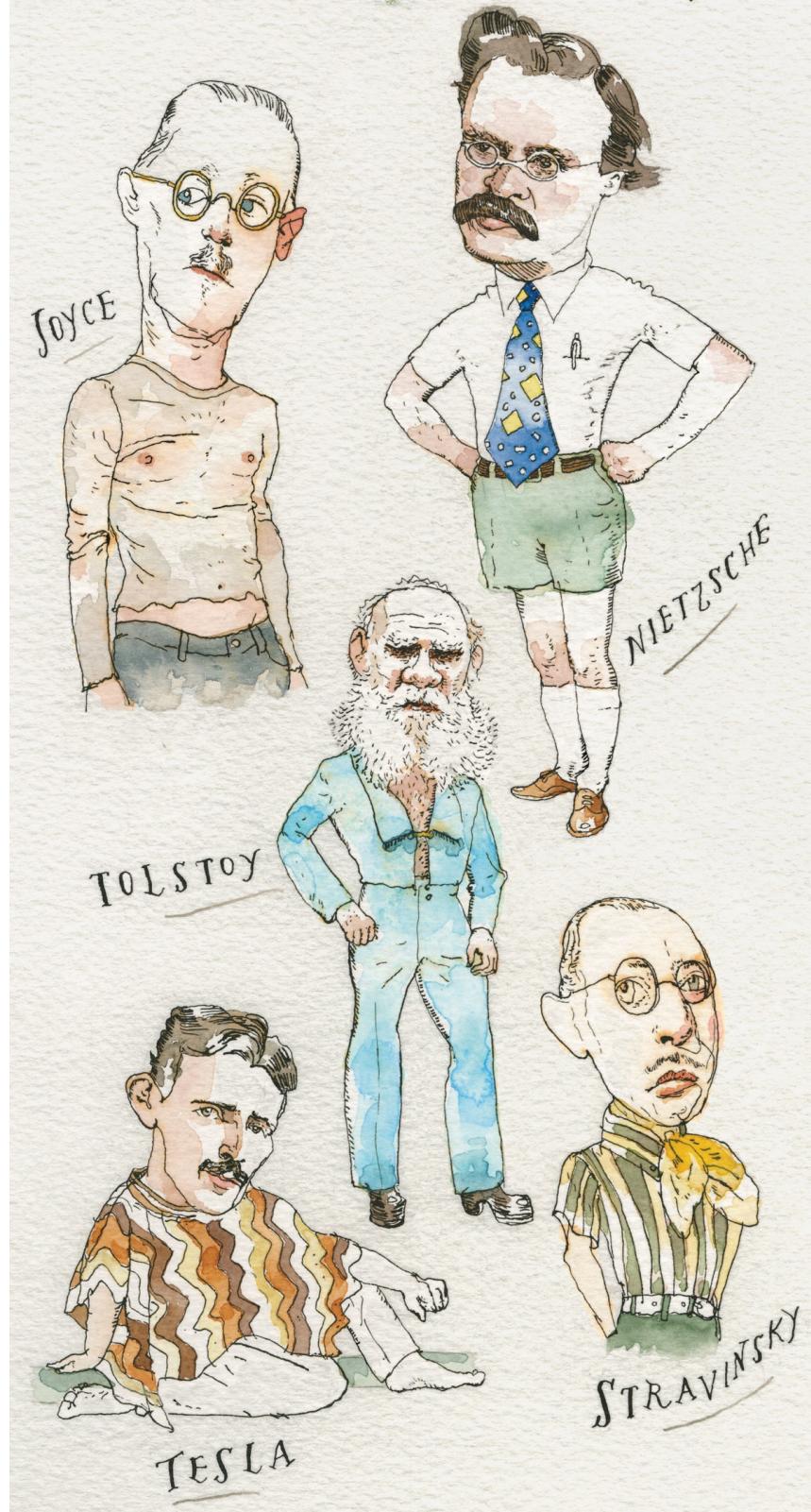
Nietzsche's kneecaps, Tesla's caftan, and Tolstoy's chest hair tell the story.

By [Barry Blitt](#)

September 16, 2024

GET SMART

(OR: WHITE MEN CAN'T ACCESSORIZE)



Barry Blitt, a cartoonist and an illustrator, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1992. In 2020, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning.

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The Art of Taking It Slow

Contemporary cycling is all about spandex and personal bests. The bicycle designer Grant Petersen has amassed an ardent following by urging people to get comfortable bikes, and go easy.

By [Anna Wiener](#)

September 16, 2024



Petersen has written that bikes can “just about save the world, or at least make you happy.”

Photographs by Jake Stangel for The New Yorker

There are places in California that can make a person feel in tune with geological time, newly alert, on the brink of something cosmic. Walnut Creek, an affluent suburb east of [San Francisco](#), is

not one of them. Nestled in the foothills of stately Mt. Diablo, the city's quaint downtown is buffeted by chain retailers and big-box stores. On a recent summer morning, I took the train there to meet Grant Petersen, the bicycle designer, writer, and founder of Rivendell Bicycle Works. Petersen has become famous for making beautiful bikes, using materials and components that his industry has mostly abandoned, and for promoting a vision of cycling that is low-key, functional, anti-car, and anti-corporate. He has polarizing opinions and an outsized influence. Sensing that it would be uncouth to arrive on foot, and wanting to honestly communicate my level of commitment to cycling, I brought my bike: a red nineteen-eighties Nashbar that I purchased in my mid-twenties, rode happily for a decade, and abandoned when I became pregnant and freshly terrified of death. The bike had spent the past two years hanging vertically in the garage, where, from time to time, I accidentally backed into it with the car. The wheels were out of true, and—a separate issue—couldn't be removed: I had installed locking anti-theft skewers, then lost the key.

Petersen met me at the *BART* station. There were ways in which my bike was not up to Rivendell standards: it had sylphlike tires and an over-all look of abandonment. He was polite about the situation. "It's steel, it has lugs," he said. Petersen is seventy and muscular, with buttony blue eyes, a gentle smile, and graying hair that gravitates toward the middle of his head, like a cresting wave. That morning, he was wearing a long-sleeved black shirt, a red bandanna, and loose pants made by Rivendell's clothing line, *MUSA*, which Petersen developed himself. ("They seem to fit like normal pants, thank god," a description on the Web site reads.) He was riding a Rivendell Roaduno, "a single-ish speed road bike" painted banana-slug yellow, and he set off on the sidewalk, beckoning for me to follow.

In the past forty years, cycling has increasingly been branded as a form of exercise, one that emphasizes speed, optimization, and competition. On any given morning, in Central, Prospect, and

Golden Gate Parks, gangs of white-collar workers—wearing curve-hugging performance apparel and tethered to the cloud by G.P.S.—whiz in circles, cheating the wind. Indoor fitness companies, such as SoulCycle and Peloton, have reinforced the image of cycling as a high-octane cardio workout. Most new, high-end bikes are compact, lightweight, and hyper-responsive, with carbon-fibre frames, drop handlebars, and disk brakes, some of which are hydraulic. One of the bikes recommended by *Bicycling* magazine last year has a matte-black colorway with “a stealthy aesthetic”: the cables and wires are tucked inside the frame. The bike is advertised as “race bred, built for speed.”

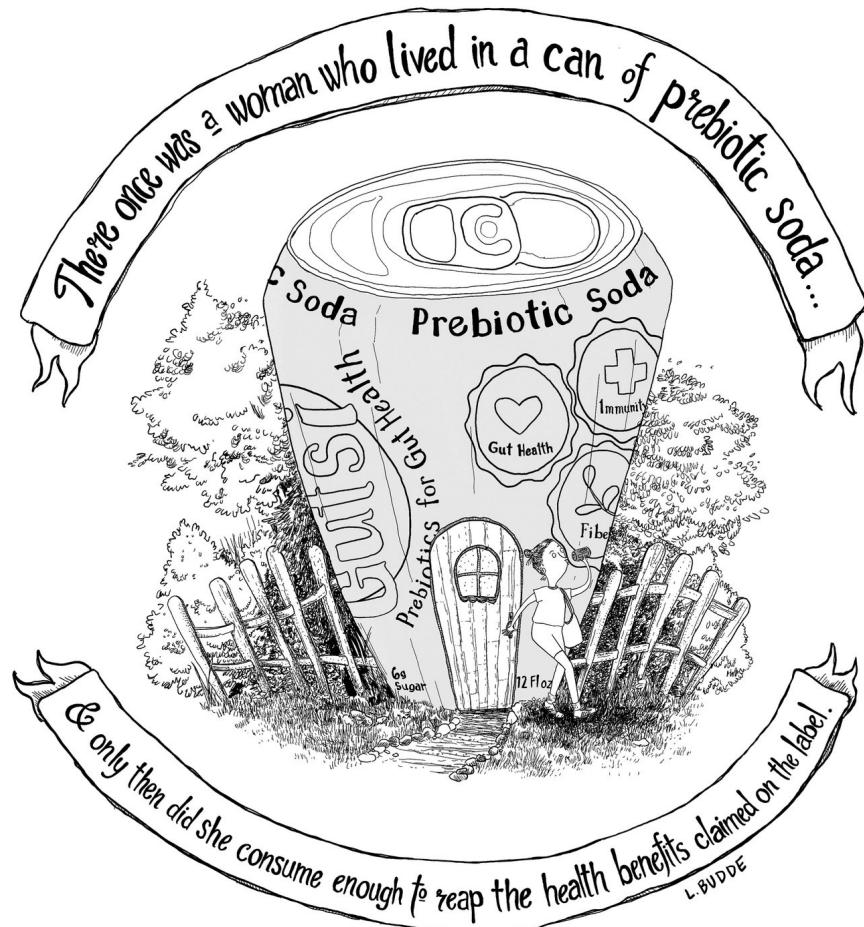
Petersen believes that the bike industry’s focus on racing—along with “competition and a pervasive addiction to technology”—has had a poisonous influence on cycling culture. He dislikes the widespread marketing to recreational riders of spandex kits, squirty energy gels, and workout apps such as Strava. He thinks that low, curved handlebars contort riders into an unnatural position; that bicycles made of carbon fibre and aluminum have safety issues; and that stretchy synthetics have nothing on seersucker and wool. “The whole purpose of pro riding now is to create a demand at the retail level for the really expensive bicycles,” he said. He sees the glorification of speed—personal bests, constant quantification, metrics, leaderboards—as discouraging to entry-level riders who might otherwise enjoy life with a bike. “I would like to see the Tour de France only allow riders to ride one bike the entire tour,” he said. “Do their own maintenance, change their own flats, the way that normal people have to. Racing would have a positive trickle-down effect, instead of the way it is now. Bikes would be better, they’d be safer, and they would last longer. And the races themselves wouldn’t be less interesting at all.”

Rivendell’s bicycles are marketed as “UNracing” bikes. The frames are made of lugged, brazed steel. They have long wheelbases, luxurious chainstays, and sloping top tubes. “The rear triangle of his bikes, you could fly a plane through there,” Ashton Lambie, a

record-breaking American track cyclist, said admiringly. “Nobody is doing that.” The bikes have playful names—Roadini, Atlantis, Hunqapillar, Susie W. Longbolts—and run roughly from two thousand to five thousand dollars, depending on the build. One of Rivendell’s signatures is the country bike: a rig equally suitable for paved roads and, as the company puts it, “the kinds of fire trails a Conestoga wagon could negotiate, but not the kind that would require a jackass.” Rivendell frames are generally outfitted with upright handlebars, leather saddles, manual shifters, platform pedals, and lush, chubby tires. They are designed to accommodate racks, baskets, fenders, and bags—whatever is useful for cross-country touring, local bike camping, and running errands. “Bikes are turning ugly,” Petersen recently wrote. “I personally have more respect, tons of respect, for somebody who rides around town, to work, for shopping, and for fun, than somebody who does front-flips on handrails with a fifty-foot dropoff on one side.” He is an advocate of pleasurable, unhurried riding—alone, or with family and friends—and is obsessive about comfort. Through the years, Rivendell bicycles have amassed a devoted following. People take portraits of their bikes in stunning natural environments and post them to social media; they “Riv up” non-Rivendell frames; they pore over Petersen’s writing, and adopt his preferences. Adam Leibow, the publisher of *Calling in Sick*, an “extreme alternative cycling magazine,” told me, “Some people call Rivendell a cult.”

In Walnut Creek, I tailed Petersen as he pedalled at a leisurely pace back to Rivendell’s headquarters. For the past twenty-six years, the company has occupied a six-bay industrial space in a sleepy area by the highway. One of the bays is a showroom, though it felt less like a sales floor and more like a clubhouse. A mobile of lugs, made by a local teen-ager, twirled from the ceiling. Rows of bicycles leaned nonchalantly against their kickstands. Rivendells are distinctive: they have Kodachrome paint jobs, elegant decals, and delicate metal-inlay head badges—a sort of hood ornament for bikes. The lugs, steel sockets that connect the tubing of a bicycle

frame, have patterns and shapes cut into them—a heart, a diamond, the curl of a leaf. Even the fork crowns are pretty. In a 1996 catalogue, Petersen wrote that he likes “the idea of a fine frame being identifiable by brand, even without its paint, decals, and head badge, if it happens to wind up in a junkyard 100 years from now . . . in 2095, a hobo art connoisseur could saunter by, see the frame, pick it up, be drawn to the joints, and say ‘(Burp) Ha!—an old Rivendell.’”



Cartoon by Lindsey Budde

We were greeted in the showroom by Will Keating, Rivendell’s general manager, a tall lapsed skateboarder in his mid-thirties. He was wearing Vans, Dickies, and a baseball cap embroidered with the *Calling in Sick* logo. Rivendell has twelve employees, a disproportionate number of whom are into vintage cameras; for a while, the shop had a darkroom. (“Skateboarders tend to follow a trajectory,” Keating told me. “They skate, then they get into photography, then they get into bicycles, and then they get into

birding.”) On the wall, there were monochrome photos of Petersen’s employees and their friends: well-dressed, tattooed, and helmetless, they rolled through groves of oak and eucalyptus, and pedalled along sun-dappled ridges. The photographs looked like an ad for California.

These days, some mainstream bikes incorporate electronics requiring batteries and firmware: shifters that change gears at the press of a button, or power meters that collect data on a rider’s output. “So many basic things are being teched out of existence,” Petersen said. He saw this as a function of business incentives: electronics break or need replacement; an upgrade is always around the corner. Petersen’s objections are practical but also philosophical. As bikes become higher-tech, riders lose skills and agency. “A lot of sports have been watered down,” [Yvon Chouinard](#), the founder of Patagonia, told me. “People are bicycling, but they have a motor. And people are climbing, but they’re climbing indoors. They’re riding big waves, but they’re being pulled in by Jet Skis. Yet there are a few people that are bucking the trend.”

In the Rivendell showroom, a table held a silver bike frame, fitted with shifters and a drivetrain: the system of cranks, chains, pedals, and gears that propels a bicycle. “It gets really sappy if I try to talk about the beauty of a mechanical movement,” Petersen said. “I don’t want to be poetic about it at all. But I think people like to see how things work.” He turned the crank and moved the friction shifter—a small, silent paddle that shifts gears smoothly, “like a ramp rather than stairs,” as the Rivendell Web site describes it—which was the industry standard until the mid-eighties, when index shifting was introduced. We watched the derailleur lift the chain from gear to gear. “It’s so simple and so easy,” he said. “It takes a little bit of practice, and it’s that little bit of practice that dooms it, absolutely dooms it, in the market.” Electronic parts, he said, were cheaper and easier to make, and lowered the bar to entry. “But the thing that’s lost in there—it’s the control that you have.”

I followed him to his office, a narrow room stuffed neatly with tools, books, fly-fishing supplies, and, on a high shelf, a plastic box full of rare derailleurs. There were two ergonomic kneeling stools; the landline telephone was wrapped in a block of ergonomic foam. By the door to the office was a small, framed color photo of two friendly-looking septuagenarians, standing next to a pair of Rivendell bicycles. “Are those your parents?” I asked. “No,” Petersen said. “That’s Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter.”

Petersen grew up in Lafayette, California, a suburb one town over from Walnut Creek. His father was a mechanical engineer, and his mother was a painter and a homemaker. Petersen was a well-liked, athletic, outdoorsy kid, and when he describes his childhood—baseball, paper routes, slingshots, pheasant-hunting—it can bring to mind a mid-century Boy Scout Handbook. Still, he felt apart from his peers. “I wet the bed until I was twenty-three,” he said. “It changes your whole point of view toward life.” He never had sleepovers and was shy around girls. The problem, a physiological one, limited his future prospects. When he graduated from high school, in 1972, dorm life seemed impossible. So he stayed home, enrolled at a local junior college, and, in 1975, began working at the newly opened R.E.I. outpost in Berkeley, a hub of the Bay Area’s energetic outdoor-recreation scene. (Petersen said that for a time the company instituted a rule, “No handwritten signs,” after he began taping up long, chatty shelf talkers for products he liked.) He took up mountaineering and rock climbing, and commuted to work on his bicycle, a thirty-mile round trip. In the summer of 1976, he and a girlfriend biked across the country, from Walnut Creek to northern Connecticut, and hitchhiked back.

Throughout his twenties, Petersen raced in local competitions. Chris Watson, a friend and teammate, said, “He probably doesn’t want to tout this fact, but he shaved his legs like the rest of us.” Most of his peers relied on bicycle parts made by Campagnolo, an upscale Italian company, but Petersen couldn’t afford them. “I think I had thirteen different brands and seven different countries

represented on my racing bike,” he said. “It was a hodgepodge, but it worked perfectly.” He was talented but ambivalent about competing. “I know the racing scene extremely well, I know the culture really well, I’m comfortable with it, and I hate it,” he told me.

In 1984, Petersen took an entry-level job at Bridgestone Cycle U.S.A., an offshoot of the Japanese tire conglomerate. Bridgestone was Japan’s largest bicycle manufacturer, but the American office, which had a half-dozen employees, was not staffed by bicycle experts. Petersen and Watson, who worked in the sales department, helped design a bike called the MB-1, which combined the sportiness and speed of a road bike with the strength of a mountain bike. “I had more influence over Bridgestone bicycles than I should have,” Petersen told me. “But nobody knew anything about bicycles except for me.” The bike sold out immediately, and subsequent models from Bridgestone Cycle U.S.A. bear certain hallmarks of a Petersen build. Kyle Kelley, the owner of Allez LA, a bike shop in Los Angeles, described Petersen’s Bridgestone designs as “some of the best race bikes in the history of mountain biking, period.” Petersen became the division’s head of marketing. He formed a subscription club for Bridgestone riders and enthusiasts, the Bridgestone Owners Bunch, and began publishing a newsletter called the *BOB Gazette*. The newsletter had articles, product listings, Q. & A.s, word games, tips (“next time somebody hoodwinks you into giving a therapeutic massage, do it with a rolling pin”), and a devoted readership. *BOBs*, as they were known, were thrifty, embraced a D.I.Y. ethos, and valued function over prestige. “I am philosophically for putting cheap, really high-functioning stuff on a bike,” Petersen told me. “A twenty-eight-dollar derailleur on a thirty-five-hundred-dollar bike has a kind of beauty in itself.”

In 1994, Bridgestone announced that it was shuttering its U.S. bicycle operation. Petersen told me that he had an informal standing job offer from Specialized, a major bicycle manufacturer,

but that he couldn't get excited about the changes in the mainstream market. Production was moving to China. Mountain bikes had begun to draw influence from motocross, incorporating shocks and suspension forks. The introduction of carbon fibre and titanium brought new manufacturers, including aerospace companies, into the industry. "The proportions, designs, paint jobs, graphics were hard for me to embrace," Petersen said. The timing was not ideal: he and his wife, Mary Anderson, had a five-year-old daughter and were expecting a second child. Still, in the final issue of the *BOB Gazette*, he announced that he would be forming his own company. "For better or worse, for richer or poorer, Rivendell will reflect my extreme personal taste," he wrote.

Within a few months, Petersen raised eighty-nine thousand dollars from friends and family, and set up shop in his garage. Anderson became the company's vice-president. Rivendell's first product was beeswax, for lubricating bolt threads; Petersen processed it in his kitchen. He began publishing another newsletter, the *Rivendell Reader*, and distributed it to the old *BOB* mailing list. "In the simplest terms, I think of bicycles as rideable art that can just about save the world, or at least make you happy," he told readers. "Yet so many modern bicycles are promoted as tools for self-aggrandizement, status, and hammering the competition to a pulp, and the bikes themselves look like hoodlums, thugs, and ne'er-do-wells." The *Reader* was rich with information about bike parts and accessories, and often incorporated Petersen's non-bicycle interests, as with a short physics primer on "Why a Boomerang Boomerangs," written by a boomerang designer. The newsletter also included a column titled "Progress Report," a detailed journal of the company's development. Financially, Rivendell was almost always in the red. "We're forging ahead with little projects that cost loot but will pay off down the road—all stuff a financial advisor would advise against, I'm sure," Petersen wrote, in 1999, at a low point. "But the lugs are so fun, and it's so ironic that here we are

doing them in an age when almost nobody gives a hoot. It's tragic and funny at the same time."

A few days after I met Petersen, I went downstairs to retrieve the mail and found a cardboard box containing what can only be described as a dossier: old Bridgestone catalogues, issues of the *BOB Gazette*, a nearly complete archive of the *Rivendell Reader*. The box also included an issue of *Outside* magazine from 1996, in which there was a story about Petersen—a “messiah to cycling Luddites”—under the headline “Lead Us Not Into Titanium.” He’d been styled for the photograph, in baggy jeans and a dark shirt buttoned clerically to the neck. A Post-it had been slapped over the text: “Hate it,” he’d pencilled. “They made me wear the clothes.” In an issue of the *Reader* from the same year, Petersen responded to the article in his “Progress Report”: “Man, I look like a turkey posing in the damn sunset holding up a frame I didn’t even make myself, and the text has me some kind of damn leader of the *\$#@!#a\$#‘flock,’ and that’s so insulting and misdirected and man, it makes me mad. . . . I don’t hate titanium! It’s good material! It’s pretty! No rusto! Bravo! Whatever! Damn!”

Rivendell’s employees object to descriptions of the company’s following as cultlike. “The other stuff is the cult,” Keating told me. “Putting the suit on, and going as fast as possible, and using the bars like this”—we were sitting at a table, and he hunched over his coffee cup, as if to protect it. “That’s the culty stuff, right? We’re just making nice bikes for regular people.” Still, people kind of get a bug. They buy in. The RBW Owners Bunch, an online forum for fans, has more than five thousand members, and users post on a daily basis. People organize “Riv Rides” in their home towns, and name-check their bikes in their professional bios and Instagram handles. On one afternoon that I visited, employees were nibbling on a large cheesecake from Junior’s, sent by a customer. Leah Peterson, a nurse in southwest Michigan, and the owner of three Platypuses—a curvy, elongated upright country bike—sends themed enamel pins to other Platypus-riding “Riv Sisters.” Some

years ago, when she visited the shop, the crew suspended a large cardboard welcome sign from the ceiling; she and Petersen cruised around town on a HubbuHubbuH, Rivendell's tandem. Several months later, her father died unexpectedly of a pulmonary embolism. She was astonished to open the mail and find handwritten notes from the Rivendell staff. "What company sends you a sympathy card when your dad dies?" she asked me.



An undeniable part of Rivendell's appeal is Petersen. The guy has an aura. He tends to ride in long-sleeved shirts, pants, and Teva sandals, on bicycles dotted with multicolor nail polish. He wraps some of his handlebars in colorful felt or tape and hemp twine, then shellacs them. ("I like to put a broccoli rubberband amidships," he has written; it adds grip.) From time to time, he'll strap poems to his basket or bars, then memorize them on trail rides. A pragmatist, he is a fan of what he calls the S24O, or the sub-twenty-four-hour overnight, a sort of working cyclist's staycation—"bicycle camping for the time challenged"—in which participants ride into nature near their homes, camp out for one night, and return in the morning. In 2012, he published "Just Ride: A Radically Practical Guide to Riding Your Bike," which offers advice on cycling technique, diet, fitness, and etiquette ("Be saintlike on the bike path"). Controversially, he is ambivalent about helmets: he believes

that most are inadequately padded, sacrificing safety for style; that our cultural obsession with them unfairly places the onus on cyclists, not drivers; and that they instill unearned confidence.

(“Don’t risk-compensate,” he told me, as I clipped mine on.) His own helmet, which he wears only occasionally, is augmented with packing foam.

Petersen keeps a blog, Grant’s Blahg: a freewheeling repository of business updates, how-to tips, personal reflections, bicycle information, appreciative photos of goats, and so on. He takes his interests seriously, and when something captures his attention—fly-fishing, insulin, behavioral psychology—he goes deep. He also has strong feelings about soap (pine tar is best), the figures on American currency (“Put Pooh on a coin”), and spelling bees (“To titillate the audience, the contestants don’t all spell the same words”). He is less dogmatic about e-bikes than one might expect (“Better than a car”). He enjoys wordplay; one Rivendell publication, a twenty-page flyer, excluded the letter “E.” “It’s not about the bike, it’s about the relationship,” Richard Sachs, a master frame builder, told me. “You’re buying Grant. You’re buying Grant’s intellectual property, and his forty or fifty years of staying true to his belief system.”

Recently, out at a bar with friends, I struck up a conversation with a man in his late thirties, a climate-impact investor named Peter, who was sitting alone at a sidewalk table, drinking a beer. Across from him was a Rivendell: an A. Homer Hilsen frame, with thick tires, side-pull brakes, saddlebags, and built-in lights, which ran on wheel-generated electricity. Peter said that he had wanted it to be an “apocalypse bike”: good for commuting, running errands, and bike camping, but also something he could “hop on after an earthquake and get anywhere, dependent on no one.” He had been taken aback by how often strangers initiated conversations with him about Rivendell; I was the third person to approach him that evening. “Would I have bought this bike if I knew people would

talk to me about it multiple times a week?” he asked. Still, a few minutes later, he said he was thinking about buying a second.

In July, Petersen enlisted his friend Dan Leto to drive us out to Fernandez Ranch, in Martinez, for a trail ride. Petersen is a licensed driver but hates to do it—“It scares me, the thought of hurting somebody”—and estimates that he has spent ninety minutes behind the wheel of a car in the past four years. When Leto arrived at the shop, driving a white nineties Ford Explorer (Eddie Bauer edition), the temperature was ticking toward triple digits. Petersen disappeared into the workroom, and returned with a blue bandanna soaked in cold water, which he tied around my neck, like a tiny cape. That morning, he had taken a sunscreen stick to his face, and his cheeks and forehead were covered in thick white streaks; an equally sopped bandanna hung around his own neck. He looked a little crazy. “Sit behind the airbag,” Petersen instructed, pointing to the front seat; he and Keating, who came along, folded themselves into the back.

The ranch, a seven-thousand-acre nature reserve, is just off the highway, a few miles from a Chevron refinery. For much of the year, it is grassy and lush, with rolling meadows and riots of wildflowers. But this was midsummer, and the earth was golden, crunchy, and pocked with ground-squirrel holes. In the parking lot, Petersen eyeballed the bicycle he had brought for me, a moss-green Clem Smith Jr., with thick tires and upright bars. The seat was higher than I was used to: I had ridden almost exclusively on pavement, with traffic, and was used to dropping a foot to the ground at short notice. The previous week, trying a Platypus at Rivendell HQ, I had slung a leg over the frame, pushed myself up onto the saddle, and fallen over. Petersen looked at me. “This saddle height is ergonomically fine but psychologically terrifying,” he said, and lowered the seat.

The ride that Petersen had chosen was short: a series of switchbacks, climbing to an overlook, and then a long, voluptuous

descent. In the days leading up to it, he had nervously e-mailed me advice and instructions—on friction-shifting, pedalling uphill, and coasting down steep descents—appended with apologies for being “helicopter-y.” His two daughters are about my age, and I had the feeling that if I hurt myself, consoling him would be the worst part. We started up the narrow trail, moving from an open field to a shaded grove. The highway and refinery fell out of sight. I was slow, and not at peace. On the ascent, I had to walk the Clem a bit, guiding it up the trail like a donkey, and, despite everyone being relentlessly reassuring and kind, I engaged in a little therapeutic self-talk to quell my shame at dragging the pace down.

About halfway through the ride, I came to a fork in the road. I didn’t know which path the others had taken, and I stood for a while, appreciating the shade of the oak trees, the quiet, the bandanna crisping around my neck. I tried to channel an essay of Petersen’s, written in 2002, on what he calls “underbiking”: taking a bike somewhere it isn’t obviously built to go. “Riding an UB changes how you look at any terrain,” he wrote. “You ride where it lets you ride, walk when it wants you to, and rely more on your growing skills than on the latest technology.” This struck me as a harmonic way of moving through the world—not my way, but whatever. I pushed off, found the group, and followed them down a steep, exhilarating slide. Dry earth sputtered against my calves. I loosened my hold on the brakes. Even in the heat, with friction shifters I didn’t understand how to use, I felt a flicker of my favorite feeling: competence. The wide tires were emboldening; the saddle height was psychologically fine. It was by far the longest, heaviest bicycle I had ever been on, and it moved with a surprising grace.

We dismounted in the parking lot. The sun returned to being unforgiving. I had no idea what time it was or how long we’d been out. I wanted to do the whole thing again. I looked at my phone: texts from the babysitter, calendar alerts, a moldering heap of e-mails. “Don’t you just feel like a kid again?” Leto asked, as he and

Petersen began disassembling the bikes and loading them into the car. I knew what he meant. But I felt, instead, a very adult sense of longing—as if I had just glimpsed, at a deeply inconvenient time, a new and appealing way to live.

Petersen often cites, as inspiration for Rivendell, a 1972 catalogue for Chouinard Equipment, the precursor to Patagonia. In the catalogue, Yvon Chouinard took his industry to task for the environmental damage of rock climbing and copped to his own culpability, as a purveyor of steel pitons. “I can relate to what he’s trying to do, because I’ve tried to do the same thing,” Chouinard told me, of Petersen. Like Chouinard, who has expressed concern about Patagonia’s size continuing to increase, Petersen is wary of growth. There are only a small number of factories that do things the Rivendell way. Its lugs, which are made using lost-wax casting, are incredibly strong but take a long time to make. The vast majority of the frames are painted by a single person. “I don’t want to dilute anything,” Petersen said. “I don’t want to be like Filson, trying to sell ranch wear to urbanites.”

Last year, Rivendell brought in four million dollars in revenue. The company sells about fifteen hundred bicycles a year, alongside parts, pants, and other things that Petersen appreciates, including merino-wool socks and sweaters, copies of “[The Wind in the Willows](#),” brass bike bells (“Noisy but friendly”), bandannas (“They come to you stiff”), and Olbas aromatherapy inhalers (“My often congested son-in-law tried it, and within two seconds asked, ‘Is it addicting?’ ”). Rivendell works with a small number of dealers, but sells most of its bicycles directly to customers. The company does not have a large storage facility, and inventory is limited. “I am no businessman, but it does seem like perhaps they are leaving some amount of money on the table if their frames sell out in 4 minutes!?” a friend recently texted me, after failing to secure a Joe Appaloosa during a presale. “I don’t think growth is necessarily good,” Petersen told me. “When you’re making a whole

lot of something, with the goal being profits, there are usually compromises.”

Since 1999, Rivendell has produced Silver, its own line of components, which include friction shifters, cranks, and hubs. Some are “virtual but ethically produced knockoffs” of products that have been discontinued by larger companies such as Shimano and SunTour. “We’re trying to become independent of the big bicycle-parts makers,” Petersen said. “Ten years ago, we could still get stuff that we liked. Twenty years ago, it was easy. Now it’s really hard.” The obsolescence of mechanical parts has been a fixation of his for more than thirty years: at Bridgestone, he kept an “Endangered Species Calendar,” a monthly listing of bicycle parts that appeared to be going out of style. Eben Weiss, the author of the blog Bike Snob NYC, told me, of friction shifters, “If it wasn’t for someone like Grant, you could only get them on eBay. He keeps them alive.” For five years, Rivendell has been working on manufacturing its own derailleur. “He doesn’t make business decisions,” Weiss said. “He makes decisions for the love of cycling.”



Petersen believes that the bike industry’s focus on racing—along with “competition and a pervasive addiction to technology”—has had a poisonous influence on cycling culture.

Through the years, some of Petersen's ideas have filtered into the cycling mainstream. People go on S24Os, and refer to them as such. They take road bikes into the mountains and document their adventures on Instagram, using the hashtag #underbiking. In some corners of the industry, baskets, racks, and thicker tires are popular; Petersen is widely credited with bringing an unfashionable wheel size—the plump, gravel-friendly 650b—back into circulation. Newer brands such as Surly, Crust, and Velo Orange now make similar frames. But some cyclists find Petersen overbearing. They are comfortable in spandex and motivated by a little competition. They don't mind if their bikes won't last forever. They have their own joy. Armin Landgraf, the C.E.O. of Specialized, said that his customers like buying professional-tier bikes seen at the Tour de France for a sense of connection with the sport. "It's a passion," he said.

The main critique that Petersen faces is that his preferences are needlessly nostalgic. In 1990, a columnist for *Bicycling* dubbed Petersen a "retro-grouch," and joked that he must be a descendant of nineteenth-century penny-farthing riders. (An ardent cyclist of my acquaintance, who underwent his own Rivendell "journey," told me that he had once worn Petersen's recommended brand of wool underwear on a multi-week tour: "It didn't work out well," he said. "For my butt.") But the same qualities that provoke this critique are part of Rivendell's appeal—as is true of other niche, low-tech products that attract dedicated enthusiasts, such as film cameras and vintage watches. "Bikes look very digital these days," Kelley, of Allez LA, said. "Rivendells look very analog." He joked that the typical Rivendell customer is someone who "maybe still has a flip phone" and listens to vinyl: "They get a feeling when they see something that doesn't look new." Georgena Terry, a famed bicycle designer who specializes in bikes for women, told me that electronic shifting was valuable for some of her older customers, such as those with arthritis. Still, she described Petersen as an "icon" in the industry. "Even people who would never ride

one of Grant’s bikes, because they just think they’re too simple, or whatever, still have a great deal of respect for him,” she said.

In 2018, Petersen posted angrily on the Blahg about the Trump Administration’s [family-separation policies](#), and was surprised when some of his readers pushed back. Later that year, Rivendell began offering discounts to interested Black customers who came into the shop: an effort at anti-racist action, if an imperfect one. In 2020, Petersen formalized the program, calling it Black Reparations Pricing, and started the Black Reparations Fund, a donation pool. Days later, right-wing lawyers accused Rivendell of illegally discriminating against customers based on race. Petersen’s lawyers advised him to shut the program down. The company renamed its charitable fund “Bikes R Fun,” to maintain the same initials; last year, it gave sixty-two thousand dollars to charities. Petersen also fund-raises for individuals, including “Grocery Guy,” a Black checkout worker he met at a local supermarket, and Isabel Galán, a single mother of three living in the South Bronx, whom Petersen read about in a *Times* article about undocumented women. He is interested in making cycling more inclusive and accessible, although he is aware that the revolution won’t be riding four-thousand-dollar Rivendells. He is currently working on a multivolume book project, “An Illustrated History of the American Bicycle: Riding through Racism, Sexism, Pollution, Politics, and Pop Culture.” It begins with the Big Bang.

Rivendell’s future isn’t obvious, or even inevitable. “For the first ten years, we were one bad month away from not being able to pay the bills,” Petersen said. Twice, in 2008 and 2018, the company could barely make rent and payroll. Both times, Petersen appealed to customers, who purchased gift cards and other items to reinvigorate cash flow; the second time around, customers bought more than two hundred thousand dollars in store credit. Rivendell could double its prices, Petersen said, but he didn’t want people to get precious. “They wouldn’t use them as everyday bikes,” he said. It was only in 2020 that Rivendell’s finances started to stabilize,

after the pandemic-era bicycle boom and a newfound popularity in the Japanese market. (Keating, the general manager, credits Blue Lug, a chain of bike shops in Japan, with much of the company's current health.) These days, Petersen's primary concern is getting Rivendell to a place where his employees, if they want to, can stay for the rest of their careers. "I know, and they know, and it's absolutely clear: if we quit doing what we're doing, nobody is going to pick it up," he said. "Nobody's going to do it."

In August, I joined Leibow, from *Calling in Sick*, for a weekend ride. At about nine in the morning, six of his friends, including Keating, gathered at the base of the Golden Gate Bridge, wearing sweatshirts, plaid button-downs, and Vans slip-ons. A thick fog hung over the bay, cloaking the arches. Seagulls drifted in the wind; cars on the bridge passed into nothing. We were headed into Marin, a popular destination for San Francisco cyclists: on weekends, the roads are inundated with riders in sleek-looking pelotons, who roll up to small-town main drags and, rocking lightly in clipless bike shoes, click-clack into bakeries for halftime refreshments. A few yards away from us, two people with spandex outfits, matching white helmets, and lithe physiques clasped each other against the cold. I thought about something Petersen had written on the Blahg: "A beautiful bicycle in a beautiful biome makes sense." There was something romantic about the Rivendells. They made the other bikes on the road look mean.

Petersen had loaned me an A. Homer Hilsen the color of celestine, with upright bars and a metal basket. Leibow and two others were on green Rivendell Clem Ls, a step-through model with an ultra-low top tube, to which *Calling in Sick* once dedicated an entire issue. One of the Clem owners said that, on a recent ride, a stranger on the trail had heckled him, hollering, "Nice that your sister let you borrow her bike!" Though Rivendell's customer base has historically skewed middle-aged—the target audience for comfort—during the past decade the company has become popular among younger riders, many of them skateboarders, who have found that

the bicycles are fun, and hardy enough, to take off-road. “The brand ethos is about being O.K. with going slow,” Leibow told me. “But the reality is, people who want to go fast go fast, even if it’s on a Rivendell.”

At a not especially swift pace, we crossed into the hills and started up a paved, curving road, toward the trail. The ground was littered with sardines, presumably dropped by birds. Wild fennel grew along the shoulder; Leibow harvested some fronds to chew on. He and Keating, who have both spent years riding around the Marin Headlands at night, to take advantage of the empty roads, seemed familiar with the area at a near-molecular level. At the trailhead, Keating suggested that we take a little air out of my tires. “Personal preference,” he said. Then we turned onto a rutted, rocky hiking path. We rode to a retired battery, which hung over the Pacific Ocean. A gun pit, filled with water, had been overtaken by newts. Three different brands of gummy bears materialized. The riders leaned over the pool, eyeballing the salamanders, shooting the breeze.

The strength and fearlessness of the others filled me with an almost indescribable envy. What was it like to leave for a long ride at dusk—or cycle off into the woods with a sleeping bag, a patch kit, and some groceries—and be reasonably assured you’d have a great night? The world seemed divided between two types of people: those with a command of the physical world, and everyone else. The former had confidence, skill, and know-how; the rest of us had YouTube tutorials on removing anti-theft skewers.

Back in the city, I parted ways with Leibow and company. For the first time in a long time, I had no particular place to be. It was pleasant to be purposeless. As I passed other riders in Golden Gate Park, I was aware that the Homer was signalling like crazy to an in-group, and I felt like a poseur: if someone had a question about, say, the drivetrain, I wouldn’t have an answer. But I wanted to—not for cachet, but because it felt right. I thought about all the ways

relentless optimization could contort a good time. I felt a not unfamiliar anxiety about Stuff, its overabundance and baseline cheapness. I tried not to get clipped by an e-bike.

A few weeks later, I went out to Walnut Creek to return the loaner. Since our last meeting, Petersen and I had exchanged dozens of e-mails: about Virginia peanuts, rubber bands, and a ride he'd taken with his nearly two-year-old granddaughter on a Rosco Bebe—a Rivendell designed to hold a baby carrier—during which he'd fed her berries and figs foraged from the saddle. "Bicycles!" he wrote, at one point. "Eventually get a really good one that works for your life and is beautiful and you love. It's just basic." When I got to the showroom, my red Nashbar was leaning against a wall. Amid the Rivendells, it looked a little wan, and much smaller than I remembered. I was happy to see it. Still, before I left, Petersen sent me around the block on a grape-purple Platypus. I cruised past the auto-body shops and a restaurant puffing anise-scented air. The Platypus was agile, and sturdy as a parade float. "You could have that bike for the rest of your life," Petersen said. "Imagine that frame, fifty years old, how beautiful that would be." ♦



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The French Perfumer Behind the Internet's Favorite Fragrance

Francis Kurkdjian had a runaway hit with Baccarat Rouge 540. Now, at Parfums Christian Dior, he's trying to make his mark on a storied fashion house.

By [Rachel Syme](#)

September 16, 2024



Francis Kurkdjian considers calling a perfumer a “nose” demeaning. A great perfume “has to have a story,” he says.

Photograph by Bettina Pittaluga for The New Yorker

What does conspicuous consumption smell like? On a December afternoon in 2013, the Parisian perfumer Francis Kurkdjian was scheduled to meet with the renowned French crystal manufacturer Baccarat at the company’s chandelier-crammed headquarters, near the Arc de Triomphe. The C.E.O. at the time, Daniela Riccardi, had commissioned Kurkdjian to create a limited-edition fragrance to mark the company’s two-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary.

Baccarat planned to produce two hundred and fifty diamond-cut crystal flacons of the new perfume, priced at three thousand euros each, and wanted the scent to reflect the quality and opulence of its vessel.

Kurkdjian (pronounced “cur-zsan”) is a fifty-five-year-old of Armenian descent, with close-cropped hair, smooth manicured hands, and Clooneyesque salt-and-pepper stubble. During three decades in the luxury-fragrance industry, he has created such hits as Narciso Rodriguez for Her, Burberry Her, and Jean Paul Gaultier Le Male. He is the head of his own perfume company, Maison Francis Kurkdjian, and since 2021 has also served as the perfume-creation director for the fashion house Christian Dior, a job that involves reinventing such storied scents as J’Adore and Miss Dior. (Both Dior and Maison Francis Kurkdjian are subsidiaries of the luxury conglomerate L.V.M.H.) For Baccarat, Kurkdjian had designed three samples riffing on scents that were popular at the time when Baccarat was founded. But he’d begun to have misgivings. “I was not happy about what I created,” he recalled recently. “I felt it was too old-fashioned.” As he was about to leave his office, he opened a drawer where he keeps what he calls his “hidden treasures”—perfumes he’s created that have never been bottled—and picked up a vial labelled “HEVA.”

Kurkdjian had formulated the scent the year before, as a technical experiment in making a new kind of “gourmand,” the industry term for a fragrance that smells like food. Gourmands are often cloyingly literal, emulating the aroma of cake batter or candied fruit. Kurkdjian wanted to “bring the gourmand into the twenty-

first century,” using a recipe of synthetic aromachemicals to produce a more impressionistic bouquet. *HEVA* was an acronym for Hedione, a jasmine-scented chemical that acts as a smell amplifier; Evernyl, which lends a mossy, musky note; Veltol, which smells like caramelized sugar; and Ambroxan, a synthetic form of ambergris, a pungent substance regurgitated by whales, which has a ferric quality, like blood in the back of the throat. The resulting perfume did not smell edible or organic; it evoked something air-gapped and untouched by human sweat, like a new Porsche that happens to be filled with cotton candy. Kurkdjian had tried to sell the formula to several luxury fashion houses, but they’d all turned it down. Before the Baccarat meeting, he recalled, “I smelled it, and said, ‘Why not? Let’s try again.’ ”

In the fragrance business, scents tend to be publicly identified with their famous wearers, not with their creators; Chanel No. 5 brings to mind Marilyn Monroe, not Ernest Beaux, the Russian-born perfumer who invented it. Even the legends of the industry are largely considered behind-the-scenes technicians—in industry parlance, a perfumer is “a nose.” Kurkdjian considers the label demeaning. “I am not just a nose walking around—I am also a *brain*,” he told me. “A great perfume is so much more than just a smell. It has to have an idea behind it. It has to have a *story*.” At the meeting, he told Riccardi that his concoction was both dense and bright, like crystal itself.

In the fall of 2014, Baccarat released the scent, then called Rouge 540, for the furnace temperature used to produce the company’s distinctive red crystal pieces. The limited run sold out almost immediately, mostly to longtime Baccarat collectors. A few months later, Kurkdjian gifted a bottle to Kelly St. John, who was then the vice-president of beauty at Neiman Marcus. The next time the two spoke, St. John told Kurkdjian that people were stopping her in the elevator; if he could make more, she would sell it at the department store. Kurkdjian struck a deal with Baccarat to produce all future

runs under his own label, in his brand's minimalist, glass vessels rather than in Baccarat's ornate ones.

In the time since, Baccarat Rouge 540, as it's now known, has become one of the best-selling luxury fragrances in the world. It developed a cult following in the twenty-tens but only truly exploded in popularity in 2021, through the corner of TikTok known as PerfumeTok, and the "fragheads" who gather there to gush about scents. The "quiet luxury" trend was peaking at the time—"Succession" was in its third season—and influencers began to label Baccarat Rouge 540, 2.4 ounces of which costs three hundred and thirty-five dollars, a "rich-girl perfume."

The fragrance, nicknamed BR540, is divisive. Some reviewers consider it too pungent, or too pricey, or too ubiquitous at the gym. Others complain that it reminds them of Band-Aids, or the dentist's office. The scent is both revered and reviled for its powerful sillage—the trail a perfume leaves behind. A few people have claimed to be anosmic, or "noseblind," to Baccarat's synthetic components, and thus unable to smell it at all. But many have found its strange, sugar-simulacrum quality to be irresistible. N.B.A. and N.F.L. players wear it, along with Olivia Rodrigo and Kacey Musgraves. It has been referred to in rap songs (Meek Mill: "Smell the venom like Baccarat"); it inspired a plotline in the recent season of "Emily in Paris." Last year, when a *Vogue* reporter wore the perfume to a fashion show for Rihanna's Fenty line, the pop star, a noted scent connoisseur, allegedly paused to tell her, "You smell good."

On a weekend in June, I went with Kurkdjian to the South of France to visit the Château de la Colle Noire, the former country home of Christian Dior, which today functions as a private museum and a hub of the brand's fragrance marketing. The house sits on a hilltop near the town of Fayence, overlooking acres of flower fields. The region's rich soil and sunbaked climate provide the ideal growing conditions for tuberose, a tropical species that smells like ripe banana and marzipan; neroli, the florets of the bitter-orange

tree; *Jasminum grandiflorum*, a white blossom that's both feminine and funky, and even a bit fecal; and, most famously, *Rosa centifolia*, the pink, puffy blossoms better known as the cabbage rose or the May rose. The nearby town of Grasse is known for processing this local harvest into some of the most sought-after raw perfumery materials in the world. Dior, who once called himself "as much a parfumier as a couturier," hoped to retire to Colle Noire, in part to be near his younger sister, Catherine, who worked in the flower trade. Instead, he died suddenly, of a heart attack, in 1957, at the age of fifty-two, and the home was eventually sold. In 2013, Parfums Christian Dior—the L.V.M.H. company that produces all of Dior's perfumes, cosmetics, and skin-care items—bought it back and restored it to Monsieur Dior's specifications.

To prepare for our visit, the head of the château had spritzed the rooms of the house with various Dior scents. In the hexagonal entryway, the air smelled lightly of roses and musk, as if an elegant madame had passed through the space just before us. It was a fragrance called La Colle Noire, created in 2016 by Kurkdjian's predecessor at Dior, François Demachy, to celebrate the château's reopening. "Alors, this is not one of mine," Kurkdjian said, sniffing the air. He was wearing Dior sneakers, slim Dior jeans, and a hoodie with an embossed "CD" monogram. Kurkdjian wears all black when he's working for Dior; when working for his own company, all white. Like most perfumers, he never wears fragrance himself unless he is testing out a new creation.

Kurkdjian's interest in perfumery grew out of an obsession with fashion which dates back to his childhood, in the middle-class Parisian suburb of Gournay-sur-Marne. His paternal grandfather was a furrier in Anatolia who later worked in the French silk trade. His maternal grandfather was a tailor from northern Turkey who fled after the Armenian genocide and established a high-end alterations business in Paris. His mother, Sylvia Florette, was a skilled amateur sewer. "She was the most fashionable person," Kurkdjian recalled. "She wore Madame Rochas perfume, and she

would alter her own dresses every season to keep up with current styles.” Sylvia’s best friend had worked as a *modéliste*, or pattern-maker, in the Dior atelier in the nineteen-fifties, and would regale Kurkdjian with stories of her time there. “Dior, in our house, was like a celebrity,” Kurkdjian said. “It was ‘Mr. Dior opened the door of the elevator!’ ‘Mr. Dior sprayed Diorissimo in the salon!’ ” The family drove into central Paris every Sunday to attend services at the Armenian Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, around the corner from the posh shopping boulevard Avenue Montaigne. “I memorized the name and location of every couturier on the street—Ungaro, Nina Ricci, Jean-Louis Scherrer, Christian Dior,” Kurkdjian recalled. “You have to understand that I was not into fashion, like things you could buy. I was into *couturiers*.”

Kurkdjian was a disciplined child who set lofty standards for himself. He studied both ballet and classical piano. At twelve, and again at thirteen, he auditioned for the Paris Opera Ballet’s training program, and when he failed to earn a spot he abandoned his goal of becoming a professional dancer. He told me, “I remember reading a quote by Victor Hugo in literature class around this time. It said, ‘I will be Chateaubriand or nothing!’ That stuck in my mind.” Kurkdjian dreamed of becoming a fashion designer but knew that his drawing skills weren’t strong enough. At fourteen, he read an article in the style magazine *VSD* about perfumers such as Jean-Louis Sieuzac, who’d co-created Yves St. Laurent’s signature fragrance Opium. Shortly afterward, he saw the film “Le Sauvage,” starring Yves Montand as a swashbuckling perfumer who seduces Catherine Deneuve. “I realized that this was it,” he told me. “If I couldn’t *be* the couturier, I would work *with* the couturier as a perfumer.” He wrote two letters—one to Dior Parfums and one to Lancôme—inquiring how a person might get into the business. An executive at Lancôme sent back a note with the address for the Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l’Aromatique Alimentaire (*ISIPCA*), in Versailles, one of the few formal perfumery schools in Europe at the time.



m.e. mcnair
“Everyone prefers apple picking to potato digging.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

In his first year of the program, in 1990, Kurkdjian learned how to inhale like a perfumer—fast and soft, he told me, “taking in just the smallest amount of air so that you don’t saturate your brain.”

Students were taught to identify thousands of ingredients only by scent, from natural essences to synthetic aromachemicals.

Kurkdjian recalled one exercise in which he was blindfolded and given a taste of strawberry yogurt sprinkled with salt. “For some reason, with that combination, your brain explodes,” he said. The students eventually began making their own fragrance blends, known in the business as accords. “The day I made my first lily-of-the-valley accord, I thought I was a god,” Kurkdjian told me.

“Because you have the power of creation. It is not possible to distill the lily of the valley into a natural essence, because the flower is too delicate. But take four raw materials—one smelling of fresh-cut grass, one smelling almondy, one smelling like cheap lavender, and one like rotten teeth—and you can.”

There is no way to experience the smell of, say, the original Miss Dior, the house’s first perfume, from 1947. Perfumes begin to oxidize and decay the moment a bottle is opened; through the decades, they become warped echoes of their former selves. At the private Dior archives, in Paris, an archivist showed me several old bottles of Dior’s most prized perfumes—including Diorama,

Dioressence, Diorella, and a bottle of Miss Dior that was shaped like Christian Dior's beloved dog Bobby—but told me not to bother smelling what was inside.

Re-creating old scents is similarly impossible. Many ingredients that were once commonly used in fragrances have been phased out by industry regulators. Animal excretions such as deer musk; castoreum, from beavers; and civet, from the perineal glands of a mammal of the same name, are no longer considered humane. Other materials have been restricted because of health risks or allergies, among them hydroxycitronellal, a synthetic chemical that smells like lily of the valley and was a major component of the original Diorissimo, from 1956, which many experts consider the house's masterpiece. Kurkdjian believes that there's been a certain muddling of the stories behind Dior perfumes as they've been reformulated to keep up with regulatory changes—a game of olfactory telephone. "There are too many gossips, too much marketing over the years," he told me. When pitching himself for the job at Dior, he submitted a memo outlining his vision for making over the house's major scents one by one, and quoted a line attributed to Christian Dior: "Respect tradition and dare to be insolent because one cannot go without the other."

Developing a new version of Miss Dior for release this past spring, Kurkdjian treated the original scent as a "cold case," hiring outside researchers to find documents related to its creation and poring over archival letters between Dior and his sister, looking for clues to the designer's original intentions. Dior had written that he wanted the scent to evoke Provence evenings "where green jasmine serves as a counterpoint to the melody of the night and the earth." But any jasmine notes in the original formula had fallen out over the years, so Kurkdjian worked for months to infuse the flower into the mix. The new scent, sprayed in La Colle Noire's "grand salon," smells to the lay nose a lot like the previous Miss Dior (sweet and fruity, like a cosmopolitan), but with subtle undercurrents of jasmine and tangerine.

At noon, we were served lunch under a portico, at a table set with Louis XIII-style goblets and plates marked with “the personal logo of Christian Dior,” a staff member told me. (In his French accent, the name sounded just like “Kissinger.”) It was raining and buggy out, so a server in formal wear presented an aerosol can of insect repellent over his arm, like a bottle of wine, and encouraged us to spritz our pulse points. A fragrant menu—shaved truffles, lamb with “thyme juice,” fresh fruit with peach-verbena syrup—had to compete with the smell of the bug spray and with wafts of American Spirits, which Kurkdjian smoked one after the other without regard for his nasal passages. As we ate, he told me that he admired not only Dior’s artistry but also his brazen entrepreneurialism. “From Day One, he added perfumes, and licensed his name for stockings, and ties, and housewares. It was such a modern vision,” he said. Perfumery is a business as much as it is an art form, Kurkdjian added: “I’m a merchant—a merchant of emotions, but a merchant all the same.”

Fragrances are among the most important moneymakers for a designer brand: there are many more consumers who can spend a hundred dollars on a bottle of J’Adore than ones who can afford a Dior suit or handbag. According to industry analysts, the global luxury-perfume market was worth \$12.6 billion in 2023, and is expected to swell to more than twenty billion by 2032. Of some seventy luxury brands owned by L.V.M.H.—among them such juggernauts as Louis Vuitton, Sephora, and Tiffany—Parfums Christian Dior is, according to *Bloomberg Businessweek*, the fifth most valuable, having earned a reported \$4.5 billion in revenue last year. Kurkdjian told me he was aware that he’d been charged with making “the best-selling perfumes in the world,” then knocked on his head as if knocking on wood and added, “You have to understand that anything less is considered, for us, a failure.”

After lunch, the head of the château walked us through the estate’s lush grounds, pointing out a pair of albino peacocks and a small historical chapel, for which Kurkdjian had recently created a

special perfume redolent of incense and labdanum. At one point, Kurkdjian wandered off on his own. He returned a few minutes later with a floppy pink rose. “I found the last one—a May rose in June!” he said, then sniffed the flower and shoved it carelessly into his front pocket. “Too green,” he declared. “Like a rotting cucumber.”

The French perfume business dates back to the Renaissance, when Grasse was France’s leading producer of fine leather goods. The town’s tanneries were notoriously foul-smelling, so leather-makers, to avoid offending the noses of aristocratic customers, began to infuse their wares with floral essences. Ever since, French perfumery has been a high-end service profession passed down from generation to generation. The perfumer believed to have made scents for Marie Antoinette, Jean-Louis Fargeon, descended from a long line of apothecaries. The venerated French fragrance house Guerlain, one of the country’s oldest, remained a family business, serving both European and American royalty (Jacqueline Onassis allegedly wore the brand’s scent Jicky), until 1994, when it was subsumed into L.V.M.H.

Kurkdjian lacked the usual pedigree for a path in luxury fragrance. “I am French, but also not. I do not come from Grasse, and I have a weird last name,” he said. Many graduates of perfume school go on to careers not in haute parfumerie but in “home care” or “personal care,” scenting laundry detergents or shampoos. Kurkdjian’s best friend from school, Valérie Garnuch-Menzel, a native of a tiny town in northeastern France who now works largely in personal care in Germany, told me that the two bonded over being the outsiders in their class, but added, “Francis always had *l’amour du luxe, l’amour du beau.*” She went on, “I am happy to see my stuff in Duane Reade. I knew he was there to be something special.”

Designer perfumes are typically not made in-house. Fashion companies license their names to beauty conglomerates that solicit scents from third-party fragrance firms. After school, Kurkdjian got

a job working in the Paris offices of one such firm, Quest International—but only by agreeing to work in home care. His first task as a trainee was to prove that he could reverse engineer popular scents on the market from scratch, without using chemical-analysis machines. He chose to copy Bulgari's Thé Vert, a grassy green-tea perfume created in 1992 by the veteran fragrance-maker Jean-Claude Ellena, who later became the first in-house perfumer for Hermès. Kurkdjian's knockoff was so accurate that his bosses let him start apprenticing in the fine-fragrance department. But his first professional breakthrough came from outside the firm. His father, who worked in I.T. consulting, had paid for him to take an evening course at the Sup de Luxe, a luxury-goods marketing school run by the jewelry company Cartier. At a graduation reception, Kurkdjian met Chantal Roos, who'd run Y.S.L.'s perfumery program in the seventies and remained one of the most powerful figures in designer fragrances. Roos, by then an executive at the global corporation Beauté Prestige, gave Kurkdjian her card and told him to call her office. A month later, at their first meeting, she said that she had just begun working with the designer Jean Paul Gaultier, who was looking for a new men's cologne. She gave Kurkdjian the brief—a memo for fragrance firms describing the concept for a scent—and told him to come back in three weeks with samples.

At the time, Gaultier was considered an enfant terrible of the fashion industry; his signatures included a “trash-bag dress” and the bondage-inspired cone bras worn by Madonna. Kurkdjian, envisioning a shirtless man emerging from the ocean, softened the formula of a classic *fougère*—an herbaceous composition common to men's colognes—with sultry hints of vanilla. He brought a sample to Roos, figuring that she might give him pointers and send him on his way. Instead, six months later, Beauté Prestige announced that Kurkdjian, a twenty-five-year-old junior perfumer, was the creator of a new Gaultier fragrance called Le Male.

Kurkdjian's euphoria wore off a bit when he saw the bottle design: a male torso, complete with a kinky choker and a sculpted butt and bulge. The over-all effect was decapitated leather daddy. The bottle was held not in a box but in an oversized aluminum can. "I was, like, 'It's not luxury,'" Kurkdjian recalled, with a sigh. "I wanted the big, crafted couture box, with embossed gold." The scent itself, though, was appreciated for its subtlety. The big colognes of the eighties—Davidoff's Cool Water, Guy LaRoche's Drakkar Noir—had been overpowering and astringent, full of macho bombast. Le Male seemed to speak to a more eclectic and perhaps more secure expression of masculinity; one critic dubbed it a "defining metrosexual fragrance." Within a year, it became a top-selling men's scent in Europe.

By then, Kurkdjian had been transferred to Quest's newly opened satellite office in New York. The move was presented to him as a promotion, but he suspected that he was being punished for his success. "My colleagues were super jealous, so they sent me away," he told me, with a flick of his hand. Kurkdjian did not speak English when he arrived in New York, and he remembers feeling unmoored. He landed a few projects, including an Axe body spray, called Lynx ("I will say, I nailed that," he said), and Elizabeth Arden's Green Tea, inspired by the matcha ice cream at a Japanese restaurant across the street from the Quest offices where he would eat lunch. But he found the American market inhospitable to creativity. "In France, perfumers are allowed to have what we call *fulgurance*, or lightning flashes of inspiration," he told me. "But in the mid-nineties, in the U.S., you got a bunch of marketing briefs, where you were told something like 'So, there is a high-income Wasp living in Baltimore, driving this type of car and playing tennis, and can you create the perfume of that?'"

He threatened to quit Quest if he couldn't transfer back to Paris. When he did return, in 2000, he went part time and started taking additional perfume clients on the side. A few years later, after a string of successes at Quest, including two scents for Dior's smaller

Privée line, he left for a more flexible job consulting for the Japanese firm Takasago. In his private work, he developed a specialty in high-profile one-offs, including a re-creation of Marie Antoinette’s signature scent for the Palace of Versailles. (In Marie Antoinette’s time, Kurkdjian said, “Hygiene was not something very French”; the Dauphine, an Austrian, was a pioneer of smelling good.) He made “bespoke fragrances” for private clients—at a starting price of more than ten thousand dollars for two ounces—including Catherine Deneuve, who enlisted him to re-create the scent of a beloved but discontinued perfume. He collaborated with the French artist Sophie Calle on a scent meant to evoke an old dollar bill. He also developed a knack for aromatic spectacle: in 2007, for the French Ministry of Culture’s holiday party, he decorated a giant Christmas tree with hundreds of glass baubles and infused the room with a scent of “frosty rose.”

In the early two-thousands, designer fragrances had been in something of a rut. Celebrity scents like Britney Spears’s Fantasy and Jennifer Lopez’s Glow dominated the market. Ann Gottlieb, a leading perfume consultant who helped launch such American scents as Obsession and CK1, told me that the industry as a whole had become “risk-averse and boring.” To fill the void, fragrance buyers began taking chances on independent, so-called niche perfume brands. In 2000, the veteran fragrance executive Frédéric Malle (whose grandfather Serge Heftler-Louiche was the founder of Parfums Christian Dior) launched a small fragrance house called Editions de Parfums Frédéric Malle—and, in an unusual move, printed the names of his perfumers directly on the bottles. The rise of other niche brands was closely tied to social media. In the twenty-tens, companies such as Le Labo, Byredo, and DS & Durga became cult sensations for their Instagram-friendly packaging and slightly off-kilter fragrances. They were given a boost by the advent of Web sites like Fragrantica, where users could rank perfumes and leave reviews, and by “sampling” sites, like Luckyscent and Surrender to Chance, which sold vials of indie

perfumes for a few dollars apiece. According to Michael Edwards, a perfume historian and the author of the reference book “Fragrances of the World,” more than twelve thousand niche scents were launched between 2000 and 2020.

Kurkdjian saw an opportunity to create his own line. He founded Maison Francis Kurkdjian (M.F.K.) with his business partner, the Parisian financier Marc Chaya, in 2009, and contracted Takasago, for whom he still consulted, to manufacture the perfumes. Most niche brands were started by entrepreneurs, not perfumers, and they contracted out the creation of scents in much the same way that bigger fashion houses did. Chaya said that, in contrast, he and Kurkdjian wanted to model their company on Guerlain in its heyday, when perfumers were “in their own houses.” Kurkdjian told me that his father, Mihran, who went by Pierre, advised him against giving the brand his own name: “He always dropped the second ‘k’ from our last name professionally, because he thought phonetically it was easier. But I said to him, ‘Papa, if Karl Lagerfeld can make it, I can.’ ”

Among the brand’s first releases were a few challenging scents that divided fragrance bloggers—including the elevator-clearing Absolue Pour le Soir, which had notes of cumin and wet animal fur—but also crowd-pleasers such as Lumière Noire, a rose-and-patchouli-scented homage to Catherine Deneuve, and Aqua Universalis, a citrusy cologne that has been a best-seller ever since. When L.V.M.H. approached Kurkdjian to buy M.F.K., in 2015, the line was still tiny but was growing fast; that year, according to *Women’s Wear Daily*, it brought in twenty-five million dollars, up forty per cent from the year before. Other niche fragrance companies were being bought up by conglomerates—Estée Lauder had bought Le Labo in 2014, and Frédéric Malle the following year—but Kurkdjian agonized for two years before selling. Being part of L.V.M.H. ultimately appealed to him, in part, because it meant proximity to other luxury brands under the company’s umbrella—including Dior.

In the fall of 2020, amid rumors that François Demachy might be preparing to retire, Kurkdjian received a phone call from a senior executive at L.V.M.H., asking to discuss Parfums Christian Dior. “I told myself, ‘This is it, Francis, Dior is going to hire you. This must be the call!’” he said. Instead, the executive told Kurkdjian that Dior was about to hire another perfumer to replace Demachy, and asked what Kurkdjian, as a member of the “L.V.M.H. family,” thought of the pick. (Of his disappointment in that moment, he told me, “I remember that call so clearly, the way I remember where I was when Princess Diana died.”) But a few weeks later L.V.M.H. tapped the designer in charge of Dior’s menswear line to run womenswear at Fendi, too. The next morning, Kurkdjian sent a four-line e-mail to the executive, proposing a similar dual arrangement, in which he would continue running M.F.K. while also taking over as the creative director for Parfums Christian Dior. He told me, “When I was a young perfumer, I had to push open all the doors myself. But here I was, expecting them to come ask me? I said, ‘Francis, you have to jump.’ I remembered my *audacité*. ”

Compared with the rococo headquarters of Dior Couture, on Avenue Montaigne, the offices of Parfums Christian Dior, in a blocky glass tower in the suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine, are blandly clinical. The lobby is white and lacquered, like the waiting room of a high-end Botox practice. Most of the building is given over to the company’s sprawling cosmetics operation—makeup, skin care, sunscreen. The fragrance “creation studio”—Kurkdjian’s domain—occupies part of the second floor, and includes a small perfume laboratory. When I visited early one morning, four technicians in white lab coats were sitting in a diamond formation at individual fragrance-mixing stations, each outfitted with a scale, dozens of small glass vials, plastic pipettes, and squeeze bottles of high-proof perfumer’s alcohol.

Kurkdjian’s policies as head of the department reflect both a persnickety attention to detail and an obsession with creative autonomy. When he took over the job, he did away with the market

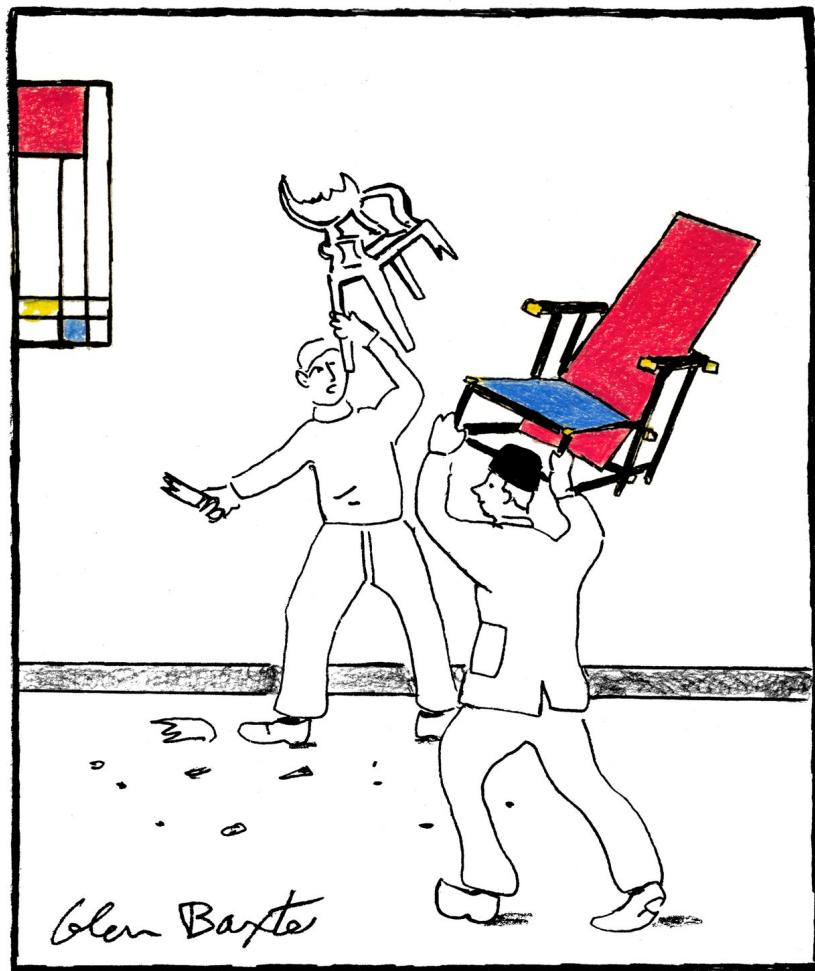
testing of fragrances and banned the word “nose.” He designed custom *mouillettes*—the long white paper strips used for smelling perfume—embossed with the Dior logo, with tapered ends fitted to lab bottles; he prefers dipping to spraying. He writes formulas but doesn’t work in the laboratory—“I have chemists for that,” he told me. Instead, he assesses samples once or twice a week, fanning *mouillettes* out in his hand, like the feathers of a peacock tail, and sniffing them one by one.

One recent project was a spinoff of the Dior cologne Sauvage. Originally formulated by Demachy, in 2015, Sauvage—redolent of dried lavender, cedar, and Sichuan peppercorns—is based on “the American West,” or, at least, a French perfumer’s idea of it. (Its ad campaigns typically feature Johnny Depp, the scent’s longtime celebrity spokesperson, standing in the wilderness wearing lots of chunky jewelry and playing an electric guitar.) For the past two years, the original Sauvage has been the top-selling fragrance in the world. Kurkdjian’s new version, Sauvage Eau Forte, released in August, is the fifth scent in the collection, which has also spawned a shower gel, an anti-aging serum, a deodorant, and a body mist called Sauvage Very Cool Spray. Reduxes of existing fragrances are known in the business as “flankers.” Like sequels to blockbusters churned out by movie studios, they help to burnish the franchise and to keep its fans spending. The bigger and riskier undertaking is a “pillar,” a brand-new scent, which can take years to develop and millions of marketing dollars to launch. Dior’s most recent pillar, Joy, was released in 2018, before Kurkdjian’s time, and was, as he frankly put it, “not the success that the house expected.” Kurkdjian said that he had no immediate plans to develop a pillar of his own, but Michael Edwards, the perfume expert, told me that he believes Dior is overdue. Of flankers, Edwards said, “You can only keep flogging a horse for so long.”

At 9 A.M., Kurkdjian met in a conference room with Julie Legrand, the brand’s director of haute parfumerie, and Kevin Séchaud, the

Dior Parfums marketing director, to smell samples of Sauvage Eau Forte.

Kurkdjian said, by way of introducing Séchaud, “He takes care of Natalie Portman and Rihanna.” The former has been the face of Miss Dior for more than a decade; the latter is the newly appointed face of J’Adore.



THE ENDURING QUALITIES OF DUTCH DESIGN ARE PUT TO THE TEST

Cartoon by Glen Baxter

Legrand extended her hand to me and said, deadpan, “I only take care of flowers.”

Sauvage Eau Forte, based around an accord of “bleached lavender,” is a bit softer and less spicy than the original, but the bigger

difference is the consistency of the “juice.” The liquid inside the bottles, on a conference table in front of us, looked opaque and white, like skim milk. Perfumes are typically made of essences suspended in an alcohol solution. This one used a “proprietary Dior technology” to emulsify the aromachemicals in water, “like a vinaigrette,” Kurkdjian explained. Instead of evaporating immediately, as alcohol does, the perfume clings to the skin like the mist on heads of lettuce at the grocery store. (When the scent was released, some TikTokers noted that its lactic hue and sticky residue brought another substance to mind.)

Kurkdjian has focussed his more experimental efforts on Dior’s Privée collection, which was launched, in 2004, as the house’s answer to the niche boom. At the end of the meeting, he pulled out a vial of a Privée scent he’d been working on, dipped a *mouillette*, and handed it to me. It smelled of honey and bonfire, cut through with a bright note of snap-pea green.

“There’s something dirty at the beginning, and quite sexy, like cold tobacco,” Legrand said, sniffing from her own *mouillette*. “It’s like you’re picking up someone else’s leather jacket.”

Kurkdjian nodded his head gently, but he later told me that he wasn’t yet happy with the formula. He brought up his admiration for Edmond Roudnitska, the late perfumer who made many of Dior’s classics, including Diorissimo and Diorella. Roudnitska, who died in 1996, was notoriously uncompromising; throughout a six-decade career, he signed his name to a total of twenty-two perfumes, according to Fragrantica. Kurkdjian, in a far more accelerated industry, has already made two hundred and forty-eight. “I have deadlines,” he told me. But, he added, “for me, a perfume is never done.”

Trends on TikTok tend to erupt suddenly and dissipate just as fast. “Rich-girl perfume” is now on the way out, having been supplanted by a mania for kitschy gourmands. In the past two years, the pop

star Sabrina Carpenter has released fragrances, under a line called Sweet Tooth, that mimic the aromas of cotton candy, caramel gelato, and cherry pie. (She has yet to put out an espresso-themed scent, but one has to assume that it is forthcoming.) Last month, the fast-food chain Auntie Anne's released a salted-pretzel-scented perfume that sold out in ten minutes. The same week, the Tennessee Titans quarterback Will Levis announced that he was partnering with Hellman's to create Parfum de Mayonnaise.

Baccarat Rouge 540 is still popular on the platform, but fragheads now debate whether it's worth the price tag and discuss the many "dutes" available on the lower-end market—including one released by Target earlier this year called, somewhat shamelessly, the New Rouge (\$36.99 for two ounces). Amateur olfactory sleuths have identified dozens of less obviously derivative scents that smell suspiciously similar to Baccarat, including Ariana Grande's 2018 perfume Cloud (forty-eight dollars per ounce at Sephora). Legally, a scent is considered an "application of technical knowledge" rather than an original creation, and thus can't be copyrighted. Kurkdjian lamented that the industry has "few ethics" around intellectual property but added, "My obsession is not being copied. My obsession is to think about the next Rouge."

Edwards, the perfume expert, told me that Baccarat will ultimately prove noteworthy less for its unusual scent profile than for its viral path to fame. "It's a woody amber with a gourmand twist—Angel pioneered that," he said, referring to the hit Mugler fragrance from 1992. Of Baccarat's success, he noted, "It's a very good fragrance, but at the end of the day it was out of Francis's hands." Maison Francis Kurkdjian recently released a new scent, *APOM*—for A Part of Me—a clean-smelling yellow floral that seems unlikely to polarize fragrance fans. With a pragmatism that Monsieur Dior might have appreciated, M.F.K. has also branched out into laundry detergent, fabric softener, and scented candles with fragrances reminiscent of things from Kurkdjian's childhood, such as his grandmother's rose-petal jam. (In general, he finds

autobiographical scents to be “vulgar,” he told me, but he makes an exception for home goods.)

The day after visiting the Dior lab, I met Kurkdjian at an outdoor brasserie in the Tuileries Garden. It was a gray, muggy day, and just as I arrived it began to pour. Sitting down at a corner table, Kurkdjian popped open a large umbrella and suggested that we wait it out; Paris showers never last too long. In a smooth, dancerly sequence, he lit a cigarette with one hand and gestured at a waiter with another. He ordered a bottle of mineral water and a white-truffle pizza for us to share. It was our first conversation alone, and Kurkdjian seemed more relaxed. He now lives in Montmartre with a long-term partner, but he explained that he hadn’t come out to his family until the age of thirty-five. “I was totally disoriented, because you find out your sexuality, but no one talks about it in a Middle Eastern family,” he said. “The first time I kissed a guy, I thought I was going to get H.I.V.!” Kurkdjian was wearing another head-to-toe Dior outfit in dark colors, but his mind was on his own company. In two days, M.F.K. would have the soft opening of its third and largest retail location in Paris, catty-corner from the Dior store on Avenue Montaigne.

We’d hoped to visit the new outpost during the opening, but Dior executives had insisted that we tour La Galerie Dior, the brand’s archival museum, instead. The fashion house seemed glad to spotlight its head perfumer, so long as the focus remained on Dior. The pushback reminded me of something Kurkdjian had said to me in an earlier conversation, about the “myth that the perfumer is free.” At Dior, as at Quest, he was beholden to the priorities of a big company, though this time he was frank about the fact that he didn’t exactly need the job. At La Colle Noire, he’d told me, with a hint of the insolence that Christian Dior endorsed, “You know, I’m very happy—I’m fine, but my life goes before Dior, and maybe after.”

M.F.K.'s flagship shop was a few blocks away, just off Rue Saint-Honoré, so we decided to make an impromptu stop there after lunch. When we arrived, we found a short queue of people waiting outside. We squeezed our way past an American woman in a T-shirt and black leggings. "Hey!" she said. "We're all in line here!" Kurkdjian just shook his head and laughed politely. Inside the shop, a jumbo bottle of Baccarat Rouge 540, as big and blocky as a French bulldog, sat on a tall pedestal. A trio of women stood in front of glass display shelves, dousing themselves in Baccarat hair mist. Kurkdjian asked the employee working the till how things had been going that day. She said that an N.F.L. player had come in and purchased a large bottle of Rouge *extrait*, a more concentrated and expensive version of the scent.

Kurkdjian had to run to another appointment, so he soon gave me two air kisses and left. A few minutes later, I noticed the same American woman waiting in the store's checkout line, clutching a bottle of Baccarat. As she approached the counter, she looked above the register, where a large portrait photograph of Kurkdjian hung on the wall. Even with his name on the bottle, a perfumer has to work to make his presence known. "Oh, gosh!" the woman said. "That was the guy." ♦



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Bowen Yang Is Sorry He's Not Your Clown Today

The comedian's trip to Oz, by way of conversion therapy and "S.N.L."

By [Michael Schulman](#) Photography by [Ryan McGinley](#)

September 16, 2024

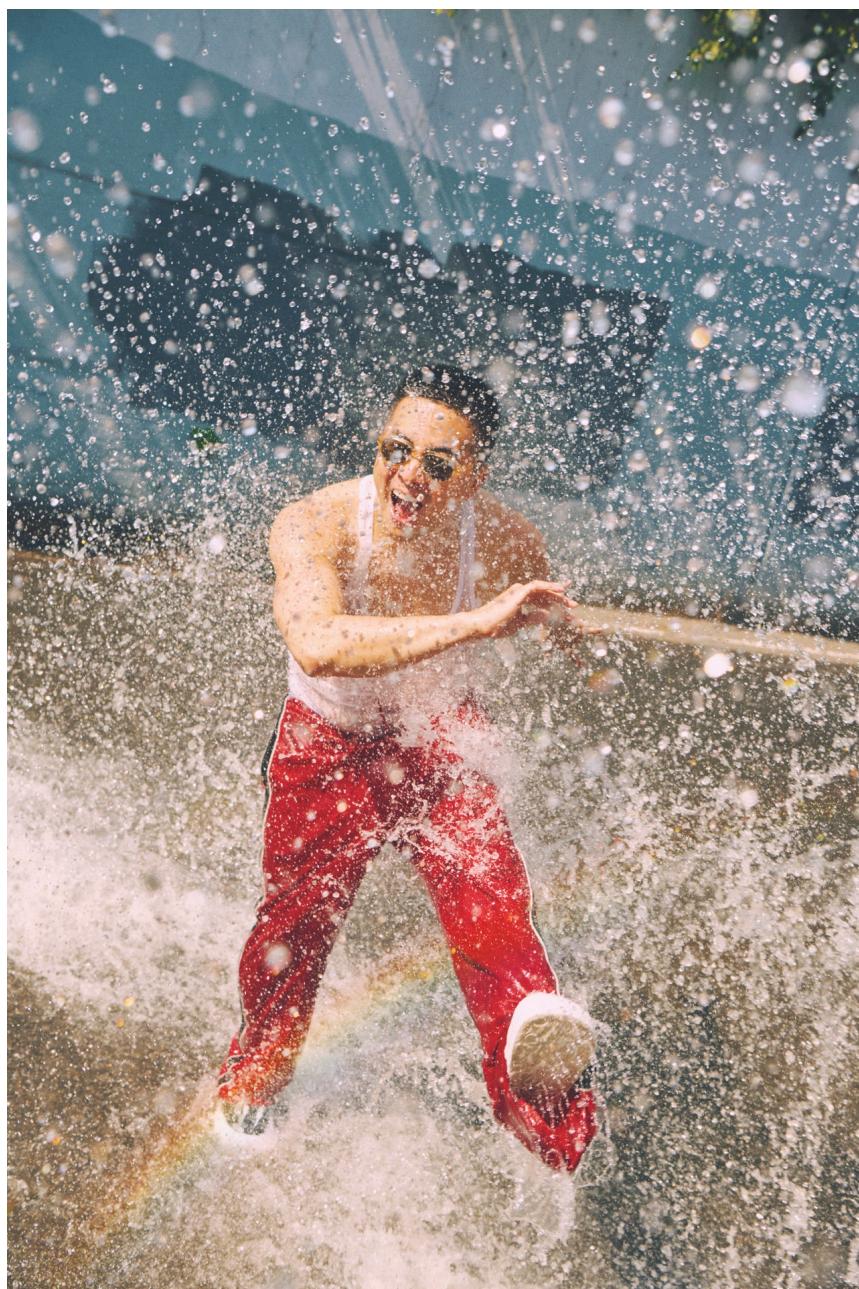


While Yang was filming "Wicked," he'd Google himself and feel like he was reading about someone else. "I was having dissociative episodes, completely detached from any sense of self," he said. Jacket by DSquared2; Shirt by AZ Vintage; Shorts by Relax Lacrosse; Bike Shorts by District Vision; Shoes by SYRO

At some point last summer, Bowen Yang lost his grip on who he was. For months, he'd been flying back and forth between New York, where he's in the cast of "Saturday Night Live," and London, where he was shooting the movie musical "Wicked," playing a snarky schoolmate of Glinda the Good Witch. Lorne Michaels, his boss at "S.N.L.," had warned him about the exhausting schedule. "I have my nootropics for focus, and I have my CBD oils for sleep. I can really overcome this," Yang recalled thinking. "And I didn't, and I couldn't."

During "Wicked," he'd spend hours getting into his elaborate costume, makeup, and toupee. Sometimes he'd sit in his trailer all

day without being called to set once—standard procedure for a big-budget movie, but the jet lag and the tedium wore him down. “It was a gradual accumulation of idling, getting dressed up with nowhere to go, feeling like it was sanding down whatever I had preserved from the week before at ‘S.N.L.’—whatever was left over of my psychic tolerance,” he said. He started telling himself that the good things in his life had been flukes, that his success had all been a terrible mistake. He wondered whether residual trauma was surfacing from his teen years, when his parents sent him to gay-conversion therapy.



Yang's laid-back cool belies his capacity for comic exuberance. His cranky, ranting "Weekend Update" characters include the haughty iceberg that sank the Titanic, a queeny Jafar, and a "proud gay Oompa Loompa."

Shirt, Pants and Shoes by Loewe; Glasses by Vada

In London, he was staying in King's Cross, isolated in a hotel without his castmates. "This cannot sound anything but name-droppy," he told me, "but [Ariana Grande](#)"—who plays Glinda—"was reaching out and going, 'Are you O.K.? Come over! Let's just watch a movie. Let's get you better.' She was there for me in a true way." Grande told me that although she found Yang's double duty "badass and incredible," it was "also a little worrisome. I understand what it feels like to travel back and forth so often and then have to perform the next day, with no time for your body or mind to figure out what's going on, and it is incredibly hard and unusual. So I just wanted to make sure he had an ear and a hug and the support he needed." It was not lost on Yang that the Good Witch of the North was trying to guide him home, showing him that he had the power he needed within himself all along.

But he kept feeling worse. "I was so stitched together at that point with spit and tape," he said. On a break from filming, he flew to Amsterdam, and his friend [Cole Escola](#), now the writer and star of the Broadway comedy "Oh, Mary!," came to meet him. "He just seemed a little down and embarrassed about feeling down, in this way that I really relate to," Escola said. "Like, 'Sorry I'm not your clown today.'" They walked around Amsterdam and saw "Les Misérables" in Dutch. ("It's a very phlegm-forward language," Escola said. "An ugly language for song.")

Yang's low point was in June, back in New York, where his funk turned nightmarish. He was at a Pride party at a Brooklyn club, on Ecstasy and cocaine. "The chemical-neurological things that were going on in the biomass of a gay crowd were just out of a horror movie," he recalled. Fans mobbed him on the way to the men's room, and to him they looked like marauding zombies. "It was beyond being recognized—that's something I can handle," he said.

“It was the enclosure of people not letting me get to the place I needed to go. I felt terrified.” He was losing track of time and space, stuck in a disorienting dream world. Back in London, he’d Google himself and feel like he was reading about someone else. “I was having dissociative episodes, completely detached from any sense of self,” he said.

Finally, while searching his symptoms online, he came across the term “depersonalization,” a condition in which you feel unmoored from your body and psyche. He Zoomed with his shrink, who said that sounded about right. He binged self-help books; one had a line about how “we stare out at reality through a highly unreliable and distorted pane of glass,” which he copied into his phone. “I was, like, I really need to get to the root of this problem, which is: Who are you? Really, who are you?”

He called Matt Rogers, his best friend since college, and said he needed time off from the hit pop-culture podcast they host together, “Las Culturistas.” “I knew something was not right,” Rogers said. “He didn’t have any objectivity on what was happening.” Yang announced his hiatus from “Las Culturistas” on Instagram, and suddenly he was reading about his depersonalization on Page Six—which only magnified the problem.

In July, the actors’ strike shut down “Wicked,” and Yang returned to New York. With “S.N.L.” on summer break, he struggled to operate without any structure. He read more books and switched his anti-anxiety meds to antidepressants. After a few weeks, he was out of the “crucible”; having relocated his “anchor points,” he went back to “Las Culturistas.” In October, he started a new season of “S.N.L.” “It was a slow dial back to being seen,” he said, nearly a year after his journey to the dark side. Then he added, “Maybe I’m still in it.”

Yang, who is thirty-three, was telling this story in a hotel lobby in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, not far from his apartment. He wore a

denim jacket adorned with the Hello Kitty frog character Keroppi, a gift from his “S.N.L.” castmate Sarah Sherman. It was April, an off week at “S.N.L.,” and Yang was practicing self-care: taking bubble baths, listening to music, and playing a soothing video game called Unpacking, in which you unbox a character’s belongings into different homes. “I’m really trying to not lean on weed,” he said.

Yang has a laid-back, vocal-fried cool that belies his capacity for both self-explosion and comic exuberance. As a guest at “S.N.L.”’s “Weekend Update” desk, he’s played a string of ranting, cranky characters: a preening Chinese trade minister (“I’m the top tariff taskmaster”), a queeny Jafar (“Of course I’m gay, you petulant fool!”), and a “proud gay Oompa Loompa.” “You watch him and you don’t know quite what he’s going to do,” Lorne Michaels told me, comparing Yang’s take on the ex-congressman George Santos to Dana Carvey’s impression of George H. W. Bush: “There’s a point where it becomes officially recognized as how that person talks and thinks.” This year, Yang was the sole member of the company to be nominated for an Emmy.

He was cast on “S.N.L.” in 2019, after a year in the writers’ room, and became the show’s first Chinese American performer and its third out gay man. The fun-house effects of fame came instantaneously. Hours after the announcement, old footage circulated of another new cast member, [Shane Gillis](#), making homophobic jokes and using an Asian slur on a podcast. Gillis issued a quasi-apology (“I’m happy to apologize to anyone who’s actually offended by anything I said”) and was fired within days. Yang watched himself become part of the online discourse, feeling “incidental to this big national story about cancel culture,” he said.

Then, when his first season as a cast member started, he became a breakout star. There were the inevitable Asian-in-the-news roles (Andrew Yang, Kim Jong Un), but Yang, with his resting glower and pop-diva flair, brought a new flavor to the show. “ ‘S.N.L.’

really leans into the idea of types,” the comedian and former “S.N.L.” writer [Julio Torres](#) said. “But every now and then someone who is not one of the existing types comes along, and that is Bowen.” In 2021, Yang played the iceberg that sank the Titanic, anthropomorphized as a scandal-plagued pop star trying to promote an album. (“I think my publicist was very clear: I’m not here to talk about the sinking.”) “After a while, you forget that it’s an iceberg talking, because it’s all so personal to him,” Michaels said.

When I met Yang, he was feeling good about his fifth season on air. After years of working within a “queer sensibility,” he said, “I realized that I built the wheelhouse in the beginning, and this was going to be the perfect time to raze it.” He pointed to a sketch from March, called “Bowen’s Straight,” in which Yang reveals that he only plays gay for laughs and is in fact a womanizer, who seduces that week’s host, Sydney Sweeney. “I hope this is not the Stockholm syndrome talking,” he said, of the show, “but it is still a great place to work.”

The season had had its thorny moments. In January, Dave Chappelle, under fire for telling transphobic jokes on his Netflix special, leaped onstage as the cast was waving good night. Yang lurked on the far end of the set, looking surly. “I was just uncomfortable on other people’s behalf,” he said. “It wasn’t this big protest.” The next month, Gillis, who has acquired an anti-P.C. following since he was fired, returned to “S.N.L.” as a host. Both times, social media dissected Yang’s body language and extrapolated his discomfort. Again, he felt like a character in a culture-war pageant: the “woke scold.” “It’s taught me about my place on the show being kind of strange and unique,” he said. “I never expected to be a Nora Dunn being furious that an Andrew Dice Clay is there.” (In 1990, Dunn, a cast member, left the show after Clay, a comic with the persona of a misogynist lout, hosted.) He said that he’s learned to distinguish between the show and “what people say about the show.”



"I know it's the eighteen-eighties and all, but I still feel like an idiot."

Cartoon by Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby

Meanwhile, he'd been reckoning with the impact of his newfound fame on "Las Culturistas." When the podcast began, in 2016, he and Rogers were unknowns expounding on pop stars, Real Housewives, and Grindr hookups. In their signature segment, "I Don't Think So, Honey," each would vent for a minute about something bugging him: chatty Lyft drivers, Mark Wahlberg. As both rose from obscure culture vultures to industry players, their gripes turned to more rarefied subjects, like red-carpet anxiety. In February, after they shared their unvarnished opinions of Oscar-season films, Tina Fey came on as a guest and dropped a truth bomb: "I don't think so, honey: Bowen Yang giving his real opinions about movies on this podcast. I regret to inform you that you are too famous now, sir. What's going to happen? Are you having a problem with 'Saltburn'? Sh-h-h. Quiet luxury." She concluded, "Authenticity is dangerous and expensive." The admonition went viral.

Months later, Yang was still grappling with it. "To hear that from her directly—and to hear that directed at *me*, was so jarring, in the best way," he said. On a recent episode, he'd raved about Taylor Swift's tepidly received new album, "[The Tortured Poets Department](#)," and listeners were accusing him of boosterism. Was it possible to critique pop culture while being a fixture in it? "For

some reason, we're trying to have it both ways," he said. "And maybe we can't."

An hour before airtime one Saturday night, Yang sat in his dressing room at "S.N.L.," a takeout container of half-eaten sushi by the mirror, a "Female Trouble" poster on the wall. It was the Mother's Day episode, and Yang's mother, Meng, was there to join him for the traditional cold-open promenade of performers and their moms. At dress rehearsal, she'd stumbled over a joke about Tom Brady being her "hall pass." "They gave me more lines than last time," she fretted.

"You'll do a great job," Yang reassured her. "We'll practice it."

Meng, who worked in medical diagnostics until she retired, was unfamiliar with "S.N.L." when Yang started there, but her colleagues informed her that it was a huge deal. "I learned from them how big this production is, and how popular," she said, as Yang texted with a writer about a soon to be axed sketch. "He never gave up. Very proud of him."

The Yang family's journey from China to 30 Rock is a tale of generational whiplash. Yang's father, Ruilin, comes from an area of Inner Mongolia so remote that it didn't get electricity until the nineties. Ruilin's mother had bound feet; the custom had been banned ten years before her birth, but the news hadn't reached her rural location. "Even in China, people would stop and stare at my grandmother," Yang's older sister, whose first name is also Yang, told me. "My dad's parents died not knowing how to write their own names." Bowen and his sister grew up inundated with tales of their father's determination. "He would read by candlelight every single night and almost went blind from the strain, or whatever," Bowen said.

Meng grew up in Shenyang, the provincial capital of Liaoning, in northeast China. As a teen-ager during the Cultural Revolution, she

was relocated to the countryside for two and a half years of physical labor, then went to medical school and returned to her home town to become an obstetrician. There she met Ruilin, who was training as an engineer. In 1986, they moved to Brisbane, Australia, where Ruilin got a doctorate in explosives engineering. Yang Yang was born there two years later, and Bowen in 1990; his birth would have been barred under China's one-child policy.

"Every now and then, my mom would bring up the idea that I wouldn't have been born had they not moved out of China," he said. Like many children of immigrants, he had to square his artistic inclinations with his parents' narrative of sacrifice and hard work. "I don't think they had the intention of making us feel guilty," he said. "It was just their way of being, like, Look, there's a lot that went into you being here and doing, like, improv comedy."

When Bowen was an infant, the family followed Ruilin's career to Canada, and settled in Montreal. At four years old, Bowen scandalized them by doing a striptease to Céline Dion in the living room. "Bowen, at this one climactic point in the song, jumped out and pulled his pants down and flashed us to the beat of the music," Yang Yang recalled. Looking back, Bowen considers it "a first moment of queer discovery, revelry, joy." In kindergarten, he won an award for a pastel drawing of a circus clown, and Meng arranged private lessons in illustration. "I thought he could be an artist or work for Disney," she said, in her son's dressing room. His sister remembered a more theatrical bent: he would sketch the most "high-drama, intense moments" of Disney movies and then act out what he'd drawn. "He did this with 'Snow White,' and we went through so many apples," she said.

In 1999, Ruilin's job brought the family to suburban Denver. "Everywhere we moved, one of the first things that my parents always did was find the Chinatown," Yang Yang said. The children were sent to Chinese school on Sundays, and Meng would drill them on their Mandarin characters. But Bowen gravitated toward Western pop culture: the Spice Girls, Broadway musicals. After his

sister told him what “Saturday Night Live” was, he’d watch it in the basement—with effort, since they didn’t have a cable box and reception came through the antennas. “This was a huge part of my Saturday, just adjusting the bunny ears,” he said. He later learned that many of his favorite sketches, like the Destiny’s Child parody Gemini’s Twin, were the work of the gay writer James Anderson—a forebear in an underground queer lineage.

At fifteen, Yang became obsessed with the hospital drama “Grey’s Anatomy” and decided that he would pursue medicine. He later realized that his interest had more to do with Sandra Oh than with healing the sick, but it was a convenient way to satisfy his parents. “I think I just did the drag of saying, ‘Well, maybe I’ll be a doctor,’ ” he told me. He joined the high-school improv team, Spontaneous Combustion, which was run by his calculus teacher and did sets in a Denver comedy club. “Improv was my only waypoint for rebellion,” he said. “We were all fifteen-year-olds performing with beer-drinking thirty-year-olds.”

One day during his senior year, Yang came home from school and found his mother sitting alone, with the curtains drawn. He’d been visiting gay chat rooms, having cybersex with strangers and sometimes posting personal ads under phony adult identities. He’d left the AOL window open, and his parents had found it. “They had printed out the entire log of that conversation, and they had earmarked and circled specific things,” he recalled. “It was like Alexis Colby Dexter throwing the receipts off the bannister in ‘Dynasty.’ I had never felt more terror in my life.” Meng read aloud the illicit phrases, each hurled at her son like a dagger, and told him, “Where your dad and I come from, this doesn’t happen.”

“There was a period of, like, three weeks where I would come home every day to my parents sobbing,” Yang said. “I had never seen my dad cry before, except when his father died.” His parents, he recalled, gave him an ultimatum: he could stay in Colorado for college and live at home, or he could choose between U.C.L.A. and

N.Y.U. (where his sister was enrolled) if he agreed to see a specialist. “My dad had printed out the Web site for this conversion therapist in Colorado Springs, and immediately I could tell it was quackery,” Yang said. “But I did not have the conviction of thinking, I’m going to be a gay man and suffer through that. I was, like, You know what? Sure. Maybe I am this malleable thing.” Part of him just wanted to make his parents stop crying. He agreed to go.

For eight weekends, Ruilin drove him an hour and a half each way to the therapist’s office; in an odd silver lining, the car rides gave them time to get to know each other better. The conversion therapist, whom Yang recalled as a “soft-spoken Philip Seymour Hoffman type,” began by asking him, “Do you want this to be a secular experience or a Christ-centered experience?” “ ‘I guess secular,’ ” Yang said. “But in the back of my mind I was, like, I’m being presented with two choices that are meaningless. I already know that you’re coming at this from a religious point of view.” After a few sessions of talk therapy, the man drilled down on Yang’s memories of same-sex attraction, or “S.S.A.,” asking him to recount his posture and state of mind with each memory. “He was trying to lead me, pretty unsuccessfully, to say, ‘Oh, I was dealing with something emotionally,’ ” Yang told me.

At Yang’s last session before heading to N.Y.U., the therapist recounted a story about a suicidal former patient who got tempted by a flirty waiter at a Denny’s. “Then my therapist shifts into the first person unintentionally: ‘I was, like, Am I really going to do this?’ And then he caught himself and went white in the face and switched back to the third person. It was clearly something that he had been through himself, and not a patient,” Yang recalled. “In that moment, I was, like, None of this was real.” (Colorado has since outlawed conversion therapy for minors.)

Afterward, the therapist walked Yang out to his waiting father, who had asked for a list of referrals in New York. The closest he’d

found was a practice in New Jersey. Yang knew he'd never go. "That's scar tissue that will never totally go away," he said. "I refuse to be hampered by it, even though it keeps catching up to me. That was a moment of real danger for me, where this thing I love and cherish about myself—there was an effort to eradicate it."

Matt Rogers, the chatty, handsome son of a Long Island hairdresser, met Yang when both were freshmen at N.Y.U., in 2008. Yang was premed but had joined the student improv group Dangerbox. His parents had enlisted his sister to keep an eye on him, and the siblings lived in an apartment on East Sixth Street—next to the gay bar Eastern Bloc. Rogers, a dramatic-writing student, lived in a dorm and, like Yang, was in the closet. "I was trying to be known as the funny guy on the floor so that no one could call me the gay guy," Rogers said. A mutual female friend invited them both to see the campus sketch group Hammerkatz. Yang, trying to will himself to be straight, had convinced himself that he was "madly in love" with her, and he gave Rogers a dirty look when they met. "That was my test run of heterosexuality," he said. "I felt threatened. Like, Who is this guy?"

They didn't cross paths again until sophomore year, when Rogers auditioned, unsuccessfully, for Dangerbox. But he did get into Hammerkatz, whose members included the future stars Rachel Bloom, Jack Quaid, and Stephanie Hsu. By then, Yang and Rogers were each tentatively out, especially after Yang's sister graduated and he was unsupervised at last. Both felt pigeonholed as each troupe's token gay. "The elders of the groups kind of said, 'Oh, that's funny, we both have one,' and would put us together and assume that we'd be friends," Rogers said. "Like, Dance for us, gay monkeys!" Nonetheless, the two became fast friends.

Yang and Rogers shared a pop-culture language. They both loved "RuPaul's Drag Race," especially the Season 2 contestant Jujubee. "We were both off book on Nicki Minaj's entire 'Pink Friday' album," Rogers said. At parties, they'd clear the floor and rap along

to the track “Roman’s Revenge,” which features Eminem reciting the line “All you li’l faggots can suck it!” “Bowen and I would just let it rip on that word,” Rogers said. “There was something to this rapport that we knew that we had with each other that gave us a dangerous edge.”

At one point, some seniors in their comedy groups decided to stage a mock wedding for them. When the hostess asked what the theme should be, Rogers deadpanned, “‘Jurassic Park.’” Years before same-sex marriage became legal nationwide, the idea of a “gay wedding”—especially one thrust on two friends as a party stunt—was still a punch line; at least, that’s how Rogers and Yang perceived it. But, heeding the “yes, and” rule of improv, they went along with the joke.

“You’re already a minority in the group. You don’t want to say, ‘Hey, I think what you guys are doing is fucked up and makes us uncomfortable,’ ” Rogers said. He called the event a “gross, exorbitant display that came at our homophobic expense.” He remembered looking at Yang during the “vows”: “It was one of the first of many times where I was, like, I think you’re the only person that gets it.” (The wedding planners have since apologized.)

Stephanie Hsu remembered Yang as having “incredibly funny hands,” but said that being premed put him at a remove from the comedy scene: “He sort of had one foot in and one foot out.” At his commencement, in 2012, he watched other students collect academic awards and wondered why he’d invested all his passion in an extracurricular activity. He took the *MCAT* twice, and during the second time he thought about a story that Steve Carell had told in an interview: “He was just out of college and starting an application to law school, and then he got to the personal-essay portion and was, like, I can’t do this. That anecdote enveloped the whole testing center for me, and I was, like, I have to go.”

He burst out of the exam room, called his parents, and informed them that, instead of med school, he was going to temp and take improv classes. They were perplexed, but their relationship with their son was already rocky. That year, he had come out to his family, on his own terms. “There was this emergency family meeting, where I flew home to Colorado, my sister flew home from D.C. The four of us just convened, and it didn’t go great,” he said. “My parents kept trying to push these pamphlets on me, and I was just, like, ‘No, I will not read this.’” It wasn’t until Yang became famous that his parents put aside their fears that being gay was a road to ruin. “Now they ask me if I’m dating anybody, and I say no,” he said, with a self-effacing laugh.

A few months after graduation, Rogers heard that Yang was considering moving back to Denver. “I was just, like, That can’t happen,” he recalled. He and some friends had started a new comedy group, Pop Roulette. He met Yang for lunch and implored him to join. “That was this huge life preserver that was thrown at me,” Yang said. Rogers wrote the first sketch in which Yang appeared, a “Mad Men” spoof about a gay millennial who is anachronistically employed at Sterling Cooper and worships Joan. (One of his lines: “Um, obsessed with her?”) The group performed regularly at the Peoples Improv Theater, in the Flatiron district, specializing in tightly choreographed songs that lampooned contemporary culture, like a rewrite of “Leader of the Pack” about Grindr.

Yang worked survival jobs in graphic design, eventually landing in the offices of the luxury-furniture firm One Kings Lane. As his performance footprint expanded, he became part of the city’s emerging queer comedy scene, an alternative to the flannel-wearing standup dudes. Cole Escola first noticed him at the variety series “Showgasm,” at Ars Nova, telling a story about how he’d accidentally tried meth. Julio Torres saw him perform a solo show about his conversion-therapy nightmare, titled “FAG: Fight Against Gayness.” “It was unlike anything I’ve seen Bowen do since,”

Torres said. “It was very vulnerable.” (“Oh, my God, it was so bad,” Yang insisted.) With the comedian Sam Taggart, Yang created a series called “Live on Broadgay,” in which gay comics staged episodes of “Sex and the City.” Torres played Miranda; his friend Joel Kim Booster was Samantha. Yang mostly stayed behind the scenes, because he didn’t want to be “too front-facing.” But he gained notoriety by posting videos online—his Instagram handle is @fayedunaway—in which he lip-synched sacred gay texts, such as Miranda Priestly’s “cerulean” monologue, from “The Devil Wears Prada,” and Tyra Banks’s scolding of a contestant on “America’s Next Top Model.” “It was the closest thing I could do to visualizing myself on camera,” he said.

In 2016, the podcast network Forever Dog approached him about creating a show, and he recruited Rogers as co-host. Yang’s initial ideas were high-concept, such as a choose-your-own-adventure format, but Rogers convinced him that they’d be better off just riffing on pop culture, as they did in their everyday lives. That March, they recorded the first “Las Culturistas” episode, a recap of that year’s Grammy Awards, at their producer’s apartment, with a mattress shoved against the window as a sound baffle. Rogers recalled, “In the beginning, I would look at our analytics, and it was, like, Oh, my God! This week, sixty-five people listened to the episode!” The show now gets more than a million downloads a month. Casting themselves as high priests of pop culture, the duo encapsulated gay-millennial preoccupations and patois. Occasionally, they’d interrupt themselves to repeat a stray musing, in unison, as a new “Rule of Culture.” (Rule of Culture No. 90: *“Catherine Keener is underrated.”* No. 106: *“There’s only one Dianne Wiest, and that’s Dianne Fucking Wiest.”*)

At the core of the podcast was the hosts’ friendship, which was tested as their professional fates began to diverge. In 2017, Rogers was invited to be a “new face” at the Just for Laughs festival, in Montreal, which is often a gateway to “S.N.L.” Yang was not. “That was the first time we were a little bit separated in terms of

career trajectory,” Rogers said. “It started to become apparent to me that we could have real conflict.” In a twist, Rogers didn’t get the call from “S.N.L.,” but Yang did. At his manager’s suggestion, Yang had sent in an audition tape, performing characters that included an aggro version of the *Times* book critic Michiko Kakutani. “I was, like, They’re never going to hire an effeminate Asian man,” he said. To his surprise, he was brought in for a live showcase, then for a screen test. “I went back to Colorado and feverishly typed on a computer in my parents’ room for two days and came up with these new silly ideas, like George Takei talking from the Singularity, because he’s merged his body with Facebook,” he recalled. After an awkward meeting with Lorne Michaels, at which Yang tried to win points as a fellow-Canadian, he returned to his day job, defeated.

The next spring, he was invited to test again—and so was Rogers, who had fantasized about being on “S.N.L.” since childhood. Rogers auditioned by impersonating Antoni Porowski, from “Queer Eye.” Yang did Elaine Chao, Donald Trump’s Transportation Secretary and the wife of [Mitch McConnell](#). (He got a big—and rare—laugh from Michaels with the line “Once this term is over, I’ll return to my wonderful life living as an Asian woman in Kentucky.”) Both were given holding deals with NBC, meaning that they couldn’t take other TV offers. “That was a really hard year for us personally,” Rogers told me. They stopped speaking for months—except when recording “Las Culturistas.” Yang said, “I’ve never felt I was performing my friendship with Matt, except for that period.”

That August, they were summoned to audition again and put in the same dressing room. Afterward, the auditioners all went out to a bar, where Yang and Chloe Fineman both received calls to go right back to 30 Rock, having made it to the next round. “That was . . . an intense moment,” Rogers said, growing quiet. “Because it felt like the first sign that we were really going to be separated, and that

potentially, if it went one way, he would really skyrocket. I was afraid he would outgrow me, and I would lose him.”

Yang was flown to L.A. to meet again with Michaels, who told him that he’d “been getting better every time.” He could taste victory—but he was offered a job as a writer, not as a performer. Yang was conflicted, but his friends Torres and Sudi Green, who were already “S.N.L.” writers, urged him to accept. “I said that, even if he did it for a year, it would be such an incredible comedy education,” Green, whose mother is Iranian, said. “I knew, as an immigrant kid, that the idea of it being a good school was going to appeal to him.”

His first fall as a writer, Yang got practically nothing on the air. A rare exception was the opening monologue for the host Awkwafina, who had cast him as her cousin Edmund on her sitcom, “Awkwafina Is Nora from Queens.” She’d originally imagined Edmund as a “Silicon Valley tech bro,” she told me, but tweaked the character for Yang, making him a neurotic gay man. “Bowen as an institution is really important for Asian American culture, because he does kind of represent an Asian American person that you’d meet,” Awkwafina said. “He has a smart exterior. He does not seem like someone who is going to do the insane physical comedy that he will do.”

In early 2019, Torres returned to “S.N.L.” after filming the series “Los Espookys.” Yang, who’d been trying to ape such standard “S.N.L.” formulas as parody commercials and game shows, credits Torres with inspiring him to find his own voice. Together, they wrote a string of sketches that slipped a stealth gay humor into the show. “Cheques,” featuring Yang’s beloved Sandra Oh, was about how writing checks is the preferred payment method for scheming femme fatales. In “The Actress,” Emma Stone played an earnest thespian cast as the woman who gets cheated on in gay porn. “We like the same trashy, campy acting tropes,” Torres said, adding that he was impressed with Yang’s workplace skills: “He knew what the

extension numbers were for the different people, which I know sounds stupid, but I never figured that out.”

That summer, while Yang was shooting “Nora” at a Russian night club in Queens, Michaels called to offer him a spot in the cast. “He was, like, There are going to be a lot of eyes on you, and I had to make sure you knew how the show worked before I put you on camera,” Yang said. Amped up about his new gig, he couldn’t sleep that night, so he walked to Prospect Park at sunrise, savoring the quiet. That afternoon, he took a nap and woke up to frantic texts from his agent: “I’m so sorry . . . Are you awake? . . . I’m so sorry.” The news about Shane Gillis’s offensive material had broken. Michaels called to assure him, “I don’t need you to be the poster child for racial harmony.” Yang texted Gillis, who called back and apologized for the mess. “I ended the call by saying, ‘I guess I’ll just see you at work,’ ” Yang recalled. “He laughed and said, ‘Sure,’ and hung up. Then they announced that he was fired.”



*“Authenticity is dangerous and expensive,” Tina Fey warned Yang on “Las Culturistas.”
Jacket and Pants by Fendi; Bag and Glasses by Laser Kitten; Jewelry by Annele*

In the time between the media blitz and the new season, Yang booked a trip to Turks and Caicos. He had talked himself down from the idea that he was a diversity hire who hadn't earned his way into the cast. But he still couldn't picture himself on the show. “It made no visual sense for me to see myself on camera, under the glare of the studio lights,” he said. He dropped acid and sat on a beach for hours, bingeing old “S.N.L.” sketches. He'd watch Stefon and hallucinate his own face swapped in for Bill Hader's. “It was this cascade of imagery that washed over, and suddenly

something clicked,” he said. “I was, like, Oh, this makes sense. I think I can do this.”

In June, Yang and Rogers were in a midtown rehearsal studio, belting out the Selena Gomez song “Single Soon.” It was the opening number of the third annual “Culture Awards,” a live outgrowth of “Las Culturistas” which spoofs the gaudy self-seriousness of awards shows. They’d announced a flurry of categories on the podcast, among them the Tina Turner Legend Award (nominees included Paula Abdul and Miss Piggy), the Daddy Award (Pedro Pascal, “the sad Sylvia Plath poem”), Best Word to Whisper (“Fuck”), and Best Word to Scream (“Diva!!!!!!”).

After working with the pianist, they high-fived and moved on to a dance rehearsal, with four male backup dancers. “We’re very much singers who stand and deliver, and the minimal choreo is better,” Rogers told the choreographer. They would make their grand entrance at the Kings Theatre, in Flatbush, riding electric kiddie trikes down the aisles. “It’s based on the Lana Del Rey entrance at Coachella this year, when she was on the back of a motorcycle, arms draped over some guy,” Yang explained.

The next night, the two were in tuxes, posing on a red carpet. Throngs of spectators—mostly women and gay men—streamed in. The dress code was “awards gold.” On the podcast, Yang and Rogers have divided their fans into hazily defined subgroups: Readers, Publicists, Finalists, and Kayteighs. “We’re Publicists,” Robbie Bartels, an entertainment lawyer who’d come with a friend, said. He had seen a Publicist mood board on Instagram. “I put my Doc Martens on, because I saw leather as an element for Publicists,” Bartels said. Publicists, he and his friend theorized, tend to be “business-minded.” Readers are like sponges, “just soaking in the information.” Finalists are “your favorite person at any event.” And Kayteighs are “that bitch.”

“*Las Culturistas*” fans have a more parasocial bond with Yang than casual “S.N.L.” viewers do. But, when Yang was cast on “S.N.L.,” he had to negotiate for permission to continue the podcast. “They were, like, Wait, we haven’t encountered this in the past, where a cast member has had a weekly outlet to express themselves,” he said. “But we got it into the contract.” That was a touchy time in his relationship with Rogers, who fell into a depression after he wasn’t hired. “I felt like my career was over, because my best friend had succeeded,” Rogers said. Looking for a change, he moved to L.A., where he got a job writing for the sitcom “The Other Two,” and the podcast went bicoastal. Rogers has since acted regularly on TV and released a Showtime special, but the friends’ lopsided levels of fame can cause tension. “I don’t care about anything more than I care about the sanctity of our friendship,” Rogers told me. “We probably have a big blowout fight once a year, and then we figure it out.”

One of those fights happened during Yang’s breakdown last summer, when he threatened to quit the podcast. Yang told Rogers that he’d been feeling like a sidekick, the Robin Quivers to his Howard Stern. Rogers urged Yang to take a hiatus rather than bail. “He can have anything and anyone he wants in this industry. I can’t,” Rogers told me. “If at any point he wanted to just toss me aside, I felt like he could. And, in that moment, it felt like he was.” They had just had Kelly Clarkson, Rogers’s idol, on as a guest. “We had just done this amazing episode with her,” Rogers said. “And *then* he called to say that he had only bad feelings about the podcast? That’s when I realized that his mental-health condition must be really dire.”

By the time they tricycled into Kings Theatre, a year later, they were united in irreverence. The evening featured appearances by Julia Fox, the Real Housewife Meredith Marks, and the pop singer Mandy Moore, who received the Lifetime of Culture Award. I sat next to Yang’s parents, who wore confounded smiles. When the hosts sang the Beyoncé and Miley Cyrus duet “I Want You Back”

and mooned the audience in their assless chaps, Meng giggled with what looked like shock. “We’ve come a long way,” Yang told me later.

The duo opened the show with some two-man comedy. “At this point in our lives and careers, we’ve had to really take stock about what we say,” Rogers said. Then Yang asked the audience to stand for the Las Culturistas Pledge of Allegiance, and a screen projected Tina Fey’s warning. Three thousand people stood and recited:

I don’t think so, honey: Bowen Yang giving his real opinions about movies on this podcast. I regret to inform you that you are too famous now, sir. What’s going to happen?

It remains to be seen whether Yang’s huge “S.N.L.” popularity will translate into movie stardom, but directors have been steadily calling him. Pfannee, the character Yang plays in “Wicked,” which comes out in November, was originally written as a woman. But the film’s director, Jon M. Chu, decided that Yang would be “delicious” in the role. “There’s a huge sense of pride as he’s become the breakout star of ‘S.N.L.,’ ” Chu told me. “We Asians can point at him: See, we’re funny! Mom? Dad? See?” Chu was unaware of Yang’s emotional struggles during the shoot. “I wish he could have told me, honestly,” he said.

Yang’s other movie roles have included God, in “Dicks: The Musical.” In 2022, he starred in “Fire Island,” a queer update of “Pride and Prejudice,” alongside Joel Kim Booster, who also wrote the screenplay. (Journalists have repeatedly confused the two gay Asian comedians. In a racist ouroboros, *Out* managed to mix them up in an article about how they were getting mixed up.) Yang’s character, a spin on Jane Bennet, was the insecure wingman to Booster’s buff Elizabeth. For one scene, the director, Andrew Ahn, had told Yang to look in the mirror and ask himself, “Am I attractive? Am I worthy of love?”

Since his unravelling during “Wicked,” Yang has learned to protect his emotions on set: no vanity searches on social media. “Why would you touch a hot stove?” he asked me one day, in Vancouver. He was there shooting Ahn’s next film, a remake of Ang Lee’s 1993 drama, “The Wedding Banquet.” In the original, a gay Taiwanese man living in New York with his boyfriend marries a Chinese woman in order to placate his parents. Yang, who’d seen the movie in college, said, “Obviously, I sympathized with the main character, but I found myself sympathizing with the parents, too, who are homophobic and putting all this pressure on their child to live a specific life.” He went on, “It was a nice mini blueprint for understanding my parents.”

In Ahn’s reboot, there’s now a gay couple (Yang and the Korean actor Han Gi-chan), a lesbian couple ([Lily Gladstone](#) and Kelly Marie Tran), and a stony Korean grandmother, played by the Oscar winner Youn Yuh-jung. Yang’s character is a birder in Seattle who, he said, “struggles with feeling worthy of the relationship.” That day, they were shooting in a dingy former municipal building outfitted as a marriage bureau. In the scene, Yang makes a grand rom-com gesture, which culminates in him kissing Han. An intimacy coördinator advised the two on how to position themselves asymmetrically, to project greater familiarity.

“I don’t know if I can pull it off,” Yang confided, before a take. “I’ve never professed that kind of sentiment before in real life. But we’ll see.”

It had been a year since he’d desperately asked himself, “Who are you?” What Yang had been searching for in Oz was objectivity about himself, something that had eluded him since his bout with conversion therapy. Had he found it? Or was he still, like every actor who slips into a role, just a “malleable thing”?

Earlier, he mentioned that he’d been thinking a lot about the 1997 anime film “Perfect Blue.” It centers on a Japanese pop star who

quits singing to become a dramatic actress. Visions of her pop-star incarnation continue to terrorize her, and she discovers an online journal written in her voice, with details no one else could possibly know. “She’s not sure what’s real and what’s not,” Yang said. “By the end of the movie, it’s hopeful, and she overcomes it all. She walks out of a hospital and the nurses are, like, Is that that actress? It must be a fake! And then she says to herself in the rearview mirror, ‘No, I’m the real thing.’ That moment really struck me. There are things about yourself that you can tell yourself are true and cannot be negotiated by other people.”

He went off to shoot his big Hollywood kiss. Afterward, I asked how it went. He answered by quoting Cher, who once responded to a question about what it feels like to be an icon by saying, “It doesn’t feel like anything.” “I think that applies to most things,” Yang said, with something like relief. “It doesn’t feel like anything.” ♦



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

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The World of Fashion

The Architect of Zendaya’s Red-Carpet Style

How Law Roach turns his clients into fashion icons.

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

September 16, 2024



Roach is known for digging deep into designers' archives for what fashion nerds call "insane pulls." His looks often honor Black female style legends from earlier eras.

Photograph by Pari Dukovic for The New Yorker

On a muggy morning in late July, the stylist Law Roach was at the Guggenheim Museum, ready to make a scene. He was there to shoot an episode of “The Bittarverse,” a satirical Web series created by the Brooklyn-based jewelry designer Alexis Bittar, which playfully skewers the fashion industry’s élite. Roach was standing on the ground floor of the museum’s rotunda, dressed for the camera, not the weather, in a black padded blazer, matching pants so long they would have tripped him had he not been wearing five-inch platform heels, and a fur stole the size of a body bag. Above

him swirled a phrase from Jenny Holzer's "Light Line" installation: "Your Actions Are Pointless If No One Notices."

Roach would be playing a version of himself. His character had been invited to the Guggenheim by the "Bittarverse" staple Margeaux (Patricia Black), a snobby fashion maven living on the Upper East Side. "Margeaux's been watching him come up, and she appreciates his hustle, his ability to fuse street with glamour," Bittar told Roach and Black. There was also some rivalry: Margeaux was afraid of losing her front-row seat at New York Fashion Week to the ascendant Roach. "They're both cunty," Bittar added. "It's a little 'A Star Is Born.'" Action. Roach traipsed through the glass doors of the lobby, tossing his stole in Black's general direction. "A gift for mother?" she inquired. "A gift *from* mother," Roach said, improvising. "Cut," Bittar called. "Beautiful!"

As the cast and crew spilled out onto Fifth Avenue after the shoot, tourists began filming them with their iPhones. Roach has styled a number of A-listers (Céline Dion, Ariana Grande, Kerry Washington). But his partnership with the actress Zendaya is what has made him a celebrity in his own right. The two began working together in 2011, when Zendaya was a Disney teen and Roach was an inexperienced stylist who did not know he needed to bring safety pins to fittings. Since then, they have become fashion's most bankable duo; their collaboration is spoken of as on a par with that of Hubert de Givenchy and Audrey Hepburn, Jean Paul Gaultier and Madonna, Bob Mackie and Cher. (Or as Roach, a Chicago native, has put it, "We're Jordan and Pippen, baby. We don't miss.")

The key difference is that Roach is not a designer. Some see stylists as glorified personal shoppers. The fashion industry has been slow to recognize the profession. The Council of Fashion Designers of America did not create a Styling Award until 2022. (That year, the C.F.D.A. honored Roach, and it has subsequently discontinued the

category.) But Roach, who prefers to call himself “an image architect,” has shown that stylists have real clout. Earlier this year, for the world première of “Dune: Part Two,” in London, he and Zendaya chose a vintage Thierry Mugler robot suit reminiscent of the Fritz Lang sci-fi classic “Metropolis.” (Timothée Chalamet, Zendaya’s “Dune” co-star, “was, like, ‘What the fuck?,’ ” Roach said, miming shock.) The look generated a hundred and fifty-two million dollars for Mugler in media-impact value, according to Launchmetrics, a company that measures brand awareness.

Roach’s signature technique is what the *Vogue* writer André Wheeler has termed “method dressing,” a form of styling that plays with themes and motifs drawn from a performer’s role. His process can rival some movies’ production schedules in length. He spent two years developing the gown that Zendaya wore to the Venice world première of the first “Dune” movie—a high-slit beige leather dress with ruching that made it cling to her body as if wet. During filming, in the summer of 2020, the actress, who stars as Chani, a native of the desert planet Arrakis, sent Roach an image of the model Liya Kebede in a chocolate-brown leather corset from Balmain’s collection which was molded to her torso. “Could we do this as a gown?” she texted. Roach asked Olivier Rousteing, Balmain’s creative director, if the corset could be turned into a dress. Rousteing agreed. They decided to make it in a lighter shade of brown, to evoke a sand dune. A team of plaster casters was dispatched to Zendaya’s home in Los Angeles to cast a mold of the actress. “I was standing in my back yard and these people covered my body,” Zendaya told me. “It was the same company that does casts for pregnant bellies.”

Method dressing made headlines in 2023, thanks to “Barbie.” Andrew Mukamal, Margot Robbie’s stylist for the movie’s press tour, put together pretty-in-pink looks and retro ensembles that captured Barbie in her many eras, working with designers such as Daniel Roseberry, of Schiaparelli, and Donatella Versace to create pieces inspired by the iconic doll. In less assured hands, method

dressing can get costumey. It can also be tonally off, as when, this summer, Blake Lively wore sparkly florals during the press tour for her new film, “It Ends with Us,” about a domestic-violence survivor who runs a flower shop. Roseberry told me, “I can always tell when a stylist is trying to pull a ‘Roach.’ It feels like the real thing, but it’s not. I’ve started calling this phenomenon Diet Roach.”

Roach is known for digging deep into designers’ archives to source what fashion nerds call “insane pulls.” When he was trying to come up with sci-fi-inspired looks for a “Dune: Part Two” première in Seoul, he remembered a gray skirt suit designed by Alexander McQueen for Givenchy’s Fall/Winter 1999 collection, which had red detailing on the front that resembled a computer’s motherboard. “I have, like, a crazy mental Rolodex of what I’ve seen before,” Roach told me. “I stay up late on Instagram just looking at the vintage stores, their pages, what they have.” He tracked the suit down at a store called Aralda Vintage, in L.A. He was in London at the time, and he phoned his tailor there, Nafisha Tosh, to see if she could alter it, a tricky task considering that the red design contained a liquid that made it glow in the dark. But Roach was in luck—Tosh had worked on the original McQueen design and knew how to tailor it. “That’s how the universe works,” Roach said, adding that one day he wants to write a book on manifesting.



Roach spent two years developing the skintight beige leather dress that Zendaya wore to the Venice première of “Dune.”

Photographs by Han Myung-Gu / Getty (Left); Stephane Cardinale / Corbis / Getty (Right)

It was the day after the “Bittarverse” shoot, and Roach and I were having breakfast at the St. Regis hotel, in midtown. Roach is tall and broad-shouldered; even sitting, he towered over me. His imposing figure clashed with his voice, which is as soft as cashmere. He was wearing a pair of white lace bell-bottoms from Simone Rocha, black cowboy boots that he bought on eBay, and a blue Louis Vuitton football jersey. He took frequent sips of tea as he peered out the window toward Central Park. He was still jet-lagged, he told me, tucking his hair behind his ears. His long black tresses are an homage to Cher, whose variety show he watched reruns of as a boy. He had just flown in from Paris, where he had accompanied Zendaya to promote her partnership with On, the Swiss running-wear company, during the Olympics. For the Games, Roach styled her in a vintage Jean-Charles de Castelbajac romper with colorful loops that looked like the Olympic rings. Earlier that month, Roach had been a guest at the star-studded Mumbai wedding of the Indian billionaire Anant Ambani. (He also styled Anant’s sister Isha for the cover of *Vogue India*.)

It has been a busy year for Roach, despite the fact that he is officially retired. In March, 2023, he announced on Instagram that he was quitting styling. “My cup is empty,” the post began.

Zendaya is his only remaining full-time client, but dressing her in 2024 for the press tours of “Dune: Part Two” and “Challengers,” in which she starred as a tennis player turned coach, gave him plenty to do. He also styled Céline Dion for the 2024 Grammy Awards and for the cover of French *Vogue*, the singer’s first appearances following her retreat from public life, in 2022, when she received a diagnosis of stiff-person syndrome, a rare neurological disorder. (He styled her in a pink Alaïa fur bubble coat for that cover. Roach, affecting a French Canadian accent, recalled her saying, “I want to wear it out!”) Next month he’s publishing a book, “[How to Build a Fashion Icon](#),” a stylist’s memoir accessorized with tips for the Everywoman (and man) looking to dress like *that girl*. “I like the way I sit now in the landscape,” he told me. “I can do special things with special people.”

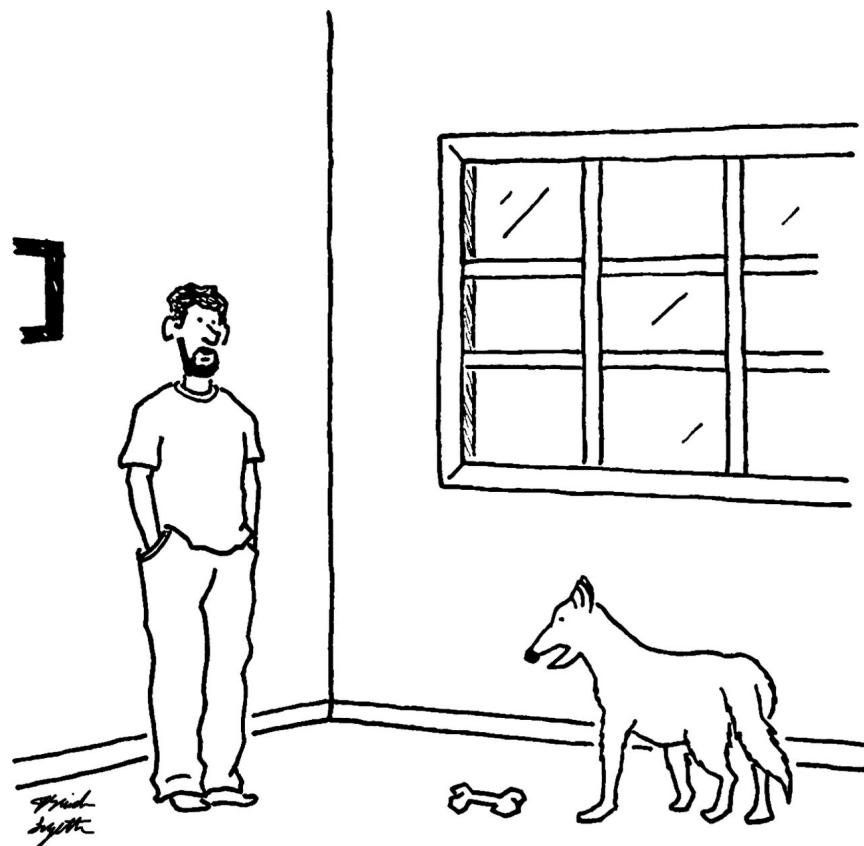
Roach was born in 1978, and raised by a single mother on the South Side of Chicago. He was the eldest of five children, and he recalls that there were times when the family did not have enough money for food. But his mother kept them fed. She “could go to the grocery store and read people’s body language before interacting with them,” he writes in his book. “Each time she would leave with her groceries paid for.” (Roach told me that memories of those days stopped him from giving up when designer after designer refused to dress his clients: “I think I go into any situation knowing there’s a yes in somebody somewhere.”) When he was fourteen, his mother moved in with her boyfriend. She took Roach’s four siblings but left him to fend for himself. “I was too old to come,” he said. Before she left, she told him, “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.” The warning instilled in him a hustle mentality that he has struggled to shake off. “When someone tells you that and gives you that responsibility as a child, it changes the way that you approach life,” he told me.

He stayed in his family's house alone until the utilities were shut off. "It got too cold," he said. Eventually, a friend's parents took Roach in. He also spent time at his grandmother's house, where, he writes in his book, he first came under the spell of style: "The night before an important event, she would press and lay out what she was going to wear and put her hair in rollers. Then when morning came, I would sit at her feet as she put it all on, watching her transform into the confident woman the world would see. It was like magic in front of my eyes." Sundays at church were his first fashion shows. "This was church in the eighties, before the whole 'come as you are' thing," he said. After service, he and his grandmother would go thrift-store shopping, or "junking," as she called it. Roach had a gift for spotting "diamonds in the rough." As he got older, friends noticed, and began putting in requests.

In the late nineties, Roach enrolled in Chicago State University, a predominantly Black school on the city's South Side. There he became friends with a fashion-forward woman named Siobhan Strong. "We didn't like each other at first," Strong said. "He thought he was best dressed, and I thought I was best dressed." In 2009, the two opened a vintage-clothing store in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago called Deliciously Vintage. They stocked it in part by sourcing clothes from estate sales and auctions. Strong remembers attending a sale of items from Fashion Fair, *Ebony* magazine's travelling fashion show, which raised money for African American charities. "We went *every day*," Strong said. Deliciously Vintage got national media attention when Kanye West, Strong's friend and another Chicago State alum, stopped in to pick up a gift for his then girlfriend, the model Amber Rose. "He bought a pair of MCM shades," Roach told me. "We were so geeking out, like, 'Oh, Amber got on my glasses!'"

In his book, Roach writes that one of his favorite movies is "Mahogany," from 1975, a bittersweet film that stars Diana Ross as an aspiring designer from the South Side of Chicago who travels to Italy and gets swept up in the world of high fashion, leaving her

community-organizer boyfriend (Billy Dee Williams) behind. Roach's own story follows a similar arc from rags to runways. He was first inspired to become a stylist in 2008, while watching an episode of the reality-TV show "The Rachel Zoe Project," which followed a high-powered Hollywood stylist whose clients included Cameron Diaz and "Mean Girls"-era Lindsay Lohan. Roach already admired June Ambrose and Misa Hylton—Black, New York-based stylists who worked with artists such as Busta Rhymes, Missy Elliott, and Lil' Kim, helping to define hip-hop style. But Zoe had access to an entirely different world. "I didn't see anybody who was Black that was doing the things that Rachel was," he said. "She was going to Paris. She was backstage talking to Mr. Armani. I was, like, 'Shit. I want that.' I wanted Hollywood. I wanted Paris Fashion Week. I wanted to go to the couture shows. She gave me something to dream about. And it all came true. It all came true."



"For once, can I get one with meat on it?"

Cartoon by Isaiah Legette

After West's visit, Deliciously Vintage started attracting other high-profile customers, some of whom engaged Roach's services as a

stylist. He worked with Eva Marcille, a contestant on “America’s Next Top Model,” and the R. & B. singer K. Michelle. In 2011, Roach writes, “I got a call that would change my life.” A regular at the store phoned to tell him about a friend’s fourteen-year-old daughter, an actress named Zendaya, who needed help picking out something to wear to the première of the Justin Bieber concert documentary, “Never Say Never.” Roach flew to California to take her shopping. “I remember he had this YSL bag,” Zendaya told me. “It had ‘YSL’ spelled out in buckles. At the time, I don’t think I’d ever seen a bag like that in person.” They went to Kitson’s, in Santa Monica, where Roach helped her pick out a shiny gray blazer and a matching leather skirt. It was a daring look for the young actress, and she was afraid of what others might think. Roach gently put his hand on her shoulder and said, “Who gives a fuck?” Zendaya, laughing, recalled the outfit: “I remember we thought, wow, we were really going for it. Metallic and patent at the same time.” Shortly thereafter, Roach closed Deliciously Vintage and moved to Los Angeles to work with Zendaya full time.

In the early years of her career, Zendaya was best known for playing a high-school sleuth on “K.C. Undercover,” and luxury brands did not believe that she could carry their fashions to market. Roach revealed on the podcast “The Cutting Room Floor” that Chanel, Saint Laurent, Dior, Gucci, and Valentino had all turned down the opportunity to dress her. “If it’s a no now, it’s a no forever,” he warned them. Roach went into hustle mode. “I figured out that whoever got the most press got the best dresses, so I was, like, I need to get her more press,” he told me. In the hope of getting her into *Us Weekly*’s “Who Wore It Best” poll, he intentionally put her in clothes other celebrities had been photographed wearing—typically a stylist faux pas. But Roach didn’t mind the competition. “Because I know she’s going to win a battle,” he said. In 2014, a publicist for various European fashion houses hesitated to lend Roach a black-and-teal Ungaro dress for Zendaya to wear to the Grammy Awards. (The publicist told me, of

her thinking, “When you’re talking about that price point, it doesn’t really make sense to have a girl translating the brand to a woman that has the means to buy those clothes.”) Roach was unmoved—literally. “I wouldn’t leave,” he said. In the end, he got the dress. Fausto Puglisi, then the creative director of Ungaro, saw Zendaya on the red carpet in his creation and invited her to the Met Gala. “That was special,” Zendaya told me. “It was our first Met. Law and I were kind of like babies to that experience.”

The job of celebrity stylist is a relatively new one. During the golden age of Hollywood, studios had costume designers create stars’ wardrobes for their off-camera lives as well as their movie roles, so that they would appear naturally, effortlessly stylish. After the collapse of the studio system, in the nineteen-sixties, actors were on their own. An Instagram account called *Nightopenings* captures the ensuing sartorial chaos. There is a photo of the comedian Sinbad at the première of “Beethoven’s 2nd” wearing a fanny pack and a towel over his shoulder. Another shows Ally Sheedy arriving at the première of “The Dream Team” in a pink “Jane Fonda Workout” sweatshirt.

The rise of the stylist is often attributed to the sixty-first Academy Awards, in 1989, when Jodie Foster won her first Oscar, for “The Accused.” She wore an off-the-rack baby-blue taffeta dress that she bought in Rome while shopping with her mother. Foster was lambasted in the media for looking as if she were going to the prom. “I have no idea who was the designer,” she later told the *Hollywood Reporter*. (There was not yet a Joan Rivers asking, “Who are you wearing?”) Wanda McDaniel, a former journalist who had been hired by Giorgio Armani to get his clothes on the red carpet, called Foster to offer her services. At the time, most European fashion houses saw Hollywood as gauche, leaving Armani with a largely untapped market. Thanks to McDaniel’s efforts, so many A-list attendees arrived at the 1990 Oscars in his clothes that *Women’s Wear Daily* dubbed the show “The Armani Awards.”

At its most basic level, the role of stylist is that of a go-between, connecting designers and clients. But a truly great stylist can generate the kind of press that helps change the trajectory of an artist's career. In 2014, a relatively unknown actress named Lupita Nyong'o was nominated for an Oscar for her first major movie role, in "12 Years a Slave." Her stylist, Micaela Erlanger, treated every public appearance in the lead-up to the Academy Awards as if it were the main event—putting the actress in a vintage Valentino mod-style dress for a *SAG* Awards party and a tight mocha-brown Stella McCartney dress with an asymmetric shoulder at the Producers Guild Awards. Nyong'o won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actress and scored one of the most lucrative beauty contracts in the industry, as Lancôme's brand ambassador. Afterward, the *Times* ran an article about how her team had used the red carpet, praising the "military precision" of their campaign.

After breakfast, Roach and I made our way down to SoHo to go vintage shopping. He wanted to watch me try out an exercise in his book that he called Reviewing the Archives. Following the book's instructions, I had gathered photographs of myself in outfits that I loved and jotted down descriptions of how they looked and how I felt in them. "Take note," Roach writes, "of a few key words from your answers. You will start to notice some repeating themselves as you do this for different looks, and your own unique style preferences will begin to reveal themselves." It turned out that my key words were "monochromatic," "sexy," and "comfortable." At our first stop, a bustling vintage store called 2nd Street, I paused at a pair of maroon velvet hot pants with an elastic waistband, realizing that they satisfied all three of my criteria. Roach's eyes widened. "Your ass is going to be hanging out," he said, laughing. I asked if he was learning anything about me. "Oh, I know exactly who you are," he said.



“That was special. It was our first Met. Law and I were kind of like babies to that experience,” Zendaya said of the 2015 Met Gala, to which she wore a custom-made red sun-motif dress.

Photographs by Neil Mockford / Getty (Left); George Pimentel / Getty (Right)

Roach, who studied psychology in college, compared his initial meeting with a client to an “intake.” (Indeed, his first job out of school was doing intake at a mental-health facility.) In 2016, when he met Céline Dion for the first time, the two spent eight hours together in a hotel room in Paris, playing with racks of clothes that Roach had brought with him. Dion was known for wearing elegant gowns and silk scarves. But Roach noticed her perking up at clothes of a different sort altogether: streetwear. “So I started bringing her Off-White, Vetements, Balenciaga,” he told me. That year, Roach styled Dion for Haute Couture Week in Paris. One day, she wore an eight-hundred-and-eighty-five-dollar oversized sweatshirt from Vetements that was emblazoned with the image of a sinking Titanic and the fear-struck faces of Rose and Jack, along with distressed skinny jeans and a pair of Gucci gold lamé heels. Like the doomed ship, the Internet broke in half. “Oh, my God. She was just the most incredibly dressed,” Edward Enninful, the former editor of British Vogue, told me. “And you just knew somebody was behind it.”

In “How to Build a Fashion Icon,” Roach writes, “*I can tell when to push someone out of their comfort zone, when to be more*

forceful with my vision, and when to pull back. That's the psychologist's training." In 2023, he styled Hunter Schafer, Zendaya's co-star on the HBO series "Euphoria," for *Vanity Fair*'s Oscars after-party. She was drawn to a racy look by Ann Demeulemeester—a long white skirt with a top comprising a single white feather. Schafer and Roach referred to it merely as "the titties." "Obviously, the look was a lot," Schafer said. "But thankfully Law loves to break rules, and so do I." I asked Schafer if they debriefed the following day. "Well, no," she said, giggling. "I woke up the next day to Law's Instagram post about retiring, and I was, like, 'Oh, my God—was the look too much?'" Another client, Naomi Campbell, said that Roach knows how to make the riskier choice the more appealing one. "The thing Law says when he styles me is 'I have something, but it's just an idea. I don't think you're going to go for it,'" she told me. "That's normally the one I go for."

At 2nd Street, Roach handed me a pair of Vivienne Westwood high heels to try on. While I was stepping into them, he grabbed the Keds I had worn all over New York City and put them in his black Birkin bag so that I wouldn't revert to flats. Training clients to walk in heels is a key element of red-carpet styling. Navigating the sand carpet at the "Dune: Part Two" world première was so challenging that Roach had to work with Warner Bros. to choreograph every step Zendaya took at the event. "Everything had to be timed out to the minute," he told me. "We had diagrams. It was incredibly mapped out." When I opened the dressing-room curtain to show Roach how I looked in the velvet hot pants, I found myself leaning against the wall and kicking one heel up. Roach smiled. He knew this reaction. "Céline gets a wiggle," he said. "She has this new walk when she's feeling a look."

Roach learned about the transformative power of the right pair of heels from his mother's favorite film, "The Wiz," the 1978 remake of "The Wizard of Oz," set in Harlem and starring an all-Black cast, with Diana Ross as Dorothy, Michael Jackson as the

Scarecrow, and a Wicked Witch of the West (Mabel King) who runs a sweatshop in the garment district. “It’s a fashion movie,” he said matter-of-factly. In 2019, Roach collaborated with Vera Wang to create a slinky green gown inspired by the Emerald City for Zendaya to wear to the Emmy Awards. Many of Roach’s early fashion touchstones were classics of nineteen-seventies Black cinema, along with beloved African American magazines. “It was *Ebony* and *Jet*, not *Vogue*,” he told me.

Roach often pulls archival looks that honor Black female style legends from earlier eras. In 2020, he styled Zendaya for the cover of *Essence*, drawing inspiration from the sixties icon Donyale Luna, often called the “first Black supermodel.” Roach re-created one of Luna’s memorable looks with a custom crocheted dress by GiGi Hunter, an African American designer who made extensive use of knitwear in the eighties. Puglisi, who is now the creative director of Roberto Cavalli, emphasized that Roach “does not use archival looks because it’s fashionable”; rather, he uses them “because he knows what the original collection represents. He’s deep in that. He knows. He knows.” For the 2021 *Essence* Black Women in Hollywood Awards, Roach styled Zendaya in an archival YSL dress that had been custom-made for Eunice Johnson, who directed *Ebony*’s Fashion Fair, and which he still had from his Deliciously Vintage days. “It was exciting to pay homage,” Zendaya told me. “We try to use fashion as a tool to show our respect and appreciation for people who’ve paved the way before us.” Those efforts have not always been appreciated by the fashion press. In 2015, for the Oscars red carpet, Roach put Zendaya in a silky Vivienne Westwood gown with her hair in dreadlocks. The following week, on an episode of E!’s “Fashion Police,” the host, Giuliana Rancic, complained that Zendaya’s hair looked like it “smells like patchouli oil or weed.” (She later apologized.)

The fashion historian Jonathan Square, the author of the forthcoming book “Negro Cloth,” about the impact of slavery on the development of the American fashion industry, told me he

considers Roach “part of the radical Black tradition.” He pointed to Roach’s decision to style Zendaya, for the 2022 N.A.A.C.P. Image Awards, in a 1957 Balmain gown that was red, black, and green, the colors of the Pan-African flag. “It was really subtle,” Square said. “When Balmain made that gown, he wasn’t thinking about Pan-Africanism. But I love that Roach saw that and put his own spin on it.”



“You’d be angry, too, if your alter ego was a successful physician.”
Cartoon by Tom Toro

After 2nd Street, Roach and I made a stop at Rick Owens, known for austere, apocalyptic-chic designs. The staff immediately recognized Roach and led him up a dramatic staircase that looked like a prop out of “Dune.” On the second floor, Roach was ushered to a back room full of flowy gray garments. While I was trying to come up with a metaphor to describe them, I heard him say, “I should get this for my friend. He thinks he’s King Tut.” I turned around to see Roach in a long shirt with an image of an Egyptian pharaoh printed on it. Roach is known for sartorial literalism. “Like, literally a tennis-ball shoe, or a tennis figure on my dress,” Zendaya told me of her “Challengers” looks. That directness, which feels of a piece with Roach’s personality, can catch you by surprise, since he is so soft-spoken. “What’s Josh O’Connor like?”

I asked him, of Zendaya's co-star in "Challengers" and the Internet's boyfriend du jour. He replied, "I think he knits and shit. Definitely sexy." I asked him if people approached him in stores to get his opinion of their outfits. He nodded and rolled his eyes. "I hate that, because I can't lie," he said.

In recent years, Roach has become a familiar figure, walking red carpets and appearing as a guest judge on "RuPaul's Drag Race" and "America's Next Top Model." He also co-hosted the first season of "OMG Fashun," a reality series on Peacock in which designers craft looks from everyday materials—a nod to Roach's "junking" days. He hosted three seasons of the HBO Max series "Legendary," a reality show that celebrated the queer subculture of ballroom, in which performers from competing houses (many named for French fashion houses, such as Saint Laurent and Balmain) "walk" the runway—usually with some dancing or voguing thrown in. Square, the fashion historian, sees in Roach's celebrity a refusal to be pushed to the margins as so many Black people in fashion before him were, including the undersung designers Ruby Bailey, of the Harlem Renaissance, and Zelda Wynn Valdes, often credited with designing the Playboy Bunny costume. "Law refuses to be invisibilized. He is very insistent on his labor being recognized," Square added.

Roach's retirement post in 2023 went viral. "If this business was just about the clothes I would do it for the rest of my life but unfortunately it's not!" he wrote. "The politics, the lies and false narratives finally got me! You win . . . I'm out." There was speculation that Roach was responding to comments made by his client Priyanka Chopra, who had just told an audience at SXSW that someone had described her as not "sample sized." Roach, interviewed by the Cut, denied that the story was about him, saying, "I've never had that conversation with her, ever." He told me that his post came amid a busy week—the Oscars were taking place that Sunday, and he had to style six clients for the red carpet at the *Vanity Fair* after-party. Meanwhile, a client he was supposed

to dress for the Met Gala had heard from a design house that Roach was not responding to its calls. “I was, like, ‘It’s the Oscars. The Met Gala is seven weeks away,’ ” he said. “I felt like everything I do in this industry, everything I become, I’m still on the phone defending myself and basically fighting with these people.” The morning after the Oscars, Roach posted his statement. “I was in an S.U.V. when I sent it,” he told me. “I was with my publicist. We were in Miami for the Hugo Boss show. I was in tears, saying, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore.’ ”

Roach felt that the Met Gala melee was a symptom of how Hollywood treats stylists: “It’s a service job.” He believed that this was all the more true for stylists of color, in a society where minorities are seen as “the help,” not the talent. It was not until 2021 that a Black person—Roach—topped the *Hollywood Reporter*’s list of the twenty-five most powerful stylists. He came in first again in 2022.

A month after he announced that he was retiring, Roach ran into Rachel Zoe at a fashion showcase. “He looked at me,” Zoe told me. “And I looked at him and said, ‘I see you. I know.’ ” Zoe, who stepped back from celebrity styling in 2014, said that the challenge with making styling work as a business is that you cannot scale it; doling work out to assistants is tricky. As Zoe put it, clients are thinking, “If I’m spending this money, I want the person there. I don’t want their No. 3, right?”

Roach and I discussed an episode of “The Rachel Zoe Project” in which Zoe is diagnosed as having stress-induced vertigo. Roach could relate. In 2019, he posted a picture of himself from a hospital bed, where he had undergone surgery to remove a benign abdominal mass. The caption read “I’ve literally been working almost every day for the last 5-or-6 years chasing success. In doing so I’ve neglected my health, love life, and sometimes my happiness.” He told me that he began feeling stomach pain in 2017 but delayed taking time off to treat the condition. “I was starting to

break through,” he said. “I was styling Céline. I was on ‘America’s Next Top Model,’ working with Ariana Grande on her Dangerous Woman Tour. I wasn’t going to stop working.”

After the surgery, Roach still did not slow down, and his personal life began to deteriorate. In 2021, he got word that his uncle had died. Roach, busy styling clients, called his cousin and asked if she could change the date of the funeral. “In hindsight, I’m mortified that I asked her that,” he writes in his book. That November, his three-year-old nephew fell to his death from the seventeenth floor of a Chicago high-rise—a tragedy he never stopped working long enough to properly grieve. Roach knew that he needed a break, but taking it easy didn’t come naturally to him. “Growing up the way I did, I didn’t have an opportunity to miss an opportunity,” he said.



Timothée Chalamet “was, like, ‘What the fuck?’,” Roach said of Zendaya’s Mugler robot suit at the London première of “Dune: Part Two.”

Photographs by Daniel Leal / Getty (Left); Aurelien Meunier / Stringer / Getty (Right)

Roach came up on the Chicago fashion scene alongside the late designer Virgil Abloh, the first Black creative director of Louis Vuitton. He told me that he last saw Abloh in Qatar at a retrospective of the designer’s work in 2021, weeks before his death, at the age of forty-one, from a rare form of heart cancer. “I sometimes look down at my phone and his contact will just be

there,” Roach said. “It has happened to me like five times since he passed away. It’s the weirdest thing.” When Abloh died, he was eulogized as part of a line of Black artists—including Lorraine Hansberry, Audre Lorde, and Chadwick Boseman—whose lives were cut short by illness. Their deaths were felt by many to have been hastened by their workloads, and the myriad pressures levied on the young, gifted, and Black. “I think in this country, especially as Black people, we’re taught to suffer through things,” Roach told me. “You almost wear your suffering like a badge of honor. I think when I retired I learned that wasn’t anything to be proud of.”

Naomi Campbell was also at the Hugo Boss show in Miami when he announced his retirement. In his book, he says that she “burst out of her dressing room and said ‘Law, I want to talk to you.’ ” She told him, “You cannot quit. You cannot let them win.” Campbell called Enninful, from British *Vogue*, and put him on speakerphone. “It was a tag team,” Enninful joked when we spoke. He added, “There was no way I was going to just let him retire without pointing out how important he was in the industry, not only as a great stylist but also as a person of color in fashion. There aren’t that many of us. A lot of young people were looking up to him on social media. I always say, If you can see it, you can be it. I wasn’t going to let that go away.”

But one of the things that make Roach a successful stylist is that he is exacting and decisive. He knew he wanted out, just as he knew he wanted Zendaya to wear white Christian Louboutin So Kate pumps as her signature shoe. Roach had been invited to walk the Hugo Boss runway along with DJ Khaled, Pamela Anderson, Campbell, and other celebrities. “There was this big water fountain” near the runway, he told me. “And it was windy in Miami. I remember the water hitting my face and my hair and my clothes, and I was wet, and I just, I don’t know, it just felt so spiritual.” It felt, he said, “like a baptism.”

In August, I visited Roach at his stately, twenty-one-thousand-square-foot home outside Atlanta. He gave me a tour of the leafy grounds, all seventeen acres, in a golf cart. “Do you play golf?” I asked as he drove. “Absolutely not,” he answered. We passed a tennis court. “Did Zendaya try to get you into tennis?” I asked. “Absolutely not,” he repeated, laughing. This was supposed to be a place where Black people did not break a sweat. Roach bought the property after doing some genealogical research in 2019, attempting to find out where his last name came from. In the process, he discovered the will of a slaveowner named Roach in Tennessee, in which the man bequeathed a five-year-old slave boy to his nine-year-old son. “I couldn’t sleep for days thinking about that,” he told me. “Could you imagine somebody giving a child a human being as basically a toy?” He became obsessed with the idea of owning a plantation as an act of reclamation. “I thought, like, what joy it would be to have land that my ancestors possibly toiled on and died on,” he said. He found a place in North Carolina that still had intact slave quarters, but he couldn’t afford it. His real-estate agent suggested a property in Georgia instead. It wasn’t a plantation, but the feeling was the same for Roach. When his nieces from Chicago visit, they take a “gratitude walk” around the premises.

Inside the palatial home, the walls were covered with evocative and sensual paintings by Black artists, such as Genesis Tremaine and Ian Micheal. One, by the latter, showed two dark-skinned men sitting poolside in pink Speedos. Roach told me that he got into art collecting after his agent bought him a Kehinde Wiley print during the pandemic. “He was, like, ‘You need to start buying art and stop buying so many bags,’ ” Roach said. He does not work with an art buyer. “I just buy what I like,” he added. We were chatting in a sitting room as we waited for lunch to be delivered from a local Jamaican restaurant. Roach was wearing a pair of silk Prada pajamas with teal and brown stripes, his hair in long braids covered by a gray wool cap. On the wall between us hung a painting of

Roach in the nude, his body posed away from the viewer with his head turned demurely over his left shoulder, like the subject of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's "La Grande Odalisque." The painting also features objects from Roach's real life: a rug he picked up in India; a photograph by Tyler Mitchell, the first Black photographer to shoot a *Vogue* cover (of Beyoncé, in 2018).

Doorbell. Our lunch had arrived. Roach brought the plastic bag to his dining-room table and laid out containers of red snapper, red beans and rice, and plantains. I told him I had rewatched "Mahogany." I had been texting with my mother about the ending, in which Mahogany, even as her débüt runway collection is met with a standing ovation, decides to return to her boyfriend on the South Side. "I don't understand why she leaves Italy," I texted my mom. "Me neither," she responded. "I couldn't believe she went back to that broke man in Chicago! Lord!" As the credits rolled, I wondered what Mahogany did with her creative energy after giving up her career. I pictured her tossing and turning in bed next to Billy Dee Williams as new ideas for silhouettes and necklines came to her in her dreams.

Here in Georgia, Roach was searching for that secret third thing between leisure and labor: the Devil wears Prada pajamas. But, with New York and Paris Fashion Weeks looming, he admitted that he was getting antsy. "The clothes. They keep calling me back," he said. In a few weeks, he would be back at the Guggenheim, sitting in the front row of the Alaïa show at New York Fashion Week. Later, he would make his way to Paris, where he planned to style Zendaya for the Louis Vuitton show. Over bites of fish, I asked Roach if he still had anything left from that *Ebony* Fashion Fair sale. Next thing I knew, he leaped from his seat, scurried off in a pair of white slippers to a closet somewhere, and returned with an Ungaro fur coat dyed mustard yellow. "Go ahead," he said, nudging me. "Try it on!" ♦



Jennifer Wilson is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker* covering books and culture.

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- **[Let's Have a Long Talk About Our Relationship Just Before Bed!](#)**

By Kate Greathead and Teddy Wayne | I think we need to litigate a text you sent in October, 2018, that's always bothered me and which I've been saving for the perfect moment.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

Let's Have a Long Talk About Our Relationship Just Before Bed!

By [Kate Greathead](#) and [Teddy Wayne](#)

September 16, 2024



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Babe, are you nodding off? I know we're both exhausted after a long day, a dinner party at which you made a three-word comment that left me feeling like you don't know me at all, and the subsequent ninety-minute fight that culminated in a tentative truce. But, now that we're finally in bed, what do you say to my ripping off your sleep-apnea mask and our having a marathon discussion about the state of our relationship?

I just feel like since our most recent dysfunctional episode is fresh in our memories we shouldn't let it go to waste. A much better use of our time would be if I dissected your diction, syntax, and micro-expressions; compared them with the historical record, thanks to a "secret sauce" algorithm I've been coding for the past year; and teased out the sources from which they came (your mother). My

guess is this will take two to four hours that could have been less fruitfully spent slumbering.

I assume you're fluffing your pillow because it'll make for a comfortable object to lean against as I cite the physical affection that your friend Dylan reflexively shows toward his partner as the kind that you once showed toward me but for some reason stopped. After a few lukewarm denials, you'll go into the reasons for this cessation, which will lead me to become snappishly defensive, and we'll devolve into a vicious cycle in which you utter variations on "This is *exactly* what I'm talking about" and "My eyelids are drooping, can we deal with this tomorrow?"

Hold on, buster—I see you dozing off just as I'm about to launch into how your habit of leaving your toothbrush head on the electric toothbrush is indicative of your fundamental lack of respect for all the domestic labor I do, which you justify because you outearn me. Which reminds me—and don't even *think* of bringing out those earplugs, which is impossible anyway, because I nail-gunned your nightstand drawer shut—of the emotional labor I take on when we're around your parents, and how, when we're with mine, you just sneak off to the guest room to "rest" because you "don't add anything to the conversation anyway."

I hid your melatonin bottle, if that's what you're looking for. Aw, shucks, you found it. Well, you're an adult—guess I can't stop you . . . but I suppose I *could* have replaced the contents with the pseudoephedrine pills I've been stockpiling. Good luck not manically jittering for the next twelve hours! Because, baby, we're gonna be airing festering grievances. All. Night. Long.

Thank you for apologizing. That took a lot, and I think it's only fair that I exploit the opening you've given me by referring back to your concession seven more times.

Yes, I know it's three in the morning. Sure, I'm aware you've got to be out the door at "0700 hours" to make it in time to your big, important "manned shuttle launch." Nevertheless, I think we need to litigate a text you sent in October, 2018, that's always bothered me and which I've been saving for the perfect moment.

Why don't you greet me with a kiss anymore? Why can't you say you love me without my saying it first and elbowing you in the ribs several times? And why is it a big deal that I placed tire spikes on your side of the mattress to insure that instead of going to sleep you —oh, I don't know—actually *listened* to me for once?

Can you get the door? It's the 100 gecs cover band I booked to play our bedroom.

Sweetie, are the "Clockwork Orange" eyelid clamps comfy? Because I don't want you to miss any part of the twelve-minute monologue I've recorded and, with A.I., turned into a David Lynchian short film that will loop at steadily increasing volume until sunrise.

O.K., we've covered a lot of ground, but I think it's best if you take the couch for the remaining half hour before the alarm goes off. So let's make up by saying good night, hugging like robots, and angrily texting each other things we belatedly thought of. ♦

Kate Greathead has been contributing humor to The New Yorker since 2015. She is the author of "The Book of George" and "Laura & Emma."

Teddy Wayne, a novelist and a screenwriter, is the author of "The Winner."

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Fiction

• “Autobahn”

By Hugo Hamilton | When a car pulled up, it felt like a bright moment of luck, but then the driver got out and pointed a gun at me.

[Fiction](#)

Autobahn

By [Hugo Hamilton](#)

September 15, 2024



Illustration by Christoph Niemann

On the Autobahn outside Frankfurt. November. The fields were covered in a thin sheet of snow. Chunks of gray sludge clung to the wheel guards of trucks. Tires ripped along the road. I had my thumb out. I was wearing an overcoat that I'd got from an uncle who was twice my size; it fit me like a house. When a car pulled

up, it felt like a bright moment of luck, but then the driver got out and pointed a gun at me.

Polizei.

He was wearing a dark-green leather jacket, and I remember him being shorter than me, stocky and overpowering. He was bald, and maybe that reminded me of my father. His eyes were full of aggression. He stood with his gun pointing at my face, and I felt a familiar weakness in my stomach as he told me to drop my bag and keep my hands out of my pockets.

He wanted to know where I was going.

“Munich.”

“Why Munich?”

“I live there. I have a partner and a baby there. I work in a printing firm.”

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Hugo Hamilton read “Autobahn.”](#)

He asked for proof of identity, but I had none with me. I told him I was Irish, and he crouched down to empty my bag: a half-finished sandwich, a Teddy bear, the book I was reading. The Teddy bear had a yellow tag with the name of the manufacturer clamped to one ear. The cop flipped through the book and threw it on the ground beside the Teddy bear. Then he stood up and asked me where I was coming from, so I told him I’d been in Frankfurt, visiting a friend —we were starting a band together.

He bore a look of extreme suspicion. The book I had brought with me didn’t help. It was the latest novel by Heinrich Böll, a writer who was seen by many in the right-wing media as an enemy of the people.

Or was there something in my eyes, some eagerness, some susceptibility in my expression? An exaggerated honesty, perhaps, that could be mistaken for transgression? My smile was my only defense. A default openness in my face which could not hide my wish to be loved. Still a boy, alert to any alteration in the mood, ready to flinch at the first sign of anger. The sudden shift in the rooms when my father came home from work. The key in the lock, the slap of his briefcase on the wooden floor, and the silence that fell over the house.

The printing firm I worked for at that time produced maps. Maps of the world. Maps of Europe. Street maps of major cities. I loved maps, but I hated the noise of the printing machines. They roared all day and sent me into a trance. Large sheets of paper were picked up by automated suction pads and pulled across four enormous drums before emerging in full color. When the machines stopped, the foreman's voice turned into a shout. An engineer had to be called because the maps were being printed incorrectly, names and streets mismatched.

I'm not sure I thought of this at the time, but there was a part of me that seemed misprinted, too, out of register; I didn't belong to the streets I walked on. I was travelling in a foreign country, my mother's country. It was like coming home, but not to my home. A stranger at home, you might say, making my way across her ancestral map.

By the Autobahn between Frankfurt and Munich, I stood with my arms out like a boy pretending to fly. People in passing cars could see a young man with a beard and long hair and a coat that was far too big being held at gunpoint. It was late in the afternoon. The sky was overcast, and I was afraid it was going to get dark soon. All I could think of was love and music and the safety of bedrooms and the baby asleep. Our baby was six weeks old. A girl.

The cop wanted to know why I spoke fluent German.

“My mother came from the Rhineland and went to live in Ireland,” I said. “We spoke German at home in Dublin.”

He didn’t believe me. He clearly took me to be living under an assumed identity, the Teddy bear part of a brilliant disguise. I was full of shit. Everybody was full of shit. It was a nervy time in Germany. A wave of domestic terrorism had swept the country, and a cop had recently been shot dead in the street while checking a license plate.

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

In the filling station where I’d bought the sandwich before walking up to the Autobahn, I’d stood for a while looking at a poster of wanted terrorists. These posters were found in train stations, supermarkets, civic offices, stuck to lampposts and billboards all over the country. Four rows of black-and-white photographs showing the faces of known suspects, with their names, dates of birth, and the places they came from. Eight women and eleven men. Written in large red letters across the top were the words “*VIOLENT ANARCHISTS*.” A line underneath, in black: “Wanted for complicity in murders, bomb attacks, bank raids, and other crimes.”

Some of the faces had been crossed out with a black X, and I knew from reading the newspapers that these people had already been arrested or shot dead. The gang leaders were being held at the Stammheim maximum-security prison. One of them had died while on hunger strike. One had just died by suicide. Some of them were still on the loose. In the bottom row was a man who looked like me. He had a beard and long hair. He grew up in a part of Germany close to where my mother came from, and I thought about how easily my life might have been switched with his. He could have been an Irish musician working in a printing firm in Munich, and I could have taken up his life of crime and terror.

A reward of a hundred thousand Deutsche marks was being offered for information leading to the arrest of any of the individuals above. Another line at the bottom of the poster said “Warning! These violent criminals make ruthless use of weapons.”

The cop told me to turn around and step over the crash barrier. I had no idea why. A man with a gun is a gun. I obeyed the gun and found myself walking in front of the cop into a small stand of birch trees. Not a forest, I remember, but enough to make me feel that I was disappearing out of sight. I soon emerged into the open, where the land dipped in front of me. The gun felt like a steel finger on my back, so I continued walking down the gradual slope into a white field. The sound of traffic had receded now, and I missed the safety of the Autobahn. I could hear nothing but the cracking of frozen grass under my feet. That off-road silence, with no noise apart from the crows in a nearby tree, the Autobahn like a river flowing by, and the crunch of his feet right behind me.

The memory of my father is ever present. He’s been dead for years, but still it feels as if he could appear at any moment. I hear the key in the door. His footsteps following me. In bookshops, in libraries. In pubs and restaurants. My father shows up at times when I least expect it. He’s there in the shape of other men, friends, musicians, workmates, bosses, officials I’ve dealt with, people I owe money to —all of them replicating the mercurial relationship I had with him.

He once came bursting into my room in the middle of the night. “How dare you!” he was shouting as he came up the stairs. “How dare you? How dare you?” I can’t recall what exactly it was that sent him into such a rage, but I woke up to find my bedroom door flung open and light pouring in from the landing. He came striding in with his fists up and my eyes had no time to adjust to the light before he started punching at my head. I managed to dodge most of the blows by sliding down under the covers. He was out of breath, boxing the pillow, trying to find my buried face, and shouting, “How dare you?” My mother behind him trying to drag him off.

The other children holding on to the bannisters, and my brother Franz standing at the door, pleading for peace with the German word *Frieden*.

What made him like that? Was he dishing out what he himself had got while growing up with his mother in a small town in West Cork, born with a limp and everybody down on him because his father had died while serving in the British Navy?

Why do these critical points of memory still come back at random? At the checkout in the supermarket, the woman on the till asks me if I have a club card, and I suddenly recall that night with my father marching into my sleep. Then I see myself walking into a winter field outside Frankfurt, behind me a cop who believes I'm one of those anarchists plotting to overthrow the capitalist order.



"If there was a marriage proposal today, initiated by me, would you say your answer would most likely be 'Yes,' 'No,' or 'Undecided'?"

Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

“Wasters,” my father would have called them.

I was no threat to the state. I was a musician. I had long hair and was wearing a borrowed coat, that's all. It was my absurd heritage, I would have said to the cop if only he'd allowed me to turn around and explain. I was partly from his country and partly from somewhere else. An elsewhere man, if you like. In my mind, I migrated a million times a day, jumping from the sea to the Autobahn in the same breath.

He told me to keep going. Farther and farther away from the public gaze, out into the field of snow, as if I were walking into a country with no end.

I thought of the Teddy bear lying on the side of the Autobahn. The woman in the shop had asked me if I wanted it wrapped—was it for a little sister, maybe? I told her it was for my own daughter. Six weeks old, I added, and she said, “Oh, that’s so sweet.” She didn’t quite believe I could be a father, with my long hair and a coat I had not yet fully grown into. I could hardly believe it myself. There was a tiny person in my life now who would need me to come home and sing a song for her.

My father once gave me a mouth organ for my birthday. He left it on the breakfast table. I thanked him and opened up the box. The instrument inside was like a big smile, a wide set of wooden teeth encased in shining metal. I blew the first warped note, a musical yelp that surprised us all around the table; it was like a blaring car horn on the street outside. The box had the name Hohner stamped on it, and “Made in Germany,” along with a picture of a man in a mountainous landscape, blowing a trumpet, above a valley with a river.

I can't recall what happened to that mouth organ. It must have got lost. The smiling harmonica went missing along with the box it came in.

The reason I remember it so well is that he bought me the very same harmonica again the following year. Had he forgotten that he'd already bought it for me? Or had he noticed that I had lost it? I thought of him making his way to McCullough Pigott's music store on his way home and buying that mouth organ once again, as if it were for himself. Or maybe he was really buying it for my mother, because she loved all sorts of music and reconciliation in the house. He kept it in his briefcase overnight and placed it on the breakfast table for me to find when I got up in the morning.

I could not afford to lose it again, and I still had it, close to my heart, that day in November, out in a blank field where I had become invisible, hoping the cop would show a bit of mercy and let me go.

There is nothing I can insert into my memory that would make this event on the Autobahn near Frankfurt look any better. Everything has remained intact. Suppressed and untold, as though it were happening right now.

He ordered me to stop walking. *Halt*. A single word, like a gunshot flying past my ears. He told me to take off my coat and turn around to face him—that's what I recall, turning to see the violence in his eyes. All the harm he could inflict on me with nobody around to witness it but the crows gone to roost. My coat lay in a heavy pool of wool around my feet. My body was thin and vulnerable to the cold. He squatted down to search the pockets and found a packet of chewing gum, which I was not aware I had until he discovered it. In the inside pocket, he found the mouth organ.

“What’s this?”

I told him it was my instrument. In the band. Along with my singing voice. He examined it and threw it at my feet.

“Play it,” he said.

I blew into my fists and rubbed them against my trousers. I picked up the mouth organ and placed it between my lips, which were trembling with the cold. At first, I produced nothing but noise. I could not look at him. I closed my eyes and put my heart into it. Playing for my life.

When I opened my eyes again, I saw him checking his watch. I was wasting his time. He had found a musician, not a terrorist who would make his name. He gave me another once-over, assessing my clothes and shoes as much as my thoughts, my point of view, my weirdness, my away-from-homeness. I had no idea what he had in mind or what he wanted from me. Was he expecting me to make a run for it or to give him a reason to use his weapon in self-defense?

Then he put the gun into the pocket of his leather jacket and turned away. I could hardly believe he was walking across the field, back up the slope to the Autobahn. I was unable to move. Waiting to see if he would change his mind and come back.

The chronology of memory can shift. Time has collapsed, and you are in two places at once. That moment in the field outside Frankfurt and also the moment when I saw my father on the street in Dublin.

Coming home from school one day, I was standing at a news vender's on O'Connell Street, looking at the magazines, when he came right up beside me in his tweed cap. I recognized his voice as he asked for the *Evening Press* in his soft Cork accent. He seemed like a kinder man than he could ever allow himself to be at home. I was seeing him for the first time in my life as an ordinary person on the main street in Dublin.

He didn't recognize me. I was about to tug at his sleeve and say, "I'm here. It's me. Your son." But then what? We had nothing to say to each other after that. There was never much communication

between us, apart from slamming doors and hard eyes, and the occasional speeches he gave at the breakfast table. No conversation we could have had going home on the train together, each of us locked in our own thoughts, our ideas moving in opposite directions.

I watched him pay for the newspaper. Knew each vein in his hand. Knew each knuckle. I admired him and feared him like nobody else in the world and wished there could one day be a truce between us so that we could laugh and talk to each other like friends. The way I sometimes saw him laugh with my mother until he had tears in his eyes and had to take off his glasses.

The vendor folded the newspaper with his blackened hands. My father thanked him and put the newspaper under his arm. I smiled and waited to be noticed, but he turned his back and walked away. I was on my own in the city, a bit homesick, as my mother often was, Dublin lonely.

I should have run after him, but I could do nothing but stand there in the street and watch him disappear into the crowd. Limping a little, not very tall, his briefcase swinging and inside it his flask, his lunchbox, a book about beekeeping, and perhaps, who knows, the newly purchased mouth organ he was intending to give me because I had lost the first one.

My coat felt cold when I put it back on. I began to shiver with my entire body. Now that there was no need to be afraid, I felt the fear even more. The time was gone, and it wasn't possible to correct the past. I held on to that memory as if it were my only friend. I made my way up to the road and found my bag on the ground. The Teddy bear looked dead. The wind from passing trucks kept lifting the first few pages of the book. The cars had their headlights on, but I was not sure that anyone could see me there in the dark.

Somebody pulled up at last, but I was unable to regain that sense of luck. The driver smiled, and I felt the warmth of the interior as I got in. He was playing the Doors on his car stereo. That yelping sound of the harmonica on “Roadhouse Blues.” I wanted to laugh and slap the dashboard and sing along with the words: *Keep your eyes on the road, your hand upon the wheel.* ♦

Hugo Hamilton is the author of works including “*The Speckled People: A Memoir of a Half-Irish Childhood*” and the novel “*The Pages*. ”

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How a Mid-Century Paramour Became a Democratic Power Broker

Churchill weaponized her powers of seduction—but Pamela Harriman came into her own when she brought her glamour to Washington.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

September 16, 2024



Harriman's emergence on the political scene was swift and impressive. She liked to bet on winners, and she was good at it.

Photograph by Guy Marineau / WWD / Penske Media / Getty

They don't make them like Pamela Harriman anymore. On balance, that's probably a good thing. Not that there isn't much to admire or, at least, marvel at in the life of the mid-century paramour turned Democratic Party power broker—her talent for keeping strategically chosen lovers as lifelong friends, her zest for reinventing herself, her unquenchable optimism about her party's prospects, her capacity for leading a remarkably consequential public life without ever holding an actual public post, or even really a job, until she was seventy-three. But Harriman's path to power—greased by aristocratic privilege, fuelled by sexual

alliances, and, for both reasons, not exactly transparent—isn’t one you’d recommend to an ambitious woman today, either for her own sake or, not to sound too stuffy about it, for democracy’s.

Sonia Purnell’s new biography, “[Kingmaker: Pamela Harriman’s Astonishing Life of Power, Seduction, and Intrigue](#)” (Viking), is a bit of a feminist reclamation project, bent on producing a more respectful portrait than those found in two earlier books, Christopher Ogden’s “[Life of the Party: The Biography of Pamela Digby Churchill Hayward Harriman](#)” (1994) and Sally Bedell Smith’s “[Reflected Glory: The Life of Pamela Churchill Harriman](#)” (1996). It’s time to set to rights, Purnell believes, Harriman’s reputation as, what she calls, a “conniving and ridiculous gold digger obsessed by sex.” I wasn’t entirely convinced that such a rescue operation was necessary. It’s true that the earlier books were meaner than Purnell’s, flecked with nineties snark and anonymous quotes. (Ogden’s was the product of an authorized-biography agreement gone sour.) And Harriman was certainly subject to gossip, some of it scurrilous and sexist. A nasty takedown in *The New Republic* by the glib British expat Henry Fairlie, published in 1988 under the headline “Shamela,” dubbed her a Washington widow of “vivid repute . . . her name inflated with each husband.” When Bill Clinton nominated Harriman to be the Ambassador to France, Senator Strom Thurmond felt it appropriate to declare, “They’re sending the Whore of Babylon to Paris!” (That would be the irredeemably segregationist senator from South Carolina, who had a string of sexual-harassment allegations to his name and a long-unacknowledged daughter by a Black teen-ager whose mother worked for his parents.)

As Purnell herself amply documents, however, Harriman’s political savvy and clout weren’t exactly overlooked in her lifetime. Clinton, whose Presidential promise Harriman recognized and championed early on, called her “the First Lady of the Democratic Party.” When the Gorbachevs made a trip to Washington, in 1987, they sought her out. Nelson Mandela made a point of visiting her Georgetown

home, in 1993, to tap her counsel on getting voters to the polls. When “Shamela” hit the stands, Purnell says, half the Senate signed a letter condemning the article (more than a few of the senators had been beneficiaries of her fund-raising largesse), adding that Harriman, “a woman of extraordinary wealth and ability,” could have chosen a life of “idleness and self-indulgence” but, instead, had chosen one of “public service.”

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Purnell, the author of three previous biographies (including the excellent “A Woman of No Importance,” about Virginia Hall, an American whose career as an Allied spy during the Second World War really was in need of rediscovery), has written a thorough account of Harriman’s rise which also manages to be a brisk, twisty read. Harriman was a woman of action and, on the evidence presented here, a supremely confident, canny, seductive, driven, and discreet one. She was neither particularly introspective nor penetrating in her observations of others. (Purnell quotes Harriman describing her lover Gianni Agnelli, the chairman of Fiat, as “nice” and “fun”; of her second husband, the hot-shot talent agent turned Broadway producer Leland Hayward, she said, “There was something very vulnerable about [him] that attracted me enormously.”) Informed of a diary kept by a formidable man of her acquaintance, the young Harriman burst out with a telling response: “Oh, what a goddam bore! Imagine! If something exciting happened during the day, the last thing you want to do is write it down.” The action is plentiful, though, much of it bound up with

the central plotlines of the times—she was not a woman to “let her century pass her by,” as Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeleine Albright put it. And Purnell has found plenty of people to talk to about their memories of Harriman, along with archival sources, including newly available transcripts of interviews with her that Ogden, her spurned biographer, conducted.

Harriman was born Pamela Digby, in 1920, the oldest child of Edward Kenelm Digby, the eleventh Baron Digby, and the Honourable Constance Bruce. Being minor members of the peerage, they naturally needed nicknames: he was Kenny, and she was Pansy. Pamela spent part of her childhood in Australia, where Kenny had been dispatched as military secretary to the governor-general. Back in England, the Digbys lived at a family estate, Minterne, where they were waited upon by footmen who wore gold buttons engraved with ostriches, part of the family crest. Minterne sat on some fifteen hundred acres and contained fifty rooms but—until Pamela’s parents moved in—no bathrooms, which Kenny’s father had thought were “disgusting.” Purnell tells us that Pansy “doted” on her spirited, rambunctious elder daughter, “almost as if she had been the desired son,” though she “rarely ventured” to the nursery where Pamela and her sister spent most of their time. Kenny, like the blustering patriarch of another aristocratic family with intelligent daughters, the Mitfords, was firmly of the opinion that formal education rendered young women unmarriageable. As a teen-ager, Pamela pleaded to be sent to boarding school. When Kenny and Pansy relented, she spent less than two years at a private school for girls, in Hertfordshire, from which she departed with a certificate in domestic science, the capstone of her classroom education.

The Digbys did dispatch her to Paris and, oddly, to Munich—in 1937, when Nazis were marching in the streets—for the requisite finishing. Purnell notes that “droves of aristocratic girls like Pamela were sent to be immersed in Bavarian culture, which was considered more polished and disciplined than that of France.”

(“Disciplined” would be one word for it in those years.) Seventeen-year-old Pamela was both politically attuned and naïve enough to ask the nearest Mitford girl—the Nazi-loving Unity—to arrange a tea for her with Hitler. Her account of their meeting wasn’t especially sharp (“he seemed made of tinfoil as later caricatures made out and he was sort of nervous”), and some of her detractors insisted that she must have made the whole thing up. Purnell doesn’t think so: “However unsatisfactory, the meeting marked the start of Pamela’s lifelong mission of self-education about politics and power.”

Soon enough, it was time for Pamela’s *début*, which is to say, the great push to marry her off to a suitable man of her social class, in the annual twelve-week marketplace ritual known as the season. Within a few years, she would secure her reputation as a world-class flirt and beauty—auburn-haired, with scintillating blue eyes and a peaches-and-cream complexion, gifted in the art of making whichever man she happened to be speaking to feel like the only man in the room. She’d lean “forward to capture his every word,” Purnell writes of one significant later conquest, stroking “his forearm with her fingertips,” laughing “deliciously at his attempted repartee, her tongue pointed erotically behind her teeth.” (That last trick is a little hard to picture, but I’ll take Purnell’s word for it.) Yet Pamela’s first season was a flop. Deborah Mitford, who also came out that year, described her as “rather fat, fast and the butt of many teases.” Nancy Mitford, the novelist, was hardly less withering, calling Pamela “a red headed, bouncing little thing, regarded as a joke by her contemporaries.” (Love in a cold climate, indeed.) Pamela ended the season without a fiancé.

The man she said yes to the following year would transform the course of her life—not through force of character (he had a weak one) or of love (theirs was not a moonstruck romance) but through the strength of his name and connections. Randolph Churchill, the only son of the future Prime Minister, “did not even pretend” to be in love with Pamela when he proposed—he’d reportedly asked nine

other women to marry him that week alone—but he told her that she looked like a healthy candidate to bear his child, paternity being his Churchillian duty. As a husband, the philandering, gambling-mad, verbally abusive Randolph was a colossal letdown, starting with their wedding night, during which he read aloud great chunks of Edward Gibbon’s “[Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire](#).” (“To ensure she was paying attention, between bouts of snoring or farting, he barked, ‘What was the last sentence?’ ” Purnell writes.) But, as his father’s son, he held a golden key. While her husband did his military duty in England and then in Egypt, she grew close to her in-laws, Winston and Clementine, who were utterly charmed by her. She sat up late with Winston, playing the two-handed card game bezique when he was too worried to sleep, cut his cigars for him, and took a deep interest in the progress of the war. By 1940, Pamela, now pregnant, had moved into 10 Downing Street, where she shared a bunk bed in the bomb shelter with the Prime Minister (she occupied the lower bunk, joking that she had “one Churchill on top of me and one inside me”) and dined with senior government ministers and foreign leaders, including Charles de Gaulle. Warning that the Germans might soon invade England, her father-in-law told her that she would have to take down at least one, using a carving knife if necessary. In the event, the Churchills would find much more suitable uses for her talents.



Cartoon by Sam Gross

Clementine, we're told in "Kingmaker," had "noticed Pamela's power over older men (including her own husband) through a rare cocktail of flattering attention, smoldering sex appeal and an impressive grasp of geopolitics." Now Clementine and Winston saw a chance to deploy their daughter-in-law in the all-important campaign of wooing the Americans to abandon neutrality and join the fight against Nazi Germany. In that cause, Pamela found her own distinctive war work, "unleashed as the Churchills' most willing and committed secret weapon." A 1941 photo spread in *Life*, shot by Cecil Beaton, of a winsome Pamela with her new baby boy, named for Winston, enhanced the appeal of the plucky English, holding out so bravely and attractively against the Blitz. But it was her deftly managed personal contacts that helped seal the Anglo-American special relationship. When Franklin Delano Roosevelt sent his irascible right-hand man, Harry Hopkins, to London, the Churchills launched a charm offensive in which Pamela was front and center. Then came an offer from Lord Beaverbrook, a press magnate whom the Prime Minister had appointed to oversee aircraft production. Beaverbrook would put baby Winston and a nanny up at his country estate so that an unencumbered Pamela could move into the Dorchester hotel, in London, and work her magic on influential Americans. He would outfit her for the mission, Purnell writes, with a wardrobe of "tight-fitting evening frocks, high heels and natty tailored suits to help her in her new role in Britain's desperate struggle to survive."

In March, 1941, F.D.R. signed the Lend-Lease Act, effectively ending American isolationism by opening up U.S. military aid to Britain. He sent W. Averell Harriman to London to oversee the program, and to report back on the British conduct of the war. Harriman, too, would require some tender persuasion, and Pamela, now barely in her twenties, was up for the job. He was forty-nine, vastly wealthy from his family's railroad fortune, and, as luck would have it, "absolutely marvelous-looking," in Pamela's estimation. At a dinner at the Dorchester soon after his arrival,

Pamela, wearing “a skin-tight shoulderless gold lamé dress bought specially for the occasion by Beaverbrook” and dazzlingly conversant in matters military and political, made immediate headway. What she called “a very fortuitous” Luftwaffe bombing raid sent them dashing to Harriman’s lower-floor quarters. Here, Purnell gets a little purple, but that must have been hard to resist: “While the building quivered from the worst raid in London to date and shrapnel rattled down onto the streets, Pamela lay naked in the arms of the man who might be able to bring the horror to an end.” She soon moved in with Harriman, who was married but with a wife far away in New York and busy with her own extramarital pursuits.

For their part, the Churchills seem to have known and tacitly encouraged their daughter-in-law’s useful affair. (In the midst of her divorce from Randolph, a few years later, in which Winston and Clementine stood by her, Randolph accused them of tolerating her infidelity for the sake of the war effort. Other than Randolph, who would blame them?) And F.D.R. was pleased by his emissary’s particular closeness to the Churchills—since his representatives in London were supposed to be gathering intelligence on the bibulous Prime Minister’s fitness as a wartime leader. Pamela not only helped to solidify ties with the United States but also became a conduit for information—all the more so when she began juggling affairs with other influential Americans stationed in London. Her admirers included [Edward R. Murrow](#), the CBS journalist broadcasting from the city; William Paley, his boss at the network, who was now helping to run an Allied PsyOps division; John Hay (Jock) Whitney, a high-ranking intelligence officer with the Office of Strategic Services; Fred Anderson, an Army Air Force general—and his British counterpart, Charles (Peter) Portal. Altogether, it made for “an astonishing collection of bedfellows,” Purnell writes. Pamela was “in a prime position to pick up snippets of high-level American conversation, throw-away comments, stories of Washington politicking, fragments of

intelligence and any statistics she could glean.” She could tell Churchill what Harriman or Anderson was saying in private about military strategy, and vice versa; she could reassure the Americans about Churchill and the good use to which their aid was being put. These men—along with generals such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and George Marshall, media moguls, and State Department officials—turned up for gatherings that Pamela hosted in a cute new top-floor apartment she had taken on Grosvenor Square. At these cozy, exclusive occasions, she’d serve hard-to-come-by treats like oysters, chocolate, and whiskey, talk “casually and cheerfully” throughout air raids, and occasionally take calls from Downing Street that sent her rushing to the Prime Minister’s side. She was, by now, all of twenty-three years old.

You could imagine a scenario in which Pamela felt pressured into sleeping with some of these men. But, if she did, Purnell reports no evidence of it. Pamela said no when she wanted to, and it appears she never had her heart broken. She seemed to feel completely free to sleep with whomever she was drawn to or deemed useful. In those years, she was known to say that she didn’t like women, and it’s true that she spent nearly all her time in the company of men. By her own account, she relished her London life, supercharged as it was with danger, sex, and political urgency. “It was a terrible war,” as she later put it, “but if you were the right age, the right time and in the right place, it was spectacular.”

The section of “Kingmaker” devoted to its subject’s war years was, I found, the most riveting and revelatory. (I feel a little guilty about that; they were such a short span, and occurred when she was so young.) After the war, Pamela moved to Paris and took up with Prince Aly Khan, the Aga Khan’s son, and then with the automotive magnate Agnelli (her American friends helped him elide unfortunate bits of his biography, including fighting for the Axis powers in Mussolini’s military, and forge ties with the C.I.A.), as well as with the baron and banker Elie de Rothschild. They all lavished her with gifts and paid her bills, making her a (well) kept

woman. She stayed friends with Agnelli after their breakup—Purnell says he called his former lover every day at 7 A.M. for the rest of her life. Pamela converted to Catholicism in the hope of marrying Agnelli, a strike against her when it came to the prospect of marrying a Rothschild. (The families of both men nixed a union with her.) The man she actually married next was the agent-producer Leland Hayward, moving in on him pretty flagrantly when he was still married to his third wife. Pamela made him very happy—kneeling to remove his shoes when he came in the door and, evidently, demonstrating such a flair for fellatio that Hayward referred to her as La Bouche—but alienated his children, a pattern she would repeat in her next marriage. It surely didn't help that Hayward touted her to his daughter Brooke as “the greatest courtesan in the world!” (Pamela comes off as a swanky, officious interloper in [“Haywire,”](#) Brooke's 1977 memoir, which, unfortunately for Pamela, became a classic of Hollywood family-dysfunction lit.) Motherhood was not Pamela's strong suit. She didn't have much time for her son when he was growing up, and although he stayed close enough to take plenty of her money as an adult, he also embarrassed her with his right-wing politics as an M.P.

In 1971, the year Hayward died, Pamela reconnected with Averell Harriman, who had by then held enough diplomatic posts to be called a statesman and had served a term as governor of New York. His wife, Marie, had died the previous year. Kindling to their wartime memories, Pamela and he quickly took up where they left off and married in September. With Harriman's money, Pamela reinvented herself as a political player in her adopted country, where she became a citizen shortly after she became Mrs. Harriman. (Harriman's assistant asked if he'd like to stop paying his new wife the monthly stipend she'd been getting from him since the forties—a lagniappe he'd apparently forgotten about.) They moved to D.C., settling into Averell's home in Georgetown, which was graced with art collected by Marie, including a van

Gogh, and bought a country manor, Willow Oaks, in Virginia horse country, overlooking the Blue Ridge Mountains. At both homes, they hosted high-level Democratic summits and fund-raisers, and dinner parties with Gilded Age menus (turtle soup and the like) which Pamela, glistening with jewels, presided over. In the early nineteen-eighties, she launched a political-action committee, nicknamed PamPac, that supported congressional candidates of her choosing.

Pamela Harriman's emergence on the American political scene was swift and impressive—though also, given all the money she had to throw around, something of a foregone conclusion. Reading about it in detail now can feel a little like an immersion in stale scuttlebutt from back issues of *Roll Call*. I was glad, but not fascinated, to learn, for instance, that a campaign ad she funded for the Maryland senator Paul Sarbanes, in 1981, effectively countered a conservative attack ad against him. Though Purnell contends here and there that Harriman was a woman of ideas, there's not a whole lot to support that—she wasn't a great public speaker, and she'd hired writers to help her with her op-eds—and what glimpses we get of her policy commitments mark her as a fairly conventional centrist. Still, she liked to bet on winners, and she was good at it. She didn't think much of the Party's 1988 standard-bearer, Michael Dukakis, particularly after he asked for a dais to speak from at her house; she chilled on Al Gore, concluding that he didn't "connect with people," and was convinced of Clinton's political chops even after he failed to win reëlection as governor of Arkansas. Purnell makes a strong case that Harriman helped buoy Democrats during the glum Reagan years, injecting glamour and pizzazz with her parties, and gritty Churchillian optimism with her reassurances that they could regain the White House. Purnell argues persuasively, too, that Harriman made an effective Ambassador to France—admired by the French for her elegance and her past. Richard Holbrooke, whom Clinton sent to Paris to help broker a deal for peace in Bosnia, appreciated her as an able partner in that effort.

After she died, four years into her service, suffering a stroke while swimming in the pool at the Ritz, the French President Jacques Chirac declared her “a peerless diplomat.”

If Harriman had come of age a little later, or in a different milieu, she might have risen to political prominence in her own right. She might have run for office, for instance, or have had a career more like the Democratic Party’s super-effective power broker today, Nancy Pelosi, who, most recently, seems to have played a crucial role in persuading Joe Biden to step aside. This is not to downplay the significance of Harriman’s affective labors. Boosting morale in the inner circles of politics can be important. But there’s a price to be paid for power achieved chiefly in that way, especially for women. One night, in 1976, the Harrimans hosted a party in Georgetown for Senator Frank Church, who was contemplating a run for the Presidency. After dinner, Pamela signalled that the women guests should follow her upstairs. But one of those women was the journalist Sally Quinn, who’d come with her husband, the *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee. Quinn was writing a profile of Senator Church and wanted to be in the room for the more informal conversation. She stayed downstairs. “Turning puce at what he saw as female impertinence, Averell bellowed that it was his house and in his house the ladies went upstairs after dinner,” Purnell writes. Pamela seemed horrified, Quinn thought, but she did nothing, and Quinn left. Pamela Harriman retreated upstairs with the ladies—not where she wanted to be, and not really where she belonged. ♦



Margaret Talbot joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of “*By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution.*”

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The Anguish of Looking at a Monet

More than beauty, more than color, the artist reveals the doubts that bind us.

By [Jackson Arn](#)

September 16, 2024



In works like “Camille Monet on a Garden Bench” (1873), even near figures have the blur of uncrossable distance.

Art work by Claude Monet / Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art

In September, 1870, while Prussian soldiers were trying to starve Paris into surrender, Claude Monet was in Normandy with his wife, Camille, and their son, Jean, looking for a boat out of France. They weren't alone. Every day, hundreds of people went down to the docks in the hope of escaping the Franco-Prussian War; only later would Monet learn that some of his best friends had shoved through the same crowd. By November, he and his family had reached London, though they spoke no English. Months passed, and the Siege of Paris gave way to the Paris Commune and thousands of murdered civilians. The Monets moved on to the Netherlands, where Camille taught French and Claude painted

canals. In photographs taken in Amsterdam around this time, their eyes look a decade older than the rest of them. They bought pots for a garden they might grow when the killing stopped.

Fleeing to two countries to avoid war was in some ways the rule, not the exception, of this artist's life. He fled apartments to avoid creditors. He fled to the French coast to avoid the man whose wife he would marry. After getting married, he fled Paris for the calm of the countryside. He had some dozen addresses in five years, but it wasn't the macho, Gauguin-in-Tahiti kind of fleeing that tends to turn into myth. If anything, Monet now stands for gardens and domestic coziness and knowing that the same things will be in the same places tomorrow—the kind of comfort, you could say, that matters most to someone for whom things often weren't.

In the nearly hundred years since his death, Monet has become . . . but do I really need to tell you? No canvas has been left un-kitchen-magnetized, no sector of pop culture remains unconquered. The first art review I can remember was about one of his lily ponds; the critic was Leonardo DiCaprio's character in "Titanic." ("Look at his use of color here," he coos, wiggling his fingers over the canvas with dreamboat sensitivity.) At present, there are no fewer than fifteen cities hosting or vying to host "Claude Monet: The Immersive Experience," in which you put on a headset and step into the artist's shoes. The show's Web site includes a picture of two women taking the V.R. tour "together," i.e., inches apart but lost in their own screen-worlds. One faces away from us; the other covers her mouth.

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It's a familiar twenty-first-century moment, a little utopian and a little dystopian. The easy thing would be to call it a total perversion of a great artist, but Monet made bright, oddly bleakish moments something of a specialty. An early painting of Camille sitting on a park bench shares more of its mood and composition with that photograph than anybody has a right to expect. Flowers float over Camille's right shoulder; over her left, a gentleman in black stares at her staring at nothing. This was in 1873, not long after the Monets had returned to France. They finally had their garden, and a six-year-old Jean to share it with, but it was also the year that Camille lost her father. The wall text next to the painting, which hangs at the Met, suggests that the scene "telegraphs sadness," but "uncertainty" might be fairer: two people, cocooned in a place built for their pleasure, almost erotically close but goggled by unknown thoughts. Time flies and technology sprints. Aloneness and togetherness, which may be parts of the same modern itch, have barely moved at all.

When it comes to artist biographies, one rarely hears about form echoing content—if there are Cubist lives of Picasso or Expressionist lives of Munch, I haven't had the pleasure. Jackie Wullschlager's "Monet: The Restless Vision" (Knopf), on the other hand, could be called an Impressionist biography of the central Impressionist. Some important events are done in smudged glimpses, but the over-all shape of his eighty-six years is clear. Every few chapters, a sudden nub of detail robs you of your breath.

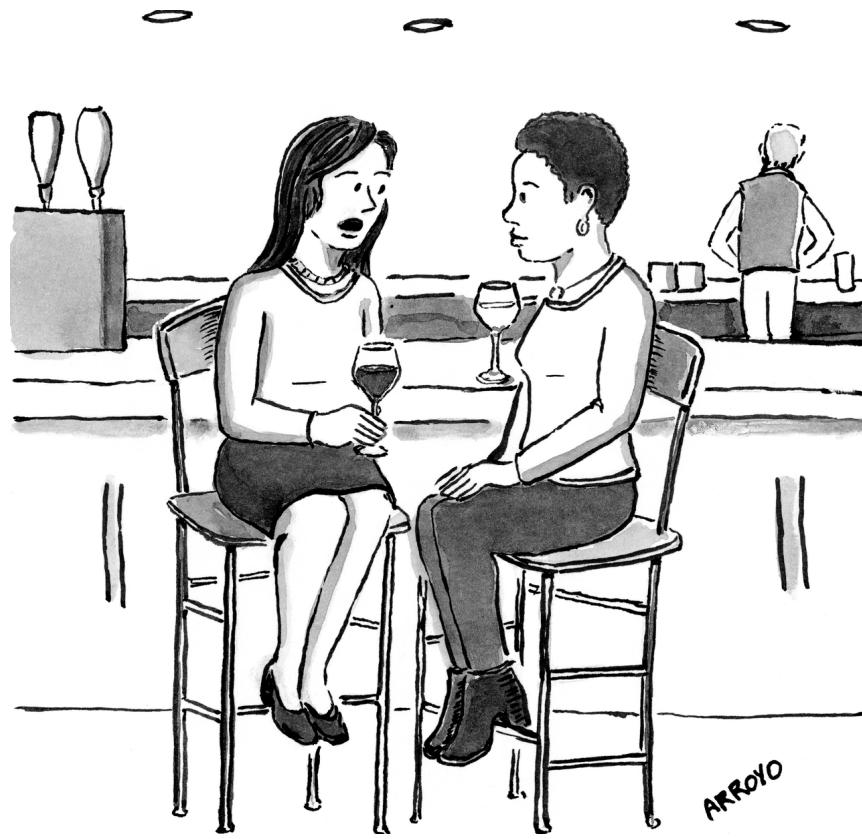
All biographies are a little Impressionist in this sense, Monet's unusually so. "Only a single eyewitness report of Monet, other than his own," we learn in the first chapter, "survives from before the

age of seventeen.” Little information survives about how he met Camille. He insisted that military service in Algeria was integral to his artistic growth, but the work he made there has yet to be tracked down. Later, when he was rich, popular, and buddies with the Prime Minister, a fog thicker than any he painted grays his life. The handful of times he suffered interviewers, he told them half-truths: he served in Algeria for two years, though really it was one; he exclusively painted *en plein air*, though really he maintained a studio; his mother, Louise, died when he was twelve, though really he was sixteen. He seems to have gone decades without mentioning her, and, if she is anywhere in the thousands of letters he sent, nobody’s found her. He destroyed almost every letter he received.

We know that he was born in Paris in 1840 and grew up in Le Havre. His merchant father, Adolphe, wanted him to go into business, but Louise seems to have encouraged his artistic dreams. Some of his earliest works were caricatures of strangers he saw by the water. (He was good at noses.) At seventeen, he befriended the landscape artist Eugène Boudin, who showed him how to paint straight from nature, sometimes by sitting next to Monet and painting the same view. In 1858, Monet completed his earliest surviving canvas, “View from Rouelles”; judging from his mentor’s version, Monet emptied the scene of buildings and animals. You might think he was only trying to make things easier, but fifty years later he was doing much the same thing: simplifying in the interest of intensifying.

Decades on, Monet still spoke of Boudin as a creative father, the antithesis of his biological one. Adolphe did, at least some of the time, send his son rent money, though Monet claimed that he had paid his way by selling caricatures—an especially slippery fib, but also a useful one, judging from the number of artists who’ve told versions of it. The bigger twist is that Monet did grow up to be a kind of businessman: a workhorse who spent gruelling hunks of his twenties painting from five in the morning to eight in the evening; who conferred with his primary dealer about how to nudge up

sales; who snubbed this dealer when he learned that a rival one could net him more money; and who completed something like two thousand paintings, not counting the hundreds he knifed apart.



"After college, I skipped the three years of acting and improv and went straight to law school."
Cartoon by José Arroyo

The rat scuttles of prices and commissions are rarely interesting to the general reader. “Monet: The Restless Vision” may be the first artist biography I’ve encountered in which this kind of thing isn’t just readable but *sexy*. What others treat as mundane context Wullschläger, an art critic for the *Financial Times*, turns into full-on characterization. She quotes from a letter in which Monet, having received twenty-five hundred francs for a “Haystack,” begs the buyer to tell everybody that the figure was five thousand, and right there, as though accompanied by violin plucks, is our guy—mischievous, cocky, positively gleeful about the fine art of selling fine art. She is equally sharp on her hero’s day-to-day: at Giverny, where he spent decades, he would rise at dawn, paint for hours, eat like a starved animal, get back to work, and keep at it until dinner

at seven. Sleeping, eating, painting, haggling, and selling, all stages of one vigorous process.

It is easy to forget how many of the key Impressionist images—of theatregoers, garden strollers, eaters, boaters, slouchy picnickers—were made by people with almost no leisure time of their own. The chapters of “Monet: The Restless Vision” on his early adulthood in Paris have a palpable grime: he sweats to finish paintings on time, working in studios so tiny that some of the bigger canvases can’t fit; he sneaks out of hotels with the bill outstanding; he borrows recklessly and, when he can’t repay, slashes his own art rather than surrender it to creditors. Camille, seven years his junior, shows up over and over in paintings from this period, in part because he was falling in love with her but also, surely, because she was an economical sitter. In 1867, after she gave birth to Jean, Monet’s family cut him off. The wedding was three years and hundreds of frantic painting hours away.

Camille is there in the foreground of “On the Bank of the Seine, Bennecourt,” from 1868. As Wullschläger notes, it’s a sloppy picture (notice the patch where the artist added his baby and then thought better of it), but also the first in which Monet attempts land’s reflection in water, one of his quintessential subjects and maybe the quintessential Impressionist subject. The river’s fidgeting surface is this painting’s real interest, but the surface refuses to play by a clear set of rules. Some bits of the reflection are long and glassy, others stubby—why? Or look at the way clouds pucker around blue sky in the lower right part of the Seine’s mirror—are they doing that because of the ripples in the water, the shape of the actual clouds, or both? We can’t know, but presumably the artist did. All of which nurtures the feeling that this picture was painted in the first person: that its maker was *somebody* and nobody else, sitting *here* and nowhere else at *this* time and no other.

Wullschläger can be as misty, when writing about why Monet painted this way, as she is rock solid about his sales. I don’t blame

her. When Monet wasn't straight-up misrepresenting his artistic methods, he could be misty, too. He studied none of the important optics texts of the day, and there is no evidence that he read a word of Henri Bergson, though he might have enjoyed the philosopher's theories of the metaphysical moment. In "The Painter of Modern Life," an essay written five years before that Seine-scape, Baudelaire celebrated an art of "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent," but he sniffed at landscape, the genre in which Monet did his finest work. A recurring sentiment in this book is "Relevant idea X was in the water at the time," and surely some of those X's did osmose their way into Monet's brain.

It is hard to trace the history of ideas through an art of subjective experience, however, and that's part of this art's glory. The first Impressionist exhibition, held in April, 1874, included canvases by Pissarro, Renoir, and Cézanne, as well as Monet's "Impression, Sunrise," which helped inspire the movement's name. Walk through "Paris 1874: The Impressionist Moment," a big anniversary show that just reached the National Gallery of Art, in Washington, D.C., and you'll see the revolution this was—a charismatic "no, thanks" to the Greek mythology and French propaganda that crowded the Salons. By far Impressionism's most important idea was negative: artists had the freedom to work without the meddling of literature, philosophy, religion, patriotism, and all the rest, answering to nothing but their eyes.

Every Monet essay, by decree of the art-history gods, must report what Cézanne said about him: "Only an eye, but what an eye!" Like plenty of catchy quotations, this seems unfair, but with half a point rattling around inside. Monet painted many of the same things as his peers, but he was never an anthropologist on the level of Manet or Cassatt or a shrewd reader of faces and bodies, like Degas (he never painted a single nude). He is so emphatic about looking that you struggle to guess what he's thinking: whether he's truly embracing the trees and ponds or if there is something stiff about the embrace.

There may be no other painter for whom so many competing responses seem not only valid but *right*. Julian Barnes wrote that Monet's work is popular because it is cheerful; the Met's wall text thinks that it telegraphs sadness; Wullschläger looks at "Luncheon" (1873), Monet's rendering of a table with no sitters, and feels "uneasy." Yes, yes, and yes, and often all three are phases of one long sensation. Who could resist the red flowers at the lower edge of "Poppy Fields Near Argenteuil" (1875), or the whizzing perspective of the two trees on the left? Keep staring, though. Things refuse to come all the way into focus; the sweets of bright color leave their pineapple aftertaste. In compositions like this, John Berger sensed something "anguished." You cannot enter into one of Monet's impressions as you enter into another painting—"instead," Berger wrote, "it extracts your memories . . . what you receive is taken from what happens *between* you and it." Monet glimpses one way, each viewer glimpses a different way, and uncertainty breeds a million private uncertainties.

You can agree with Berger, or you can wonder how poppies could fill anyone with anguish, but, by disagreeing, you really only strengthen his point. I'm not sure where Wullschläger comes down on any of this, because she does not always have much to say about Impressionism as a style. More often, we get the canvas as flypaper, catching whatever drama happens to be in the air that week. Seen this way, an image's tone is mainly a consequence of its subject: a painting of Camille and baby Jean, e.g., is supposed to show Monet's "pride in his companion and child"; another, of a lunch in a garden, is implied to be unfinished because of "the instability of his family situation." It's not a useless way of analyzing art by any stretch, but for a Monet it's fighting with one hand tied behind your back. The shimmer of moods becomes a glare.



"The Portal of Rouen Cathedral in Morning Light" (1894).
Art work by Claude Monet / Courtesy Getty's Open Content Program

In the book's most powerful moment, style and subject nail their parts. On September 5, 1879, Camille died, aged thirty-two, at the Monets' home in Vétheuil. They'd been sharing the space with Alice and Ernest Hoschedé, former patrons who'd fallen on hard times. The previous year, Camille had given birth to a second child, Michel, but was still in pain. Nobody knew what was wrong—it's been hypothesized that uterine cancer was to blame, but evidence is scant, and the chapter is full of mays and coulds. Camille's earliest symptoms may have been masked by pregnancy. Monet may have

been falling out of love with her, or he could have begun falling for Alice, who nursed Camille and later became his second wife.

Before his first wife was buried, Monet painted a picture of the body. What's extraordinary about "Camille Monet on Her Deathbed" is how many similar paintings he'd already done: Camille's pale face arrives in a fury of blue, white, and violet that (as this book explains at length) might have come from any of Monet's views of Vétheuil in fog or snow. She almost seems to melt into a storm—"returning to nature," Wullschlager writes, which is to say, returning to the subject Monet painted for a living. If this doesn't trouble you, it troubled him. "Even before I had the thought of fixing the features to which I was so deeply attached," he recalled decades later, "my automatic instinct was first to tremble at the shock of the colour, and, despite myself, my reflexes pulled me into the unconscious operation that is the everyday course of my life."

Automatic . . . instinct . . . tremble . . . shock . . . reflexes . . . unconscious . . . everyday . . . So many bloodless words with two tender ones in the middle, like a still warm corpse in a storm. And so much guilt! Guilt for being a robot who turns his wife into an assignment, and for trembling over a silly thing like color. Guilt, possibly, for desiring another woman, and guilt, definitely, for not being able to grieve like clockwork, which may be the most robotic behavior of all. Artists have it especially bad, I suspect, because they want to believe that they can snap their fingers and summon strong emotions from an audience—what a nasty surprise to find that theirs aren't so punctual.

Berger was right: Impressionism rips memories out of you. The fragment-within-a-haze of Camille's face commands me to complete it, and I think, without trying, about my father's memorial service, and how the entire time I could not, if you had paid me a billion dollars, stop worrying about the freelance deadlines that were fast becoming the everyday course of my life. My father's

father had died two years earlier; I remember wondering what non-funereal things *he'd* been thinking that day, and I remember this giving me a small, lukewarm comfort. Berger was right, and he was wrong. There is anguish in Impressionism, and much of it comes from the way style divides viewer from viewer. But there is community in feeling divided and anguished together, in knowing that nobody is having the proper, official emotional response because no such thing has ever existed. From doubt, strange new certainties.

Monet rarely painted his second wife. Even if Alice had been a natural model like Camille, she remained married to Ernest Hoschedé until his death, in 1891. Divorce was illegal in France for much of the eighteen-eighties, and going to jail for adultery was far from unheard of, and so, all through the decade, there were tears and accusations and spluttery letters. Monet's brother Léon refused to meet Alice. Ernest, still crawling back from bankruptcy, tried to make his way as an art critic. Monet, you will be flabbergasted to learn, does not appear to have been one of his favorite painters.

For all that, life got easier. Trips to Bordighera and Étretat in the middle of the decade inspired landscapes that charmed a new base of royals and heiresses. Wullschläger reports that Monet's income for 1875 was under ten thousand francs; by 1892, it was well over a hundred thousand. He spent lavishly, on silk furniture, Japanese prints, a six-hundred-book library, delectable dinners, and enormous gardens, though he also organized (and donated to) an international campaign to buy Manet's "Olympia," insuring that it would stay in France.

Selling paintings was, above all, a way of funding a life of more painting. In his late fifties, he was still rising at 3:30 A.M. to catch the mist on the Seine. If nature never failed to fascinate, people often did, and by the end of the nineteenth century he'd all but stopped painting them. Another recurring sentiment in this biography is "Monet would never finish another picture of X"—

after 1878, no more pictures of Paris; after 1879, no more of Camille; in 1886, his last completed self-portrait, which was also the first. Walk through the Monet rooms at the Met and you can see him dumping subjects like excess freight, whatever it takes for nature and color to float higher. Sophisticated critics of the day, to say nothing of envious Impressionists, booed the ascent—Félix Fénéon, e.g., faulted the work of the late eighteen-eighties for rejoicing in the lurid surfaces of things at the expense of “the contemplative.” Is there any older prejudice? Surfaces are presumed to be trivial; what’s beneath must be intellectual, *deep*. Monet pushed past that.

He did not do this all at once. As 1900 approached, he was still painting his old favorite, water reflecting land, though without the usual crisp fold between one and the other. In “Branch of the Seine Near Giverny” (1897), the river doesn’t reflect the riverbank so much as both turn to vapor. The scene is only a few firm details away from abstraction, a Rorschach test tilted sideways—not a thing plus its echo but an unbroken flat-deep surface. If it is still an impression of a lost moment, there is something newly sturdy mixed in; each brushstroke declares, I’m still here. It is telling that the only artist who truly intimidated Monet seems to have been Cézanne, who said that he wanted “to make of Impressionism something solid and durable.”

A late Monet can make anything sturdy, even a nanosecond. In 1892, he began painting the façade of Rouen Cathedral, in rain, fog, twilight, midday sun. Taken together, the series might seem the ultimate Impressionist statement on transience (even an eight-hundred-year-old slab blushes with the hours). The trick is that transience itself takes on a thick, solid thinginess, each canvas barnacled over with paint. This summer, five years after the same thing happened to Notre-Dame, in Paris, Rouen Cathedral caught fire. Consider how terrible we are at protecting grand old buildings and you, too, may find it easier to imagine a future without a stone

Rouen than one without an oil-on-canvas version. Monet, at least, made backups.

In 1912, his right eye cut to black. A cataract diagnosis soon followed. Neither event came as a total surprise; as early as 1867 he'd had trouble seeing. Eventually, his sight returned, but fifty years of outdoor sunlight had left a cloudy gunk in his lenses. Blurriness came and went for the rest of his life.

The real torture was not knowing what would happen next. "I'm half deaf and blind. I haven't much longer to live," he wrote in 1920, with six years to go. 1922: "my sight is going completely and if you knew what that meant for me." Later that year, eyedrops helped him "see as I haven't for a long time." He kept working throughout, though his primary dealer considered his paintings unsellable. Finding it easier to observe "the motif in large masses," he went big: canvases six feet tall and fourteen wide or more, dressed in forty boxes' worth of paint. Art historians argue that Abstract Expressionism drew on these images: bold contrails that may, when you step back, mean some definite object but always mean themselves. Are these images still Impressionist, then? In some ways, absolutely: they've been painted with no pretense of objectivity by an artist who relies, if reluctantly, on the curves and tints of his own eyes. Except that now there is no moment to mourn and no transience to flip on its head—he's already done that. At some point between cathedrals and lilies, paint has become its own reward, unapologetically *here* as it has never been. DiCaprio knew whereof he spake: *Look at his use of color!*

And when we step back and look at the artist? There is no heroic cult of Monet, as there have been cults of Gauguin or O'Keeffe or Kahlo. Those painters had wilder lives, which we nervously thank them for living so that we don't have to. However much Monet moved around, he mostly worked. But think about the trick he pulled off. Diving into his lonely, flickering subjectivity, shushing his doubts, he discovered a kind of beauty beloved by so many that

it became universal. It's a version of the quest that many of us seem to be on in 2024, whether we do anything creative or not. Monet had paint and canvas; we have social media and apps designed to recognize our taste in songs or partners. The goal is to be so precise about how we see the world, and so public about our precision, that we reach some others who see it our way, too. When Monet tried this, he reached everybody. Most of the people trying today would be satisfied with a few others, or just one. Millions scratching through the dark, hoping for sun and oxygen. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the title of the Impressionist exhibition at the National Gallery.



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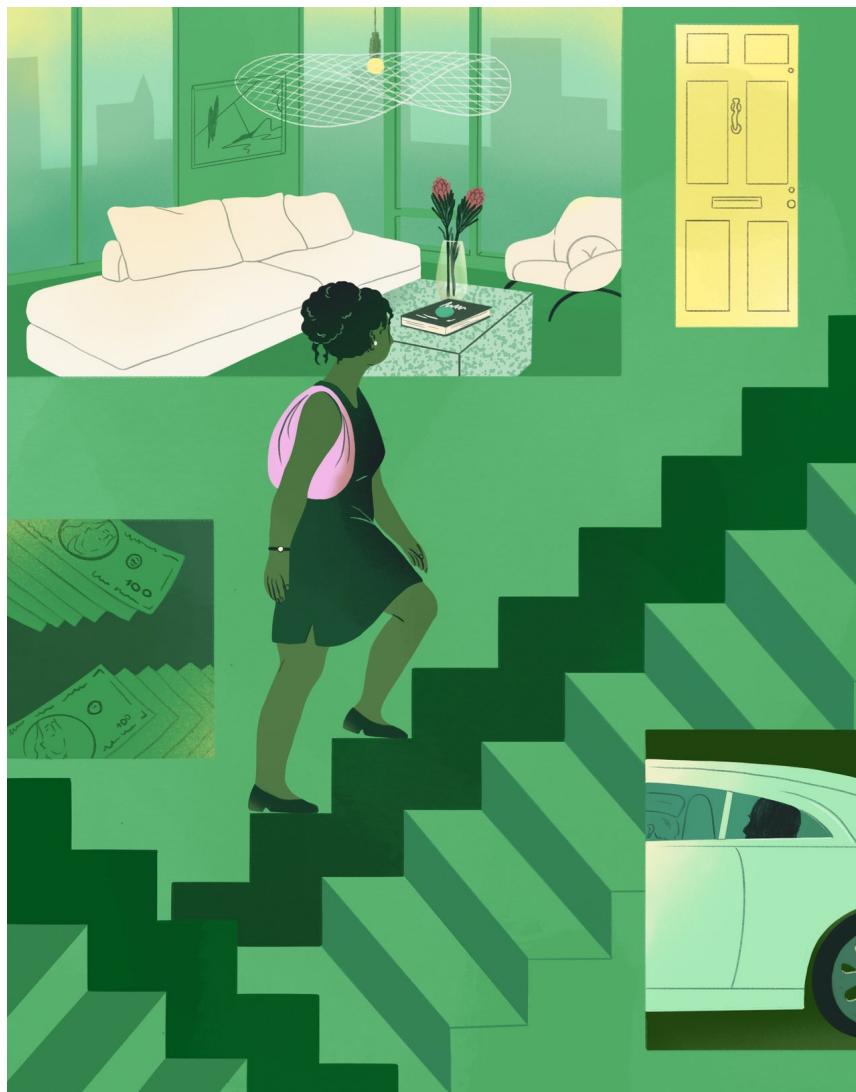
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Other People's Money Can Drive You Mad

In Rumaan Alam's novel "Entitlement," a woman goes to work for a rich man's foundation—and finds herself spinning between worlds.

By [Laura Miller](#)

September 16, 2024



"*Entitlement*" features themes that Rumaan Alam has touched on before—transracial adoption, privilege, and cosmopolitan social life—but it's darker and more claustrophobic than any of his previous works.

Illustration by *Michelle Mildenberg Lara*

After love, money is perhaps the novel's favorite subject, especially the novel in its most hopelessly (or, depending on your taste, endearingly) bourgeois form. Whether handled with Trollope's irony or Fitzgerald's romanticism, money in fiction challenges love's delusion that our lives are defined by anything other than the hardest of practicalities, and that's one reason money versus love is a venerable theme. But what if the two ostensibly opposing forces collapsed into each other, forming a sort of black hole? That would be enough to drive anyone around the bend, which is just what happens to Brooke Orr, the protagonist of Rumaan Alam's fourth novel, "[Entitlement](#)."

Alam is best known for "[Leave the World Behind](#)" (adapted into a film by Netflix), in which a Black couple bearing news of a mysterious catastrophe arrive at the Long Island summer house they've rented out to a white family for the week. Although that novel's characters are familiar types (the Karen-ish white lady in her forties and her inept professor husband; the no-nonsense Black financier), Alam's observation of the attitudes and trappings of contemporary upper-middle-class American life has a delicious precision. His shopping lists are as vivid as poems. "[Entitlement](#)," which benefits from that precision, features themes Alam has touched on before: transracial adoption; the rivalrous friendships of ambitious young New Yorkers and the wedge that economic disparity drives between them; the complex tissue of privilege and status that makes up cosmopolitan social life. But the tone of this novel grows darker and more claustrophobic than that of any of his previous works, even the apocalyptic "[Leave the World Behind](#)." Never has one of his characters so thoroughly decompensated. Brooke's fateful move is merely to take a job at a foundation dedicated to giving away the fortune accumulated by an office-supply magnate named Asher Jaffee, but the proximity to so much money unhinges her.

Brooke has enjoyed what a friend from Vassar regards as an enviable upbringing enriched by "the secret weapon of a chic

mother with a Manhattan apartment.” The Black adopted daughter of an unmarried white lawyer running an organization dedicated to reproductive justice, Brooke has grown up under the hovering benevolence of a trio of glamorous “aunties,” friends with whom her mother formed “what they would have called a family.” Her younger brother, who is white but also adopted, has flourished under these conditions. Brooke, however, can’t figure out what to do with herself. Having spent nine years teaching at a charter school in the Bronx, she takes a job at the Asher and Carol Jaffee Foundation. The decision disappoints her mother, who now considers Brooke a glorified secretary. Asher, eighty-three and semi-retired, is himself at loose ends. He sees Brooke (“Black, gorgeous, serious, passionate”) as “the sort of woman he wanted at the foundation, the sort of woman he wanted working in his name,” and decides to make her his protégée.

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Significantly, Alam sets “Entitlement” in 2014, a period that Brooke regards as “a boring moment in the world’s long history, Obama’s placid America.” Unusual prescience on her part or an authorial intrusion from the vantage of our less orderly world? This isn’t the only such ambiguity in the novel, which flits from one character’s perspective to another’s so quickly that it’s often unclear whose impression the reader is glimpsing. When Brooke is out at a bar with her friends, discussing her new gig, the narration reads, “Had Brooke chosen both teaching and her job at the foundation because her mother felt that the only useful work was

selfless? Children never clearly saw the source of their opinions, ideas, habits, biases.” Are these Brooke’s musings, or one of her friends’, or the author’s? The uncertainty surrounding the origin of such thoughts gives the novel a jangly quality, disorienting at first but also a simulacrum of Brooke’s too permeable mind.

Brooke has no father, and Asher’s beloved daughter, his only child, died at her desk at Cantor Fitzgerald in the 9/11 attacks. The relationship between Brooke and her new employer begins promisingly. Asher takes her out to lunch, and she suggests that they skip his customary steak house (Keens, of course; Alam’s cultural signifiers are always on point) in favor of a diner.

Afterward, Asher playfully sends Brooke a check for the difference in cost between a steak lunch and the diner sandwich, but she tries to return it, saying that the gift doesn’t seem “ethical.” She tells him that she doesn’t need his money, and he replies, “But the question is whether or not you *deserve* it.” Then he says something that lodges in Brooke’s psyche, worming its way ever deeper: “If you don’t ask for what you’re owed, who can you blame when you fail to get it?”

Under Asher’s wing, Brooke tags along when he meets with the Ford Foundation, rides around in the cocoon of a chauffeured Bentley, and advises her boss to buy an eight-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar Helen Frankenthaler painting for his wife’s birthday. Kim, one of her old college friends, comes into a big inheritance and buys an apartment in the West Village with a fabulous view. Echoing a dynamic in Alam’s first novel, “Rich and Pretty,” Kim badly wants to preserve her bond with Brooke and the third member of their trio, Matthew. It’s possible to pretend that they all still live the same lives while meeting for drinks or brunch, but real estate puts the lie to such sentimentality. The splendor of that new apartment betrays just how wide the economic gulf between Kim and the other two has become. Like the pretty but relatively poor friend in “Rich and Pretty,” Kim’s companions have already begun to drift away. Matthew, a project manager at an ad

agency, has the kind of job that doesn't pay handsomely but carries some status and lets him rub shoulders with the truly affluent. It also provides a constant, nettling reminder of what he doesn't have. People like him and Brooke, Matthew argues, care the most about money, because "we know what money can do. We know how we'll never get our hands on it, but we know it could make us free."

Brooke can't afford to buy any apartment, but that doesn't stop her from asking Kim's real-estate agent to show her a few options. She sees a place on Twenty-ninth Street, a plausible address, not too extravagant, but nevertheless out of her reach. She falls in love. Every New Yorker knows that every New Yorker obsesses over real estate, but Brooke takes her passion even further. When Asher or her mother asks her about boyfriends or marriage, she replies that she has no interest in either; she wants to marry the apartment. Brooke believes that the apartment will remake her in much the same way love is supposed to. It will give her everything she needs, she insists—it will become "a self transubstantiated into walls and floors." And, unlike a lover or a husband, the apartment is secure. It can be bought. It is love and money in a single package. What could be simpler, or more foolproof?



"Oh, no—the other team is praying, too."
Cartoon by Trevor Spaulding

“It didn’t matter at all, somehow, that she didn’t have the money, the letter from the bank, the plan,” Brooke decides. “That would come in time.” Doesn’t she deserve the apartment? And, if she doesn’t ask for it, whom can she blame when it fails to materialize? Matthew finds her transfigured, strangely beautiful and animated. She has the certainty of the manic, or the converted. She has become a member of the elect. Once, she was one of those people who thought that “money, like grace, would be accrued.” But her association with Asher has convinced her that she is now someone to whom money, like grace, will just happen.

History has made Brooke’s optimism anachronistic, but, during the complacency of Obama’s second term, her belief that the deserving will be rewarded would have seemed almost credible, if you squinted. She walks streets that have been plastered with “*HOPE*” banners. An ambient faith in progress, which Alam expertly conveys, undergirds Brooke’s sense of the world. Her job, after all, is to bless those people found worthy of the Jaffee Foundation’s largesse, to supply the material for making their dreams come true. Key to Brooke’s sense of her own chosenness is her lofty mission and the ritualized language that comes with it, bland philanthropic palaver about making the world a better place. “I consider this work a privilege,” she solemnly tells Asher’s longtime assistant, when the woman catches her printing out a dodgy letter on foundation stationery to send to a mortgage-loan officer. “It’s demanding but understand—it makes me feel good.” Brooke is perfectly sincere, even if she’s no longer the same woman who tried to return that check to her boss. Captivated by her own virtue, sheltered in the aura of Asher’s extraordinary wealth, she has come to consider data (for example, the actual amount of her salary) to be little more than a transitory obstacle to getting what she wants and what she so clearly ought to have.

Brooke’s search for an ideal beneficiary for the foundation takes her to the Throop Community School, a one-woman operation in Brooklyn that teaches African dance and drumming to

neighborhood kids. Here, she is sure, she will find the “story” that Asher wants to hear, a soulful story about “Black kids with Black problems.” The founder and head of the school, an older woman, baffles Brooke by rejecting the opportunity. “You come here and tell me that I must need something,” she says to her young would-be benefactor. “But, sister, I did not ask you here. And I did not tell you that we were in need.” More money might lead to superficial improvements, but, in this woman’s experience, “it comes at a cost” she isn’t willing to pay. Her daughter proves more receptive, and brings a candidate for the City Council along to a meeting. To Brooke’s displeasure, the candidate appeals to their shared identity as Black women. As far as she’s concerned, that identity has value only when she can use it to her own advantage: “Brooke was most passionate about Black art, Black lives, Black matters, when her boss asked her to be.” She bristles when her race is invoked as an obligation.

In “Entitlement,” as in “Leave the World Behind,” Alam tends to brush against race more often than he tackles it directly. As Brooke sees it, she and the candidate don’t have anything in common. One of them is “a church girl from Brooklyn, with a vast network of cousins and vague relations,” and the other “a private-school kid from Manhattan with a white mother, a white brother, many white aunties.” Class, it seems, is what Brooke believes defines her, and she and the candidate don’t come from the same place. Yet even Brooke’s long-standing loyalties are fraying. When her mother telephones with the news of the sudden death of one of her aunties, Brooke finds herself unmoved. The auntie—who had “danced with Albert of Monaco and dined with Karl Lagerfeld” before being laid off from her “chic magazine gig” and forced to take a receptionist’s job at a suburban orthodontist’s office—mostly serves as a cautionary tale. Brooke vows that she will not follow the same path: “She would be interesting, she would be good, she would be successful, perhaps with luck she would be free.” But she is more similar to her fallen auntie than she wants to admit. Everything she

now thinks she has is precarious, dependent on her employer's favor.

For some, money means luxury, power, or admiration. For Brooke, it means freedom, specifically freedom from the claims of anyone else, with the exception of Asher Jaffee. What she finds most enviable about her boss's forty-seventh-floor apartment on Central Park West is its hermetically sealed removal from the rest of the city. The New York City of "Entitlement" is haunted by a criminal, dubbed the Subway Pricker by the press, who, unseen, jabs women with a hypodermic needle in crowded trains. At the beginning of the novel, Brooke scoffs at the idea, writing the panic off as mass hysteria, but by the end she believes that she, too, has been pricked, a victim of the anonymity and indignity of the crowd. The allure of the Twenty-ninth Street apartment is curled within the word itself: its apartness. When the loan officer calls to request more documentation of Brooke's finances, she informs the woman, "There are those who do not live among the rest of us," and to whom customary standards and rules do not apply. She's a "good person." Why shouldn't she be one of the lucky few?

Brooke is losing it, but she's also just taking the rich at their own word. Aren't they always proclaiming that they deserve what they've got, that their money testifies to their worth? By that logic, the unmoneyed worthy, too, must be due their portion. The noxious effect of great wealth consists not just of the envy and temptation it inspires but also of the ideas it emanates like fumes. Alam chronicles Brooke's slow poisoning so deftly it almost seems possible that she'll turn positive thinking and fearless self-assertion into some version of the American Dream. That is, after all, how rich people like to say it works. Jay Gatsby isn't around to warn her off. Sure, love can hurt. But money, and the people who have it, will wreck you every time. ♦

Laura Miller is a books and culture columnist at *Slate* and the author of "[The Magician's Book: A Skeptic's Adventures in Narnia](#)."

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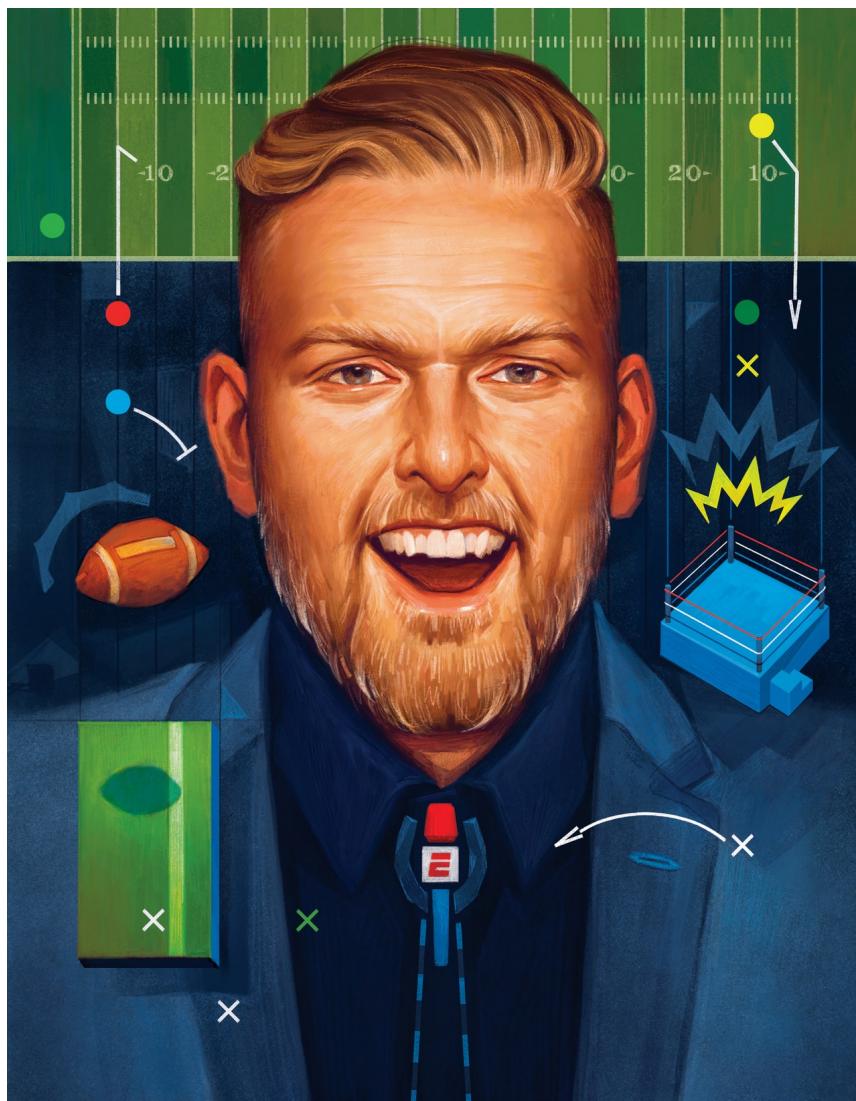
On Television

Pat McAfee, the Football Bro

On ESPN's "College GameDay" and on his own program, "The Pat McAfee Show," the talk-show host offers an idealized new vision of the American personality.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

September 13, 2024



Couth and manners feel passé when McAfee speaks; his currency is volume.
Illustration by Sam Rodriguez

If, on a cool weekend morning in autumn, you happen to be watching "College GameDay," on ESPN, don't worry about figuring out which of the broadcasters behind the improbably long

desk is Pat McAfee. He's the one with the roast-pork tan, his hair cut high and tight, likely tieless among his more businesslike colleagues. The rest of the on-air crew—Lee Corso, Rece Davis, Kirk Herbstreit, Desmond Howard, and, newly, the former University of Alabama coach Nick Saban—tend to look and dress and talk like participants in an old-school Republican-primary debate. McAfee, though, favors windowpane checks on his jackets and a slip of chest poking out from behind his two or three open buttons. If the others are politicians, he's the cool-coded megachurch pastor who sometimes acts as their spiritual adviser.

This Saturday-morning getup—little brother gets sharp—counts as downright dressy for McAfee, who, in the course of the past few years, has become one of ESPN's most visible sports-talking stars. In 2019, two years after retiring from the N.F.L., where he had been a punter for the Indianapolis Colts for eight years, he started his own program, "The Pat McAfee Show." On the current version of the show—which he began licensing to ESPN last fall, and now runs for two hours every weekday afternoon—he typically wears only a tank top and a thin gold chain. It's all about context: wherever McAfee appears, he's always trying—he's never effortless, that's not his thing—to be underdressed by a few noticeable degrees. That style rule is symbolic of his broader meaning on sports TV. He's there to loosen things up.

College football, which you might translate as "sports for kids," retains a paradoxical sheen of formal presentation when it's televised. "College GameDay" is a dude-rock version of "Good Morning America" or "The View": it's a vehicle for respectable fun. It opens with an arena-worthy country song, wailed by Darius Rucker, Lainey Wilson, and the Cadillac Three. Each episode is shot in a different football-obsessed town; behind the big, horseshoe-shaped outdoor desk sit thousands of cheering fans, many holding signs about the game, about "GameDay" itself, and, sometimes, about Jesus Christ. One function of the show is to emphasize the localities—often Southern—in which undergraduate

athletics reign supreme. Another is to further heroize the icons of the sport. “GameDay” is dotted with beautifully produced profiles of coaches and star athletes, serving them up for amiable scrutiny by the masses tuning in as their chili warms on the stove.

Maybe the greatest facility of the show, though, is to project an ideal vision of the American personality. College football’s emphasis on regions and their various celebratory customs makes a program like “College GameDay” a kind of aggregate—throw all these attitudes together, represented by all the guys behind the desk, and out pops a proxy upstanding dad. Until McAfee arrived on the scene, the resulting image was somebody with a flawless smile, a straight back, and, implicitly, a formidable handshake. He was older and white, but drew his energy from—and imposed his benignly strict ethics on—the young, largely Black athletes tossing themselves around from down to down. Maybe this guy comported himself a bit like Mitt Romney—or, for that matter, like Nick Saban.

McAfee—who has also been a commentator for W.W.E. since 2018—means something else. His rise has occurred alongside huge structural changes to college football: the “name, image, and likeness” rule, which allows athletes to be compensated for appearing in commercials and other media; the increasingly transactional “transfer portal,” which makes it possible for players to bounce between schools like pros on the move. Formerly unforgivably exploitative, college football is now more brash and individualistic than ever. Similarly, “The Pat McAfee Show” departs entirely from sports TV’s respectable consensus.

The “program,” as McAfee calls it, has a fly-by-night feel: McAfee hangs out in a big, goofily decorated room with a half-dozen friends, chattering in circles about the games. Aaron Rodgers, the vax-hesitant hallucinogen advocate who also happens to play quarterback for the New York Jets, is a frequent (and, it turns out, paid) guest. Not long ago, while stumbling through a complex

point about the W.N.B.A. rookie star Caitlin Clark and the dramatic, often racialized discourse that surrounds her interactions with other players, McAfee referred to her as a “white bitch,” meaning it, strangely, as a compliment. He cleaned up after himself on Twitter:

I shouldn’t have used “white bitch” as a descriptor of Caitlin Clark. No matter the context . . . even if we’re talking about race being a reason for some of the stuff happening. I have way too much respect for her and women to put that into the universe.

On his own show, this all contributes to an atmosphere of slightly off-the-rails entertainment. On “College GameDay,” it’s the basis for a culture war fought on generational grounds. The first “GameDay” episode of the new season, which was broadcast from Dublin, Ireland, where Georgia Tech faced off against Florida State, found McAfee exploring the meaning of the Irish saying “What’s the craic?,” or, in his Americanized translation, “What’s the story?” “The story last night for me was thirty Guinesses,” he said. The day before, on “The Pat McAfee Show,” he’d been pounding them back. Last season, many fans, online and elsewhere, expressed their distaste for McAfee’s antics. A poll by the Athletic found that nearly forty-nine per cent of the site’s respondents felt negatively about him, which McAfee addressed, again on Twitter:

To the 49%, I have some great news . . . I have heard you all very loud and clear since the beginning of my stint with GameDay. It’s one of the biggest reasons why I have not resigned a contract with the legendary show. I’m not right for some crowds and the “distinguished” College Football folks are definitely one of those.

But you can’t so easily keep a fellow like McAfee down. Perhaps to the chagrin of the old guard of viewers, he’s back in his seat on “GameDay,” creating uneasy contrasts with his every move. In one

video, shot during a commercial break, he's wearing an electric-blue jacket and a bolo tie, dancing along to the song "Snap Yo Fingers" by Lil Jon. Next to him sits Saban, who seems to be looking off regretfully into space. McAfee and Saban, in fact, have great onscreen chemistry, and later, on McAfee's show, joked about the way the video made them look—the conservative icon bugged almost to death by the uncouth up-and-comer. "I'm thinking about, When are you going to ask me to dance?" Saban joked.

If the video's humor was more symbolic than actual, that doesn't mean that it wasn't somewhat true. McAfee appearing on "GameDay" heralds the emergence of a new kind of guy. He's always been around—you probably know him from college, or from a job you only sort of liked, or from the brand of politics that has kicked stiffs like Romney out on their asses, maybe for good—but, until recently, he hadn't been front and center on the national stage, representative of a growing disposition. He talks his way into success, and sometimes out of it. If he's a bit rough around the edges, you'll have to deal. Couth and manners feel passé when he speaks; his currency is volume. His parents might have gone to church, but, with him, religion never comes up. He wants to laugh and kick back and feel free. You know he's telling the truth by how little he seems to stop and think. Even if you'd prefer not to, he's good at getting you to laugh.

A couple of weeks ago, while delivering a highly climactic prediction that Texas A. & M. would win its matchup against Notre Dame—Notre Dame ended up winning—McAfee ripped off his shirt to reveal his reddish barrel of a torso. He called out a "big-ass American flag" in the crowd, hyping himself and everybody else up. There at the desk, soaking in the cheers, making the guys in the suits seem ancient, he looked like a weathervane for the American mood. ♦



Vinson Cunningham is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His début novel, “[Great Expectations](#),” came out in March, 2024.

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[The Current Cinema](#)

How “A Different Man” and “The Substance” Get Under the Skin

In films starring Sebastian Stan and Demi Moore, the directors Aaron Schimberg and Coralie Fargeat satirize the self-annihilating pursuit of beauty.

By [Justin Chang](#)

September 13, 2024



In Aaron Schimberg’s film, Sebastian Stan stars as a neurofibromatosis sufferer.

Illustration by Nadiia Zhelieznova

Horror movies have taught us to shudder before a bathroom mirror, lest an assailant suddenly appear, looming behind an unsuspecting protagonist, as the medicine-cabinet door swings shut. But not all reflections are jump scares in waiting, and not all victims and predators are distinguishable. This week brings two pictures, each a conceptually bold, mordantly funny cautionary tale, in which a mirror bears witness to an astonishing transformation—a miracle, or so it seems, that gradually curdles into a nightmare. In “A Different Man,” a disfigured face is peeled off, revealing smooth skin and chiselled features just underneath. In “The Substance,” a woman’s dream of eternal youth is fulfilled as she gives violent

birth to her own younger, shapelier doppelgänger. You needn't be a [David Cronenberg](#) fan (though I suspect one of the filmmakers is) to find yourself murmuring his most famous mantra: "Long live the new flesh."

In "A Different Man," a thrillingly mercurial third feature from the writer and director Aaron Schimberg, Sebastian Stan plays Edward Lemuel, a mild-mannered New Yorker with a genetic disorder called neurofibromatosis. With bulging tumors above the neck, he's "facially different," in the parlance of a workplace sensitivity-training video in which he appears as an actor. But little such sensitivity greets Edward in the real world. People gawk and flinch on the subway; a comely neighbor, Ingrid (Renate Reinsve), upon meeting him, lets out an involuntary shriek. She and Edward soon strike up a friendship, but the suspicion lingers that Ingrid, an aspiring writer, might be nosing around for good material. Sure enough, she later drafts a semi-biographical play, titled "Edward," which she keeps shredding and rewriting, struggling to walk an empathetic tightrope over an exploitative chasm.

Schimberg is consciously walking that tightrope himself, though with such assurance and daring that, at times, he's practically dancing. He has ingeniously structured "A Different Man" around a theme of mutability, with switchblade twists, droll reversals of tone, and a fluid sense of genre. The scenes in Edward's apartment, a dump with a suggestively rotting hole in the ceiling, are a study in close-quarters paranoia, the camera prowling about like a trapped cat. Later, the movie becomes a mad-scientist fiction: Edward subjects himself to an experimental-drug trial, which proves stunningly successful. Stan, now prosthetically unmasked, projects Edward's shock and exhilaration as a former pariah who suddenly finds himself an object of admiration, envy, and desire. But there is also a quiet unease in this dewy new skin. Edward, rather than acknowledge his medical miracle, takes on an entirely different identity. His new name, amusingly, is Guy.

Even so, his former life beckons. In a Ripley-esque twist, Edward/Guy worms his way back into Ingrid's life, and into the lead role in "Edward," a part he was surely born to play. Or was he? Before long, he and the movie are navigating the aesthetic pitfalls of appropriation and authenticity—concepts that the script gets at, shrewdly, without naming them. At every turn, Schimberg unleashes a nervy fusillade of ideas: about the unequal distribution of physical beauty, the social privilege that such beauty commands, the challenge of trying to probe these inequities through art. The director broached some of these in "[Chained for Life](#)" (2019), a cool-toned intellectual thriller that prominently features the English actor Adam Pearson, who actually has neurofibromatosis. Schimberg's masterstroke in "A Different Man" is to deploy Pearson again, casting him as a roving bystander, Oswald, whom he lobs, like a grenade, into Edward/Guy's path.

Whatever resemblance there is between Oswald and pre-op Edward, it ends at the physical: Oswald, far from being shy or forlorn, is the very picture of self-assurance—urbane, gregarious, effusively charming. Blessed with Pearson's burbling wit, Oswald swiftly demolishes one of Edward's foundational lies—that appearance confers destiny—and turns the movie's very premise on its head. He also allows Schimberg to call his own storytelling choices into question, with delirious abandon.

In the interest of rejecting Hollywood ableism, would it not have been wiser to cast Pearson as Edward 1.0? Perhaps, though doing so might have replaced one variety of inauthenticity with another, denying us the exquisite sad-sack physicality of Stan's performance: the defeated slump of his shoulders, the twitchy uncertainty over what to do with his hands. But then, in the context of what Schimberg is trying to provoke—a dismantling of conventional standards of attractiveness—does Stan's slippery triumph here count as a kind of failure? Remarkably, as the movie accelerates into wilder, bloodier terrain, these contradictions don't tear it apart; they deepen it. Schimberg may have concocted a

madly inventive thought experiment, but to say that “A Different Man” merely deconstructs itself would miss how completely and satisfyingly it comes together. It’s a thing of beauty.

The Substance, in “The Substance,” is a neon-yellow fluid that, when injected into your veins, causes you to black out; within moments, “a newer, better you” springs forth, fully formed, from a gaping orifice along your spine. How exactly your body survives this trauma is one of a few questions that the writer and director Coralie Fargeat (“Revenge”) leaves unanswered. (The unseen manufacturers of the Substance, operating behind anonymous lockboxes and a terse customer-service hotline, are no more forthcoming.) But such is the Faustian bargain struck by Elisabeth Sparkle (Demi Moore), a faded Hollywood star who has just been fired, for blatantly ageist reasons, from an aerobics show she’s hosted for decades. Alone and forgotten, she requires little persuading to try out the Substance and its promise of a second youth.

And so emerges Sue ([Margaret Qualley](#)), a citadel of physical perfection who, with taut glutes, voluptuous moves, and perfectly pink-chronized lipstick and leotard, lands Elisabeth’s old job in no time. But the old flesh is not so easily cast aside. The catch of the Substance is that Elisabeth/Sue is now one person in two codependent bodies, stuck in a brutally unforgiving regimen— involving liquid food packs, stabilizer fluids, and a nightmarish kit of intravenous devices—that makes even the fiercest diet-and-workout routine look like a trip to Shake Shack. Most inconvenient of all, only one body can be conscious at any moment, and Elisabeth/Sue must switch vessels at strict seven-day intervals. “Respect the balance,” the hotline intones, warning that the slightest deviation will have dire consequences. How dire? Let’s just say that the Substance is basically the Mixture of Dorian Gray.

Fargeat’s movie can be called many things: a body-horror buffet, a feminist cri de coeur, an evisceration of the sunny, surface-obsessed

Los Angeles where it unfolds. It's also a movie of process, deliberately paced, exactingly observed, and no less gripping for its sometimes gruelling repetitions. Everything is exaggerated, from the cavernous expanse and dark monochrome walls of Elisabeth/Sue's apartment, which amplify her crushing solitude, to the uniform boorishness of the men on the margins, especially Elisabeth's former boss (a repellent [Dennis Quaid](#)). Most flagrant is the Grand Guignol climax, in which Fargeat's emphatic allusions to "[Black Swan](#)," "[Death Becomes Her](#)," "[Sisters](#)," and other classics of double-decker female rage (plus a dash of "[Vertigo](#)") pay off in spectacularly sanguinary fashion.

Such exaggeration, of course, is endemic to the language of both horror and satire, though whether it proves the glory or the undoing of "[The Substance](#)" is a thorny question. In the months since the movie premiered, at the Cannes Film Festival, where it won a screenplay prize, critics have at once hailed and assailed its value as a #MeToo-era provocation. Fargeat's consideration of the female form leads her toward unsparing visual extremes, lingering on Moore's and Qualley's nude bodies one moment, pushing Moore toward haggard Baba Yaga cosplay the next. In making a near-fetish of both the lovely and the grotesque, does she reinforce the reductive, objectifying imagery that she seeks to call out? For me, the movie's deeper flaw lies in its scattershot dualism: through no fault of the actresses, the sense that we're watching one woman divided against herself, the victim of a self-inflicted psychological mitosis, never springs persuasively to life.

Moore, however, *is* persuasive, and for reasons that are painful to consider. At the height of her nineties stardom, she drew misogynist jabs aplenty from the press, who targeted her movies, her performances, and her personal life. Now sixty-one, and with a quieter Hollywood profile, she is as poignant an emblem of sexist, ageist industry neglect as Fargeat could have hoped to conjure. But Moore's casting is more than just a symbolic coup. The most shattering moment in "[The Substance](#)" belongs to her alone: in a

sequence of wrenching simplicity, Elisabeth, preparing for a rare night on the town, stares with utter desolation into her bathroom mirror, and what it reflects is not horror but heartache. Some of us will always see what we don't want to see. ♦



Justin Chang is a film critic at *The New Yorker*.

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[Poems](#)

For Better or Worse

By [Megan Fernandes](#)

September 16, 2024

If New York has taught me anything
it's indifference. I have an eternal feeling
and forget it in a week. Nothing lasts.
I walk and am overcome by oranges
piled high in a cart. By kids playing street ball
in Tompkins while the small park dogs cheer.
Getting caught up in a stranger with a crow tattoo
or a butcher, unloading rosy carcasses on 9th Street.
We all roll on, each with our little tragedies,
our shrunken attentions. At Lucien,
I order half a dream chicken, I mean really
the severed bird of my dreams, and accidentally dip
my black hair in the triangle of my neighbor's
martini glass. I smell like vermouth for the evening
and the next day bargain for fifty samosas
at the deli, stack them in my freezer
until it looks like my childhood.
And there are paintings, yellow and otherwise.
And a carton of chucked cigarettes, Vogues,
squashed by a foot on the street. Indifference is not
the absence of care. It's the enlargement of so much life
that it dulls heart song, even sweet you.
My interiority has nothing on this city.
You and I? We're nothing here.
I answer a text with my voice.

You barely make out my laugh for a siren, a couple
decoupling, a fire burning a church into its ruin.
I do a line and look upon the gold lights and dark rivers
while someone swims in a bathtub on a floor above.
Day comes. I carry on, irrelevant. I'm carried on.

Megan Fernandes is the author of poetry collections including “*I Do Everything I’m Told*” and “*Good Boys*.”

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[Poems](#)

I refuse to be intimidated by time

By [Erika Meitner](#)

September 16, 2024

even though it is only early September
& in the strip mall with the Target

where I went to get a sympathy card
for my sister-in-law whose mom died

& wound up instead getting a six-pack
of sympathy cards because lately my

friends' parents keep dying I noticed
that the newly shuttered Bed Bath

& Beyond next to the also vacated
Buy Buy Baby had just reopened

as a Halloween City, & it is always
too soon for retail holidays, candy

in bulk turning up in the seasonal
aisle in late August right after school

supplies are moved to clearance.

Sacred time is indefinitely recoverable,

indefinitely repeatable, wrote Eliade
& I'm not sure what qualifies as sacred

when I am profane, or, rather, historical,
or just not-transcendent but I still

refuse to be intimidated by time
even when, at the head of the path

to the beach at Eastern Point Light-
house, there's a dead gull lying

on its side with a rock placed carefully
over its head, as if to say, hey! if you

want to experience the terrifying
beauty of Dog Bar Breakwater—

of the rough surf pounding Cape Ann
while you walk on granite blocks

with wide cracks between them
stretching half a mile into the ocean—

you must first step over a reminder
of your own mortality & mortality

isn't the same as death, but a sort of
awareness that time itself is sacred

& epiphanous & as much as I plan
I think maybe the one-day-at-a-time

people are right: we never know
what's around the irreversible

corner. My sister calls from her car
on the way to do *tahara*—preparing

a body for burial by washing it, in a
ritual act of purification. She is a rabbi

so this is not as unusual as it seems,
but any Jew can be part of a holy

society of volunteers who tend
to the dead gently, with intention

& many apologies: a *chevra kadisha*.
This practice, I'd imagine, leads to

embodied temporal awareness,
which is nothing like standing under

elms in autumn when their leaves
turn yellow & fall like snow in moments

when the wind picks up though it's
still over seventy most days, dusk arriving

earlier & earlier until it's basically
winter when it comes to the light

if not the weather & is it worth
mentioning that I also bought two

felt pumpkins from the Target dollar
bin because buying only a six-pack

of sympathy cards was too depressing
& we are all participating in the passing

of time which I refuse to be intimidated by,
even when those golden leaves catch

in my hair, whether time is cyclical
or linear, whether I'm distracted or

have focus. Good people are meant
to engage in a daily practice of seeing

carefully, of opening to what's literally
in front of us, the word "now" & its

demands, but I find any mono-focus
on the present moment moralizing

& want to resist, though perhaps
a kind of dichotomy with no gray

area would be healthier for me & if
I had good temporal habits I would

not think of the past, on some days
with me all the time like the arthritis

in my knees, on others asserting
itself like extra pens spilling from

my purse when I'm digging in the
dark expanse for my phone & keys.

Even worse: the what-ifs or any
kind of future plans, & when my

friend sends her mother's obituary
for me to edit (trust the poet) again

I am steeped in mortality: *leaves*
behind a loving family who will miss

her dearly, she was a leader & loyal friend whose greatest loves were . . .

I hope someone can answer
that question for me one day,

the way, when I brought my mother's
gold watch to the jeweller because

it wasn't keeping time, he said,
you can try laying it on its side &

*tapping it, but the movement
is probably broken & you'll need to*

send it away for repair. In legal terms
“repair time” means the interval

between the issuance of a corrective-
maintenance work order & the return

of the system to operation so perhaps
the best we can hope for with time

is not to be reassured or comforted
or heartened or emboldened or

solaced by it, but just to stay ticking.

This is drawn from “Assembled Audience.”

Erika Meitner is the author of poetry collections including “*Useful Junk*” (2022) and “*Assembled Audience*” (2026). She teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

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Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Tuesday, September 10, 2024](#)**

By Mollie Cowger | Today's theme: Sew to speak.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, September 10, 2024

Today's theme: Sew to speak.



By [Mollie Cowger](#)

September 10, 2024



Mollie Cowger is an assistant puzzles-and-games editor at The New Yorker.

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