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[Goings On](#)

## Scary Movies for Spooky Season

*Also: The appalling betrayals of “The Apprentice,” a cabaret convention, a Bay Ridge dive bar, and more.*

*October 18, 2024*

**Rachel Syme**

Staff writer

*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.***

**There is little better**, when the weather turns just chilly enough to necessitate a big scarf and a leather jacket, than to duck into a movie theatre to see a film that makes your blood run cold. Sure, you can binge scary movies at home, huddled under a blanket, locked safely behind your front door’s deadbolt, with a bowl of popcorn in hand, but few experiences rival that of watching a horror flick in the company of dozens of strangers, all of you gasping in unison with every jump scare. Freaky films are meant to be shared, in the dark, like campfire tales. Starting on Oct. 25, the Lower East Side arthouse cinema Metrograph screens fright-night classics such as Werner Herzog’s **“Nosferatu the Vampyre,”** a gothic-horror adaptation of Bram Stoker’s **“Dracula,”** from 1979, starring Klaus Kinski and Isabelle Adjani—and thousands of rats—and Andrzej Żuławski’s creepy body-horror film **“Possession,”** from 1981, also starring Adjani, in which a German spy, played by Sam Neill, discovers that his wife may or may not be cheating on him with a gooey, worm-like creature. The film contains one of the great gross-out scenes of all time, in which Adjani has a bloody, violent miscarriage in a Berlin subway station and slams her body around as if in the throes of an exorcism.



*Isabelle Adjani in “Possession.”*  
Photograph from Limelight International / Everett

If you are in the mood to see some brand-new slashers, you can check out the **Brooklyn Horror Film Festival** (Oct. 17-24), in partnership with Nitehawk Cinemas. The festival showcases more than a dozen independent films, at both Nitehawk's Williamsburg and Prospect Park locations, including the New Zealand director James Ashcroft's sophomore effort, **“The Rule of Jenny Pen,”** starring John Lithgow as a psychotic nursing-home resident, and the New Jersey director Ryan Sloan's **“Gazer,”** about a woman who has dyschronometria, the inability to tell how much time has passed. The festival will also screen the new documentary **“Generation Terror,”** from co-directors Phillip Escott and Sarah Appleton, about the booming nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands horror-movie industry, and the ways in which films like **“Scream,”** **“The Blair Witch Project,”** and **“Saw”** forever shifted the genre. If you don't happen to be in Brooklyn but still want to join in, the festival operates its own streaming service, called, fittingly, **Nightstream.**

Speaking of fresh frightening films, for my money, one of the best things you can do this season is to run to see the French director Coralie Fargeat's **“The Substance”** while it is still playing on the big screen. The thriller stars Demi Moore as a famous exercise guru named Elisabeth Sparkle (think Jane Fonda in her spandex era) who is fired from her aerobics show by her piggish boss (Dennis

Quaid) when she turns fifty. She is despondent and adrift and angry, until she learns about a mysterious, neon-green fluid available on the black market (the titular “substance”) that promises to restore her youth and allow her to create a “better version” of herself. What this means in gory practice is that, after just one injection, Moore’s spine splits open—a goopy, grisly sequence that is wildly fun, if nauseating, to behold—and a shiny, taut new body (Margaret Qualley, looking resplendent) slithers out. The way the substance works is that Elisabeth and her youthful avatar, named Sue, are supposed to switch places each week, but as Sue begins to enjoy the perks of her perky assets, she begins to steal more and more time from her older creator, leading to disastrous and hideous results.

The film has one of the most bombastic and surprising endings I’ve seen in years, one that is as unexpectedly touching as it is horrifying and hilarious. Moore is giving perhaps her best performance to date, a redemption that feels all the more poetic given her intense personal struggles with aging and body image, which she wrote about in her 2019 memoir, **“Inside Out.”** The film allows Moore to be funny, formidable, and truly brave—she goes to ugly places where few beautiful women dare to tread. I was nervous going into the film, as I tend to be squeamish when it comes to needles and nosebleeds, but in the end it was a total blast. So go ahead, leave your house and see something that scares you. Be brave.

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## About Town

Off Broadway

“**Twelfth Night**” famously begins with shipwreck—Viola (Britt Genelin) washes ashore in Illyria—but the director Randall Sharp’s twilit production wonders if anyone *really* made it out of the water. Even as cross-dressed Viola woos Olivia (Katy Frame) for her new

master, Orsino (Jon McCormick), Viola's reality sinks into the dim undersea: creaking timbers punctuate the onstage music's "dying fall"; Karl Ruckdeschel's gray-toned eighteenth-century costumes glimmer with crepuscular glamour; and the group's movement ebbs and eddies eerily. A design and staging triumph, the show follows an unusual leader: Olivia's drunk uncle Toby (George Demas). Everyone in Illyria may be drowning, but Toby has been drowning for years, and Demas shows us that even a collapse can look a little like a dance.—*Helen Shaw* (*Axis Theatre*; through Oct. 26.)

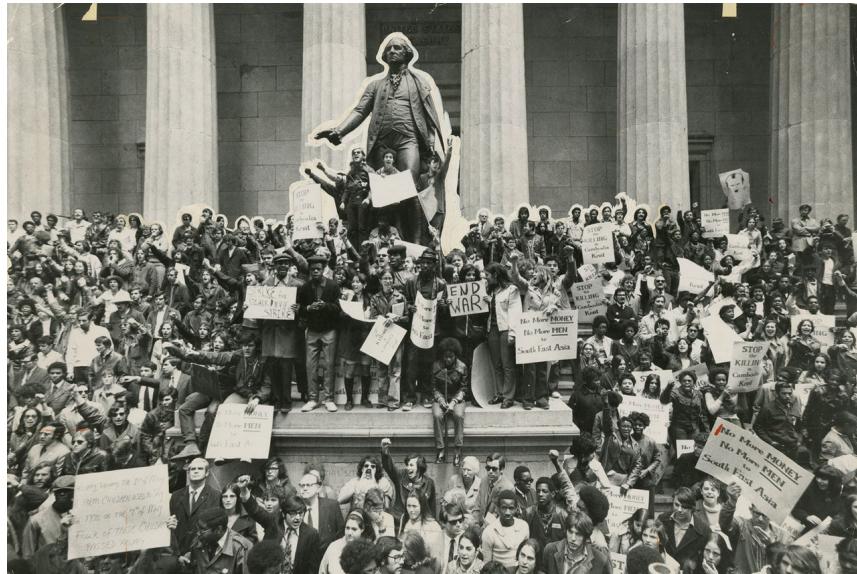
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## Cabaret

*Willkommen, bienvenue, welcome:* the **New York Cabaret Convention** celebrates its thirty-fifth anniversary. Presented by the Mabel Mercer Foundation and hosted by Jazz at Lincoln Center, the three-night event boasts its largest lineup ever this year, with more than seventy-five performers both green and evergreen. Each evening has an overarching theme: the first is an ode to the composer Charles Strouse, including references to "Annie" and "Bye Bye Birdie"; the second draws from the songbook of the late singer Bobby Short, with favorites from Sondheim and Cole Porter; the third, "Everything Old Is New Again," features timeless classics.—*Jane Bua* (*Rose Theatre*; Oct. 22-24.)

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## Photography



*A protest on Wall Street against U.S. involvement in Cambodia, 1970.  
Photograph © Estate of Jack Manning / Courtesy Howard Greenberg Gallery*

For anyone alive during the twentieth century, “**Extra! Extra! News Photographs from 1903-1975**,” a show of vintage images at the Howard Greenberg gallery (through Nov. 16), is full of triggering flashbacks—moments we could swear we witnessed, and, in some cases, did. Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald, Robert F. Kennedy dying on the floor of the Ambassador Hotel, the Hindenberg in flames, an execution in the street in Saigon. Seeing these images again as they were first distributed, as grainy black-and-white prints with crude crop marks and a wealth of scribbled and printed information on the back, grounds them in history but doesn’t disturb their terrible, marvellous immediacy. The girl kneeling next to the body of a dead student at Kent State on May 4, 1970, will never stop screaming.—*Vince Aletti*

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## Experimental Music

A former member of the pop-R. & B. girl group Danity Kane, the singer-songwriter **Dawn Richard** carefully mapped out an independent career in the twenty-tens, drumming up more left-field takes on dance music, from avant-pop to New Orleans bounce. Meanwhile, the touring musician turned solo multi-instrumentalist **Spencer Zahn** was operating at the intersection of jazz, electronic,

and neoclassical sounds. The two artists realized they were kindred spirits while touring with the singer Kimbra, and a one-off 2018 collaboration led to the 2022 album “Pigments,” an immersive, synesthesia-inducing experience that builds a color palette out of synths and vocals. Now, having just released a new album, “Quiet in a World Full of Noise,” they return to the stage as a unit in complete balance.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*National Sawdust*; Oct. 29-30.)

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## Movies



*Maria Bakalova, as Ivana Trump, and Sebastian Stan, as Donald Trump.*  
*Photograph by Pief Weyman*

The director Ali Abbasi’s **“The Apprentice,”** a fictionalized dramatization of Donald Trump’s rise to celebrity and fall into ruthlessness, in New York in the nineteen-seventies and eighties, is focussed on his relationship with the lawyer and fixer Roy Cohn. While working in the grungy family business of outer-borough middle-class housing, Donald (Sebastian Stan) connects with Roy (Jeremy Strong) in Manhattan high society and seeks his help fighting federal racial-discrimination allegations, learning Roy’s strategies of relentless lawsuits, outrageous falsehoods, and blackmail. Meanwhile, his courtship of Ivana (Maria Bakalova) devolves from romance to prenup to cruelty. The movie, written by the journalist Gabriel Sherman, savors the specifics of backroom

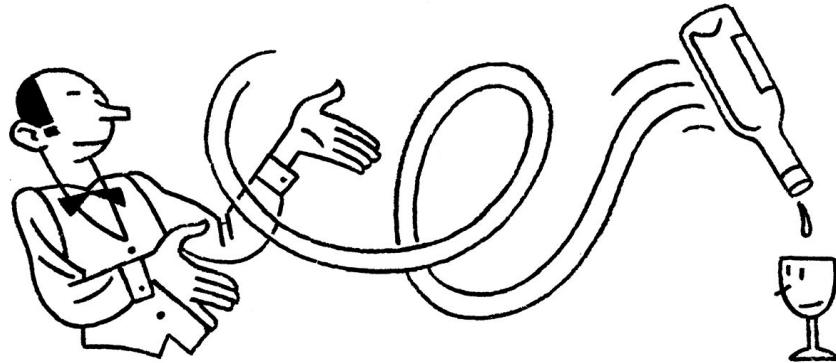
deals and displays appalling betrayals but offers little sense of the protagonist's dark allure or the world in which it sells.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In wide release.*)

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## Dance

**Sergio Bernal** is a product of the new Spanish dance, a fusion of styles infused with flamenco and the nineteenth-century *escuela bolera*, distilled through conservatory training, and honed through ballet. “A Night with Sergio Bernal” combines the pirouettes, leaps, and partnering of ballet, and the percussive footwork and through-the-body drama of flamenco. The music is often classical, and includes works by Manuel de Falla, Ravel (yes, “Boléro”), and Saint-Saëns. Other sections feature a traditional flamenco ensemble. Bernal even performs his own male reinterpretation of the well-worn ballet solo “The Dying Swan,” with steps that show off his lyricism and grace of form.—*[Marina Harss](#)* (*Joyce Theatre; Oct. 23-27.*)

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## Bar Tab

*[Ray Lipstein](#)* stumbles upon a Bay Ridge institution.



*Illustration by Claire Merchlinsky*

On a recent Wednesday night down in Bay Ridge, where the Verrazzano-Narrows Bridge looms gorgeously overhead, a millennial with a dead phone stepped into a bar looking for the gym. A sedate row of men were ranged out evenly, each set up before a drink, a handful of dollar bills, and the Mets game—but the calm was shattered by a request for directions. Hands pointed to a door at the far side of the room, which deposited our friend, blinking, up the street from the gym marquee. **Kelly's Tavern** is a portal to more than the past, though it is that, too; it takes you across the triangle where Fourth and Fifth Ave. meet, like the Flatiron Building if it had an Irish pub running through it. Here, an upside-down shot glass at your place signifies that someone has, with a timeless, Tony Soprano bravura, paid for the next of what you're drinking. When a horse race is on, Bernie, a red-haired Irishwoman with a piercing wit, lets you pick a card for two dollars; if yours has the winner's number, you get the pot, and the whole bar's notice. It's not a cop bar—per two regulars, Mario and Billie, it's an old-man bar, as it was back in the day, before Kelly's

son sold to John, upstairs. Its façade appears in “Saturday Night Fever,” looking exactly the same, but that’s not advertised, and there’s no price list, apart from one for the bar phone: two dollars gets you “On his way,” four for “Haven’t seen him all day.” The bar phone is no longer, but the regulars are, drinking Buds at four bucks a bottle. For the refined or ridiculous, there are a few imported beers, and a tasty Bloody Mary, to keep you from the gym. To say more would be to kill some mystique; we may have said too much already.

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

- The woman who could smell Parkinson’s
- Volta Jazz’s “Djougou Toro”
- Kelly Oxford’s TikTok curation

*A previous version of this piece mischaracterized the breadth of Metrograph’s Halloween-movie screenings.*

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**Photo Booth**

## A Bronx “Family Album” from Hip-Hop’s Early Days

*In the eighties, the Puerto Rican photographer Ricky Flores captured the parties and the people that shaped his teen-age years.*

By [Geraldo Cadava](#)

October 12, 2024



*Ed Alvarez, left, posing with friends in homage to the song “Money (Dollar Bill Ya’ll).”*

*Photographs by Ricky Flores*

Before production began on the 1984 film “Beat Street,” a semi-fictional drama about the early days of hip-hop and breaking in the South Bronx, a researcher on the production team visited Ricky Flores at his apartment. Flores was a young Puerto Rican photographer from the neighborhood who had been taking pictures of the teens he grew up with—his crew. The “Beat Street” team wanted to look at Flores’s photographs to make sure they got the look and feel of the culture right. “This is not a film about break dancing,” Harry Belafonte, who served as a producer, said. “It’s about the people who make up the hip-hop culture.”

“The bastards,” Flores said, when I spoke with him recently. “They used my shit as source material, and all they gave me was a free subscription to *The New Republic*.” They gave him no credit, and little compensation. But Flores kept capturing images of his neighborhood, and beyond. He photographed the protests in Washington Heights in response to the murder, by police, of a twenty-two-year-old Dominican immigrant named Jose (Kiko) Garcia, just a couple of months after the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles. In the days after 9/11, Flores took an iconic photograph of firefighters hoisting an American flag above the rubble of the Twin Towers. In subsequent years, he took pictures of a Mexican rodeo in Yonkers, Ecuadorian migrants who settled in Ossining, and Puerto Rico after the devastation of Hurricane Maria. In 2011, Representative Charles Rangel honored Flores and other “Puerto Rican Photographers of New York” on the floor of the House of Representatives, and he has received citations from New York’s City Council and the State Assembly for his “service to their community.” Now his early photos, the ones the “Beat Street” researchers consulted, are collected in a new book, [\*\*“The South Bronx Family Album,”\*\*](#) published by Culture Crush Editions.

Flores’s parents came to New York in the nineteen-fifties, a period known in Puerto Rican American history as the “great migration,” when some fifty thousand people from the island arrived in the city each year. His father was a merchant seaman, and his mother was a garment worker. Flores was born in 1961. His father died of asthma just four years later. His family was “dirt poor” after his father’s death, Flores told me, and he and his mom moved from the north Bronx to the heart of the south Bronx to be closer to her family. Yet his dad had been able to leave him a small inheritance, which he could access when he turned eighteen. With it, he bought a Pentax K1000, largely, he recounted, because of the influence of a friend named Joey Rios, who taught Flores martial arts and engaged him in “long intellectual discourses about what was happening in the

world.” Joey also had a camera. Flores remembers “just holding it, and the feel of it was instantaneous. I loved it.”

Flores went to libraries and bookstores, where he bought, borrowed, or stole everything he could to teach himself about photography. “Remember, I was a poor kid,” he said. “If you understand that part, everything else kind of makes sense.” The first darkroom he had access to was in the basement of the Police Athletic League’s Lynch Community Center, at 156th Street and Beck Street. Nobody had used it in a long time. William (Bill) Rainey, an African American veteran of the Second World War, after whom a park in the Bronx is named, was the longtime director of the center. He dropped a legal pad in front of Flores and told him to write down everything he would need to get the darkroom up and running, and then he bought the supplies. Flores didn’t know how to print photographs, but he learned through trial and error. One night, Flores got locked inside the building. He stayed overnight, because he worried that, if he broke out and the door remained unlocked, someone might take the equipment.

Many of the photos he took during those early years appear in “The South Bronx Family Album.” In addition to Joey, who is pictured sitting cross-legged in a Buddha-like pose, wearing sunglasses and a loose-fitting knit tie, there was Boogie (the jokester and the d.j. in his crew); Eddie (the brawler, whom they called Knuckles because “he had these boulders at the end of his hands that nobody wanted to get hit by”); someone called Pimp; and Watu, Carlos, Santo, Louis, Pete, and Guillermo. There were also the girls they hung out with: Audrina, Maritza, Yolanda, Elaine, Diana, Venus, and others. These are the “family” members at the center of his album. Flores captures them sitting on stoops smoking cigarettes, playing basketball, roughhousing, playing in water gushing from hydrants, sunbathing at Orchard Beach, congregating in front of bodegas, listening to their boom boxes, playing instruments, dancing in the streets, dancing in social clubs. He also took pictures of others in his neighborhood who were outside his circle—girls going to

church, people marching and dancing in the Bronx Puerto Rican Day Parade, passengers on graffitied subway trains, kids in front of bodegas, Puerto Rican nationalists who had fired on Congress in the nineteen-fifties, and firefighters dousing buildings engulfed in flames. All of these scenes captured the culture in which hip-hop and breaking were born.

Flores's community was only one among many in the South Bronx at the time. He told me that he had never even heard of Clive Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc, credited as one of the founders of hip-hop. He learned about Herc only in 2008, when he was talking with Joe Conzo, Jr., another photographer on the scene, who had taken pictures of Herc, Tony Tone, the Almighty Kay Gee, and many others. For Flores, though, hip-hop and breaking had multiple origins. The Black and Latino residents of the South Bronx did it all together, all at once. That much "Beat Street" got right: its main characters are Black, Latino, and Black and Latino. But some of the early figures are better remembered than others. Describing the musical inspiration for "Hamilton," Lin-Manuel Miranda recalled watching "Beat Street" with his sisters, and listening to m.c.s like the Fat Boys and Eric B. & Rakim. Flores tells other origin stories, including one about a dance move called the Dale Webo (pronounced "*dah-leh weh-boh*"). The first person he saw do it was a guy called Loco. There's a photo of him "dropping his drawers and grabbing his crotch," a dance move that morphed into something used to diss competitors, Flores said. "Is he the progenitor of that particular move? I don't know. There's no way for me to tell. All I know is I never saw it before." Twenty years later, he saw a friend teaching the Dale Webo in an online class on dance. For better or worse, it was, by then, a staple of breaking. Flores remembers asking his friend, "You're teaching that? Are you insane?"



*Geraldo Cadava*, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, is a professor of history and Latino studies at Northwestern University, and the author of “*The Hispanic Republican: The Shaping of an American Political Identity, from Nixon to Trump*.”

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# The Talk of the Town

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By Bill McKibben | The next President will have to deal with a stream of unnatural disasters. So perhaps it would be wise for Harris to more aggressively remind voters of the stakes.

- **[Hannah Gadsby Bravely Meets Old Age \(Their Mid-Forties\)](#)**

By Andrew Marantz | The comedian, whose new show's title, "WOOF!," might refer to dogs or to a reaction to a Gadsby joke, ponders the very particular environments in which they flourish.

- **[A Virginia Living Room Moves Onto Fifth Avenue](#)**

By Henry Alford | The opera singer Davóne Tines visits a re-creation of his rural childhood home at the Cooper Hewitt, where he'll perform with his grandparents.

- **[Hot \(and Sweaty and Maybe Blistered\) Singles!](#)**

By André Wheeler | In a run club organized by the dating app Lunge, participants—dressed to indicate their relationship status—meet up to find love over five kilometres.

- **[Brighton Beach Goes Hollywood](#)**

By Jennifer Wilson | Sean Baker, who directed the action rom-com "Anora," meets the actors Karren Karagulian and Vache Tovmasyan for a tour of Russophone Brooklyn, where the cast lived during filming.

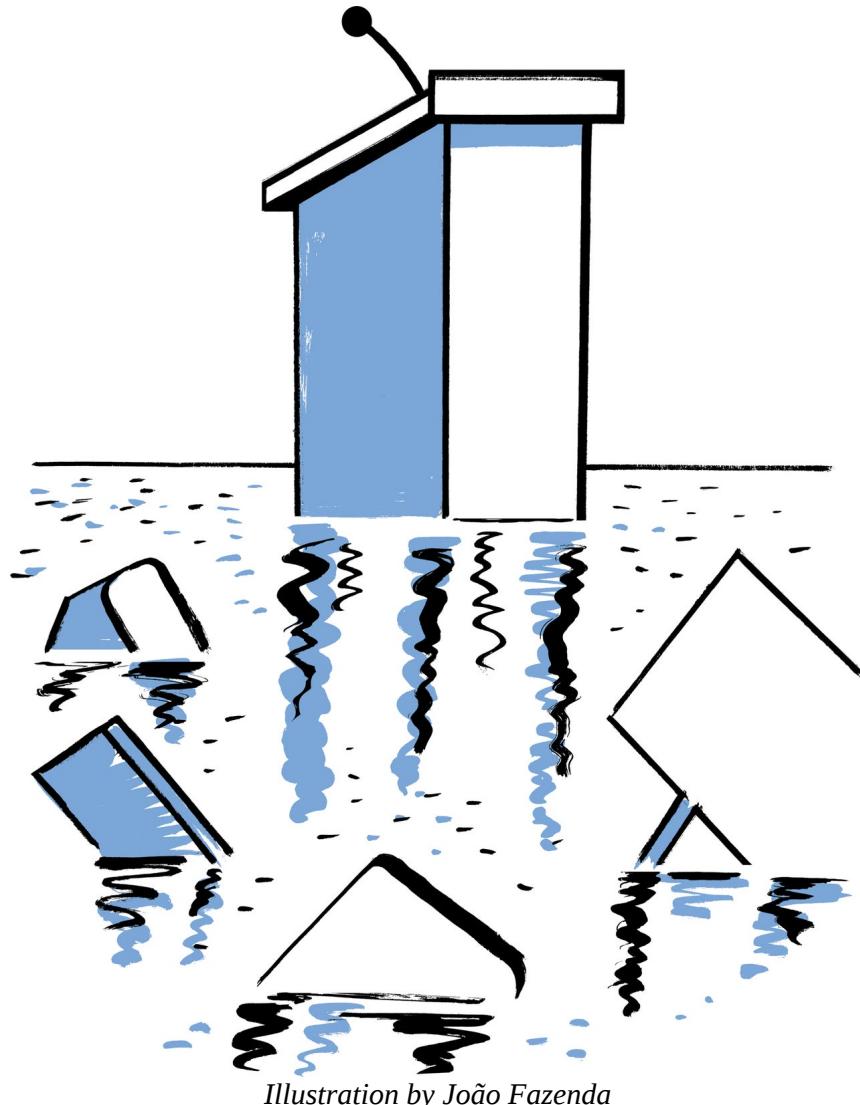
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## Could Talking About Climate Change Now Help Kamala Harris's Campaign?

The next President will have to deal with a stream of unnatural disasters. So perhaps it would be wise for Harris to more aggressively remind voters of the stakes.

By [Bill McKibben](#)

October 20, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In the final minutes of the last Presidential debate of the 2020 election, the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, called for an end to

all federal subsidies for the oil industry. Global warming, he'd explained earlier, is an "existential threat to humanity," adding, "We have a moral obligation to deal with it, and we're told by all the leading scientists in the world we don't have much time." Then, in response to a belligerent challenge from the incumbent, Donald Trump—"Would you close down the oil industry?"—Biden said, "I would transition from the oil industry, yes." "Will you remember that, Pennsylvania?" Trump said, hopefully. Twelve days later, Biden carried Pennsylvania and, with it, the election.

In the intervening four years, here's what has happened to the climate: average air temperatures have soared above any ever recorded. The oceans have set new marks, too—last year, a reading off the Florida coast showed a hundred and one degrees Fahrenheit, and pools of that warm water helped amp up hurricanes such as, most recently, Helene and Milton. Frightening new evidence has emerged about warmer water undercutting the glaciers of the Antarctic, and about the ways that melting ice in the north seems to be menacing the currents of the Atlantic. Worldwide, drought and heat have sparked a series of unprecedented fires, and floods have inundated vast regions. The planet's chief diplomat, U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres, has issued one undiplomatic pronouncement after another—last spring, he called the fossil-fuel industry the "godfathers of climate chaos" and implored the world's leaders to find an exit from "the highway to climate hell." This month, in the journal BioScience, a group of the world's leading climate experts warned, "We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster. This is a global emergency beyond any doubt."

Not that you'd know it from this year's Presidential campaign. Vice-President Kamala Harris, since becoming the Democratic nominee, has spoken very little about climate change. To the degree that a transition from fossil fuel has been discussed at all, it's been in the form of her assuring Pennsylvanians that she won't interfere with fracking. She has spoken about creating green jobs, but not

much else. The reasons are fairly clear. First, the Democratic Party essentially had no primary season. Biden faced only token challenge, and when he stepped down Harris was nominated by acclamation, so activists had no chance to elevate climate change to a crucial electoral issue, as they had done in 2020. Remember the backdrop: Greta Thunberg's movement had crested in the fall of 2019, with some six million people marching in protests around the world. In this country, the Sunrise Movement was pushing a Green New Deal. The governor of Washington, Jay Inslee, who was also briefly a Presidential candidate, called that time a "magic moment" for climate politics. NBC reported, "Climate change has recently shot to the top of polls of issues that Democratic voters care about in the presidential primary, rivaling for the first time longstanding bread-and-butter topics like health care." Harris, in her primary bid, said that global warming "represents an existential threat to who we are as a species." Biden, after winning the nomination, secured Senator Bernie Sanders's support by committing to work with him on climate initiatives.

The second reason for the relative silence this year is that Biden, in fact, largely kept to his commitment. He somehow persuaded the Senate to pass the Inflation Reduction Act, which finally devoted serious federal money to an energy transition. His need for Senator Joe Manchin's vote meant that the bill included gifts to the fossil-fuel industry, but it has nonetheless unleashed hundreds of billions of dollars on everything from heat pumps and E.V. chargers to battery factories. The basic stance of mainstream environmentalists now is that the country is more or less on the right track. They assume that, if Harris wins, many of the people driving policy in the White House will remain in place and that, in four more years, the momentum behind clean energy will be unstoppable. The fossil-fuel industry apparently assumes the same thing: it has been raising money at Spindletop rates for Trump, who has promised to "drill, drill, drill" and has noted, "I hate wind." The choice is so

obvious that Harris doesn't really need to say much. But, if she's elected, she's going to have to do a lot.

Even if the U.S. keeps to its current decarbonization path, it will need to decide whether it wants to increase its already world-leading exports of natural gas. The next President will have to deal with a steady stream of unnatural disasters that will demand ever more federal dollars, and also quite likely with an insurance crisis that could reignite inflation. So perhaps it would be wise for Harris and her team to more aggressively remind voters nationwide of what's at stake, maybe in an ad with a drone shot of the destruction caused by Hurricanes Helene and Milton near Augusta or Asheville or Tampa, and a voice-over of Trump from a September rally, saying, "You'll have more seafront property. . . . Isn't that a good thing?" If nothing else, it would be a counter to the disinformation that Trump is spreading about *fema*; Georgia, North Carolina, and maybe even Florida are battleground states, too. (As is Arizona, where Phoenix just had an unprecedented twenty-one straight days of high temperatures that matched or broke records.) Perhaps Harris's running mate, Governor Tim Walz, could meet with hurricane survivors who used the capacious batteries in their E.V.s to keep their refrigerators humming.

If Harris's team thinks that supporting fracking in Pennsylvania is key to winning over undecided voters, then so be it. But, especially as polling still shows widespread support for climate action, it wouldn't hurt to send a broader signal of concern about this most crucial of issues. The 2012 Presidential election was similarly quiet about global warming—there was no mention of it in the debates—until Hurricane Sandy hit the mid-Atlantic, in late October. Michael Bloomberg, New York's Republican-turned-independent mayor at the time, used the occasion for a surprise endorsement of President Barack Obama, saying that the devastation had brought the stakes of the election into "sharp relief."

Responding to Bloomberg, Obama said, “Climate change is a threat to our children’s future, and we owe it to them to do something about it.” A child who was born that year is now in middle school, and the planet is far, far hotter. ♦



*Bill McKibben* is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker* focussing on climate policy. His books include “*The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened.*”

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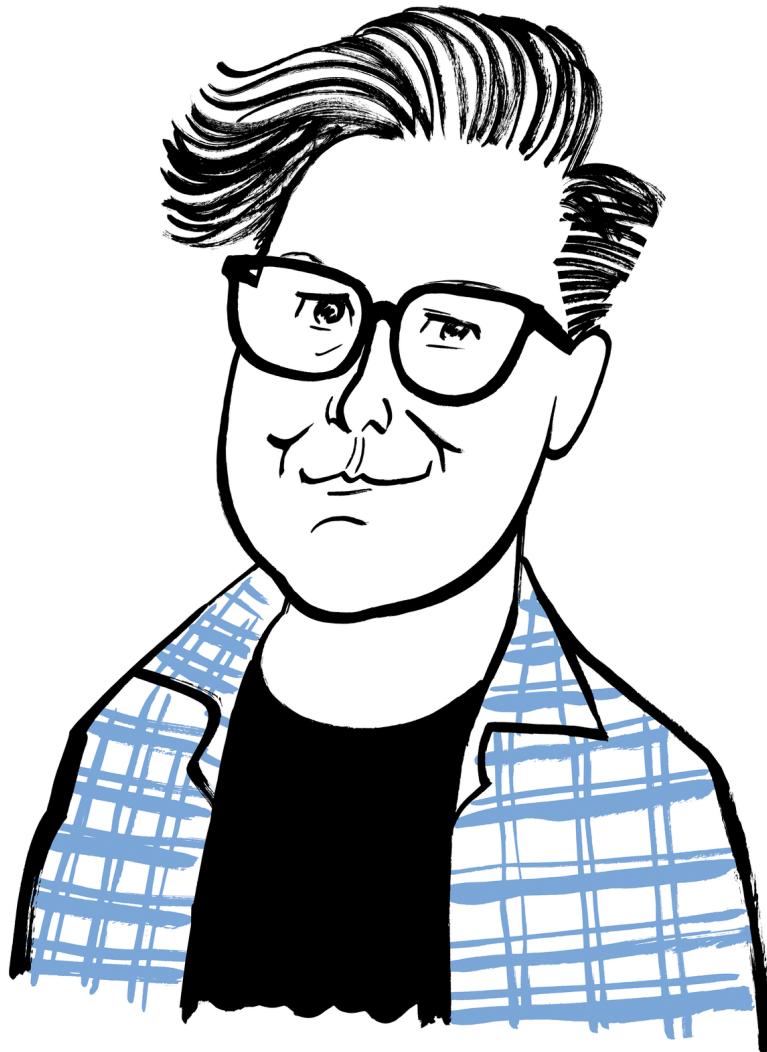
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## Hannah Gadsby Bravely Meets Old Age (Their Mid-Forties)

The comedian, whose new show's title, "WOOF!," might refer to dogs or to a reaction to a Gadsby joke, ponders the very particular environments in which they flourish.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

October 21, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The standup special that made the Australian comedian Hannah Gadsby famous was called "Nanette," after a stranger Gadsby once

encountered in a coffee shop. The anecdote was cut from the show before it was released on Netflix, in 2018, but the title stuck.

Gadsby's next special was called "Douglas," after their dog; the special after that was called "Something Special," which is about as close to "Untitled" as a pun-besotted comedian can get. Their new show, currently at the Abrons Arts Center, is called "WOOF!"—as in dogs, again, but also an onomatopoeia approximating the reaction you might have if someone were to break the news of their father's death with a knock-knock joke ("Who's there?" "Not my dad, he's dead now"), or describe the crucifixion of Jesus as "a late-term abortion," or tell a story about the time they had to clean up a human turd left in a half-eaten tray of biscuits on the floor of a motel room. The other day, in Madison Square Park, Gadsby was derailed mid-thought by the sound of a passerby rustling a paper bag. "Being neuro-atypical, I'm not always super comfortable moving through the world," Gadsby said. "But that's also connected to my superpower"—a heightened version, perhaps, of every comedian's superpower, which is the ability to say shocking or revealing things to strangers "while, on the inside, feeling absolutely nothing."

It was sunny, and Gadsby wore aviators, corduroys, and New Balance sneakers. "If I could stick with one pair for life, then they'd be Old Balances, wouldn't they, and I could break 'em in properly," they said. "But I had on these new ones, and I did something weird onstage, and now I've messed up my knee." A pause, impeccably timed. "It's 'cause I'm old, I guess, but let's blame the shoe." Gadsby is only forty-six, but age seems to be on their mind. Even during periods of grief and exhaustion, they said, they were "still able to write some of my best gags," and they took this as a hopeful sign that they'll "still be fun to have around, even in an old-age home." A lot of their material is about their evolving identity—about being diagnosed as having autism, and then sleep apnea; about growing up poor and then getting rich; about coming out as genderqueer; even about the fine line between "trauma

comedian” and silly wordsmith—for which Gadsby seems almost apologetic. “Figuring yourself out is a young person’s game,” they said. “At a certain point, it’s more about receding gracefully.”

Given Gadsby’s way of moving through the world, they warned, picking a park bench might be a process. “Can we find one with a nice dapple?” they said. One bench, in dappled sunlight, bore a plaque with a dedication to a woman named Ethel (“Ah, well done, Ethel”) and a line from “A Bushel and a Peck” (“What’s a bushel? Mass or volume?”), but it was too close to the dog run. “Do we smell dog piss?” Gadsby said. “We do. Don’t we? Right.” Moving on. Full shade—no. Full sun—absolutely not. Another sun-dappled bench was sandwiched too tightly between a phone-talker and a bag-rustling lunch-eater. The Goldilocks bench was properly lit and properly spaced but mostly covered in bird droppings. “Can we handle a bit of bird shit? I think we can,” they said. “Besides, fascism’s rising and the world’s ending, so—small fry, ultimately.”

They did some people-watching, and some sotto-voce crowd work. (“Now, *this* is a commitment to denim I’m quite impressed with.” “She and that pup have an instant soul connection, don’t they? Or maybe it’s just her food.”) After “Nanette,” which was an international hit, Gadsby signed more deals with Netflix and landed a supporting role on the show “Sex Education.” But they were loath to “commit fully to the show-biz life,” which they defined as “networking, hustle, eternal positivity, and lunch”—and, more to the point, probably New York or Los Angeles. Instead, they live in a quiet town near Melbourne. “I garden a lot,” they said. “Except for my wife, I can not talk to people for weeks.” (The subject of wives led to a riff that involved both the Borat voice and a reassessment of Henny Youngman: “ ‘Take my wife.’ Human trafficking, no?”) They try to stay away from social media, which they have defined as “where neurotypical people go to experience the worst of autism.”

On one arm, Gadsby has a tattoo of a Louise Bourgeois drawing of St. Sebastian, or St. Sébastienne, “who has been adopted as a sort of gender-bending icon.” On the other arm is a Tasmanian orchid, which, they said, is “like me—I only flourish in very particular environments, otherwise I die.” Their current show keeps evolving; at some point, presumably, it will appear on Netflix, but by then it may have different jokes, a different through line, or a different name. “I try to put all that out of my mind and focus on one room at a time,” Gadsby said. “I’m a good authority in a small room.” ♦



*Andrew Marantz* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “[Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation](#).”

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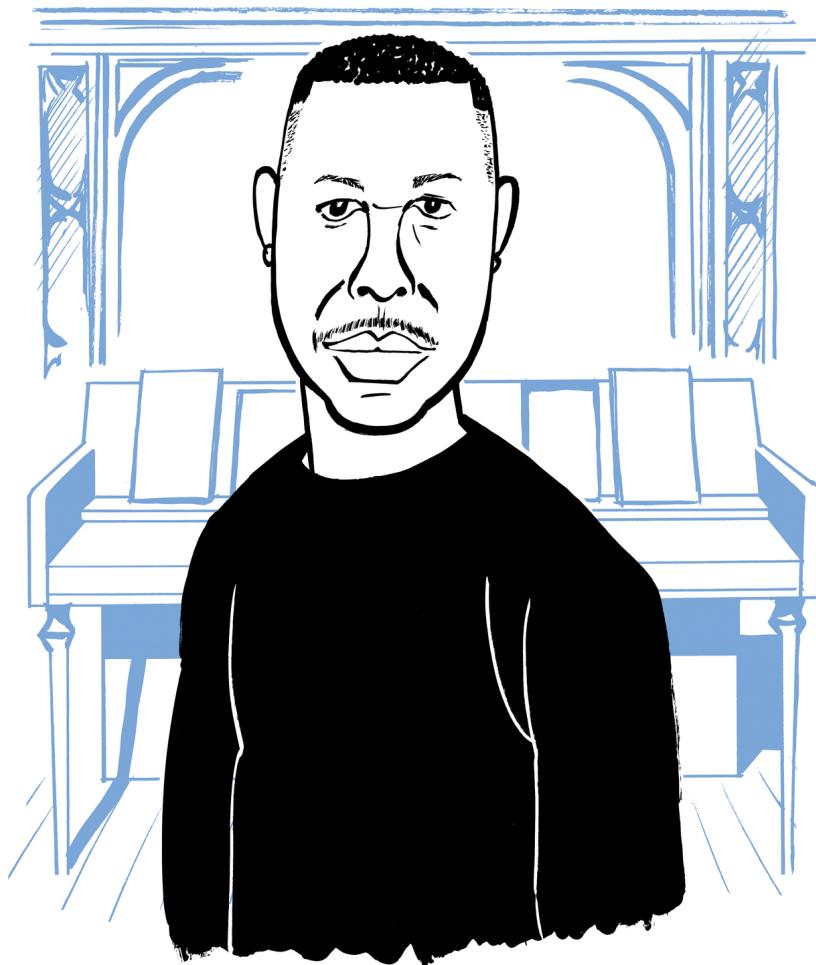
[At the Museums](#)

## A Virginia Living Room Moves Onto Fifth Avenue

The opera singer Davóne Tines visits a re-creation of his rural childhood home at the Cooper Hewitt, where he'll perform with his grandparents.

By [Henry Alford](#)

October 21, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At the Cooper Hewitt, the Smithsonian's design museum, situated in Andrew Carnegie's 1902 mansion on upper Fifth Avenue, the warm light bouncing off the parquet floors and coffered oak

ceilings can make visitors feel as if they were floating inside an enormous Scotch-and-soda. On a recent Wednesday, the opera singer Davóne Tines experienced a similar feeling of dislocation, when he beheld, in the spot where Carnegie’s dining table once stood, a painstakingly accurate re-creation of Tines’s own childhood living room, from rural northern Virginia. The display was one of twenty-five exhibits in an upcoming show called “Making Home.” “This is surreal!” Tines boomed. He had sent a slew of reference photographs to the museum’s curators in the past year, but he was seeing the cozy array of striped couch, white carpet, end tables, and upright piano in their final positions for the first time.

Tines’s rebooted living room is set about two feet off the floor, on a plinth that is on rockers—the artist Hugh Hayden’s attempt to illustrate how Tines, who spends three hundred days a year on the road performing, links the word “home” to balance and stability.

The Cooper Hewitt had invited Tines to come by when the museum was closed to visitors in order to put accent pieces in their proper positions, so that technicians could later mount them in place. Standing before two tables covered with books and picture frames, Tines told a curator, “It’s like you pillaged the house in Virginia. These are the exact same hymnals that are on our piano. And this is a version of the cantata that I stole from the Harvard library—I mean, the one I *borrowed* and haven’t returned yet.” Tines, who is six feet two and thirty-seven years old, had on Versace shorts, Balenciaga sneakers, kneesocks, and an abundance of pearl jewelry, including earrings and a pinkie ring. Unsure where to begin, he asked the curator, “So, how do we do the do?” Given free rein, Tines grabbed two songbooks and yelled, “It’s like a game show!”

In a private preview before the show’s November 2nd opening, Tines will sing while standing on the living-room plinth, accompanied by his grandparents, who raised him and fostered his

love of music. It would not be eccentric to consider Tines's singing gospel hymns with his relatives—who are descended from enslaved people—on an unstable surface in a mansion on Fifth Avenue as another in a series of musical provocations. In “Robeson,” a one-man show about Paul Robeson that Tines conceived with the director Zack Winokur, he sings an a-cappella version of “Some Enchanted Evening” while reënacting Robeson’s attempted suicide in a Moscow hotel room. In his 2018 show “The Black Clown,” Tines stared down audience members while repeating the line “You laugh / Because I’m poor and Black and funny / Not the same as you.”

Positioning a lamp on an end table, Tines said that the work of the director Peter Sellars, his colleague and champion, had deepened his love of staring at audiences. “Standing in front of someone and making eye contact should not be seen as confrontation,” he went on. “We are literally here together in this space. You literally paid to see me, so I’m looking at you.” Shortly after Tines graduated from Juilliard, he auditioned for Sellars and the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho by performing the spiritual “There Is a Balm in Gilead” and a spoken-word cantata based on Homer. Sellars immediately offered him a starring role in Saariaho’s opera “Only the Sound Remains.” Tines said, “In that one instant, I was hired to make my débuts at the Dutch National Opera, the Finnish National Opera, Teatro Real, in Madrid, Lincoln Center, and the Palais Garnier. It blew my mind.”

Although he has an apartment in Baltimore—which he shares with his sibling—Tines mainly lives out of hotels. “You form little rituals,” he said. “Like, when you arrive, you have to turn on every light in the room. It’s very important that you leave the room and then return to it in the same day, so you think of the room as someplace that you go to. And incense—crucial for the olfactory component. If you smell it in the room, it ties that room to other spaces you’ve smelled it in.”

After Tines had spent an hour moving objects around, Carlos Soto, a creative director who was working on another exhibit in the show, stopped by to say hello. Tines said of the fake living room, “It’s uncanny, because it really feels like home.” Soto cast a diagnostic eye at the exhibit and offered a suggestion. “It needs, like, a cough drop on the floor,” he said. Tines whooped in approval. Soto added, “Or a Werther’s Original, without the wrapper.” ♦

*Henry Alford, a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to The New Yorker for more than twenty years. He is the author of the Joni Mitchell biography “[I Dream of Joni](#).”*

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[Meet-Cute Dept.](#)

## Hot (and Sweaty and Maybe Blistered) Singles!

In a run club organized by the dating app Lunge, participants—dressed to indicate their relationship status—meet up to find love over five kilometres.

By [André Wheeler](#)

October 21, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The year 2024 has so far included a number of trends that jumped the shark. Brat summer. Demure. Existing in the context. Another head-scratcher: singles swapping out Tinder for run clubs. The novel approach sprouted from social-media folklore, with viral posts alleging that run-club members were doing a lot more than

jogging with one another. “Run clubs are the new horny singles club,” the comedian Dan Carney posted on X, in June, along with a satirical video. In the clip, a group of runners pore over a complex cluster diagram of romantic connections. Last month, NBC News reported, “Thousands of singles in New York City are flocking to run clubs to meet their soulmate, but some say they are just as rife with drama as the dating apps they wanted to escape.”

One weekly run club, organized by the dating app Lunge, cuts to the chase: runners who are single wear black, while those who are taken wear colorful clothing. “We found that a lot of run clubs are strictly focussed on running,” Steven Cole, the twenty-eight-year-old founder and C.E.O. of Lunge, said the other day, before a meetup in Washington Square Park. “We wanted a more social vibe.” Cole, a former competitive water-polo player and investment banker, teamed up with Rachael Lansing, a twenty-seven-year-old fitness instructor at F45 Training, to start Lunge Run Club in May. Since then, meetups have grown from thirty people to more than a thousand.

As runners trickled into the park, Cole and Lansing handled logistical matters. Both wore all-black gym attire. Translation: single and ready to mingle. “We’re both hosts and participants,” Cole said, laughing. “I met someone through the app. I was seeing her for, like, six months right after we launched.” They broke up, and he’s gone on dates with more than ten people thanks to the run club.

“I’ve always preferred meeting someone in person,” Lansing said, about her own love life.

A few moments later, throngs of runners in black had filled the park’s north side. Erin Mertes, twenty-seven, and Barbara Quagliarbi, twenty-three, scoped out the scene.

Quagliarbi, who had travelled from Jersey City, said, “I like the concept. You can’t just randomly run three-point-whatever miles and try to connect with someone.”

Mertes was cool about her prospects of finding a guy. “I’m more here for the experience,” she said warily, adding that she didn’t have a problem meeting people in real life.

Nearby, a twenty-three-year-old sales director named Henry, who gave only his first name so that people at work wouldn’t learn of his dating activities, realized that he had misread the dress code. “I thought you were supposed to wear red,” Henry, who is single, said.

“You better take that top off, bro!” a friend shouted at him. The red T-shirt read “Property of my hot wife.”

“I’m not really big on dating apps or anything,” Henry said. “So, if I find the right one today, I find the right one today. I’m young, I got some priorities. So she needs to be the right one for me to really take a jump.”

Cole and Lansing stood on the edge of the park’s fountain, ready to kick things off. They shouted instructions into a bullhorn.

Participants could join one of two groups: “runners” (about a three-mile course) and “hot walkers”(1.5 miles). As people sorted themselves, some mixing and mingling happened. Then it was off to the races.

The runners powered down Christopher Street and up Washington, in the protected bike lane. As they ran, Henry and his friends chatted up Isabel Miller, a twenty-one-year-old. The classic icebreaker: “Is this your first time here?”

It seemed to work. Outside the Biergarten at the Standard, one of the week’s designated post-run bars, Miller and her friend were still

talking with Henry's crew. Miller seemed interested. "It's very hard to speak while you're running, but you can make it work," she said.

Had she made a connection? "Yes," she said, smiling. "Maybe." ♦

*André Wheeler, a young-adult novelist and formerly a writer at Vogue, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2021.*

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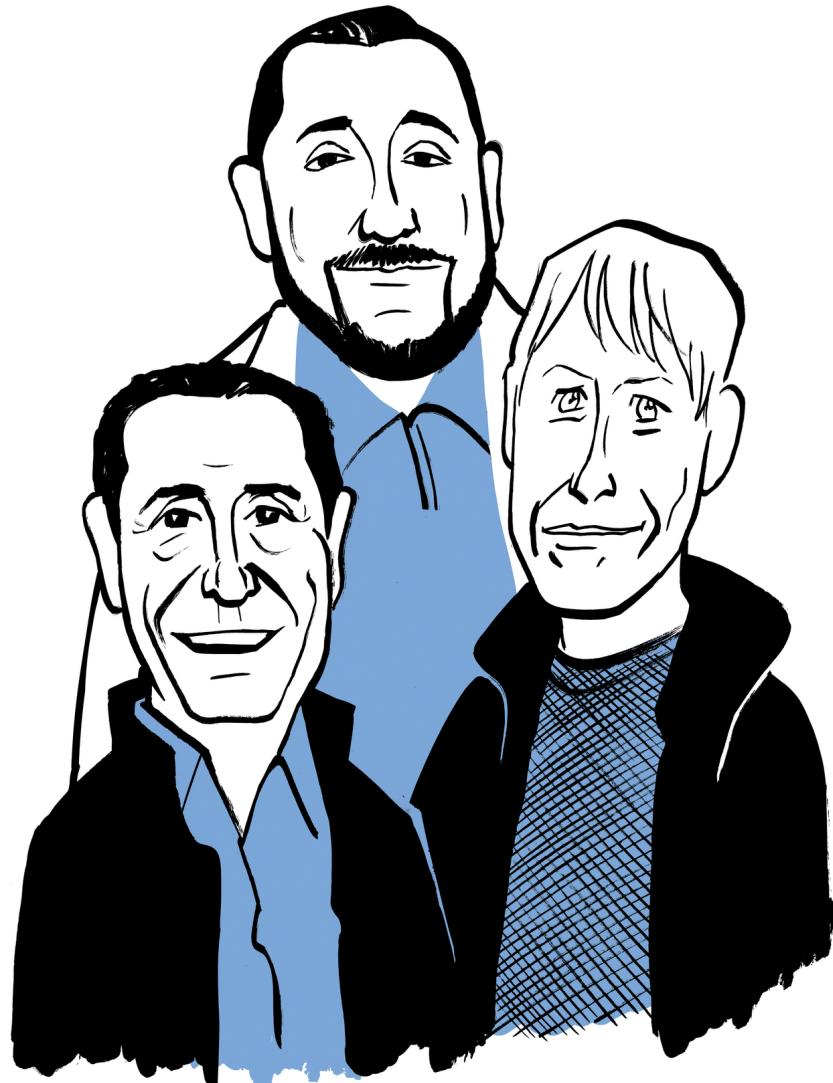
[The Pictures](#)

## Brighton Beach Goes Hollywood

Sean Baker, who directed the action rom-com “Anora,” meets the actors Karren Karagulian and Vache Tovmasyan for a tour of Russophone Brooklyn, where the cast lived during filming.

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

October 21, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In 1990, the Armenian actor Karren Karagulian arrived in New York City with just two hundred dollars and five tins of black caviar. His first stop was the Russian-speaking enclave of Brighton Beach. Visiting the neighborhood the other day, he pointed toward the corner of Brighton Beach and Coney Island Avenues, and recalled his early days as an immigrant. “There were people from different Soviet countries standing next to me,” he said. “One was selling an iron.” He estimated that he got about a hundred dollars per tin of caviar: “It was enough for me to survive for three months.”

Karagulian is one of the stars of the new action rom-com “Anora,” and his co-star Vache Tovmasyan and the film’s director, Sean Baker, joined him in Brighton Beach. Standing under the elevated B/Q stop, Baker gestured at a second-floor window that faced the train tracks. “Our production office was right there,” he said. A train roared by. “It was three months of us all screaming to hear one another,” he yelled over the noise.

In the film, Karagulian and Tovmasyan play the Armenian henchmen of a Russian oligarch whose son, Ivan, is living in New York City and surviving on a diet of strippers, video games, and ketamine. When Ivan elopes with a Brighton Beach stripper named Anora, the henchmen are dispatched to find him and bust up the marriage. One stop on their search is Tatiana Grill, a Russian restaurant on the boardwalk.

Sitting down for lunch there, the three colleagues described the chaos of shooting in the restaurant, amid actual, clueless patrons. The first time Karagulian barged in, looking for the wastrel Ivan, people were concerned. “They wanted to help him find his lost son,” Baker said, laughing. By the third take, the diners were fed up. Karagulian got up from the table and imitated an angry customer who’d cursed him out in Russian: “How many times I told you I haven’t seen the kid? We’re trying to have dinner here!”

The cast lived in Brighton Beach during the shoot, where they got a taste of the local hospitality. In one scene, Tovmasyan's character gets his nose broken and then pukes after taking painkillers. "I walked home with fake vomit and fake blood running down my shirt," he said, "and no one stopped and asked me if I was O.K." But Yura Borisov, who plays a third tough guy, received a hero's welcome and kept getting stopped by fans. "He's the Ryan Gosling of Russia," Baker said.



*"Next riddle: Without looking it up, can you tell me which is the routing number and which is the account?"*

*Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz*

Baker and Karagulian, who has been in all eight of the director's feature films, had dreamed of making a movie in Brighton Beach for a long time. "At first, we were thinking about a Russian gangster movie," Baker said. But they settled on a Cinderella story about a stripper who is whisked away by a rich young Russian. A gaudy estate in South Brooklyn stood in for the prince's castle. "I literally Googled 'biggest and best mansion in Brighton Beach,'" Baker said. It has walls covered in yellow leather and heated marble floors, and was once owned by the ex-wife of a Russian oligarch. Baker was so nervous about damaging the floor that he filmed in his socks.

Baker picked up one Russian word from his cast: *blyad'*, which is used as an exclamation to mean “Fuck!” but literally translates as “hooker.” “Anora” is his fifth film in a row about sex workers and the insults they endure. The film was screened for a group of sex workers and strippers. One dancer told Baker that she recognized her own Cinderella story in the plot.

As lunch was winding down, Baker’s wife, Samantha Quan, who was also a producer on “Anora,” stopped by. “Who doesn’t want the fairy tale?” she asked, joining the conversation. “We all want to believe that dreams can come true. It’s just like when people come to America.”

Karagulian, remembering his smuggled caviar, nodded. These days, he refers to New York City as his home town.

“It’s all tied together,” Quan said. ♦



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

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By Tad Friend | Glenn Horowitz built a fortune selling the archives of writers such as Vladimir Nabokov and Alice Walker. Then a rock star pressed charges.

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By Susan B. Glasser | The former President has been fighting to win back his wealthiest donors, while actively courting new ones—what do they expect to get in return?

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## The Tight-Knit World of Kamala Harris's Sorority

A.K.A., the oldest Black sorority, expects excellence and complete discretion. How are members responding to their most famous sister's Presidential campaign?

By [Jazmine Hughes](#)

October 21, 2024



*Kamala Harris with two of her line sisters at Howard University, in 1986.  
Photograph courtesy Lisa Jackson*

The advice flying around the last night of the Democratic National Convention this past August, at Chicago's United Center, was to not leave your seat after 9 P.M. All day, social media and the convention hall had been abuzz with rumors that the night would end with a performance by Beyoncé. Or maybe Taylor Swift. Or maybe, in a show of interracial solidarity the world had never seen before, they would perform together. Although the superstars never materialized, the crowd was still electric as it waited for the true headliner of the night: Vice-President Kamala Harris, who would

be accepting the Democratic Presidential nomination. An hour before Harris appeared, the comedian D. L. Hughley took the stage and addressed what was perhaps the most enthusiastic demographic in the arena: members of Harris's sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. "Where those A.K.A.s at?" he said, and nodded as the room filled with cheers. "In three months, ain't gon' be no living with y'all."

If Harris wins the election, she will not only be the first female President; she'll also be the first member of A.K.A. to reach the Oval Office. Since its inception, in 1908, A.K.A., a historically Black sorority, has never endorsed a political party or a candidate—as a nonprofit organization, it isn't allowed to. The sorority's leadership had strongly discouraged the display of A.K.A. insignia at the D.N.C. There would be no pearl-encrusted ivy-leaf pins, no pavé brooches spelling out the organization's founding year.

And yet floating among the Convention's fifty thousand attendees, like lily pads across a pond, were hundreds of Black women dressed in the sorority's colors: vibrant greens and various shades of pink—hot, rose, pastel. (The organization's official hue is "salmon pink," but it doesn't specify the temperature of the fish.) I spotted someone in a pink-and-green patterned dress descending the grand staircase of the United Center, as if for a prom picture. Several women wearing fuchsia flats and dyed-green denim stood in line for chicken tenders. One woman toted a pink bag with green letters that spelled out "*Thank You for Shopping Here.*"

Thirty of the Jewels of Iridescent Splendor—as the A.K.A.s who were initiated with Harris at Howard University are called—had travelled to Chicago from places like California, Texas, and Tennessee, taking time off from their jobs as lawyers, nurses, accountants, and teachers. They wore white, in honor of the suffragettes, with nods to their group: a magenta blouse, a string of pearls. The corporate securities lawyer Jill Louis watched her line sister's speech—"On behalf of everyone whose story could only be written in the greatest nation on earth, I accept your nomination to

be the President of the United States of America,” Harris beamed to the crowd from the Convention stage—and told me later that she recognized Harris’s discipline, fortitude, and resilience from their time in Alpha Kappa Alpha. “That strength doesn’t have to be iron,” Louis said. “It is an elegant strength.” She pointed to the symbols of the sorority: the hardy ivy plant that can survive in many climates, the beautiful pearl that is wrought through agitation. “Being able to move forward through adversity is built into the fabric of Alpha Kappa Alpha,” she told me.

That training has been remarkably effective. A.K.A. members are a Who’s Who of political, cultural, and business luminaries.

Minnijean Brown-Trickey, one of the Little Rock Nine, and Bernice King, a daughter of Martin Luther King, Jr., both pledged A.K.A. Toni Morrison was an A.K.A., as is the poet Sonia Sanchez. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, before she became the first female President elected in Africa, joined A.K.A. It is the most represented sorority in Congress today. The first Black woman to go to space, the first W.N.B.A. player to score more than a thousand points, the first Black female mayor of a major American city, the first Black women to lead the Treasury and Energy Departments, the first Black woman to win a Grand Slam—and now the first Black woman to become a major party’s Presidential candidate—are all A.K.A.s. “The first Black woman to fill-in-the-blank is almost always a sorority woman,” Dana A. Williams, an A.K.A. and a dean at Howard, told me. “It’s incredibly hard to achieve the first without the sorority backing, because of the networking and bravado.”

At the D.N.C., I met Jolanda Jones, an A.K.A. who is a Texas state representative, a former “Survivor” contestant, and a onetime star of “Sisters in Law,” a reality show about Black female lawyers. She was holding court near a concession stand, hugging people and saving their numbers in her phone. When I asked her why she had joined A.K.A., she looked at me as if I had asked her whether to season meat before cooking it. “Because it’s the best,” she said. “I

mean, is there even a question?” She’d already booked her flight and hotel for the Inauguration. (“I’m wearing pink and green. I’m having custom shit made. I ain’t gonna be dressed like nobody else.”) Jones told me that she was at the Convention to witness a Black woman on the path to achieving what white women before her never had. “Black women have been saving America forever,” she said. “There was no way I was going to miss the opportunity to be a part of history for a sorority sister.”

Alpha Kappa Alpha originated at Howard, the nation’s premier historically Black university, and was the first Black Greek-letter organization (B.G.L.O.) for women. (Alpha Phi Alpha, the first B.G.L.O. for men, was founded two years before, in 1906.) Today, A.K.A. has about three hundred and sixty thousand members, who belong to more than a thousand chapters across the world. This summer, the nonprofit organization formed a *PAC* for the first time to allow political donations and later issued a challenge for members to raise \$1,908,000 for Harris. (When asked in late September if they’d met that goal, Danette Anthony Reed, the C.E.O. and international president of A.K.A., told me, “We haven’t given out any of those numbers at this particular time.”)

A.K.A. is part of the Divine Nine, an informal name for the council of the largest Black fraternities and sororities. These organizations, which are all full of movers and shakers, have become a formidable bloc of support for the Harris-Walz campaign. As the former Atlanta mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, a member of Delta Sigma Theta, said, “This is a very powerful coalition, and it’s a lane that the Vice-President uniquely owns.”

As I wandered around the Convention, I spotted Christina Henderson, an A.K.A. and a Washington, D.C., council member, near a step-and-repeat, where reporters and TikTok influencers were trying to get a sound bite from Stacey Abrams, the former Georgia gubernatorial candidate. Henderson told me that on July 21st she had been at Target buying school supplies when news

broke that Joe Biden had withdrawn from the race and endorsed Harris: “A girlfriend of mine FaceTimed me and she was, like, ‘Girl.’ And I said, ‘Girl?’ And that was all.” Henderson rushed home to attend a Zoom meeting organized by the group Win with Black Women, during which forty-four thousand people—among them politicians, church leaders, celebrities, and civilians—gathered to strategize about the campaign. Henderson had started attending the group’s weekly meetings just before the 2020 election, when the Biden-Harris ticket won ninety per cent of Black female voters.

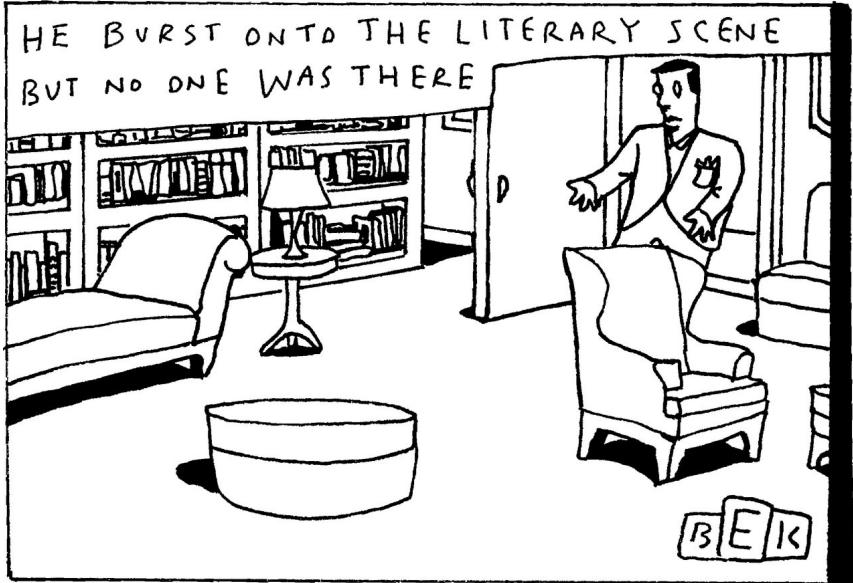
“Our organization has already had voter-engagement, civic-engagement efforts, so there’s no need to build infrastructure or anything different,” Henderson said. Even before Biden left the race, the sorority had launched Take 4 or More, a campaign to encourage each member to get at least four additional people to vote. The Divine Nine have a history of voter mobilization; Henderson called them “the original phone tree.” Like many of the women I spoke to, she was both proud of and protective of Harris, steeling herself for the inevitable vitriol that would greet a Black female candidate. Kyandra Darling, another A.K.A. and a first-time delegate from Florida, told me that the entire campaign felt personal. “Her being a Black woman and understanding that of course she was expected to face some challenges that we didn’t see when Hillary ran,” she said. “She’s been the first in many of these spaces.”

In the following weeks, Donald Trump was dismissive of Harris’s sororal affiliations. He complained in September that Harris had missed Benjamin Netanyahu’s congressional address for a “sorority party.” In fact, she had spoken at the biennial conference of Zeta Phi Beta, another historically Black sorority. More than six thousand people attended the conference, in Indianapolis, and Harris was reportedly interrupted by applause thirty-two times in less than twenty minutes.

Harris was born to an Indian mother and a Jamaican father. After her parents separated, she and her sister, Maya, were raised by their mother, a biomedical researcher. “She knew her adopted homeland would see Maya and me as black girls, and she was determined to make sure we would grow into confident, proud black women,” Harris writes in her memoir, “The Truths We Hold.”

Yet this racial pride has rarely found its way into Harris’s campaign. In her Convention speech, Harris instead emphasized her upbringing as a middle-class American. It has been her opponent who has been much more likely to discuss her race. Right before the D.N.C., Trump, in an interview at the annual convention of the National Association of Black Journalists, insinuated that Harris had changed her racial identification for political gain, saying that she “happened to turn Black.” (In her first major television interview as a candidate, on CNN, Harris batted away a question about his comment: “Same old tired playbook. Next question, please.”)

Afterward, many of her supporters held up her time at Howard and her long and active affiliation with Alpha Kappa Alpha as proof that she’d always identified as Black. Many people see in her A.K.A. membership not just a signal of Black identity but a familiar kind of Blackness: a down-home, American-grown world of spades, stepping, homecoming games, and cookouts. As the literary historian Deborah Elizabeth Whaley told me, Harris has a “commitment to Black cultural experience that the larger populace doesn’t get. They don’t know what it looks like.”



*Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

But her sorority sisters do. “I love President Obama, and I love Michelle, but neither of them were Greek,” Jolanda Jones said during our conversation. (Michelle Obama was invited to become an honorary A.K.A., in 2008, and she accepted, on a nonexclusive basis.) “Black folks about to do more for Kamala than we did for President Obama.”

Among other edicts issued by A.K.A. headquarters in recent weeks was one urging members to be cautious when speaking to the press. The day after Harris became the nominee, sorors received an e-mail that read, “This message serves as a gentle reminder to be vigilant, careful and mindful of how you are involved in the political process.” Many A.K.A.s at the D.N.C. declined to say anything political beyond emphasizing the importance of voting, or referred me to their press office. Similarly, A.K.A.’s customs and rituals are fiercely guarded by its members. When I called my auntie, who pledged A.K.A. in 1994, to tell her that I was working on a story about her sorority, she told me how proud she was of me. “But you know I can’t tell you anything!” she said.

Harris, too, has upheld the secrecy surrounding the organization. She declined to be interviewed for this story, and she mentions the sorority only once in her memoir: “I pledged a sorority, my beloved

Alpha Kappa Alpha, founded by nine women at Howard over a century ago.” In a 2020 interview, she refused to do the sorority greeting, known as “skee wee,” for a Black female journalist who was not an A.K.A. “When you go through the process of becoming one, we can have that conversation,” Harris said. Skee wee is a high-pitched sound—imagine Mariah Carey after sucking down some helium—and a literal trademark of the sorority: registration No. 5116853 in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

A few weeks after the D.N.C., two professors at Howard, Jennifer Thomas and Sheryl Johnson, who both attended the university at the same time as Harris, gave me a tour of the campus, in Washington, D.C. (Johnson is a member of Delta Sigma Theta; Thomas pledged A.K.A. the year after Harris and thus felt compelled to refer to her famous soror as “Most Gracious Lady Kamala Harris,” as per sorority code.) Before we began, Johnson pulled up an e-mail on her phone and rattled off a disclaimer worthy of a commercial for blood-pressure medication: “We’re speaking in an individual capacity, not as Howard employees.” Johnson wasn’t “speaking for Delta Sigma Theta, and I’m not speaking for Alpha Kappa Alpha,” Thomas said. “And H.U. is nonpartisan, thus no stance on the election.” Then we set off for the science buildings.

Harris matriculated at Howard in 1982. As a high schooler, she already knew that she wanted to be a lawyer, like her hero Thurgood Marshall, a Howard Law alum. Since then, she has essentially said that every positive character trait of hers that was not shaped by her mother was formed at Howard. In the nineteen-eighties, D.C. was peak Chocolate City: Black people made up sixty to seventy per cent of the population. It was also a golden era for historically Black colleges and universities across the country. Children of the civil-rights movement were entering higher education with strong racial pride and expectations of solidarity. In 1987, Bill Cosby created the “Cosby Show” spinoff “A Different World,” which followed a Huxtable daughter at a fictional

historically Black college. It quickly became one of the top-rated shows on TV, and H.B.C.U. enrollment rates notably increased during its six-year run. In 1988, Spike Lee released “School Daze,” a film partly based on his experiences at Morehouse College, another H.B.C.U. But Howard has long been referred to as the Mecca, a place where Black achievement, community, and culture converge. The historian Natalie Hopkinson told me that attending Howard was tantamount to four years of living as a white man: “Everything is in your image. Your history, your perspective, your lens on the world is all centered.”

Harris pledged A.K.A. as a senior, in 1986. About three hundred women applied that year, from a student body of roughly ten thousand. Thirty-eight were accepted. Members of Black Greek-letter organizations were particularly well regarded on campus. “It was almost like being a celebrity,” Lorri Saddler, a line sister of Harris’s and a vice-president at Clark Atlanta University, told me. Saddler’s mother was an A.K.A., as are two of her daughters; when her children were younger, Saddler dressed them in shirts that read “*My Mom is an AKA*” across the front and “*My Grandmother Is Too*” on the back.

Thomas and Johnson still keep in touch with some of Harris’s line sisters, and we compared notes as we walked by the president’s house and through the Punchout, a campus café where Harris reportedly liked to hang out with the fraternity brothers of Kappa Alpha Psi. (Sorority women who did so were called Kappa Sweethearts.) Harris has written that the campus felt like “heaven” as soon as freshman orientation, and it was easy to see why: Black students of all complexions and nationalities and hair styles milled around us. We stopped in the Yard, the university’s main quad, where nine trees painted with Greek letters lined the perimeter. It was early in the semester, and students sat in candy-red lawn chairs; above them, a Pan-African flag and a Pride flag fluttered amid the branches. On Fridays at noon, Thomas and Johnson told me, A.K.A.s and other sorority members would congregate in the

Yard. The flagpole was the meeting point for protests; the trees were the party jump-off. Traditionally, B.G.L.O.s don't have their own housing. In recent years, a few of the organizations have installed commemorative statues on campus, but the trees, Thomas told me, were their unofficial "national monuments."

Alpha Kappa Alpha has a mission of "service to all mankind," which must have appealed to the college-age Harris. One can almost hear echoes of her own 2020 Presidential-campaign slogan, "Kamala Harris for the People." Historically, the organization always maintained a civic focus, with bylaws mandating that each chapter member perform "at least one piece of Christian, social or civic service" in the community annually. Harris has spoken of Christine Simmons, a longtime family friend, who was initiated into A.K.A. in 1950, also at Howard, and later became president of an alumni chapter. In 1981, Simmons hosted Norma E. Boyd, one of the sorority's founders, who signed a copy of her memoir for Harris. "That cherished book now sits in my West Wing office at the White House, as a testament to our enduring legacy," Harris told a crowd of A.K.A.s at a convention in Dallas this summer. "A legacy that began a hundred sixteen years ago, when Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, was founded to create desperately needed social and legal change and to build networks of support for Black college women."

By the early nineteen-hundreds, only about a thousand Black people had graduated from American colleges and universities. Many no doubt had elders who could give them firsthand accounts of slavery. In 1896, *Plessy v. Ferguson* had codified Jim Crow laws. The N.A.A.C.P. had yet to exist. Unsurprisingly, Black students were barred from joining existing Greek-letter organizations. In 1908, A.K.A.'s founding year, eighty-nine Black people were recorded as lynched. Alpha Kappa Alpha, like Alpha Phi Alpha before it, was forged as an act of self-reliance: inspired by stories of sorority life on other college campuses, Ethel Hedgemon Lyle, a Howard student from St. Louis, recruited

classmates to create a group of their own, in the spring of 1907. Using the Greek lettering system was a rejoinder to former Vice-President John C. Calhoun's pronouncement that "a Negro would never learn to parse a Greek verb or solve a problem in Euclid."

From the beginning, A.K.A. aimed to prepare its members for success. In "Disciplining Women: Alpha Kappa Alpha, Black Counterpublics and the Cultural Politics of Black Sororities," Whaley details some of the expectations that the organization set forth in "The Ivy Primer," a sorority manual:

The ideal soror should control excessive and public display of emotion; conceal weakness; multitask; never use excuses for failure to perform in life . . . be law-abiding, resourceful, tactful; exercise sound judgment . . . remain neatly dressed and poised; and be wide-ranging in conversational ability.

In its first few decades, A.K.A. advocated for anti-lynching legislation, full voting rights, and education for Black children. During the Great Depression, it provided social services through programs such as the Mississippi Health Project, which brought mobile medical clinics to African Americans in rural parts of the state. In 1948, the B.G.L.O.s formed the American Council on Human Rights, which advised the U.S. government on civil-rights legislation. In 1965, A.K.A. was the first organization chosen to establish a federal job-training program for women.

In 1983, A.K.A. ran a letter-writing campaign to recognize Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s birthday as a federal holiday. The sorority, along with several other civil-rights organizations, sent half a million letters to Congress and collected more than four million petition signatures. Multiple efforts to pass the bill had stalled. But later that year President Ronald Reagan signed the legislation into law, after the bill was reintroduced by Representative Katie Hall, of Indiana—also a member of A.K.A.

Greek organizations have a long history of using hazing rituals to weed out recruits. The process can range from forcing pledges to undergo mild humiliation to requiring more dangerous stunts.

B.G.L.O.s also adopted this practice. In 1925, the *Hilltop*, Howard's student newspaper, reported that prospective B.G.L.O. inductees went around campus singing songs and wearing "odd attire" during their initiation. The next year, Thurgood Marshall, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, was suspended from his H.B.C.U. for hazing recruits, which, as one biographer noted, he recounted with "glee" later in his life. One of his favorite pranks was to have pledges compete in a pantless race, with pickles clenched between their buttocks.

In the fifties and sixties, hazing practices, which by then could include referring to pledges as "worms" or forcing them to roll pencils across a floor with their noses, became inconsistent with the ideals of the civil-rights movement. As hazing was outlawed by schools, many organizations moved their pledging activities underground, and incidents of violent or otherwise unsanctioned hazing activities increased. In 1989, an Alpha Phi Alpha pledge at Morehouse College died following a hazing session. (The university temporarily banned the organization.) As reports of these incidents continued to rise, A.K.A. officially changed its process to focus more on knowledge of sorority history. But this didn't stop the problem. In 2002, two women drowned in California during an A.K.A. pledging process. And, in 2017, a woman who had recently been initiated into A.K.A. at Northwestern University died by suicide, after communicating to her big sisters that the hazing process was causing suicidal thoughts. (In 2020, a lawsuit against the national organization related to the suicide was dismissed.)

For decades, pledges have submitted to the indignities of hazing because the practice was seen as legitimatizing, even beneficial. A 2013 study in the *Howard Law Journal*, called "Belief, Truth, and Positive Organizational Deviance," found that, although too much hazing has negative outcomes, a moderate amount leads people to

feel more positively about their organization, and to become more active participants. “There’s a kind of human need when going into organizations to have some sort of ritualistic symbolism that allows the person who is outside the group to go into the group and feel accepted,” Lawrence Ross, a member of Alpha Phi Alpha and the author of “The Divine Nine: The History of African American Fraternities and Sororities,” told me. “But it’s a fallacy to believe that hazing creates loyalty.”

Chassidy Mayo, a Christian life coach who was initiated in 2014 at Lamar University, officially renounced her A.K.A. membership last year, in part because of the façade of friendship that she says she was expected to maintain: “You’re being forced to have a relationship with the people who are bringing you into the organization after they’ve mentally or emotionally abused you, and then you’re expected to just be B.F.F.s.” Mayo said that her initiation felt like a “cult experience.”

None of the thirty-odd A.K.A.s I interviewed would discuss hazing or provide details, on or off the record, about what Harris’s process might have been like. “She’s been through it,” Whaley hypothesized. “They will be difficult on you. They will put you in circumstances in which you have to think quickly on your feet.” This treatment, Whaley argued, may have helped Harris get through law school, become a district attorney, and run for Senate.

On February 12, 1986, Harris and thirty-seven other women received letters inviting them to the sorority’s pledge ceremony. No one wanted to talk to me about the rituals involved. I finally found what seemed to be an A.K.A. ritual manual, from 1977, on WikiLeaks. It outlined instructions for an elaborate initiation ceremony, during which pledges dressed in black and wore wreaths of ivy. At least according to the manual, they prayed, sang, and took vows to be “submissive and in every way to subjugate [themselves] to the highest authority” and to be “free and clean of heart, and strong to beat the glory to its goal.” One source familiar

with the organization said, “It looks like someone took aspects and produced an inaccurate document.” I asked several A.K.A.s, individually, if the document was authentic. In response, I received a group e-mail from five of them declining to verify it, and stating that they no longer wished to participate in this story.

Once inducted into A.K.A., Harris became known as C<sup>3</sup>: calm, cool, and collected. Much has been written about her time at Howard: her tendency to carry a briefcase around campus and her participation in student protests against apartheid. Many of her line sisters told me that she was unflappable and precise, with a big, hearty laugh. During her freshman year, Harris was recruited for the debate team—the only place her affability didn’t follow her. A classmate from that time has said, “The one thing I can always remember about Kamala is that she was always friendly and the nicest person. But in a debate it was almost like a switch was turned.” In her first year, her line volunteered at local hospitals and day-care centers, performed at a gospel show for seniors, and fasted to raise money for hunger.

Before our tour concluded, Thomas and Johnson wanted to show me the campus chapel, which has stained-glass windows that honor the Divine Nine. In the past century, Martin Luther King, Jr., Desmond Tutu, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Mary McLeod Bethune have all spoken there. Every Sunday, Thomas and Johnson told me of their time at Howard, the members of the B.G.L.O.s would attend church together, dressed in black coats and patent-leather shoes. Afterward, they’d “line up like dominoes,” Thomas said, and start their greetings. Some forty years later, she still remembered how to greet older members. She straightened her back, stiffened her arms by her sides, and flared her hands, whipping her head back on every “Alpha”: “Hello, most gracious ladies of the upper, uppermost house of *Alpha* chapter, *Alpha Kappa Alpha* Sorority, Incorporated, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 20059!”

Alpha Kappa Alpha was formed in part to cultivate friendship and community among like-minded Black women in college, but nearly everyone I spoke with emphasized the feeling that joining was a lifetime commitment, and that mentorship was key. “For white folks, Greek life is a club,” the sociologist Matthew Hughey, an author of the *Howard Law Journal* article, told me. “For Black folks, Greek life is a calling.”

After graduating, Harris, too, carried forward A.K.A.’s mission of uplifting other Black women. Venus Johnson, the chief deputy attorney general of California, worked for Harris more than a decade ago, when Harris was the state’s attorney general. Johnson told me that a promotion by Harris, who counselled her on professional and personal matters, changed the trajectory of her career. In 2004, Lateefah Simon, now a Bay Area congressional candidate, was hired in her early twenties by Harris, who at the time was the district attorney of San Francisco. Simon said that Harris has mentored her ever since: “When I see an unknown caller on my phone, I’m, like, ‘It’s either student loans or Kamala Harris.’ ”

Simon’s tenure in the D.A.’s office was part employment, part finishing school. She called Harris the toughest boss she’s ever had, and told me that she went to college only because Harris “made” her enroll. Once she did, Harris kept track of her grades. “And, let me tell you, I was a grown-ass woman with a child,” Simon said. (She had also already won a MacArthur Fellowship.) “But no one was asking of me what Kamala had asked of me, and I found that I needed it and wanted it.”

But there is also, Simon insisted, a warmth to Harris. She’s the type of boss who calls you on your birthday. When Harris’s employees didn’t have child care, she encouraged them to bring their kids to work, the way her mother had done with her and her sister. One day, Simon asked Harris a style-related question: Why did she wear pearls all the time? Harris told her that pearls were a reclamation of

the way the world disparaged Black women, or saw them as rough. “I went to Howard University,” Harris told Simon. “I’m a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha.”

If she wins, Harris would not be the first Greek to occupy the Oval Office. Nineteen former Presidents were fraternity men. Several, including Rutherford B. Hayes, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush, were Dekes, or members of Delta Kappa Epsilon, which was founded at Yale in 1844. These days, a quarter of the House and sixty-four per cent of the Senate are members of a Greek-letter organization. Professional success and fraternal affiliation have always had a chicken-and-egg relationship: Do Greek organizations produce leaders, or just attract them? What comes first, the drive or the pledge?

A career in politics no doubt appeals to members of fraternities and sororities, which in many ways are governments unto themselves: for everything in politics, there is a fraternal or sororal equivalent. Greek organizations have regular elections and distinct emblems. A national or international body, governed by alumni, sets the rules. Parsing a bill on the Senate floor or fund-raising for a campaign may come more easily to those who participated in similar activities in college. Caya Lewis, who pledged A.K.A. at Spelman College in 1992, is now the chief adviser for policy and strategy for the Office of Global Affairs at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She told me that she learned Robert’s Rules of Order as an A.K.A., as well as two skills she still uses today: how to make a vegetable plate and how to run a meeting.

Early fraternities expected their pledges—white, male, Christian, and preferably wealthy—to be among the “most handsome, athletic, social, and confident” members of their class, according to a 2010 study on the history of white college fraternities. Though emerging out of segregation, Black Greek-letter organizations, too, had supercilious standards for their members and rules about who could join. Sojourner Jackson, a former president of Zeta Phi Beta,

once observed that when she was an undergraduate, in the nineteen-thirties, fraternity and sorority membership demanded that recruits belong to a certain class. “At that time, if you didn’t have the money—if your parents didn’t give it to you—you couldn’t get into the organization,” she said. Some recent undergraduate A.K.A.s told me that their initiation fee was between \$1,500 and \$2,000, an eye-popping amount for which some inductees have to fund-raise.



*“I don’t think we should get married till our friends can afford better wedding gifts.”*  
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

Hughey, the sociologist, described B.G.L.O.s as having a “schizophrenic” relationship with class. “These organizations, make no mistake about it, are élitist,” he said. (Hughey, who is white, is a member of Phi Beta Sigma, a B.G.L.O. “I grew up in a majority-Black neighborhood in the South, and a lot of my mentors were fraternity men,” he said.) Yet he pointed out that their social contributions cannot be ignored. He sees them as “vibrant contributors to Black life, and to the betterment of white America, too.”

B.G.L.O. members were never expected to assimilate into white culture; rather, it was hoped that they would anticipate and upend negative stereotypes by comporting themselves excellently:

maintaining good grades, being active in their communities, advocating for equal rights, and so on. But the organizations' image control could be oppressive to their pledges, and was in some ways reminiscent of the élitist, exclusionary ways of white G.L.O.s. I couldn't help broaching the concept of "respectability" in many of my conversations with scholars, the sense that these organizations were training their members this way for the approval of white people. Ross, the author of "The Divine Nine," said that the battle wasn't for acceptance: "It's about a fight for dignity in terms of the notion of fighting an ideology that says, 'You are, by being Black, completely inferior.' "

Even though B.G.L.O.s emerged from an effort to engender racial solidarity, they also have a history of reinforcing colorism. Until the nineteen-twenties, according to Whaley's book, eighty per cent of the student population at five H.B.C.U.s reportedly was of a lighter complexion. Even when that began to change, the B.G.L.O.s' preference for fair-skinned members was obvious. As one student wrote in the *Hilltop* in 1929, "We find these fraternities and sororities seeking the brotherhood or womanhood of those persons who are of light complexion or who are light brown skinned. Very few are chosen from the third group or darker set."

Alpha Kappa Alpha, in particular, has long had a reputation for colorism. In a 2011 study of stereotypes among members of historically Black sororities, published in the *Journal of Sorority and Fraternity Life Research and Practice*, participants described A.K.A.s as "classy, rich . . . delicate, pretty, dainty, snobby . . . and light skinned with long hair." Many sorors I spoke with over the phone told me their skin color, unprompted, as if to dispel A.K.A.'s reputation. "Oh, I didn't know Kamala was an A.K.A.," my sister said, after I told her about this story. "But I'm not surprised. She looks like one."

"I call all that urban legend," Danette Anthony Reed, the organization's C.E.O., said. "A.K.A. right now is all shades."

Brea Baker, who was initiated into A.K.A.’s New Haven chapter as a Yale student in 2016, acknowledged that, as a fair-skinned Black woman, she perpetuates the stereotype. Measures like insuring that a soror’s skin color is no darker than a paper bag may have fallen out of fashion, but more insidious forms of prejudice persist. Baker recounted that long, flowing hair has been integral to an A.K.A.’s presentation. “Alpha Kappa Alpha has stepped up and done some really amazing things, sociopolitically, for the Black community,” she said. “But if we only make space in those rooms for Black people who look just like us, then that’s not as liberatory as we might think.”

One way that A.K.A. encourages a lifelong commitment is by increasing the likelihood that its members are accepted into the Links, an invitation-only service organization centered on prominent Black women, and Jack and Jill, a cultural and social club for African American children. (Harris is an honorary member of the Links.) These organizations all put a high value on professional success, and view community service as both a form of outreach and a sign of conformity to a middle-class ideal. When Glenda Glover, a former president of A.K.A., told me that the Harris campaign and the organization shared a mission, I was not expecting her to talk about the effort to increase Black female representation on corporate boards and in the C-suite. “We’re putting people in positions of power so you can influence others,” she said. She saw this mission in terms of destiny. “That’s the ultimate, to become President of the United States,” she said. “That shows how far God has brought us as a people, and how far Black women have come.”

Even before I grew up to be a dreadlocked, braless lesbian with tattoos and hairy armpits, I was always suspicious of sororities. Secrets and group activities make me uneasy. I am the eldest of five daughters, and I never want to wear a matching outfit again. The A.K.A.s I interviewed for this story frustrated me—in part because, aside from their Fort Knox levels of secrecy, so many of them were

encouraging to an almost absurd degree. They were so happy to hear that I was writing for a magazine. They were so happy to see that I was Black. Four women told me that they were praying for me and my article. After my afternoon at Howard, Johnson sent me a thank-you card for the tour that *she gave me*.

I could see how Harris might continue to derive fortitude from her relationships with these women. Throughout the years, her line sisters have stayed close, and they look out for one another. Jill Louis, the lawyer, told me that, when she and a line sister were undergoing cancer treatment at the same time, the other women came to care for them. “I have a lovely, stable home and family, but there was something about having that line sister who came to make sure that I was well and that my husband was well that first week,” Louis said. The bonds and the level of organization go back to their college days. When the women were on campus, they were “a well-oiled machine,” Lorri Saddler told me. “We all fell into our roles and contributed based on who we are.”

They’ve taken that model to their campaign work. Debbie-Anne Reese, who was elected as the president of Harris’s line more than forty years ago, organized everyone into various committees. Kuae Noel Kelch reviews all media requests for the line. Saddler is comfortable being more public-facing, so she handles many of the interviews. Nine women on the line are lawyers, so they weigh in on protocol and legalities. I asked Louis—who has a background in nonprofit governance—how they managed to do all of this without running up against partisanship. “That’s not a problem for us,” she said. “That’s what we learn in the sorority, how to be disciplined.”

All of A.K.A.’s fund-raising efforts are directed by the *PAC*. A source shared an official e-mail, sent to members in mid-October, that reported that the *PAC* had raised \$460,000 for Harris and \$450,000 for congressional races. On the ground, A.K.A. is focussed on getting out the vote. An unofficial A.K.A. group chat called Pearls for Kamala, which more than eight thousand sorors

have joined, allows members to sign up for action items like designing merchandise and registering voters. On social media, various chapters have posted Election Day checklists (I.D., water, “good attitude”) and state-specific rules on absentee voting. A.K.A.’s initiatives have changed since the civil-rights movement, but in some ways the national landscape hasn’t. As Whaley put it, “They’re not at diners trying to desegregate things, but there’s a resurgence of a kind of Jim Crow, trying to disenfranchise people.” Recent voter-registration drives have been held in areas with sizable Black populations: New Haven, Chattanooga, Cleveland, Chicago, Savannah. As one eightysomething A.K.A. told me, “Anytime we’re doing anything, we’re going to be registering voters.”

Will efforts like this by A.K.A. and the rest of the Divine Nine make a difference in the election? Aisha Mills, a public-affairs strategist and social-impact adviser, thinks they could. “It’s the marshalling of bodies that makes it such a powerful organizing and mobilizing bloc,” she said. “If you contrast that with the Republicans, they have evangelicals, they’ve got AIPAC, but they’re not on college campuses.” She noted, “Democratic victory is predicated on Black communities.”

On a balmy Sunday afternoon in September, I went to a voter-registration drive in Manhattan, held by Fordham University and the Pi Kappa Omega chapter of A.K.A. The attendees, who were mostly women in their fifties and sixties, stood around a cookie-and-coffee station in their church clothes. The turnout was only decent at first, despite a scheduled appearance by the actor Courtney B. Vance. Someone whispered that the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the influential church in Harlem, was having a community-outreach event at the same time.

Undaunted, three sorors—accessorized in pink and green, naturally—sat behind a long wooden table. They asked anyone who came within listening distance if they were registered to vote. Fun-size

candy bars littered the table. One soror tallied how many people the women had spoken to (twenty-five) versus how many voter-registration forms they'd handed out (four). Lisa White-Tingling and Jasmine McFarlane-White, a mother-and-daughter pair, introduced me to everyone there. White-Tingling, the chair of the chapter's social-action committee, had registration forms in English, Spanish, and Korean. She told me that her chapter had been getting all kinds of people to vote: high-school students, senior citizens, people in transitional housing. Like everyone else I interviewed, mother and daughter emphasized their nonpartisan status, going so far as to point out that they were each wearing something blue and something red. (They also both wore pearls and Converse tennis shoes, just as Harris did on the February, 2021, cover of *Vogue*.)

During the next hour, the sorors high-fived registered voters and tried to avoid the temptation of the cookies. A few people came by to thank them for their service; one woman bragged that she'd been voting "since Jimmy Carter." When Courtney B. Vance arrived, everyone jumped up for an impromptu photo shoot. One woman, Yunice Emir, handed me her phone and asked if I could take pictures. We began talking, and eventually traded numbers. Later, I received a text from her: "So incredible meeting you brilliant queen!" She thought we should go to lunch. ♦

*Jazmine Hughes*, a former editor and writer at the *Times Magazine*, has received two National Magazine Awards.

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[Letter from Washington](#)

## The U.S. Spies Who Sound the Alarm About Election Interference

A group of intelligence officials confers about when to alert the public to foreign meddling.

By [David D. Kirkpatrick](#)

October 21, 2024



*China, Iran, and Russia are the prime manipulators of U.S. political discourse.*

*Illustration by Ben Wiseman*

The Intelligence Community Campus-Bethesda, a vast office complex covered in vertical panels of maroon siding and mirrored glass, sits on a cliff overlooking the Potomac, surrounded by a forty-acre lawn and a tall wrought-iron fence. Roughly three thousand employees of various United States spy agencies work there. About two dozen of them are assigned to the Foreign Malign Influence Center—the command hub of the battle to protect the

Presidential election from manipulation by foreign powers. The center, which opened in 2022, is responsible for deciphering, and defeating, surreptitious efforts to rig or tilt the American vote. The October before an election is the busy season.

Jessica Brandt, a forty-year-old newcomer to the intelligence world, is the center's first director. Before her appointment, last year, she'd spent her career writing research papers at Washington think tanks, most recently on "digital authoritarianism"—the way dictators use technology to control or manipulate people, at home and abroad. At a thirty-seat conference table in the center, we talked about her move from theory to practice. Now that Brandt has access to classified intelligence, she knows as much as anyone about how foreign powers are trying to tamper with American elections. But she has also experienced firsthand how the polarization of U.S. politics is making it harder to protect the fairness and credibility of the vote. These days, a warning from the U.S. intelligence agencies is no longer accepted at face value. It's immediately spun for partisan advantage.

Intelligence officials use the term "election interference" to describe attacks on the actual mechanics of vote counting. This is now considered an extremely slight risk. The hodgepodge of state voting systems makes a mass hacking impossible, and recent security upgrades have insured the preservation of paper backups for almost every ballot. The more realistic danger is what officials call "malign foreign influence": hacks and leaks, bots and trolls, hidden payments and targeted attack ads. Adversaries can use these underhanded tactics to twist public opinion, discredit the vote, and sway its outcome. The center's job is to mitigate the effects of such machinations, and one of its main tools is forewarning voters through public bulletins.

Yet ever since July 28, 2016, when the director of the C.I.A. began briefing President Barack Obama on the Kremlin's plot to help elect Donald Trump, it has been agonizingly clear that government

alarms about hidden meddling by foreign hands might themselves be perceived as tainting the electoral process. Obama decided not to alert the public before Election Day about the full extent of the Russian conspiracy to assist Trump, fearing that such a disclosure would look like a thumb on the scale in favor of Trump's opponent, Hillary Clinton, and potentially undermine her widely expected victory.

That, it turned out, was the wrong worry. When the Kremlin brazenly pulled off another hack-and-leak operation the next year, in Europe, France's response provided an instructive contrast. The Russians had stolen gigabytes of e-mails and other data from the Presidential campaign of Emmanuel Macron. But, before the day of the vote, credibly nonpartisan government agencies informed citizens of a foreign cyberattack; an electoral commission instructed news organizations not to report on the leaked material. David Salvo, the director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, at the German Marshall Fund, told me that the French government's action, and the public's trusting response, was "the best-case scenario."

The U.S. intelligence agencies, though, waited until two months after Trump won the 2016 election to lay out the sweeping scale of the Russian operation. Instead of averting a partisan battle, the delay ignited one. Democrats argued that the Kremlin's support rendered Trump an illegitimate leader; Trump and his allies claimed that the intelligence agencies were part of a deep-state conspiracy against him. Seven years later, the fight continues.

Now another U.S. Presidential election may hinge on tens of thousands of votes across a handful of states. Almost any illicit advantage could arguably decide the outcome (and cast doubt on the results), making the race a prime opportunity for foreign meddling. Indeed, intelligence officials and tech-company analysts say that more foreign spies than ever are getting into the game. Clint Watts, the manager of Microsoft's Threat Analysis Center,

told me that the Kremlin’s success in 2016 “convinced almost every authoritarian nation that they needed to jump into this.” And the biggest players, Russia and Iran, are working even harder at election influence than they did in 2016 or 2020. Yet the government’s warnings about foreign schemes are frequently undercut by the efforts of both Democrats and Republicans to weaponize such intelligence. In 2024, Democrats have railed about Vladimir Putin “rooting for” Trump, while Republicans have insisted that Biden-appointed intelligence officials are underplaying Iran’s schemes to defeat the former President—including by plotting his assassination. Representative Mike Turner, an Ohio Republican who chairs the House Intelligence Committee—and who recently put out a statement under the headline “Is the Biden-Harris Administration Colluding with Iran?”—told me, “You don’t hear a lot from the Administration about the malign influence of Iran in hacking the Trump campaign and attempting to kill Donald Trump.” According to people involved in a recent classified briefing on election security, the two sides of the House Intelligence Committee got into a shouting match over the relative scale of the threats.

Brandt told me wearily that she’d heard “the critiques,” and insisted that the center nevertheless stayed focussed on building “the most accurate threat picture we can.” But Kathleen Hall Jamieson, an expert on public opinion at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of a book documenting the effects of the Kremlin’s influence operation in 2016, told me that, with so much partisan noise threatening to drown out the center’s warnings, “our system is still defective.”

A parliamentary election in Slovakia last September marked the advent of a new era in election chicanery. A pro-Russia faction promising to end support for Ukraine was locked in a tight race against a Western-friendly party, Progressive Slovakia. Three days before the vote, an anonymous Instagram account uploaded a recording of the voice of Progressive Slovakia’s leader, Michal

Šimečka, describing a “secret plan” to curb alcoholism: raising the price of beer “by seventy per cent to a hundred per cent.” As that recording raced across Slovakian social media, a second one appeared to catch Šimečka conspiring with one of the country’s best-known investigative journalists, Monika Tódová. “Again, will someone walk in and insert the ballots directly?” Tódová’s voice asked.

Šimečka: “This has been taken care of already.”

Tódová: “All right, then. What about me? Is it true that ‘by coincidence’ I will win some kind of valuable prize?”

Šimečka and Tódová called the recordings fraudulent. But while tech-company fact checkers were struggling to determine their authenticity, the Slovakian media entered a legally required forty-eight-hour news blackout before the vote. By the time the recordings were debunked as A.I.-generated deepfakes, the pro-Russia party had won a narrow victory.

The impact of the deepfakes is difficult to quantify. Their exposure did not stop an ally of the pro-Russia party from winning the Presidency the following year. Yet the Slovakian election put Washington on guard that A.I. could blur the boundaries of political reality as never before. This year, U.S. intelligence agencies said that China was probably behind videos of A.I.-generated Taiwanese newscasters reading aloud from a made-up book containing made-up scandals about Taiwan’s President. Brandt, of the Foreign Malign Influence Center, told me that deepfakes “can come in thirty-six thousand flavors,” so teams of forensics experts from throughout the government had conducted a “summer of exercises,” rehearsing plans to quickly evaluate the authenticity and origin of inflammatory material that might surface in the final days of an American Presidential campaign.

MEET 'N' GREET 'N' INGEST 'N' DETEST 'N' FREAK OUT 'N' SNEAK OUT



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

In a one-page “election security update” issued in September, the intelligence agencies declared that various foreign adversaries had already posted numerous deepfakes on the Internet. Russia had deployed the most, spreading “conspiratorial narratives” and amplifying “divisive U.S. issues such as immigration” in order to help Trump and hurt the Democrats. Iran had used A.I. “to help generate social media posts and write inauthentic news articles” about everything from the Presidential race to the Israel-Palestine conflict. China was “using A.I. in broader influence operations” but “not for any specific operations targeting U.S. election outcomes.”

Intelligence officials said that, so far, foreign adversaries’ A.I. trickery was “a malign influence accelerant” but not “revolutionary,” in part because those countries had not yet caught up with Silicon Valley in their use of the technology. The report noted that one of Russia’s most widely circulated fakes—a video of a woman in a wheelchair claiming that Kamala Harris had disabled her in a hit-and-run accident—had actually been staged the old-fashioned way, with real actors.

Mark Warner, a Virginia Democrat and the chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, told me, “A.I. is the dog that hasn’t barked —yet.” Warner, whose committee compiled a thirteen-hundred-page report on the Russian intervention in the 2016 election, believes that the U.S. is less prepared than ever to fend off foreign influence schemes. Major social-media companies, he told me, have slackened their crackdowns on misinformation—partly because of lawsuits claiming that the platforms’ coöperation with the government threatens free speech. Then, there’s the matter of who is in charge: Elon Musk has taken over Twitter (now X), and TikTok is owned by the Chinese. Moreover, Warner told me, political polarization has made voters increasingly credulous about fake claims that reinforce their instincts—whether the subject is a stolen election or the Vance family couch.

Voters have a limited number of ways to learn about the illicit attempts of foreign powers to manipulate them. One way is for private companies—Microsoft is currently the most active—to publish research about suspicious social-media content or cybercrimes that appear to be state-sponsored. Brandt described such civilian-identified plots as “caught in the wild.” But private companies can never speak with the authority of the government, and, without subpoenas or spies, they also lack the same breadth of information. Watts, a former F.B.I. special agent, told me that the government is “the ultimate source of confirmation on attribution and actors.” A deepfake that Microsoft spots “may be the tip of the iceberg,” he continued, and U.S. intelligence officials “can understand it at a much deeper level.” Then, there is what he called “a chicken-and-egg problem” facing private companies. The government asks them to shut their platforms to malicious foreign trolls, but the companies “are waiting for the state to tell them *who* those accounts are.”

Criminal prosecutions are another way that covert foreign plots targeting an election can be exposed. Since the appointment of the special counsel Robert Mueller to investigate the Kremlin’s gambit

in 2016, federal indictments have consistently provided the most detailed, and therefore potent, accounts of such influence operations. This past summer, news reports about a hacking of the e-mail accounts of Roger Stone, a former Trump adviser, evidently prompted prosecutors in Washington, D.C., to file an indictment against three Iranians. They were charged with dozens of hacking attacks during a five-year period, almost all of them against Americans involved in national security or foreign affairs. The U.S. government had been watching these Iranians for at least four years; the indictment cites evidence that, in each of those years, two of the operatives repeatedly visited a Tehran address linked to the crimes. On June 27, 2024, according to the indictment, the Iranians e-mailed two Biden campaign officials a stolen copy of materials that Trump had used to prepare for that night's Presidential debate. (The Iranians presciently warned that, if Biden lost the debate, the Democrats "will have to replace" him.) There's no evidence, however, that the recipients read the e-mails; Biden flailed in any case. A subsequent attempt to give journalists stolen vetting materials about Trump's running mate, J. D. Vance, also found no takers. The *Times* reported its editors had concluded that "publication was likely to serve the interests of the attackers."

Other legal findings, also unsealed in September, described a sweeping Russian operation that was years in the making. An affidavit by an F.B.I. investigator quoted notes from meetings held at the Kremlin by a top aide to Putin as early as April, 2022. The aide had hired three Russian contractors to conduct a covert online propaganda campaign to weaken global support for Ukraine's attempt to repel Russia's invasion. In 2023, one of the contractors submitted a more detailed proposal, called the Good Old U.S.A. Project, to sway the 2024 election in America. The proposal asserted that an isolationist view of the Ukraine war had become a "centerpiece" of the Presidential race; Russia must therefore "put a maximum effort to ensure that the Republican point of view (first and foremost the opinion of Trump's supporters) wins over the U.S.

public opinion.” (The names of the parties and candidates were redacted in the filing.) The proposal’s authors saw an opportunity in “the high level of polarization of American society,” which had created an “information situation” that “differs dramatically from that in all other Western countries.”

The Good Old U.S.A. Project envisaged setting up hundreds of fake online accounts, including eighteen seemingly apolitical “sleeper” groups on multiple social-media platforms across six swing states; “at the right moment,” they would “distribute bogus stories disguised as newsworthy events.” (Kremlin documents included in the filing describe Twitter as the most hospitable “mass platform,” although a partially redacted sentence suggests that the Russians liked Trump’s Truth Social even more.) To avoid detection, the Russians planned to disseminate misinformation by inserting comments or replies into authentic message threads; these comments would include links directing users to sites showcasing more elaborate propaganda. The Russians also set out to secretly promote real American influencers who supported “ending the war in Ukraine” and were “ready to get involved in the promotion of the project narratives.”

In March, two of the Russian contractors were sanctioned by the Treasury Department for their role in the operation. In July, U.S. prosecutors, after receiving a tip from another government agency, seized nearly a thousand X accounts allegedly tied to a Russian “bot farm” that used A.I. “to create fictitious social media profiles,” evidently as part of the same scheme. Finally, in September, the government shut down thirty-two Web sites that disguised Kremlin propaganda as content from news organizations such as Fox News and the *Washington Post*. At the same time, prosecutors charged two Russian spies with conspiring to pay ten million dollars to a group of conservative American influencers. Although the unsealed indictment redacted the names, other details indicated that the Russians worked through a Nashville startup called Tenet Media. According to the indictment, in recent months the Russians had

posted nearly nine hundred video clips of their own propaganda directly to Tenet social-media feeds. Until the indictment was unsealed, American viewers had no way of knowing that the Kremlin was behind this.

But U.S. intelligence agencies definitely did, just as they plainly knew about the disguised Web sites. Details from the indictments make clear that federal prosecutors were aware of the underlying schemes for months or longer before informing voters. Of course, educating voters about foreign plots is not the primary responsibility of law enforcement, which moves at its own methodical pace. Subpoenas must be obtained to legally acquire information that other agencies might have learned through spycraft; it takes time to squeeze conspirators to testify against one another, and to lock down conclusive evidence before unsealing charges. Law-enforcement agencies may also want to delay an indictment so that they can arrest suspects before they can flee—although, in the recent election-influence cases, the three Iranians and two Russians indicted were already far out of reach.

Prosecutors also work under their own deadlines. Justice Department policy precludes the agency from taking any public actions in the sixty days before an election which might affect the outcome—including filing indictments that expose a foreign adversary’s backing of a candidate. Prosecutors appear to have kept working on the Russia indictments in secrecy as long as they could. They were unsealed on September 4th, on the eve of the sixty-day deadline. Still, Brandt told me that, whatever the timing constraints, the Justice Department can “go much farther than we can” when releasing information. “That is how you end up making public multiple internal Russian planning documents, which is something the intelligence community could *never* release.”

For voters, the Russia and Iran indictments also raise questions about what else the government knows. Both filings offer keyhole views of major influence operations that surely were not limited to

a few inconsequential hacks and to the staff of a small Tennessee media company. Watts, of Microsoft, told me that the government is cracking down on covert Russian influence operations more aggressively than it did before the 2020 election, when there were no such indictments; prosecutors have gone after a “sizable chunk of the Russian efforts we have noted.” But he said that law enforcement had not yet taken any visible action against two other Russian online networks that Microsoft had spotted meddling in the election. The company calls those two networks Storm-1516 (which pushed the staged video falsely accusing Harris of a hit-and-run) and Storm-1679 (which pushed a viral video showing a fake New York billboard that hyped false claims about Harris).

Representative Jim Himes, of Connecticut, the ranking Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, told me he was “quite certain” that the foreign corruption of Tenet Media was not an isolated incident: “We are going to find out there are other cases where some cutout says, ‘Hey, I’ve got five million dollars for you to promote that Fauci is a Bolshevik,’ or whatever, and the answer is ‘Yeah, give me that five million!’ ”

Hearing directly from the U.S. intelligence agencies is the third way Americans can learn about foreign efforts to manipulate our elections. This election season, the Foreign Malign Influence Center has scheduled periodic “updates” to address the torrent of questions from journalists about such plots. For the spy services, one official told me, this level of public disclosure “is like standing there naked compared to what we have done in the past.” The agencies, always zealous about protecting their sources and methods, prefer to talk as little as possible, and as vaguely as possible. The resulting updates, typically about five hundred words each, are exasperatingly abstract. Speaking as the “intelligence community,” or I.C., an update from early October noted:

A range of foreign actors continue to try to influence U.S. elections as we approach November. These activities include

broad efforts aimed at undermining trust in U.S. democratic processes and exacerbating divisions in our society, while also seeking to shape voter preferences toward specific candidates. Our assessments about the activities and goals of Russia, Iran, and China are unchanged from earlier election security updates. On the presidential race, the IC continues to assess that Russia prefers the Former President and Iran prefers the Vice President; China is not seeking to influence the Presidential election.

The center also holds hour-long conference calls with journalists, but the officials on the calls limit their answers to the contents of the written updates.

The opacity of such intelligence assessments, whether to journalists or to lawmakers, inevitably opens opportunities for political spin. In 2019, intelligence officials appointed a career spy named Shelby Pierson to the new post of election-threats executive. Her job was to coordinate the analysis of foreign interference or influence operations. After Pierson briefed the bipartisan leaders of the congressional intelligence committees, people on Capitol Hill leaked that she had said the Kremlin once again preferred Trump. The President exploded in anger, tried to get Pierson fired, and attempted to stop the briefings.

She survived. But Trump then appointed two new directors of National Intelligence, both of whom downplayed the Russian threat. The first was the former ambassador Ric Grenell, who served as temporary acting director. Under Grenell's tenure, a declassified update provided to the committees declared that the intelligence community "has not concluded" that the Kremlin was aiding either Trump or Biden, "nor have we concluded that the Russians will definitely choose to try to do so in 2020."

John Ratcliffe, a Republican congressman and a former prosecutor, took over as director in May, 2020. He played up supposed

intelligence about a major plot by China instead of Russia. Shortly before the election that fall, Ratcliffe was asked in an interview on Fox News whether China opposed Trump. Ratcliffe replied that he could not “get into a whole lot of details” in an unclassified setting, but did say that China was “using a massive and sophisticated influence campaign that dwarfs anything that any other country is doing.”

Democrats complained that the Trump appointees were twisting the conclusions of the career analysts, but the classified nature of the reports left no way to settle the dispute. Then, on January 6, 2021, the spy agencies’ “analytic ombudsman” released a report saying that, in the final year of the Trump Administration, intelligence about foreign efforts to influence the election had been “delayed, distorted, or obstructed” for “political reasons,” and that career analysts viewed some of the public statements issued under Grenell and Ratcliffe as a “gross misrepresentation” of the agencies’ assessments of the Russian and Chinese operations. (Grenell told me that the ombudsman’s report had relied on liberal partisans inside the intelligence agencies; Ratcliffe defended his statements about China as a dissenting view based on his own analysis.) Two months after Biden took office, a declassified version of the agencies’ post-election assessment stated that several arms of the Russian government had, in fact, carried out influence operations “supporting former President Trump” and that the Russians had also been spreading misinformation denigrating Biden for at least six years. A headline in the assessment declared, “China Did Not Attempt to Influence Presidential Election Outcome.”

Grenell has since become an informal adviser to Trump’s 2024 campaign, and he argued to me recently that Biden Administration appointees were now slanting intelligence about foreign influence operations to benefit the Democrats. “You’re surprised?” Grenell asked me incredulously. He added, “Putin says he would prefer Joe Biden, or now Kamala Harris, because they are more predictable! Why would you dismiss that?” (Prosecutors unsealed their detailed

Russia indictment a few weeks after I interviewed Grenell, and news reports that Trump had stayed in touch with Putin after leaving the White House emerged after that.) If Trump wins, Grenell, Ratcliffe, and Turner, the chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, are all prime candidates for senior roles in the new Administration.

Brandt, the Foreign Malign Influence Center’s director, told me that the intelligence agencies now adhere to a formal protocol designed to keep politics out of the process—thereby insulating Presidents from the anxieties that stifled Obama, and from the accusations of bias that have hung over Trump and Biden. The rules, which are little known to the public and are all but ignored by the political class, were formulated in 2019, initially under the tenure of Dan Coats, Trump’s first director of National Intelligence. Coats, a former Republican senator, remains widely respected by lawmakers of both parties for his handling of that role. Biden signed off on the protocol with only slight modifications.

The process hinges on an “experts’ group” of a dozen career intelligence analysts or other civil servants from across the relevant agencies. Brandt—who was tapped for her job by the current director of National Intelligence, Avril Haines, a Biden appointee and an Obama Administration alumna—is excluded. Under the policy, the committee evaluates any intelligence of an imminent foreign-influence threat according to five criteria. Two of the criteria address the quality of the intelligence: Is it credible and specific? Three address the nature of the threat: Is it foreign in origin, underhanded or covert in nature, and severe in its potential impact? If the experts deem all five criteria met, the group can recommend a public notification.

One catch, however, is that the public does not know who sits on the experts’ group—all its members are anonymous, as is its chair. Since the Foreign Malign Influence Center was inaugurated, the intelligence authorities have withheld even the name of the

election-threats executive, making Brandt (or Haines) the face of any public notifications.

Another catch is that, before a warning from the experts can be shared with the public, their recommendation must be reviewed by a “leaders’ group” composed entirely of political appointees. The group essentially duplicates the National Security Council: the director of National Intelligence convenes the Secretaries of State, Defense, Treasury, and Homeland Security, along with the Attorney General and the directors of the F.B.I., the C.I.A., the N.S.A., and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency. An emergency notification becomes public only with the approval of these leaders. (A loophole: the notification protocol does not necessarily restrict a director of National Intelligence from making statements or giving interviews about election threats, as Ratcliffe did.)

The day I visited the center, Brandt, in an attempt to dispel doubts about partisanship, took the exceptional step of introducing me to the chair of the experts’ group—a stern veteran of the intelligence agencies who looked at least a decade older than Brandt, and whom I agreed not to name. She told me, “As a career civil servant, I try not to have a public persona.” During her two years leading the experts’ group, she said, nobody had ever discussed potential political repercussions: “Never in any of the meetings has it even come up—what will this mean for a political party, or what will it mean for an Administration?”

The main threshold for a public notification about a piece of intelligence, the experts’ chair said, is “Could it undermine the credibility of an election or potentially change its outcome?” Brandt, speaking as a former think-tank scholar, noted that political scientists still have no accepted way to gauge the impact of an online propaganda campaign. But the chair struck a firmer tone, saying, “If we think the activity might undermine the credibility or

affect the outcome, we are going to weigh very seriously a public notification.”



*“Let her scroll—in thirty years, she’ll be teaching you how to upload your consciousness to the cloud.”*

*Cartoon by Emily Bernstein*

The experts’ chair insisted that in this cycle the intelligence agencies had not withheld information “that met all five of the criteria”—and did not risk exposing sources and methods. Nor had the leaders’ group ever overruled a recommendation by the career experts. And if they did? It would be the job of the chair of the experts’ group to stand up or speak out, she told me: “That is why we pick a career civil servant who is retirement-eligible.” In other words, she can resign in protest.

Brandt said that, if a private player like Microsoft calls out a foreign influence operation, that can alleviate the need for a

government notification. In other cases, she said, law-enforcement agencies tell their intelligence counterparts, “We’ve got this one.” And if a foreign operation aims at only an individual or a campaign—as is often the case—officials from the intelligence agencies may notify the target privately.

As a result, since 2019, the experts have proposed only three public notifications. All were carried out, and all were about Iran. The first occurred on October 21, 2020, when Ratcliffe, the director of National Intelligence, publicly announced that Iran was secretly behind a wave of e-mails, putatively sent by the Proud Boys, telling Democrats that if they didn’t vote for Trump “we will come after you.” At a press conference, Ratcliffe declared that the e-mails were an Iranian plot “to incite social unrest.”

Yet Ratcliffe went on to say that Iran also sought to “damage President Trump”—a conclusion that intelligence officials told me was Ratcliffe’s own inference. Playing up the Iranian threat, he added that “we have not seen the same actions from Russia.” Democrats, fearing that Trump might gain from the impression that Iran backed Biden, spun the revelation in another direction: in a television interview, Senator Chuck Schumer, the head of the Democratic caucus, insisted that his intelligence briefing had characterized the Iranian operation as a ploy “to undermine confidence in elections, and not aimed at any particular figure.”

The second and third expert-group notifications, which took place within a few weeks of each other this year, did not forestall controversy, either. A notification issued on August 19th confirmed earlier news reports that Iran had hacked Roger Stone’s e-mails in an attempt “to compromise former President Trump’s campaign.” But the notification, unlike those reports, also brought up the Democrats. To influence the “election process,” the notification added, Iran had also sought to access “the presidential campaigns of both political parties.” A few weeks later, another notification

revealed that the Iranians had sent Trump's debate-prep materials to the Biden campaign.

Grenell, Trump's former acting director of National Intelligence, told me that the August 19th notification's mention of "both parties" had been a favor to Kamala Harris: the gratuitous reference to an attack on her campaign had obscured the broader fact that Iran wanted her to win. But the chair of the experts' group defended the assessment to me, insisting that the agencies had disclosed the hacking activities as soon as they learned about them —and not in response to news reports about Stone. "We go with what we know," she said, and argued that *withholding* the information about "both parties" would have been the truly partisan choice.

Both Brandt and the experts' chair contended that the public-notification procedure was as insulated as possible from the appearance of political influence, given that the U.S. government is headed by an elected official. Nonetheless, in two out of two Presidential election cycles, the protocol has failed to allay accusations of a partisan agenda. I could see why. As I spoke with the two officials, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was sitting across a table from people who knew much more than they were telling me about how foreign spies were trying to influence my vote or mess with our heads. My questions kept colliding with the intelligence agencies' concern about protecting their sources and methods.

But even a little more real-time transparency would surely bolster public trust, if only by dispelling some of the mystery. Could the U.S. intelligence agencies have told the public any sooner that Iranian hackers with a history of conventional espionage were attempting to breach the Trump campaign? Did the government need to wait until almost exactly sixty days before the election to warn voters that the Kremlin was behind Tenet Media (whose YouTube videos in the past year have logged sixteen million

views)? Himes, the top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, told me that timely information about election-influence operations too often gets bottled up by the “tension between law enforcement and intelligence gathering.” He added, “Law enforcement wants to put people in jail. Intelligence would like the criminals to keep doing what they do for twenty years, so they can identify their associates. But maybe there should be more of a tension between prosecution and the public’s right to know.”

At the end of last year, the intelligence agencies released a public version of their assessment of foreign influence operations during the 2022 midterm-election season, and it underscored how little information the government shared with Americans before voters went to the polls. The assessment described an upward trend in activity by “a diverse and growing group of foreign actors,” which the agencies attributed to “perceptions that election influence activity has been normalized” and to “the low cost but potentially high reward of such activities.” The foreign mischief that had been detected in 2022 included “payments to influencers and enlistment of public relations (PR) firms” and efforts aimed at “amplifying authentic U.S. public narratives.” Like devious music producers, foreign powers were turning up the volume of certain “authentic” American voices to maximize discord. But which influencers took what payments, and how were narratives amplified? What other governments were in that “growing group of foreign actors”? Later in the assessment, bullet points name six foreign governments—all blacked out—whose covert influence activities “did not clearly meet” an intelligence-community threshold for public disclosure. People familiar with the classified assessment told me that the redacted names were often “frenemies,” such as Middle Eastern clients with their own agendas in Washington. (Senator Warner told me, “There are countries that are our friends one day and our challengers the next.”)

Although the Foreign Malign Influence Center has said that China is staying out of the Presidential race, the center’s updates have

also said that the country is attempting to sway certain down-ballot races, including “tens” of congressional races. The assessment of the 2022 election also concluded that Chinese authorities had “tacitly approved efforts to try to influence a handful of midterm races” and had “identified specific members of Congress to punish for their anti-China views.” That included “covertly denigrating a named U.S. Senator online using inauthentic accounts.” Did anyone notify the voters in the senator’s state? The intelligence officials declined to say. (The *Washington Post*, citing a researcher at Clemson University, recently reported that in 2022 Chinese-linked accounts had spread memes and tweets attacking Senator Marco Rubio, a prominent China hawk who was on the ballot that year. Rubio declined to respond to my questions.) Nor have the intelligence officials disclosed which other statewide races China has tried to influence in either 2022 or 2024. (The *Post* identified one current target as Representative Barry Moore, an Alabama Republican. A Chinese-linked account called him a “Jewish dog,” although he is not Jewish.)

Brandt told me that the elliptical bulletins are “setting the table” for the possibility that future operations by China or other nations might rise to a level meriting a public warning. She argued that, if the intelligence agencies alerted the public about every scrap of intelligence on an influence scheme, no matter how minor the threat, the constant notifications would lose their power to arouse public alarm. The din of suspicion could also weaken the credibility of the democratic process. “We would be blowing wind in our adversaries’ sails,” she said. Still, she insisted, no foreign nation got a free pass: “If you are a foreign actor trying to influence our elections, you are in our sights.”

Salvo, of the German Marshall Fund’s Alliance for Securing Democracy, said that he now worries about what will happen if the intelligence agencies successfully expose a major foreign influence operation in the final weeks of the Presidential race. “The closer we get to Election Day, the less I think that would even matter, because

of the hyperpoliticized moment that we live in,” he said. “The director of National Intelligence could come out then with information about a Russian or Iranian information operation targeting Election Day, and you’ll have tens of millions of Americans who don’t believe it, because national political figures are out there challenging the Intelligence director!”

During the final weeks of the 2024 campaign, the experts’ group has been meeting three times a week to evaluate any intelligence about potential threats, and staying in contact on the weekends. In a measure of both the group’s vigilance and the over-all threat level, an intelligence official recently told journalists that the number of “nominations” the experts had proposed for a notification had “increased threefold” from the 2020 election. All but the two notifications about Iran were privately rendered, but Brandt and the experts’ chair told me that, unlike the Justice Department, the intelligence agencies have no rule against publicizing allegations about a foreign influence plot in the days before the vote. Their mandate is just the opposite. The experts’ chair said, “What we don’t want to do is get the information out *after* the election.”

Brandt then added, “We’ll all be a lot smarter in January.” ♦



*David D. Kirkpatrick*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, is the author of “[Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East](#).”

# sound-the-alarm-about-election-interference

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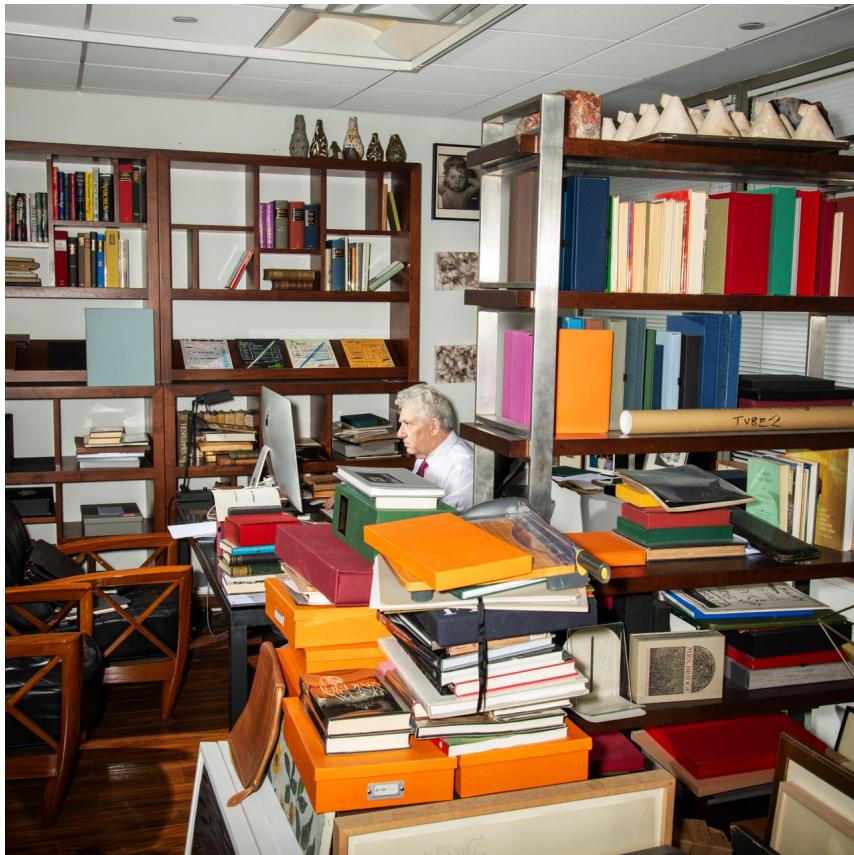
## Profiles

# A Controversial Rare-Book Dealer Tries to Rewrite His Own Ending

Glenn Horowitz built a fortune selling the archives of writers such as Vladimir Nabokov and Alice Walker. Then a rock star pressed charges.

By [Tad Friend](#)

October 21, 2024



*Horowitz reshaped a staid business with a combination of acumen and gall. One longtime customer said, “For grifters, Glenn’s a scholar, and for scholars, he’s a grifter.”*

*Photographs by Brian Finke for The New Yorker*

If Glenn Horowitz comes calling, should you be flattered or alarmed? It means that you have an exceptional literary reputation. It also means that your time on earth is nearly up. Horowitz, a rare-book dealer of matchless temerity and flair, has sold the papers and possessions of more Nobel laureates than anyone else; he describes himself, with derisive pride, as “the Grim Reaper with a sack of shekels on his back.” He sold the archives of Gabriel García Márquez, J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, and Bob Dylan, as well

as books from Derek Walcott's library, manuscripts of Seamus Heaney poems and Saul Bellow stories, spicy letters that he acquired from one of William Faulkner's mistresses, and Isaac Bashevis Singer's Yiddish typewriter. He also sold Alice Walker's papers for \$1 million, Vladimir Nabokov's for \$1.375 million, Cormac McCarthy's for \$2 million, Norman Mailer's for \$2.5 million, and John Updike's for \$3 million, arranging a deal between Harvard University and Updike's widow a few years after Updike said that allowing him into the house would be like "visiting the undertaker who's going to bury me." Horowitz's knock is the scrape of the chisel on your tombstone. When he was preparing to sell Tony Kushner's archive, Kushner insisted that he not be marketed as the "Angels in America" guy, a one-hit wonder. The dealer replied, "If you hadn't written 'Angels in America,' we wouldn't be having this conversation."

Horowitz, who is sixty-nine, plows through as many as two hundred and fifty books a year and can tell a lively story about nearly everything he's read or heard or done. He deals in stupendous things, and his gift is to illuminate their stupendousness, as Las Vegas illuminates the night sky. The novelist Jonathan Lethem, whose archive Horowitz sold to Yale University, told me, "Glenn is able to do with books what artists do with other objects, such as the Golden Bowl or Hitchcock's glass of milk: he makes them glow from within."

Every form of collecting is an effort to stop time, but book collecting is a singularly hopeful incarnation of that wish. It is nourished by twin beliefs: first, that our most glorious ideas and fancies have been bound together in crushed morocco or polished calf—sacred repositories that must be conserved against fire and water and forgetfulness. And, second, that ownership of great literature in its most talismanic form will ennoble you. Horowitz cultivates these credos in his clients, yet his usual practice is to wrest books from the grip of one, bestow them into the hands of another, then wrest them back for a third. When I told him that

Susan Cheever, the writer and the daughter of John Cheever, said that Horowitz had paid her handsomely for her father's inscribed novels and letters "because Glenn is a gentleman, and because he wanted to help me," he seemed offended. "I like Susan enormously," he assured me, "but I bought from her at prices that allowed me to sell the material profitably."

Dealers in precious objects customarily present themselves as concierges: discreet, in the know, delighted to be of service. Horowitz follows this model insofar as his temperament allows. He delivers decorous circumlocutions in an adenoidal purr: "The subject arose" (*I raised it*); "Blessedly, I was beckoned" (*They responded*); "Someone who was qualified psychologically and financially to be a custodian of the letters" (*A buyer*); "Circumstances finally permitting, we arrived at an alliance of kindred spirits" (*We closed the deal*). Yet, when he is aroused, Sir Walter Raleigh gives way to Nathan Detroit, often in midsentence. Writing to a colleague who had crossed him, he graciously blamed the slight on "the vicissitudes of corporate life," then smoothly code-switched to "suddenly you shit gold nuggets?"

Other dealers characterize Horowitz as a pulp-novel antagonist: the dastardly villain. It's not just that he is brazen, or that his success inspires envy and flashes of antisemitism. It's that rare books have always been a handshake business: the dealer Robert Wilson recalled approvingly that W. H. Auden invited him to cart away his books and letters and "send me whatever you think proper." Few who've dealt with Horowitz would be as blithe. Ed Maggs, a prominent English dealer, told me, "Glenn is such a very clever guy, but I never knew that he particularly understood the truth. I would not trust him one inch."

To many of his colleagues' delight, Horowitz was indicted by the Manhattan District Attorney in 2022. A decade earlier, he had sold five legal pads scrawled with lyrics by the Eagles' drummer and singer, Don Henley, including thirteen pages of work on "Hotel

California.” He’d purchased the pads in 2007 for \$50,000 and sold them five years later for \$65,000, so his profit was trifling. But, when the two collectors who bought the pads later tried to auction off some of the lyrics, Henley became convinced that they’d been filched from him, and ultimately contacted the D.A. Horowitz and the collectors were charged with possessing stolen property, and Horowitz was accused of helping to fabricate the provenance of the pads.

The indictment seemed to confirm suspicions in the trade that, as Horowitz put it to me, “Aha! He must have been doing this all along, thieving and pilfering and stealing like an eighteenth-century pirate.” He was more dismayed by the reaction of the leading libraries: “Institutions that I had had a profound hand in shaping—the New York Public Library, Yale, the University of Texas at Austin—started treating me as if I was a dog turd.” From his holding cell, after his arrest, he finalized the sale of a Jean Genet manuscript to a prominent institution. The deal fell through once the curators discovered where Horowitz had been texting from.

On a gray day in February, the defendants went on trial in Manhattan, and the prosecution began by depicting Horowitz as a master of deception. During the midday break, he and a few family members walked to Le Coucou, an elegant French restaurant. Tracey Jackson, Horowitz’s wife, is a writer and the screenwriter of such films as “Confessions of a Shopaholic”; for years, they threw lively parties where you might meet Salman Rushdie, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, or Matthew Barney. “In a city like New York, public profiles and transactional relationships are all-important,” she told me. “You come to our party, maybe you need a book deal, and there’s Sonny Mehta”—the longtime editor-in-chief of Knopf. “We were the white-hot center of that.”

I met Horowitz twenty years ago at one of his parties, and we became friendly without ever quite becoming friends. My wife and I had an occasional dinner with him and Jackson, or went to

gatherings at their Manhattan apartment or their house in Sag Harbor. He'd greet you with a ringmaster's flourish, grasping your arm as he inquired, "How's your health? Have you lost weight? And the kids are well, I trust?" Keenly attuned to his guests' networks and net worths, Horowitz often seemed to be sizing me up to see how much use I might be to him (not much, we tacitly agreed). I went nearly a decade without seeing him before I began work on this story, but he lingered in my mind as a gatekeeper to a glimmering world—the kind of New Yorker who wears Tod's loafers without socks and has a regular table at Michael's.

It turns out to be more complicated, of course. At Le Coucou, as Horowitz picked at a plate of heritage chicken, Jackson said, "It's been a time of fear and heartbreak and loneliness. We've lost fifty per cent of our friends—when you can't help people anymore, they disappear. A woman yelled at me in the lobby of the Beverly Hills Hotel, 'How dare you be here?' So we're pariahs, apparently."

Horowitz scowled and said, "We are charged with *fibbing*, not under oath. There's nothing I did that doesn't comport with the way I've done business for forty years, and I'd do the same exact thing again." His mirthless laugh might have suggested Kafkaesque persecution, or Hardyesque inexorability of fate. Either way, he appeared determined to rewrite the ending.

Bill Kelly, who retired two years ago as the director of the Research Libraries of the New York Public Library, admires Horowitz's protean talents. "For grifters, Glenn's a scholar, and for scholars, he's a grifter," he said. "But, really, he's an impresario. He brought me some Virginia Woolf correspondence and first editions, knowing well what we might need in our collections, and we wound up acquiring it for about half of what I expected"—\$750,000, with an equal amount credited as a charitable gift. "Glenn even suggested two or three admirers of Woolf who could fund the purchase for us. The deal was all tied up in a bow before he came into my office." Kelly went on, "Pretty much all of my

colleagues in the book world and the library world regard Glenn as Satan, and the Henley matter just intensified the contempt: *I'm never going to do business with Glenn again.* Well, who are you going to do business with, then? Who else does business at that level?"



*Horowitz's peers describe him as unusually pugnacious. One dealer said, "The space Glenn wants to be in with you is negotiating, challenging you."*

In England, in the days before the Industrial Revolution ruined everything, there were two professions a gentleman could pursue: wine merchant and rare-book dealer. Neither required undue exertion. That clubbability still overlays the trade in rare books: the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America, or A.B.A.A., is ninety-eight per cent white and eighty-two per cent male, and many of its members' Web sites appear to have been designed by hobbits.

Even as book collectors have, over the centuries, shifted shape from rectors to hedge-fund managers, they have remained driven by an impulse that is both febrile and fastidious. Traditional collecting aims at first editions in "pristine" or "mint" condition;

the booksellers' wry joke is "Never judge a book by its contents." Valuable books are protected with Mylar jackets or leather slipcases against the depredations of soiling, rubbing, thumbing, cropping, scuffing, chafing, shaking, and shelf wear. A book in the ninety-ninth percentile of condition will often be worth two to three times more than a book in the ninetieth percentile. Christiaan Jonkers, an English dealer, told me, "If you're of a compulsive nature, you can forever pursue closer and closer degrees of perfection, and I will encourage customers in that laudable pursuit."

Yet changes are afoot. Book Row, around Manhattan's Fourth Avenue, once contained forty-eight rare- and used-book stores, complete with standoffish cats; now only the Strand remains. The Internet destabilized both supply and demand. Before, collectors had to wait for a mimeographed mail-order catalogue to learn whether a long-sought copy of "Sons and Lovers" had turned up. Prices were based on condition, the fame of the work, and the scarcity of the copy on sale—a scale delineated, in order of increasing expense, by such descriptors as significant, pivotal, seminal, stunning, very rare, exceedingly rare, and extremely rare. The Internet made scarcity scarce: everyone could see that there were a gazillion copies of the 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica for sale online, and their price plunged. To sell, a book now had to be the best copy, the cheapest copy, or the only copy.

The business, at the top end, angled away from condition and toward singularity, toward "association copies": books owned by or signed by the author or by someone instrumental to their contents. A well-preserved first edition of "For Whom the Bell Tolls" might sell for \$1,000. That same copy might go for \$10,000 if Hemingway had signed it; \$20,000 if he'd inscribed it to someone he knew; \$50,000 if he'd inscribed it to Dorothy Parker; or \$300,000 if he'd movingly inscribed it to one of his wives. Such books required dealers to know more and to be more imaginative: they had to articulate what made a particular provenance or

inscription so valuable. Christiaan Jonkers said, “Our job as booksellers is to justify the difference between the price we bought it at and the price we’re selling it at by providing a narrative about why you should buy it.”

The bookseller’s narrative is often one of proximity to inspiration, a tangible point of contact with genius. This idea is implicit in the prizing of first editions—especially first editions with a personal connection to the source. The novelist Reynolds Price said of his treasured copy of “Paradise Lost,” which was originally owned by John Milton’s daughter, “It was like the apostolic succession. I was touching the hand that touched the hand that touched the Hand.”

A superb dealer can, Scheherazade-like, embed such narratives within a tale of historical sweep. Henry E. Huntington, a railroad and streetcar magnate whose book collection would form the basis of the Huntington Library, once remarked, “Men may come and men may go, but books go on forever. The ownership of a fine library is the surest and swiftest way to immortality!” The person who’d imbued him with this belief was his dealer, George D. Smith.

Glenn Horowitz grew up in the Borscht Belt, two hours’ drive from Manhattan and a nearly unreachable distance from the rare-book dealers on Madison Avenue. His family owned a bungalow colony where Jewish families from the city rented cabins for the summer; his father, Aaron, also helped run a used-furniture store. The area, around the town of Wawarsing, “was Podunk,” Horowitz told me. “One movie theatre, no restaurants of any quality, no museums.” A bright, wary child, he lived in fear of his mother, Lynne, a former elementary-school teacher. “She screamed and threw shoes and food at me and my father,” he said. “I still carry a bucket of anger and frustration at her, and some anger at my father, too, for taking her side ninety-eight per cent of the time.”

Horowitz was rescued by a librarian with the splendid name of Virginia Wolfe Bartlett. “I was blessed that my sophomore year she arrived at my school, a compelling and attractive woman,” he said. “She made a project of me, and she soon had me reading five to seven books a week: Austen, Dickens, Hemingway, Pound.” That year, Horowitz also began seeing a girl named Poochie. “She was half Black and half Puerto Rican, a single mother at age fifteen. I was in love with her. Anthony, my friend and the father of her child, attempted suicide by drinking a bottle of Clorox after he found out about me and Poochie.” Horowitz could have stayed and been a frustrated used-furniture dealer. Instead, determined to prove to his mother that he was “worth more than having food thrown at me,” he left and never looked back; he is not in touch with his brother or sister, let alone Anthony or Poochie.

At Bennington College, Horowitz wrote fiction under the tutelage of Bernard Malamud and appraised his wealthy, worldly classmates. One of his professors, the novelist Nicholas Delbanco, told me, “Glenn had to recast himself as a savant, in ways that were contrary to who he was as a wide-eyed boy.” Yet Horowitz found that art offered him a point of entry. “The first time I read ‘Ulysses,’ as a freshman,” he said, “it made me understand what the act of reading was about. It opened up the idea that I was participating along with Joyce in constructing the text, in trying to unravel all his asides and culs-de-sac that would keep the scholarly industry buzzing.”



*"It's all there, but my life is such a mess right now I didn't have time to organize it."*  
Cartoon by Jon Adams

After graduating, in 1977, he moved to New York, where he acquired a literary agent, with help from Malamud, and worked on a novel in the magic-realist vein. But he soon realized, "Nobody's going to read this shit." His day job, in the rare-book room of the Strand, seemed more promising: "I loved matching financial wits with the brightest of my customers, and I'd wake up thinking, How can I make an extra dollar today?" Two years after arriving in the city, he opened Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, on the fourth floor of a nondescript building near Grand Central Terminal. "I had beautifully creamy stationery and a bright-red logo stolen from an English designer named Reynolds Stone," he recalled.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of dealers and collectors: those delighted by medieval incunabula or King James Bibles, and those drawn to the more transactional arena of "modern firsts"—fiction and poetry since Henry James. The former type is often dismissive of the latter; a dealer named Tom Goldwasser told me that the modern firsts he sells are seen as "books for half-educated people." Horowitz was firmly of the latter type. He had inventory,

because a criminal-defense lawyer he'd met at the Strand ran into difficulties and sold him his collection of Steinbecks and Hemingways. (Horowitz told me definitively that the price was \$75,000, then later declared that it was \$100,000; his numbers can have a magic-realist quality of their own.) A chunk of the payment came from his bar-mitzvah money. He also got a loan from his father, who worked for several years in his office, keeping the books.

Horowitz had a plan for his ascent. He told me, "There were elderly people whom it made sense to befriend, to do the errands for them that young people can do." His first conquest was a dealer named Marguerite Cohn, the doyenne of House of Books, on Madison Avenue, who was in her nineties. Cohn was working with a collector named Carter Burden, a Vanderbilt heir whose credo was "You can never be too thin, too rich, or have too many books." Horowitz said, "I was in her shop one day, carrying the galleys of my third catalogue, seductively, and Carter came in. I knew exactly who he was: tall, thin, handsome Dunhill blazer. She recovered well and told him, 'Glenn was bringing me, *for you*, at my request, the galleys of his new catalogue.' " Burden called that afternoon and ordered a hundred and eighty books, Horowitz said: "When he came by with his driver to pick them up, I told him, 'If you're going to build a *great* collection, you're going to need Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neill.' By the time we were done talking, I'd identified eight more genres for him."

By honing Burden's taste, Horowitz weaned him from Cohn. (He noted Cohn's death, in 1984, with a so-it-goes shrug: "Margie looked the wrong way leaving the Ritz in London and got hit by a garbage truck. Tom Stoppard had to go to the morgue and identify the body, what was left of it. She was about as big as a leaf of lettuce.") In the next fifteen years, Horowitz sold Burden several thousand books. A dealer named Rick Gekoski told me, "Glenn saw, in a way that few of the rest of us did, that if you want to make serious money you need to spend ninety-five per cent of your time

with the five per cent of your clients who will provide ninety-five per cent of your income.”

Horowitz scoured the lists of dealers from places like Gloucester City, New Jersey, and Oxford, Mississippi. “The book business is hierarchical,” he told me. “Books move from rural environments into urban environments, where buyers can conceive of higher prices.” Burden could conceive of Horowitz’s prices, but he was slow to pay. “Carter almost bankrupted me through his good old English habit of paying his bills once a year,” Horowitz said. “At his peak, he owed me about half a million. I’d try to get him to pay, and he couldn’t sign a check because he’d sprained his wrist playing squash.” He chuckled. “I learned a great deal from him.”

Horowitz was also working to assemble a home life. In the early eighties, he fell for a cartoonist named M. G. Lord, who was grieving the murder of a woman she’d loved. “The first few years were great,” Lord said. “Glenn wrote me, ‘I know who you are, and I love you even more because of it.’ He had the ability to make you feel really valuable.” In 1985, Carter Burden hosted their wedding at the River House. The night before, a Henry James scholar whom Horowitz had befriended handed him a treasure to sell on his behalf: James’s annotated copy of a play he’d written based on his novel “*The American*.” In Burden’s kitchen, before the ceremony, Horowitz sold him the play for \$45,000. And then, in the expansive spirit of the day, he knocked off five grand.

If an association copy feels closer to the creative process than a first edition, then an archive—replete with heavily revised drafts and letters about the elusive muse—feels closer still. Yet, when Horowitz started out, celebrated authors often donated their “foul papers” to their alma mater, or simply tossed them. Quicker than anyone else, Horowitz grasped that these heaps of disordered proximity were of such interest to scholars that they’d burnish the renown of the institution that contained them. He also saw that a market maker would have enormous leverage. He would be

intermediating between parties who didn't even know the product existed until he supplied it: as he once remarked, his job with an archive was "to broker a marriage between an uninformed seller . . . and a likely but unsuspecting purchaser."

He sold his first archive in 1984, after Paula Schwartz, W. S. Merwin's fiancée, mentioned that the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign wanted to buy his papers. She asked Horowitz if he would come to dinner with the curators and help. When he said that he didn't know anything about archives, she replied, "Whatever you know is a thousand times more than Bill knows."

At the dinner, Horowitz recalls, "Bill started babbling to the university people, and he would have said, 'Give me ten thousand and I'll send you everything.' It was a revelatory moment, where I understood all the vibrations. To shut Bill up, I said, 'I'll be out in Maui'"—where Merwin lived much of the year—"in February to catalogue everything.'" He went with Lord to Hawaii and spent five days working through the files. "We were probably stoned the entire time," he said. "I catalogued the papers, which had some wonderful Sylvia Plath and Galway Kinnell letters, and I told Bill, 'Two hundred and twenty-five thousand is the appropriate price'—a number I a little bit pulled out of the sky."

The university, as a state-funded institution, required a second opinion, which came in at \$35,000. "I later learned to respond to that 'We need another appraisal' objection by saying, 'I'm not *evaluating* the collection, I'm prepared to sell it to you for this number,'" Horowitz said. "But back then I called the Illinois folks and said, 'I've been talking with Bill Cagle at the Lilly'"—the library at Indiana University Bloomington—"and he said he'd pay a hundred and eighty-five thousand dollars.' They said, 'We can get the deal done for a hundred and eighty-five.'" Horowitz leaned back blissfully. "I had fifteen per cent of the transaction. I said to myself, 'Do you know how many books I'd have to sell to make twenty-

eight thousand dollars?’ It Linda Blair-like caused my head to spin on its neck.”



*“Let’s take these tender emotions and volatile mother-daughter dynamics and teach you how to drive!”*

*Cartoon by Maggie Larson*

The archives business was poised for disruption. Forty years ago, scholars had to make an appointment, and sometimes even furnish letters of recommendation, before they donned white gloves and began piecing through boxes. With digitization, they could search an author’s papers online from anywhere in the world. “The first decade was slow,” Horowitz recalled. “But selling the Nabokov archive to the New York Public Library in 1991 got it all going.” Though Nabokov’s son, Dmitri, was a touchy and domineering client, from the dealer’s point of view he was ideal. “Dmitri never achieved that third dimension that befitted someone who bore the name Nabokov,” Horowitz explained. “So he ended up taking the brutalist position of ‘I’m going to get rid of this material’—applying a patina of elegance through the beautiful catalogue we made—‘but I want as much money for it as I can get.’ ” It was the first seven-figure archive, selling for almost \$1.4 million. Rodney Phillips, who handled the sale for the library, told me that it was worth the price: “It greatly increased our visibility and status, and it’s still one of the most heavily used collections there.”

Writers have reasons to resist having their work archived. As Horowitz told me, placing an archive means “moving data out of

the darkness into bright sunlight.” Gamy secrets can emerge: D. M. Thomas’s archive, at the British Library, includes a list of the eighty-eight women he’d slept with, with a grade attached to each encounter. Stylists are often reluctant to reveal their kludgy early drafts, a prospect that Gabriel García Márquez likened to “being caught in your underwear.”

Horowitz has a response for every misgiving. When Tom Wolfe was having second thoughts, he bucked him up with a speech that I also heard him deliver to a photographer who’d sought his counsel. “*Don’t leave the archive to your children,*” he implored. “*After you’re dead, it will all be even more poignant for them, because the material comes to embody their bygone beloved mother—all that’s left of you. It just becomes a sour, brackish, unpleasant experience.*”

I spoke with a number of writers, and widows of writers, who praised Horowitz’s work in seeking out, curating, and selling their archives. He would not rest until they agreed to work with him. M. G. Lord said, “Glenn would be crawling around people’s houses, looking under the bed, and it was all kind of charming.” She termed this practice “the widow watch,” and drew a cartoon that showed Horowitz in a cemetery, comforting a bereaved wife by saying, “If you let me sell his archive for you, you’ll be able to buy that second home in Sag Harbor.” Horowitz venerates the writers he pursues—until his quest fails. Louise Glück, who wouldn’t let him sell her archive, was “a madwoman.” Orhan Pamuk, whom he approached with the same idea, is “the most self-centered person imaginable.”

Horowitz remembers the Merwin transaction as a vital moment in his growth, but Merwin and his wife always believed, without any proof, that Horowitz had cherry-picked his library for his own benefit. A leading appraiser told me that Merwin repeatedly complained that Horowitz had shorted him on the payment for his archive. (Horowitz denied this, and said that he had bought at least

fifty of Merwin's books without incident.) Twenty years after the sale, M. G. Lord, who by then had become a writer herself, went to see Merwin read in Los Angeles. "I expected to be greeted warmly, but he wouldn't speak to me," she told me. "Paula took me aside and basically said, 'You have to understand—Glenn stole from him. And we kind of hate you, because you were complicit.' "

Horowitz said that when his team catalogues an archive, "I ask myself, 'How heavily biographied will this person be?' I'm looking for correspondence with publishers and agents and editors and other writers, which can open up research in lots of directions. You yearn to find intimate documentation, diaries and journals, that has never been disclosed." Yet archives, in one way or another, are invariably incomplete. Michael Ryan, a retired curator, said, "You're always seeking the complete correspondence, but what you mostly wind up with are *incoming* letters. You can only get a piece of the man, not the full man." Curators like an archive to "talk" to their other collections: it makes more sense to acquire the correspondence of Maxwell Perkins if you already have the other side of some of it from Hemingway or Fitzgerald.

Ultimately, though, what Horowitz is selling is a writer's conversation with the culture at large. When he pitched David Mamet to Tom Staley, a longtime archival director at the University of Texas at Austin, he characterized him as "the last American playwright, somebody whose work, like that of Williams, Miller, and O'Neill, became part of the larger dialogue." Sold, for \$1.65 million!

Staley was a like-minded ally. He was determined to make his library, the Harry Ransom Center, the leading American repository for literary archives. Horowitz sold him some forty archives and collections, for about \$25 million, and routinely used him as a sounding board and a stalking horse. To avoid cultural-repatriation laws, Staley had a trove of literary papers smuggled out of France in a bakery truck; to avoid apartheid-era sanctions, Horowitz had

Nadine Gordimer's archive shipped out of South Africa as a cargo of books. Both men loved a marquee name and a lavish deal that could be framed as a bargain. In 2005, when Norman Mailer was shopping his archive for \$5 million, Horowitz told Staley that he was prepared to offer it for just \$2.5 million. "And that's the price at which I will buy it!" Staley replied.

Both men also relished a memorable story. Staley told Tony Kushner that when he visited Arthur Miller's house he asked about a bundle of letters tied with pink ribbon, and Miller said, "Oh, those are from Marilyn," and tossed them into the fireplace. Horowitz scoffed when I mentioned the anecdote, saying, "I drank enough Scotch with Tom late at night that if he'd watched Arthur Miller burn Marilyn Monroe's letters I would have heard of it. Tom was a world-builder, a fabulist." Tracey Jackson said of Staley, who died in 2022, "Tom was in many ways the father Glenn never had."

Horowitz faced greater obstacles in constructing an actual family. By the mid-nineties, he and Lord were living apart. He said, "I felt that if an environment was created where M.G. felt loved and secure, this would somehow expunge her need to express her attraction toward women—but it doesn't work that way, unfortunately." They eventually agreed to divorce, and the proceedings became contentious. When Horowitz shipped Lord's dishware to her in Los Angeles, she told me, "my mother's plates, my grandmother's Limoges—it was all sent with no packing material, so everything was in shards. He blamed it on his packer, but I'd seen how the packer carefully packs rare books, so I find it hard to believe it was accidental. Glenn can be very not nice, too." Horowitz said, "I would never intentionally destroy her family heirlooms," adding, "It may be part of the lack of empathy that people accuse me of, but I have no memory of it."

Uniquely among major American dealers, Horowitz never became a full member of the A.B.A.A. It's a point of pride for him. One reason he gives is that the association's only real perk is the ability

to exhibit at its rare-book fairs. He suggested another reason to the dealer Sunday Steinkirchner when she mentioned that she was applying for membership: “Why would you want to be bound by a code of ethics?” (Horowitz denied making the remark, adding, “Even if I felt that way, why would I say it?”)

Whatever his rationale, Horowitz was unsuited to the usual forms of collegiality. He can be magisterially slow to pay his peers. One dealer said, “After years of chasing him, I started putting on my invoices, ‘Due on X date, or the property must be returned.’ I don’t do that with anyone else.” A former assistant of Horowitz’s, Katie Vagnino, described a typical dodge: “If someone called and said, ‘I’m waiting for that payment,’ Glenn would say, ‘Tell them we mailed the check two days ago.’” (Horowitz said that he would settle any overlooked bills if a reminder came in.)

The dealer Joshua Mann told me, “The space Glenn wants to be in with you is negotiating, challenging you. The first time he bought from us, we had an atlas inscribed by Truman Capote to Perry Smith, one of the killers in ‘In Cold Blood.’ We asked seventy-five hundred dollars, and he bludgeoned us down to less than six thousand. Right afterward, he said, ‘I would have paid your price, but I wanted to see what I could get.’” Horowitz’s favorite approach with other dealers is to ask, “What’s the lowest price you could afford to sell it to me at?” When the dealer says, “Well, X, because that’s what I paid for it,” Horowitz replies, “That’s not true —you could *afford* to sell it for a dollar. You own it, right? It’s just sitting on your shelf gathering dust. Taking your losses is often very healthy!”

Most booksellers resist that everything-must-go framework because they remain collectors at heart. The dealer Michael DiRuggiero showed me a copy of Philip Pullman’s “The Amber Spyglass” that Pullman had inscribed with a detailed account of his creative process. “This is *the* copy of this book,” he said, “and I’m never selling it.” Horowitz rejects such views. He likes to say, “You

succeed in business by moving product from point A to point B.” When writer friends such as Joseph Heller and James Salter inscribed books to Horowitz, those books often ended up for sale.



*“Fire! Smouldering fire! Crackling fire! Roaring fire!”*

Cartoon by Maddie Dai

I spoke with three women who worked for Horowitz. They told me that he taught them to write crisp copy, to treat each book as a unique work of art, to read people, and to stand up for themselves. “Glenn made book recommendations, from ‘Housekeeping’ to ‘Wide Sargasso Sea,’ that opened up a world for me,” Jess Butterbaugh, who is now a project manager at Carnegie Mellon’s Robotics Institute, said. They also told me that he would ask if they wanted to borrow his credit card to buy nicer clothes, inquire about who they’d had sex with over the weekend, or, unprompted, give them weight-loss targets. (Horowitz denies this behavior.) In 1994, he interviewed Jessy Randall to be his cataloguer. She told me, “He asked, ‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ ‘Do you like to smoke marijuana?’ ‘Are you a lesbian?’ I finally said, ‘You know these questions are illegal, right?’—which I think might have gotten me

the job. Glenn's comfort zone was being in an adversarial relationship with everyone." Katie Vagnino told me that once, when Horowitz got mad at her, he e-mailed her a "Bond villain-esque" warning: "You are standing on such a thin sheet of ice you can't even begin to see how far you can fall."

Several of Horowitz's younger colleagues told me that he can be generous with his time and his knowledge. Amir Naghib said, "When my wife came down with long *Covid* and my daughter was sick for more than a month, I heard from Glenn twice a day, asking what he could do to help." But the dealer's acquisitive focus often operated as a Midas touch, turning those around him into golden objects. A collector named Richard Levey told me that he did business with Horowitz for more than fifteen years, beginning in the eighties. Horowitz sent him items from Robert Lowell and his circle, and Levey sent back Joyce, Huxley, Eliot, and Marianne Moore. "Glenn stayed at my house in Detroit, inquired sincerely about everyone's health, and stank up the place with his cigars," Levey said. "We were friends. We even published a small book together. But, other than one check for twenty-five thousand dollars for a 'Ulysses,' I don't remember getting any money from him. Every time I asked to see a statement of what he owed me, he'd just send me another bill for what I owed him. All in all, I think I'm at least a hundred thousand dollars poorer than I should be."

(Horowitz maintains that Levey's figures are "just the memory of an older man," and that, if anything, Levey probably owes him money.) Levey, who didn't keep documentation of his side of the bartering, acknowledges that a less absent-minded customer would have demanded clearer accounting. "Had my eyes been a little smaller, things would have turned out differently," he said. "But every time I'd start to question Glenn he'd say, 'Boy, have I got something for you!'"

One morning, I met Horowitz at Christie's Fine Art Storage Services, an air-conditioned warehouse near the Red Hook waterfront. Eight boxes sat on a table in an otherwise empty room:

a Joyce collection, much of it purchased from Horowitz, whose owner had decided to sell. “This is the best Joyce collection in private hands,” Horowitz said. “Admittedly, there is not usually any satisfaction for the collector in getting the books all at once. However,” he went on, his eyes gleaming as he opened a box, “this is a unique opportunity for a family in the U.A.E. or for a library in Canada or Japan . . .” He trailed off, nonplussed to find that the books were all wrapped in white Tyvek, a generic department-store display. He phoned and asked his assistant Silas Oliveira to join him. As Oliveira held bundles aloft, Horowitz shook his head and said, “Nah, that’s nothing . . . Nothing . . . Of no consequence.” He clarified: “The ‘Ulysses’ we’re looking for, the ones printed in Paris by Sylvia Beach, will be two and a half times that size.”

When Oliveira finally supplied the book he’d most been awaiting, he examined the inscription, angled on the title page in Joyce’s bold hand: “To Ezra Pound: In token of gratitude.” His face turned a delicate pink. “Despite the surfeit of great books I’ve been blessed to handle,” he said, “there’s something electrifying, a powerful gas released into the atmosphere, about getting your hands on *this* copy.” Flipping through the pages, he said, “Pound helped edit ‘Ulysses,’ as well as ‘The Waste Land,’ the twin modernist masterpieces, right at this time. Pound knew everything, one of the half-dozen great brains. He knew French and some Chinese and, in his own meshugganah way, economics.”

He thought that the book, which he’d first bought from Pound’s daughter in the late nineties for a six-figure sum, could now be worth \$3 million, if he could stimulate a buyer’s appetite. Horowitz’s erudition, combined with his energy, is a powerful sales tool. He has a nose for people with income to dispose of and no notion of how it should be disposed. “You want someone who is educable,” he told me. He sometimes referred to his bookshop in East Hampton as “the butterfly net”: it drew in window shoppers, such as Martha Stewart, whom Horowitz would turn into industrious collectors.

In the early eighties, Dennis Silverman, the president of a Teamsters Union chapter, came to Horowitz asking about pulp fiction by Mickey Spillane and H. P. Lovecraft. Horowitz elevated his attention to James Joyce. The Teamster was daunted by Joyce's prose, but not by the requisite investment. "That fucking 'Ulysses'!" he said. "I decided I'd just *buy* the books."

Among his prizes was a "Ulysses" inscribed by Joyce to a book scout named Henry Kaeser, which Horowitz sold him for \$48,500. But the book didn't stay Silverman's for long. He was subsequently forced from the union for embezzlement, and, as Horowitz told me, "Dennis, alas, died an alcoholic with an ankle bracelet on his foot, needing money." Horowitz bought the Kaeser copy back, along with the rest of his client's collection, and then sold it, for \$115,000, to Roger Rechler, a Long Island real-estate developer whom he described to a colleague as the kind of man "who walks on his knuckles."

Horowitz was able to keep raising his prices because he surrounded himself with impressionable students, a kind of "Dead Poets Society" of social climbers. Rechler had approached him with a plan to fill the library of his Manhattan town house with leather-bound volumes, in the style of an English manor house. Horowitz told him, "People will laugh when they see it." Instead, he took Rechler to exhibitions, murmured in his ear, and made rare books seem as enthralling as the developer's other hobby, breeding and showing Afghan hounds.

During the dot-com crash, Rechler ran into difficulties and auctioned his books (retaining their embossed leather slipcases, so that his library would continue to resemble Blenheim Palace). Horowitz bought a third of the collection back for other clients, including the Kaeser. This time, the price jumped to \$460,500, paid by the music promoter Ron Delsener.

In Horowitz's view, the book still had not found its resting place. A few years later, he predicted in the *Times* that the Kaeser would be the first twentieth-century book to sell for more than \$1 million. He told me, "Honestly, I can't remember now, but, knowing myself, I would imagine I would have used the statement as a come-hither." After the story ran, the artist Richard Prince, another collector in Horowitz's sphere, called and said that he was hither. He proposed a price of \$1 million for the Kaeser, and, as Horowitz recalled, "it took Ron about ten seconds to say yes." His commission was \$100,000.

When Tracey Jackson met Horowitz, at a book party in Manhattan, in 1997, she viewed him as a promising first draft. "Glenn was a terrible dresser, and he always wanted to be the first person at a dinner party," she said. "I told him, 'No, it's déclassé.' But I thought, Oh, my God, look at all this raw clay!"

Jackson was at home in realms that Horowitz had yet to penetrate; her mother was the society columnist for the Santa Barbara *News-Press* and a lover of Baron Philippe de Rothschild. After they married, in 1999, Horowitz took to wearing bespoke suits, and they began hosting book parties at their rented town house on the Upper East Side. A conveyor belt of poached salmon and orchids from L'Olivier ran through their lives. Horowitz said, "The parties gathered in people who realized they could sell materials. It made significant collections available to me." A chance meeting with a *Paris Review* editor led to Horowitz representing the magazine's archives; George Plimpton, its editor-in-chief, later recommended him to Carl Bernstein, and in 2003 Horowitz sold the Watergate papers of Bernstein and Bob Woodward to Tom Staley for \$5 million. "That was far, far, far in excess of what a seasoned appraiser would have assessed the collection at," he said. "But we laced Woodward and Bernstein into the deal"—they hosted a series of Watergate conferences at the university—"and Texas got so much publicity that it was totally worth it to them."

In the nineties, Horowitz expanded his business to fine art and photography, before eventually setting them aside. By the turn of the century, he was at the apex of both the rare-book trade and the archive business. One archives dealer told me, “Glenn made the fucking market. He was like Larry Gagosian”—the leading dealer in contemporary art—“and there was no No. 2. The others just weren’t good at sales. One more tumble of the dice and they’d have been librarians.”

Horowitz’s operation embodied both the allure and the poignance of the trade. In 1998, when a philosophy student and book dealer named John McWhinnie was considering Horowitz’s offer to manage his East Hampton store, he asked colleagues for advice. A dealer named John Wronoski recalled, “I said, ‘John, you’ll have the opportunity to see and do things that no other bookseller could give you access to. At the same time, you risk losing your soul.’ ” But, Wronoski went on, “John loved books, and Glenn represented the opportunity to get closer to the grail: intimacy with the sources of creation, with your gods, through the intercession of objects.”



*“Why am I always having my picture taken from an unflattering angle?”*  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Horowitz's remit became global. He had tea with Naguib Mahfouz's widow in Cairo; he bought rare books in Jaipur; he visited Derek Walcott in St. Lucia, to "go ferreting around for Walcott material," he recalled. On a trip to nearby Grenada, he met his match in determination. He discovered that "the library there had one of the two very rare books that were printed when Derek was a teen-ager. What I liked was that it had the stamps of the Grenada public library in it—it was particularized in a way that would permit you to ask a sophisticated collector to pay a premium. I said to the librarian, 'Seems like that book is a bit lost down here. What if I offered to buy it'—I would have proposed ten thousand or so—'and I also sent you a hundred and fifty boxes of books to replenish your library?' She exploded like a volcano: 'You should be deported from the island! Never darken my door again!' "

Horowitz's brass shone brightest in his dealings with Lord Conrad Black, the C.E.O. of Hollinger, the Canadian media conglomerate. In 2000, Horowitz bought a collection of Franklin Roosevelt material for \$3.3 million, then sold it to Black for \$8 million. Black, no slouch at imperious behavior, persuaded Hollinger's board to make the purchase for him. When the board asked for an appraisal, Horowitz wrote a letter declaring that "nothing of this magnitude and quality has ever appeared in the market," and placed the value at \$12 to \$14 million.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Hollinger's affairs proved to be a total mess: Black was later convicted of fraud and obstruction of justice and spent more than three years in a federal penitentiary. When I spoke with Black, he expressed a sneaking regard for Horowitz's vigor but remained nettled that "Glenn, speaking to the special committee investigating the company, rather patted himself on the head for making a brilliant sale and taking me over a barrel. It was ungentlemanly." (The committee's report noted that Horowitz recalled calculating his appraisal "on the back of an envelope.") Horowitz seemed to feel that, in these matches of financial wits,

Marquess of Queensberry Rules didn't apply. He observed that Black, who was on the board of Sotheby's, "was hardly a member of the extended family of the Beverly Hillbillies," and concluded, with a smirk, "Alas for poor Conrad, the shit hit the fan." As the company fell apart, Hollinger consigned the collection to Christie's. The highest offer was \$2.4 million.

Horowitz's disinclination to pay his bills has inspired complaints over the years, some on legal stationery. His longtime lawyer, John Morris, told me, "I firmly believe that Glenn always intends to pay, but across twenty-five years this issue has come to my desk six or eight times." Only once, Morris said, did the matter go to court: in 2010, Horowitz settled with Roger Rechler's estate for \$130,000.

But in Don Henley the dealer was facing an opponent of unprecedeted means and resolve. The Eagles, who sold more than a hundred and fifty million albums, rode a tide of surly melancholy and bell-bottom jeans much further than anyone expected, and Henley viewed himself not merely as a celebrity with lawyers on call but as a troubadour in the heroic tradition.

Like many writers, Henley had a complex relationship with his rough drafts. When he testified at Horowitz's trial, gravel-voiced in a churchgoing suit, he called his lyric pads "detritus." Yet he had preserved every one in his barn in Malibu, and in 1980 he shipped a handful of them to the Eagles' biographer, Ed Sanders. "I thought if I gave him access to our songwriting process," Henley testified, "it would make the book better." Then he forgot all about it for more than thirty years.

In the interim, Horowitz tried to sell the archive amassed by Sanders, a member of the influential band the Fugs and a chronicler of the Manson family. When the sale failed, he bought some of Henley's notepads as a consolation. After his associate John McWhinnie died in a snorkeling accident, in 2012, Horowitz cleaned out inventory, and sold the notepads to two rock-

memorabilia specialists. It was when they tried to auction off four pages of lyrics to “Hotel California” that Henley was reminded of their existence. He was incensed, mistakenly believing that the notepads had been burgled from his barn.

Horowitz agreed to mediate. He knew all the parties involved; Henley had been a customer, and Horowitz hoped that by interceding he could “perhaps revivify Don as a consumer of William Faulkner.” He agreed with Henley’s lawyer on a price—\$8,500—but never mentioned that the collectors retained more than eighty additional pages of lyrics. When they later tried to put some of those pages on the market, Henley, fed up with buying back his own handiwork, had his lawyer complain to the District Attorney.

In court, a central issue was the question of title. Did Ed Sanders have a right to the lyric pads, because Henley had never asked for them back? Or did his contract with the Eagles require him to return them? Some dealers felt that Horowitz should have made a thorough inquiry, but most believed that he’d adhered to the good-enough-to-be-defensible industry standard. One dealer told me, “If Glenn was guilty because he was telling stories about provenance, half the booksellers I know should be in jail.”

When Horowitz was interviewed by prosecutors, in 2017, he was so unconcerned that he didn’t bother to call his lawyer. John Morris told me, “Glenn is always going to believe that if a dispute arises his eloquence will get him out of it.” In court, though, it emerged that the dealer had written Sanders a number of dubious-looking e-mails: he seemed to be coaching him to tell the D.A.’s office that he’d been given the pads by Henley’s writing partner, Glenn Frey. Horowitz wrote, “If Frey, he, alas, is dead, and identifying him as the source would make this go away.”

The prosecutors had evidence that Horowitz had a history of using the dead for his convenience. In 2009, Horowitz sold the Ransom Center a Thomas Pynchon trove: material gathered by his editor

Ray Roberts, who was dying of pulmonary fibrosis. Roberts seemed conscious that Pynchon, who is legendarily private, would be irate to have his manuscripts and letters rerouted. He e-mailed Horowitz to inquire, “Does Texas really have an interest in Pynchon or would it be a keg of dynamite?”

Horowitz moved ahead, but with precautions. Once the sale was finalized, he wrote to a Ransom Center publicist, “Let Roberts die before announcing it,” because getting into a dispute with Pynchon “would hasten his demise.” A few months later, he explained in another e-mail, “My calculation was that it would be hard for TP and his folks to refute the statements of a dead man.” (Horowitz told me that the dead man in question was the Little, Brown president Kevin Dolan, who, he says, had given Roberts permission to take Pynchon material—but his e-mail talks specifically of deferring “until after Ray died.”)

After Pynchon’s lawyer got involved, Horowitz finally told the Ransom Center to give the papers back. “I awakened and suddenly realized you can’t speak for the dead,” he told me. But two manuscripts are still missing, and the Pynchon family remains upset that the Ransom didn’t contact them as soon as Horowitz suggested obscuring the sale. They’re not too happy with Horowitz, either—even though he insists that all the Pynchon material he catalogued was returned. Pynchon, his wife, and his lawyer were all on the prosecution’s witness list.

Before they could speak, though, Don Henley blew up the case. Eight days into the trial, he reversed course and waived attorney-client privilege, allowing thirty-five hundred pages of his and his lawyers’ e-mails to be delivered to the court. Details in them contradicted key pieces of testimony—they showed, for instance, that Henley knew Sanders’s manuscript included photos of the handwritten lyrics—and on March 6th the prosecution dismissed its own case. Judge Curtis Farber scolded the prosecutors for “passive

complicity” in a manipulative action by Henley to recover the notepads, and discharged the defendants.

As Horowitz’s daughter, Lucy, wiped away tears, the dealer shook hands with one of the prosecutors and said, “Thank you for doing your duty.” His shoulders beginning to lift, he told me, “I’ve learned a lot of life lessons, whether or not I apply them, and I’m ready for the rehabilitation.” He’d paid more than \$1 million in legal fees and lost millions in forgone business. What lessons? I asked. “First and foremost is, Don’t talk to law enforcement without a lawyer present!” His wife leaned in and said, “And don’t e-mail *anything*, ever!”

The family went out for a celebratory brunch, but Horowitz peeled off, saying, “I’m going to the office to go to work. I want to get my name back.”

Horowitz has reinvented himself before. In 2016, he became a sort of pop-culture plenipotentiary after he sold Bob Dylan’s archive. Horowitz, retained to broker the deal, immediately thought of the George Kaiser Family Foundation, in Tulsa. Five years earlier, he’d helped place Woody Guthrie’s archive at the foundation, which was determined to put Tulsa on the cultural map. He told me, “I called my friend Ken Levit, the head of the foundation, and said, ‘How are things going with the Guthrie?’ And he said, ‘Only seventeen to twenty thousand people a year are coming through.’ I said, ‘The deal I’m working on would guarantee a quarter of a million visitors.’ ” Horowitz said that his original ask was \$30 million, and that he gradually came down to twenty: “I said to Ken, ‘Twenty million dollars will buy you a lousy Willem de Kooning painting—and for the same price you get *all* of Bob Dylan, American icon!’ ” (Two people who are intimately familiar with the sale say that, in fact, there was no haggling over major points; Horowitz simply proposed a price agreeable to both parties.)

Once that deal was signed, Horowitz began working to convince the foundation to buy Johnny Cash's archive: "My idea was that Tulsa should become the archival center of American music." He also began discussing projects with Paul Simon, Neil Young, and Jann Wenner, a co-founder of *Rolling Stone*. Bill Kelly, who was then at the New York Public Library, told me, "Glenn brought Jann into my office. He'd worked out this deal where we would buy Wenner's papers, all the notes to his interviews with celebrities over the years, and Wenner would coordinate programming around our twentieth-century journalism collection. Glenn said, 'Jann will do a series of evenings and bring in all his fancy friends, and it will bring a ton of attention to the N.Y.P.L.' " As the discussions continued, Horowitz invited Kelly to have lunch with him and Dylan's business manager at Gramercy Tavern. "I try to see five steps ahead with Glenn, but he was ten steps down the road," Kelly said. "He can perform spontaneity beautifully. The lunch was his way of saying, 'Here's a little taste of the world you should be moving into. You can sit there with the dusty archives of the second- or third-tier novelists he was talking about then, or join me on the flashy road to a new entertainment strategy!'"

Horowitz planned to ask for \$6 to \$8 million. However, amid the discussions, Wenner sold a majority stake in Wenner Media. Kelly said, "I kept trying to understand what Wenner's papers actually were, and it turned out that the people who now owned *Rolling Stone* owned the papers, so what Glenn was actually selling was nothing. It was bupkes. When I challenged Glenn on it, he just laughed and said, 'I'm not selling the *archive*, I'm selling Jann Wenner.' " (The dealer said it was likely that he told Kelly, "You're also buying into the Zeitgeist through Jann.")

The Kaiser Foundation eventually passed on the Johnny Cash collection. Horowitz's vision for the city hasn't turned out quite as promised: last year, fewer than twenty-five thousand people visited the Bob Dylan Center. "I don't think the Kaiser regrets doing the

deal,” Horowitz said. “But, hey, they caught the milk truck. It’s still Tulsa, Oklahoma.”

After Horowitz’s case was dismissed, he returned to his office, on the sixth floor of a nondescript building in midtown. His earlier locations reflected the arc of his ambitions: the outpost near Grand Central, the town house on the Upper East Side, the loft space downtown, and then the thirty-five-hundred-square-foot penthouse overlooking the sculpture garden of the Museum of Modern Art. This room, downstairs from that penthouse, was essentially a storage space with three desks. It was crammed with the leavings of a lifetime: first editions by Salter, Roth, DeLillo, and Heller jammed in with Artichoke Underground lithographs and a five-volume history of the Methodist Church.

He e-mailed several leading libraries to inquire about resuming trade. Leslie Morris, at Harvard’s Houghton Library, hesitated to reply. She’d been a fan of Horowitz’s. “He peppers you with e-mails, seven to ten a week, to the point where I stop opening them,” Morris told me. “But I appreciate the hard sell.” Still, his behavior in the Henley matter left her and others with serious questions. “It may not have been illegal,” she said, “but eliding the provenance of something could certainly be considered unethical.” Stephen Enniss, who succeeded Tom Staley at the Ransom Center, declined to discuss Horowitz, observing, “Glenn’s contribution to the trade has been to introduce a Trump-like, transactional ethic into what had been a guild-like community.”

Horowitz began to realize that, though his case had been dismissed, he was still on trial. He told me, “The five institutions that constituted fifty to sixty per cent of my income evidently came away feeling ‘Blowhard, egomaniac, lives in New York, makes lots of money off of us—but the material is so good we have to deal with him.’ And maybe they don’t feel that way anymore. It’s that great line from ‘Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,’ ‘Sentence first —verdict afterwards.’ ”

The Henley case was flimsy, but the attendant celebrity-driven publicity had encouraged Horowitz's peers to recirculate old stories and grudges. As I looked into them, I discovered embellishments in the dealer's recounts of small matters and elisions in his recollections of larger ones. When I began to bring these issues to his attention, he grew cordially elusive. "Let me have until tomorrow," he said at one point, "and I will get back to you by the end of the weekend." He would offer up character witnesses and then, after reconnoitering or reconsidering, take me aside in the manner of a physician consulting with a colleague to murmur, "He's operating under, as you can imagine, great strain," or "She's an ancient woman who, as it seems, has a brain illness."

John Morris, Horowitz's lawyer, told me, "I wish that Glenn would focus on each person in front of him, rather than the next transaction beyond them. Have we discussed business practices? Yes: 'Make your intent clear—"What am I selling you, on what terms?"—and then abide by it.' I'm not sure how much sinks in." Horowitz acknowledged that he could be "pigheaded" and "sharp-elbowed," but seemed to view most of these issues as procedural quibbles raised by jealous colleagues. "I don't have time to dip my toe in inch-high puddles," he e-mailed me. "It feels somewhat as if you're endeavoring to indict me for conducting business with more energy and imagination than others." There is certainly an argument that other dealers see themselves as hedgehogs outraged by a fox, when they're actually foxes outraged by a wolf. The dealer Tom Goldwasser suggested, "Based on the public record, Glenn is seventy per cent honest, and maybe the average bookseller is eighty per cent honest."

Yet some of Horowitz's conduct seemed to me beyond any conceivable industry practice. In the eighties, he worked with a collector named Walter Shirley, who was rapidly drinking himself to death. He describes Shirley as "a ne'er-do-well playboy out of a Preston Sturges movie—white loafers, a boater, an ascot—who was selling his books because he needed money." On two occasions,

when other dealers were looking at material in Shirley's apartment, Horowitz invited them to take whatever they wanted, as Shirley would never notice. One of the dealers told me, "That to me was egregious. I thought that Glenn wanted something to hold over us, that he wanted to make us complicit." Horowitz told me that any such invitation must have been a joke.



ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT WITH NANCY, THE FRIEND WHO INVITES YOU TO THINGS BUT DOESN'T GIVE YOU ENOUGH INFORMATION ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE.

*Cartoon by Joe Dator*

In the summer of 2006, Horowitz and his assistant Jess Butterbaugh went to Gerald Ford's house in Rancho Mirage, California, to assess his archive, and Horowitz shipped the material back to his office for cataloguing. He told me that, after Ford died, that December, the F.B.I. called and "gently suggested it would be wise to return" the trove, to be archived in the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Museum—which he did.

Yet Butterbaugh, who worked for Horowitz for more than six years, said that after the visit to Rancho Mirage he gave her a folder and said, "Keep these where no one can find them." The folder contained letters to Ford, roughly half of them from Richard Nixon. Uncomfortable holding the cache, she returned it to Horowitz a month or two later. She recalls that, when Horowitz

packed up the material to return it, she asked whether to include the folder, and he said, “No, we’re keeping that.”

When I asked Horowitz about the archive, he said that he’d brought back a number of inscribed books, but no letters. He added, categorically, “I did not buy any letters or material from President Ford.” Around the time of Ford’s death, though, he told both a *Times* reporter and the historian Douglas Brinkley that he’d purchased the archive from the former President. Brinkley, who was working on a biography of Ford, told me that he spent ninety minutes in Horowitz’s office reading the Nixon letters. He quoted them throughout his book, and thanked Horowitz profusely in his acknowledgments.

Wanting to give Horowitz the opportunity to refresh his memory, I relayed what Butterbaugh had told me. He calmly professed to be mystified, and then recalled that Ford had presented him with one Nixon letter and one from Ronald Reagan, as gifts. (Later, he would add, “There must have been a number of letters that were inserted in the books and that fell out when we examined them.”) I told him about Brinkley’s reliance on the letters, and e-mailed him a copy of the acknowledgments page. He replied that Brinkley’s whole account was made up. “There’s not a germ of reality here,” he insisted, repeating that he never bought “a single book or letter from President Ford.” On that, anyway, we could agree.

Still hoping for some sign of regret, or even of ambivalence, I read Horowitz observations from three established dealers that conveyed their distrust of his probity and dislike of his treatment of them. He frowned and scratched his head, then recommitted to his story: “You could flip those quotes around and say, ‘He’s clearly good at what he does, at certain tactics—better than those three dealers.’ And I promise you they would all buy from me tomorrow.” They probably would, at that. Kevin Rita, an antiquarian book dealer, told me, “Even with all the problems and suspicions, in a perverse

way you want to believe in Glenn. You want him to be aware of his better angels.”

Early in his career, Horowitz spent a few days with Saul Bellow. “It was like being in the company of a deity,” he told me. “Like being a character in ‘*Herzog*.’” Tracey Jackson said, “Glenn likes this work because he wanted to be a great writer, and he’s not a great writer. But he understands great art, and how to talk to writers, and he discovered a way that he could sit with García Márquez, and work with these great texts.”

Yet the texts that the market wants are changing. One day this spring, Horowitz eyed a pile of untidy boxes near his desk—Jeffrey Eugenides’s archive—and said mournfully, “Ten years ago, an archive generated by a late-middle-aged heterosexual white male with a certain reputation would have had a percussive quality that is today not the case.” He sighed, remembering how he sold John Updike’s papers to Harvard for \$3 million in 2009. “I’d like to believe that I have enough intellectual and bull-in-the-china-shop vitality to make Harvard buy that archive today. They would, of course, buy it for five hundred thousand, or even a million, but it would be a much more difficult conversation at one and a half million.”

Horowitz was trying to restore his reputation in a rapidly evolving landscape. Institutions were running short of space: Yale’s Beinecke Library, already stocked with more inventory than it can catalogue, recently limited its curators to eight hundred linear feet of new material a year, two-thirds of its usual intake. And, after the murder of George Floyd and the resulting prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, institutions and individuals alike had accelerated the shift in their appetites. Since Horowitz’s trial, Harvard’s Leslie Morris has made five small purchases from him, only one of which involved a white male author. “The material being collected is different now,” Susan Benne, the executive director of the A.B.A.A., told me. “It used to be about ‘high

spots’—the pivotal works in literature, science, medicine, and philosophy, what’s called ‘the mind of man.’ Now it’s also about topics such as women’s history, the Underground Railroad, L.G.B.T.Q.+ and sexual history.”

Whatever libraries now want Horowitz will provide, even if he has to convince them that it’s what they now want. In May, Horowitz had a Zoom call with two officials at Brown’s John Hay Library. He hoped to sell them a death-row correspondence between Damien Echols, one of the West Memphis Three—teen-agers wrongly convicted of satanic murders—and Lorri Davis, who championed Echols’s cause, fell in love with him, and married him. Echols was released in 2011, after HBO documentaries about the case attracted attention from such supporters as Johnny Depp and Eddie Vedder. The letters—candid, yearning, at times despairing—were potentially the couple’s most valuable asset, and Horowitz had priced them at \$200,000. Several universities turned down the trove. But, Googling for a likely repository, he discovered that the Hay had a new collection focus: Voices of Mass Incarceration in the United States.

As Horowitz’s cataloguer helped him locate the Zoom link on his computer screen, he began plotting his pitch. “Brown’s project is embedded in the African American experience, and the curator is Black,” he said. Echols and Davis were inconveniently white, he acknowledged. “But I can provide Damien to them as part of this. I can also provide them Al Sharpton, who’s a very dear friend.” He reconsidered. “Actually, he’s not a very dear friend. But he’s a very dear acquaintance!”

When the call began, Horowitz said, “This is very exciting, because this is my fourth Zoom meeting—”

“Of this morning, already?” Amanda Strauss, the library’s director at the time, asked.

“No, no, no—ever!” He went on to praise the library’s incarceration project, adding, proudly, “It’s curious, because *I* was incarcerated.” After an extended account of his indictment and trial, he elaborated on his bona fides: “When Damien was released, Johnny Depp gave him as a gift, not inappropriately, a first edition of Rimbaud’s ‘A Season in Hell.’ When Damien and Lorri asked Johnny for his permission to sell the book, I had just done a deal with Johnny to sell him Hunter Thompson’s archive, so he said, ‘You should go see Glenn Horowitz, who’s as reasonable and straightforward a character as could be.’ ”

He had begun to anatomize the couple’s extraordinary love story when Strauss broke in: “The love story is incredible, and you’re the first bookseller to bring us something like this, but our interest is in that story situated within the broader carceral system.”

Christopher West, who until recently was the library’s curator of the Black diaspora, said, “Mr. Horowitz, let me give you an example. Mumia”—Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is serving a life sentence for murder, and whose papers are the project’s foundational exhibit—“types on the back of a triplicate form requesting to speak to a correctional officer, uses the material of the carceral system for his own correspondence. I know that sort of material is there—”

“I’m sure Lorri has a great deal of it,” Horowitz said, “but I didn’t ask, because I thought, My God, four thousand letters, written from some hideous, awful place in Arkansas on death row! It almost moved me to tears to see that in certain years there were more letters than there were days in the year. What would be going through a human being sitting behind bars in what had to be a shithole, writing two, three letters a day!” Reading their neutral nods, he cleared his throat and said, “I will certainly pursue the avenues you are kindly shining a flashlight on. And, one helium balloon—I have an intimate and long-standing friendship with Al Sharpton, who would be a great bird dog for material like this. If I

ever said, ‘Would you go up to Brown and talk?’ he’d be on a train in five minutes.”

“That’s great, Glenn,” Strauss said. “It sounds like you have a lot of incredible connections and roots in this.”

“And I’m not only the first bookseller to bring you something like this, I’m the first *incarcerated* bookseller to bring you something like this!”

Afterward, Horowitz told me that he’d already cut the price to \$150,000. “If I make another accommodation, it becomes impossible for them not to do it,” he added. “They were trying to see what else they could get, but that was just another way of saying yes. It’s done. *It’s done.*” It wasn’t done, in fact—it still isn’t done; it may never be done—but he was already planning to use the sale to launch a new line in innocence-project material. “I am going to ask Sharpton, who’s very close to the Central Park Five, to introduce me to a couple of them, and I’ll query them as to what is potentially preserved in their files. If this goes well, and a second archive sale follows, there will be a trail of other booksellers that try and follow me.” ♦



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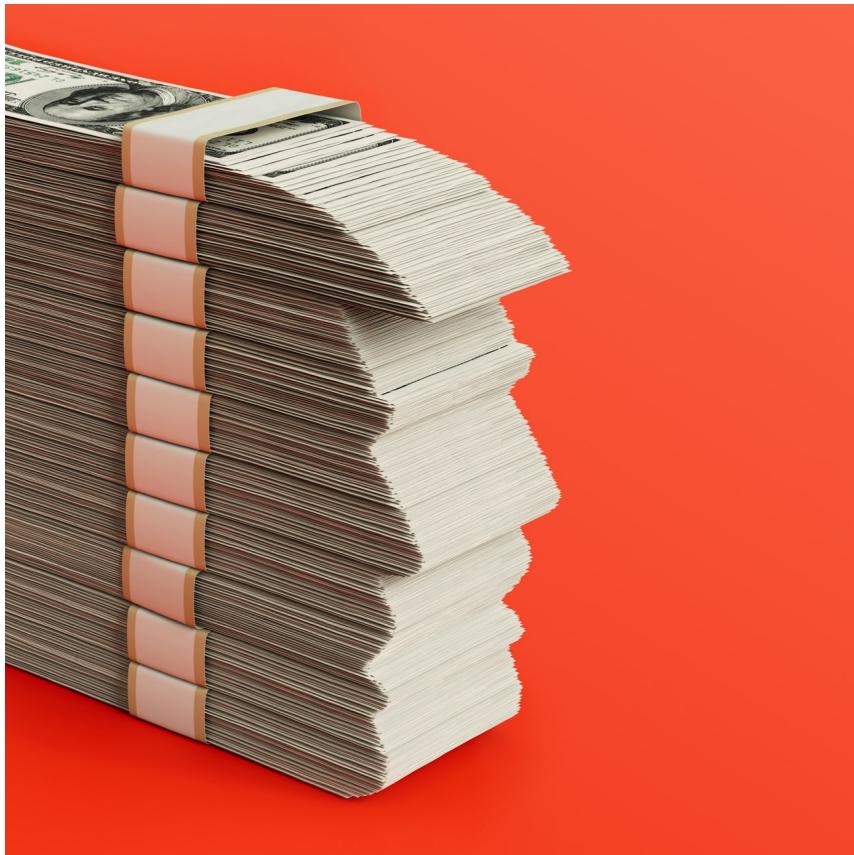
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# How Republican Billionaires Learned to Love Trump Again

The former President has been fighting to win back his wealthiest donors, while actively courting new ones—what do they expect to get in return?

By [Susan B. Glasser](#)

October 18, 2024



*“There wasn’t an alternative to not be for Trump,” a Republican fund-raiser said. “The alternative would be for no one.”*

*Illustration by Ricardo Tomás*

In February, the billionaire investor Nelson Peltz convened two dozen of the country’s wealthiest Republicans for a dinner at Montsorrel, his \$300-million oceanfront estate in Palm Beach, just down the road from Mar-a-Lago. During the 2020 campaign, Peltz had hosted a lavish fund-raiser for Donald Trump at the mansion,

which took in \$10 million. But, in the aftermath of the January 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, Peltz, like many Republicans of all income levels, had publicly denounced the President. In an interview with CNBC on January 7th, he apologized for his vote and said that Trump would always be remembered for that day's "disgrace." "As an American," he added, "I'm embarrassed."

During this year's Republican primaries, Peltz gave \$100,000 to a super *PAC* supporting Tim Scott, the South Carolina senator, but Scott dropped out before a single G.O.P. vote was cast. By the time of Peltz's dinner, it was clear that Trump would secure the Republican nomination for an unprecedented third consecutive election. Peltz, who was no longer on speaking terms with the ex-President, opened the discussion with a blunt assessment of the race. "I don't like Donald Trump," an attendee recalled Peltz saying. "He's a terrible human being, but our country's in a bad place, and we can't afford Joe Biden." So, Peltz concluded, however much they might dislike it, "we've all got to throw our support behind him."

Some of Peltz's guests remained skeptical, holding to the view, as the attendee put it, that "Trump's a terrible person—I'm going to focus on the Senate." Most of the donors, however, adopted a more pragmatic approach to the ex-President. Many of them had been granted significant access to the White House during his four years in office. Some were expected to be considered for senior roles in a second term: Trump has personally floated the name of the hedge-fund tycoon John Paulson, for instance, as a potential Secretary of the Treasury, touting him as "a money machine." "They know how transactional he is," the attendee told me. "They're hoping to have some influence over the course of appointments and therefore the direction of his Administration."

A few of Peltz's guests were all in. Steve Wynn, the Las Vegas gambling titan, has known Trump for decades; his wife, Andrea Hissom, is close to the former First Lady, Melania, and the two

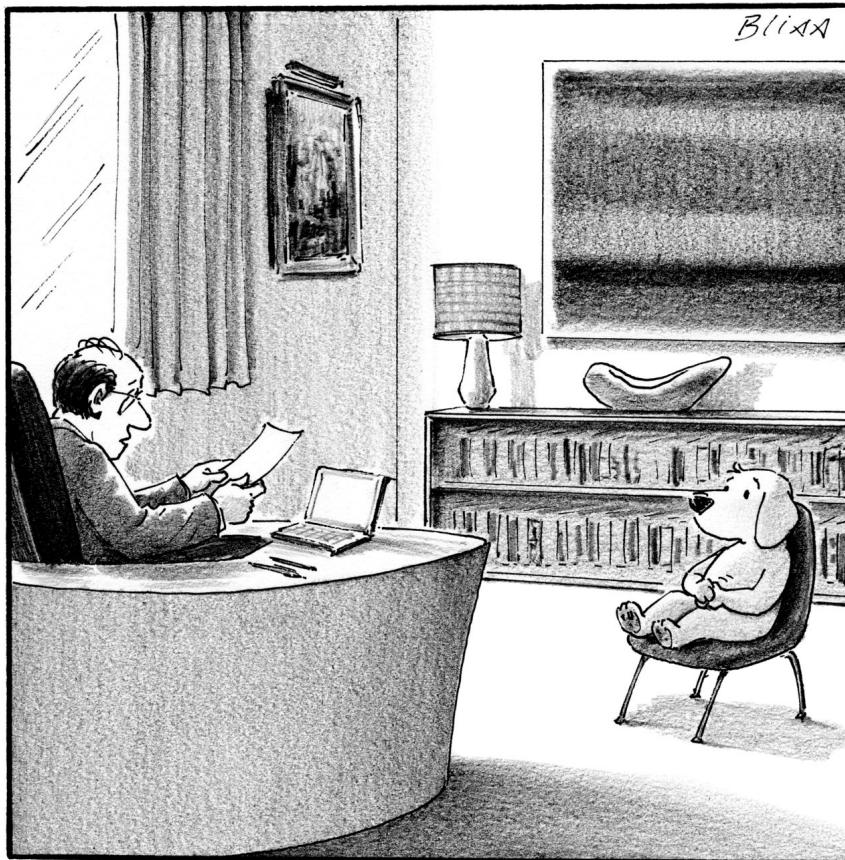
couples have spent time together in Palm Beach. And then there was Elon Musk, the world's richest man, who had reportedly got to know Peltz through Peltz's son Diesel, a tech entrepreneur. At the time, Musk had said that he would not back a candidate in the Presidential race. By the fall, he would enthusiastically endorse Trump, spending \$75 million to support him through a new super *PAC*, and spreading pro-Trump lies and conspiracy theories on his social-media platform, X.

Trump, the richest man ever to serve in the White House, is himself a billionaire, though the extent of his wealth has long been in question. (As of mid-October, with stock in Trump's social-media venture, Truth Social, experiencing a pre-election bounce, *Forbes* estimated his net worth at about \$5.5 billion.) In 2016, Trump hardly bothered to court big donors. He was shunned by much of the G.O.P. élite and largely self-funded his Republican primary campaign. He lambasted Jeb Bush, the brother and son of Presidents, as a tool of the moneyed class. "Super *PACs* are a disaster," Trump said in a 2016 debate. "They're a scam. They cause dishonesty. And you'd better get rid of them, because they are causing a lot of bad decisions to be made by some very good people."

But in 2020, as an incumbent President, Trump embraced super *PACs* and their funders. The two main super *PACs* supporting his campaign raised \$255 million on his behalf that year; his total fund-raising came to more than \$1 billion. However, Biden, like Hillary Clinton four years earlier, raised even more than Trump, bringing over-all spending in the 2020 Presidential race to a record \$5.7 billion.

As 2024 began, Trump's money problems were mounting: Biden started the election year with almost \$120 million in the bank—nearly three times as much as Trump. The ex-President, with four criminal indictments and multiple civil lawsuits pending, was also paying tens of millions of dollars in legal bills through his political

operation. The main super PAC of his Republican rival Nikki Haley, meanwhile, outraised his own by nearly \$5 million in the second half of 2023. In January, Trump posted a threat on social media to the donors defecting to Haley, whom he had taken to calling Birdbrain: “Anybody that makes a ‘Contribution’ to Birdbrain, from this moment forth, will be permanently barred from the MAGA camp. We don’t want them, and will not accept them.”



*“Might you explain to me how your division managed to spend twenty-six thousand dollars on tennis balls?”*

*Cartoon by Harry Bliss*

On February 16th, the same day as Peltz’s dinner in Palm Beach, Trump’s business was hit with a \$355-million judgment, plus interest, in a New York civil fraud case. At a fund-raiser in Dallas, in March, Biden taunted his rival about his dire financial state, joking, “Just the other day, a defeated-looking guy came to me and said, ‘Mr. President, I need your help. I’m being crushed with debt.

I'm completely wiped out.' I had to say, 'Donald, I can't help you.' ”

But Trump's cash crisis was misleading. By mid-March, after Haley dropped out and the ex-President clinched the nomination, his fund-raising comeback was already under way. Many rich Republicans might have preferred to move on from him, but they were still, above all, right-wing partisans. They had flip-flopped on Trump before; they could do it again. Later that month, Peltz hosted Musk, Wynn, and a few others for a Sunday-morning breakfast. This time, Trump was not the subject of agonized debate among the billionaires. He was the guest of honor.

Trump's effort to win back wealthy donors received its biggest boost on the evening of May 30th, when he was convicted in Manhattan on thirty-four criminal counts related to his efforts to conceal hush-money payments to the former adult-film actress Stormy Daniels. After the verdict, Trump walked out to the cameras in the courthouse and denounced the case brought against him as “rigged” and a “disgrace.” Then he departed in a motorcade of black Suburbans. He was headed uptown for an exclusive fund-raising dinner, at the Fifth Avenue apartment of the Florida sugar magnate José (Pepe) Fanjul.

The ex-President arrived with his son Eric, stopping to shake hands and exchange pleasantries with each of the approximately two dozen guests, a “AAA list” of the G.O.P.’s top funders, as John Catsimatidis, the billionaire supermarket owner, put it. Such events, another attendee told me, often feel like a birthday dinner for the host, except that “there’s a lot of money being given to someone who isn’t the host—making Donald Trump the birthday boy, so to speak.”

Trump was seated at the head table, between Fanjul—a major Republican donor going back to the early nineties—and Stephen Schwarzman, the C.E.O. of Blackstone, the world’s largest private-

equity fund, who had endorsed Trump the previous Friday. Securing the support of Schwarzman was a coup for the Trump campaign. In 2022, he had said that he would not back the former President again, because it was time for “a new generation of leaders,” and, during the primaries, he had given \$2 million in support of Chris Christie, the former New Jersey governor, who had repeatedly called Trump “unfit to be President.” In a statement explaining the reversal, Schwarzman said that Biden’s “economic, immigration and foreign policies” were “taking the country in the wrong direction.”

At the dinner, Trump reprised his public rant about the “biased” legal proceedings brought against him, but an attendee who spoke with me was struck by how “calm and confident” Trump seemed for someone facing prison time. “He has this very strong internal capability to push those things aside and still feel good about things,” the attendee said. At the end of the evening, Trump went around the room and solicited opinions on whom he should pick for his running mate. Haley, Scott, and Doug Burgum, the governor of North Dakota and a wealthy businessman, were mentioned; a couple of the attendees expressed a preference for J. D. Vance, the young populist senator from Ohio, whom Trump would ultimately choose. The donors appeared to relish the chance to help select a Vice-Presidential candidate. “I’ve never seen anything like it,” the attendee marvelled. Trump raised about \$50 million at the event.

Trump was fund-raising off his conviction with small-dollar donors as well; his campaign, which portrayed him as the victim of a politicized justice system, brought in nearly \$53 million in the twenty-four hours after the verdict. Several megadonors who had held back from endorsing Trump announced that they were now supporting him, including Miriam Adelson, the widow of the late casino mogul Sheldon Adelson; the Silicon Valley investor David Sacks, who said that the case against Trump was a sign of America turning into a “Banana Republic”; and the venture capitalist Shaun Maguire, who, less than an hour after the verdict, posted on X that

he was donating \$300,000 to Trump, calling the prosecution a “radicalizing experience.” A day later, Timothy Mellon, the banking-family scion, wrote a \$50-million check to the Make America Great Again super PAC.

Ed Rogers, a longtime G.O.P. lobbyist, had never publicly endorsed Trump or raised money for his campaigns. On May 31st, the day after Trump’s conviction, he sent his first contribution to the ex-President. “There was no case to make that that was not targeted prosecution,” he told me. He predicted that other Republicans who, like him, had been “allergic” to Trump would now get on board as well. “I tell people I am a Bill Barr, Chris Sununu, Nikki Haley Republican,” he said, listing the names of Republican officials who had criticized Trump in blistering terms only to support him again in 2024; Haley, despite having called Trump “unhinged” and a threat to the Republic, had announced the week before his conviction that she would vote for him. “The choices are Biden or Trump, and I’m at peace with that,” Rogers said in June. “I wish it was a different equation, but it’s not.”

Many donors I spoke with at the time described Trump’s trial as an impetus, but they tended to cite a litany of other reasons, too, including questions about Biden’s age and fitness to serve another term, concerns about his economic policies, and gripes about some of his appointees, such as the head of the Federal Trade Commission, Lina Khan, who has launched high-profile antitrust investigations. Trump, despite his populist rhetoric, deficit spending, and support for market-distorting tariffs, has sold himself as a pro-business candidate. He has promised extensive deregulation, nearly unfettered drilling for oil and gas, and tax cuts for corporations and wealthy individuals. “A lot of the donors have just come to the conclusion that, when you add it all up, the risks with Trump are behavioral—personal behavior and what he says—versus the policies,” the attendee at the Fifth Avenue fund-raiser told me. It was a “rationalization” adopted by “even those who

were initially very put off, very alienated, by his behavior at the end of his Presidency.”

By late May, Trump’s campaign had more money in the bank than Biden’s. The incumbent President’s disastrous performance in a June 27th debate against Trump only accelerated the trend. “After the debate, Biden looks like a loser, so these people who were never going to give to Biden, they’re now even more attracted to the idea of giving to former President Trump,” the attendee at Fanjul’s dinner said. “Because he looks like a winner.”

The following month, as Democratic donors and elected officials frantically pressured Biden to drop out of the race, Trump and the Republicans again outraised the Democrats. “The Zeitgeist in the business world is that Trump is going to be President again,” a billionaire C.E.O. who is not a Trump supporter told me at the time. “Therefore, why fall on your sword on principle?” He added, “Businesspeople—their main focus in life is to make money, and you make money by backing winners. . . . They’ve concluded, O.K., he’s going to be President, let’s hold our nose and do what we have to do.”

The modern era of campaign finance began with George W. Bush’s 2000 Presidential campaign, which professionalized the idea of the campaign “bundler” and created, in effect, a national club for wealthy Republicans who backed the G.O.P.’s Presidential effort. Individual contributions to federal candidates were limited to a few thousand dollars in so-called hard money, but wealthy supporters could tap their networks to bring in hundreds of thousands more. The Bush campaign formalized this approach, calling its top fund-raisers, those who raised more than \$100,000, Pioneers; in 2004, a new category, Rangers, was added for those who collected more than \$200,000. “We made it fun,” Jack Oliver, Bush’s national finance director, recalled. “We built a community.”

During the 2008 campaign, Bush’s successor, Barack Obama, harnessed his hope-and-change platform to the power of the Internet, raising an unprecedented number of gifts online from small-dollar donors. The increase in donations—in addition to both parties actively recruiting big-dollar bundlers—made it the first Presidential election in history in which the campaigns spent more than \$1 billion. Two years later, the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision ruled that federal law could not prevent corporations from spending unlimited sums to elect candidates, a decision that effectively ended restrictions on campaign fundraising.

The arms race of political spending that ensued has not only increased the influence of money in politics—it’s changed the nature of national elections. “What’s happened is that money has moved from the political parties—which were a centering force in American politics for two hundred years, because they had to stay competitive—out to super *PACs* on the right and the left,” Tom Davis, a former Republican House member from Virginia, who once ran the Party’s congressional-campaign committee, told me. “That has only further polarized our politics.”

Earlier in this election cycle, the Federal Election Commission, already a largely toothless agency, undid some of the few remaining restrictions on coördination between candidates and super *PACs*. Many large contributions are no longer disclosed at all, with huge sums flowing through so-called dark-money funds that support candidates or causes without revealing their donors; the Web site OpenSecrets found about \$660 million in such spending in 2020. Far more dark money is expected in this year’s election. One veteran political operative told me that, even as the billion-dollar campaign remains a recent phenomenon, the country could soon see its first billion-dollar contribution. “The amount of money sloshing around Washington now is beyond any sense of reality,” Fred Wertheimer, a public-interest lawyer who spent his career advocating for enhanced campaign-finance laws, said. “It’s like a

sandbox for billionaires, and they treat it like a sandbox, and they go in and play.”



*“I’ve been confronting my demons all morning, so we decided to take a break for lunch.”*

Cartoon by David Sipress

Gordon Sondland, a wealthy hotelier from Seattle who parlayed a million-dollar donation to Trump’s 2017 Inauguration into an appointment as the Ambassador to the European Union, began bundling donations for Republicans in the early two-thousands. “Look, I bundled for George W. Bush. I bundled for McCain, Romney, Jeb Bush, and then, ultimately, for Trump,” he said. “And if you bundled a few million dollars through a fund-raiser or through a lot of cold-calling, leaning on friends, colleagues, acquaintances—that was considered a significant achievement.” At the start of the Trump era, Sondland added, “you used to get a really good seat at the table at an event for fifty grand. . . . Now you add another zero to that. It’s five hundred to get to the roundtable, and that’s just a ten- or fifteen-minute discussion in someone’s dining room with the candidate.”

It’s not only the sums that have changed; donors now expect more for their money. “It’s a whole different class,” Sondland said.

“They’re less concerned about the photo op and a visit to the state dinner at the White House.” Instead, he added, “they want to essentially get their issues in the White House. . . . They want someone to take their calls.”

During the 2019 impeachment inquiry of Trump, Sondland acknowledged under oath that there had been a “quid pro quo” in Trump’s attempt to pressure the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, into investigating Trump’s political opponents. Trump fired Sondland two days after the impeachment trial ended in a Senate acquittal. Nonetheless, Sondland told me that he planned to vote for Trump again. “It’s a binary choice,” he said. “And I want the Trump policies.”

The bundling of hard-money individual contributions—currently capped at \$3,300 each for the primary and the general election—which Sondland calls “business as usual” fund-raising, is still happening. But, whereas Bush’s Rangers needed to bring in \$200,000, a bundler now has to collect \$2.5 million to join the top-tier “Trump Victory Trust,” according to documents obtained by CNBC. “Bundlers of hard money still have a role, because that is the principal way in which Republicans fund campaigns at the federal level,” a Trump supporter who was one of the original Bush Pioneers told me.

The reason is structural: Democrats have retained an advantage in small online donations, while Republicans rely on a higher percentage of large contributions. As of late September, sixty-eight per cent of contributions to the Trump political network had come from big donors, compared with fifty-nine per cent for the Democrats. Trump, in other words, needs his billionaires more than the other side does. Raising more money from fewer donors is the Party’s strategy.

Trump’s time in the White House provided ample evidence that some billionaires could have extraordinary sway in a second Trump

Administration. “They think they have a greater chance to have influence over Trump than they have had the last four years over Biden,” a prominent Republican fund-raiser told me. Key positions in Trump’s first Administration went to alumni of Goldman Sachs, the C.E.O. of the nation’s largest oil company, and scions of wealthy families, such as Betsy DeVos. When criticized for appointing so many ultra-rich Cabinet members, Trump responded, “I want people that made a fortune!” His signature legislative accomplishment slashed the top corporate tax rate from thirty-five per cent to twenty-one per cent and reduced the top individual-income-tax rate. “You all just got a lot richer,” Trump was reportedly overheard saying, at his Mar-a-Lago club, hours after signing the bill.

In office, Trump gave some of his donors highly unusual roles in government. Schwarzman, the Blackstone C.E.O., for example, had not supported Trump in the 2016 primaries, but he gave \$250,000 to his Inauguration; soon after the Senate passed the tax-cut bill, he hosted a private lunch with Trump at his New York triplex—the former home of John D. Rockefeller—where the cost of entry was \$50,000 a plate. Schwarzman revealed in his 2019 memoir that Trump had asked him to help renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement. Schwarzman reportedly spoke with Trump as often as several times a week during the talks. “Donald listens to me because I’m richer than Donald,” Schwarzman joked at one point to Gerald Butts, then the top adviser to the Canadian Prime Minister.

Schwarzman also wrote that he had served as Trump’s intermediary with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping, personally extending the invitation that led to Xi’s visit to Mar-a-Lago, in early 2017. In 2018, Schwarzman made eight trips to China “on behalf of the administration,” personally reporting back to Trump about his efforts “to assure senior Chinese officials that the President was not looking for a trade war.” His pivotal role was not disclosed at the time, despite the potential conflicts inherent in having the person in

charge of Blackstone's broad investment portfolio also represent the U.S. government. In 2020, Schwarzman gave \$3 million to a pro-Trump super *PAC*.

Peltz, the billionaire who hosted fellow Republican donors in Palm Beach, also had direct access to the White House. A few months after Trump's Inauguration, he met privately with the President in the Oval Office, presenting him with a written dossier that made the case that Amazon and its owner, Jeff Bezos, were responsible for the economic woes of the U.S. Postal Service. Trump, who had long attacked Bezos as the proprietor of the *Washington Post*, summoned a senior official to hear Peltz's complaint. According to the official, Peltz told Trump that "the reason why the Post Office is in the red is almost entirely because of Amazon," claiming, falsely, that it received preferential rates, benefitted from "unfair competition," and ought to be considered an antitrust violator.

Trump's staff tried to figure out what Peltz's interest was in the matter. It turned out that Trian Fund Management, Peltz's asset-management firm, had recently taken a \$3.5-billion stake in Procter & Gamble, the consumer-products giant. Peltz, an activist investor who buys his way into corporate-leadership roles, often by prompting proxy fights, considered Amazon's purchase of Whole Foods a threat to his business. On December 29, 2017, Trump tweeted, "Why is the United States Post Office, which is losing many billions of dollars a year, while charging Amazon and others so little to deliver their packages, making Amazon richer and the Post Office dumber and poorer? Should be charging MUCH MORE!"

Isaac Perlmutter, the former head of Marvel Entertainment, which he sold to Disney, in 2009, for \$4 billion, was also at Peltz's breakfast for Trump in Palm Beach. (Trump personally introduced the pair at Mar-a-Lago, where Perlmutter has a regular table next to the ex-President's; last year, Peltz and Perlmutter joined forces when Peltz launched an unsuccessful bid to win a seat on Disney's

board.) Perlmutter donated \$5 million to Trump's 2016 campaign; his wife, Laura, was a member of Trump's Inauguration committee. Soon after Trump became President, he installed Perlmutter and two of Perlmutter's friends from Florida as de-facto overseers of the Department of Veterans Affairs, an agency with an annual budget of some \$200 billion. "On any veterans issue the first person the President calls is Ike," a former Administration official told ProPublica, which revealed the arrangement.

David Shulkin, whom Trump had appointed to head the V.A., made multiple visits to Palm Beach to consult with the troika that officials came to call "the Mar-a-Lago crowd." "There probably weren't too many times I met with the President when he didn't say, 'What's happening with Ike?'" Shulkin once said. When Perlmutter visited Washington, Shulkin told me, "I would get a call —'Could you come over to the White House? Mr. Perlmutter's here with the President.'"

Shulkin was fired by Trump, in March of 2018, amid a controversy over an expensive trip to Europe that Shulkin had taken at taxpayers' expense. Within hours, he went public with accusations that the story had been hyped by Trump political appointees who were intent on privatizing many of the V.A.'s services. Shulkin told me that he never fully understood why Perlmutter, who had not served in the U.S. military or even visited a V.A. hospital until Shulkin took him to one, had been given such power over the agency. He described Perlmutter as "a private-sector guy" whom Trump admired as a self-made man, someone who "had started with very little and built empires." The problem, as Shulkin saw it, was that Perlmutter had little idea of what he was doing. "Because he never worked in government, he didn't understand government," Shulkin told me. "Part of my role was always trying to translate —'That isn't the way we could do things in this organization.'"

Perlmutter, however, has remained close to Trump. He and his wife gave \$21 million to a super *PAC* supporting Trump's bid in 2020,

and, in 2024, they bankrolled a new pro-Trump super PAC, Right for America, donating another \$25 million. By September, Right for America had raised some \$70 million, which it has spent on an advertising blitz this fall. The venture drew support from other longtime members of Mar-a-Lago, including the Newsmax founder Christopher Ruddy, who gave \$100,000, and Anthony Lomangino, a South Florida waste-management mogul, who donated \$7.85 million. Scott Bessent, another hedge-fund executive often mentioned as a possible Trump Treasury Secretary, also contributed \$100,000.

Perlmutter's highly unusual role in the first Trump Administration appears to have become something of a template for outside influence in a second term. In March, when Elon Musk met with Trump at Peltz's house for breakfast, they discussed a broad advisory gig for the tech billionaire on such matters as immigration and the economy—"in the mold of the role" that Perlmutter had played at the V.A., according to the *Wall Street Journal*. By August, after publicly endorsing Trump, Musk had fleshed out the idea. During a lengthy live-streamed conversation with Trump, Musk suggested that a commission was needed to investigate how to rein in government spending. Such a panel, Musk posted on X, "would unlock tremendous prosperity for America."



*"It feels like everyone is migrating but me."*

Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

Weeks later, during a speech at the Economic Club of New York, Trump formally announced his support for a “government-efficiency commission” that would “conduct a complete financial and performance audit of the entire federal government.” He proposed that Musk, despite having received billions of dollars in government contracts and subsidies for his ventures SpaceX and Tesla, should chair the effort. Soon, Trump was calling Musk his future “Secretary of Cost Cutting.” It sounded like a more ambitious version of a project that Trump had launched early in his Presidency, when he named the billionaire investor Carl Icahn as a special adviser in charge of overhauling federal regulations. Icahn left the role less than a year later, when an article in this magazine raised questions about potential conflicts of interest.

Trump has long made a practice of telling potential supporters what they want to hear. This year, he has also changed previous policy positions in ways that would benefit some of his party’s largest donors. In March, for example, he publicly reversed course on forcing the sale of the Chinese-owned social-media app TikTok, despite having signed an executive order, in August, 2020, stating his intention to ban the app if it was not sold to a U.S.-based buyer

within forty-five days. Back then, Trump warned that a Chinese company owning so much of Americans' personal data was a national-security threat. But this winter, when the Biden Administration endorsed a bipartisan bill to force TikTok's sale, Trump came out against the measure. On Truth Social, he wrote, "If you get rid of TikTok, Facebook and Zuckerschmuck"—his derogatory name for Facebook's C.E.O., Mark Zuckerberg—"will double their business." Steve Bannon, Trump's former adviser, posted another explanation for the about-face: "Simple: Yass Coin."

Days earlier, at an event in Florida for the conservative group Club for Growth, Trump had met with Jeff Yass, a major investor in TikTok's parent company, ByteDance. Yass, a libertarian-leaning Wall Street billionaire who started out as a professional poker player, has not officially endorsed Trump or donated directly to him. Instead, he has given more than \$25 million to the Club for Growth *PAC*, which is supporting the ex-President's reëlection. (According to OpenSecrets, Yass and his wife have contributed more than \$70 million to conservative candidates and causes this election cycle.) Yass also appears to have had a hand in Trump's personal enrichment. This spring, the company behind Truth Social merged with Digital World Acquisition Corp., a company in which Yass's trading firm, Susquehanna, was the single largest institutional investor. Truth Social went public in March, and Trump's majority stake in the company is now worth an estimated \$3 billion.

Perhaps the most striking example of the former President's donor-friendly flexibility in 2024 has been his shift on the cryptocurrency industry. In recent years, he was unambiguously critical of bitcoin, the most widely traded digital currency, saying it "seems like a scam" and "potentially a disaster waiting to happen." But, in 2024, he became an unapologetic promoter of it, attracting contributions from major players in the field, such as the twin brothers Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, each of whom donated \$1 million in bitcoin

to help Trump. The former rowing stars who famously sued Zuckerberg, their classmate at Harvard, for allegedly stealing the idea for Facebook, went on to found the cryptocurrency exchange Gemini. (In a speech this summer, Trump called them “male models with a big, beautiful brain.”) This year’s Republican Party platform offers few details on many policy issues affecting Americans, but it is unusually specific on crypto, promising to “defend the right to mine Bitcoin” and opposing the creation of a “Central Bank digital currency,” which could threaten the crypto industry’s biggest investors.

In July, Trump flew to Nashville for the Bitcoin 2024 conference, where he spoke shortly after one of his top fund-raisers, Howard Lutnick. Lutnick, the C.E.O. of the Wall Street firm Cantor Fitzgerald, has become a leading public proponent of the crypto industry; at the conference, he announced a plan to lend \$2 billion to crypto investors, allowing them to use bitcoin as collateral. Onstage, Trump said that his Administration would permit the creation of so-called stablecoins, which, he promised, would “extend the dominance of the U.S. dollar to new frontiers around the world.” Trump also promised to fire Gary Gensler, Biden’s chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, whose pro-regulatory positions on crypto have outraged bitcoiners. The United States, Trump vowed, “will be the crypto capital of the planet.”

Lutnick, who has known Trump for thirty years and who once made a guest appearance on “The Celebrity Apprentice,” supported Trump’s previous campaigns. But he has significantly increased his giving in 2024. According to Bloomberg, Lutnick and his wife donated \$30,200 to Republicans in 2016 (though he also gave \$1 million to Trump’s 2017 Inauguration committee), \$1.3 million in 2020, and \$12.1 million so far this year. In May, during the former President’s trial in Manhattan, Lutnick hosted a fund-raiser for him at Lutnick’s apartment in the Pierre hotel. In early August, he held another event at his forty-acre estate in Bridgehampton, which brought in \$15 million; seats for a roundtable with Trump in

Lutnick's dining room went for \$250,000. The following Monday, MAGA Inc., a pro-Trump super PAC, recorded a \$5-million donation from Lutnick, the largest individual political gift he'd ever made.

After the Bitcoin event in Nashville, Trump brought Lutnick on board his plane, Trump Force One, to a campaign stop in Minnesota, where Lutnick introduced Vance. Lutnick later told an interviewer that travelling to a rally with the former President was like "going to a rock concert with Mick Jagger." During the trip, Lutnick said, Trump offered him a formal role as co-chair of his Presidential transition team. The decision was announced a few weeks later, after the fund-raiser at Lutnick's Bridgehampton home. Another co-chair is Linda McMahon, the former head of the Small Business Administration in the Trump Administration. She, too, is a wealthy donor who, according to federal records, has given more than \$10 million to support Trump in 2024.

That same month, Trump announced that he and his sons Don, Jr., and Eric were getting into the crypto business themselves. Steve Witkoff, a New York real-estate mogul and a major Trump donor, who testified on Trump's behalf during his civil fraud trial this year, helped set up the venture, called World Liberty Financial. One of the entrepreneurs brought in as a partner, Chase Herro, was later revealed to have referred to himself as "the dirtbag of the Internet." Trump, during a rambling two-hour live-stream rollout on X, struggled to describe how exactly the new business would work, or even when it would launch. "Crypto is one of those things we have to do," he said. "Whether we like it or not."

By then, Lutnick's sphere of influence had moved well beyond bitcoin. In October, he told the *Financial Times* that appointees in a second Trump Administration would be subject to a strict "loyalty" test to avoid the kinds of senior aides who sought to constrain Trump during his first term. "Those people were not pure to his vision," Lutnick said. "We're going to give people the role based

on their capacity—and their fidelity and loyalty to the policy, as well as to the man.”

For all Trump’s success in winning back reluctant conservative billionaires, many of them have seen firsthand the ways in which his erratic behavior and anti-market ideas could disrupt their businesses and the wider economy. After Trump became President, he asked Schwarzman to enlist high-profile business executives to serve on an advisory council. The participants included Musk; Jamie Dimon, the C.E.O. of JPMorgan Chase; Mary Barra, of General Motors; Bob Iger, of Disney; Larry Fink, of BlackRock; and Jack Welch, the former C.E.O. of General Electric. It was a perfect Trump setup: the biggest brand names in American business would come to the White House, kiss his ring, and offer free advice. But, as one of the panel’s members recalled, the first session quickly devolved into an argument between Trump and several participants over his false allegation that China was manipulating its currency. In the summer of 2017, following Trump’s comments about there being “very fine people on both sides” of the white-supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, the group convened an emergency call and decided to disband. After Schwarzman conveyed the news to the White House, Trump preëmptively tweeted that he had decided to shut the group down.

Early this summer, Trump’s campaign surprised the Business Roundtable, a members-only organization of corporate C.E.O.s, with a last-minute acceptance for the ex-President to appear at the group’s quarterly meeting in Washington. Andrew Ross Sorkin, the *Times*’ financial columnist and a host of “Squawk Box,” on CNBC, reported that even C.E.O.s at the meeting who were sympathetic to Trump had found the former President uninformed and “remarkably meandering.” A source in the room told me that Trump’s digressions included complaints about his court cases and “crazy rants about Venezuelan immigrants.”

Soon after the event, Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, a professor at Yale University who tracks the political preferences of America's corporate leaders, wrote in an op-ed for the *Times* that not a single Fortune 100 C.E.O. had donated to Trump by June of this year, something he called a "telling data point." In fact, Sonnenfeld argued, the lack of giving to Trump from traditional Republican donors in the business community was the real fund-raising story, "a major break from overwhelming business and executive support for Republican Presidential candidates dating back over a century." Sonnenfeld told me that such giving "fell off a cliff" when Trump became the Party's nominee—going from more than a quarter of Fortune 100 C.E.O.s in 2012, when Mitt Romney was the G.O.P. candidate, to zero in 2016. In 2020, he noted, only two Fortune 100 C.E.O.s had given to Trump—someone in the energy sector who is no longer running his company and Safra Catz, the C.E.O. of the Oracle software corporation. One lobbyist who speaks with many corporate C.E.O.s told me, "Unanimously, they hate the Biden Administration's policies. But I think almost unanimously they would much rather deal with that than the risk of catastrophic disaster from a Trump Administration." By fall, the only Business Roundtable member publicly backing Trump was Schwarzman.

Charles Koch, perhaps the most legendary Republican financier of recent decades, has never backed Trump, either. The political network affiliated with him and his late brother David remained officially neutral in the Presidential races of 2016 and 2020, and spent tens of millions of dollars trying to defeat Trump in this year's Republican primaries, much of it supporting Haley. When she dropped out, the Koch network concentrated on down-ballot races. But Kochworld, like the Republican Party more broadly, remains divided. "There are a lot of donors in that network lobbying Charles from the perspective of, I know you don't like him, but he's better than the alternative," Marc Short, who worked for a Koch-affiliated group and later served as Vice-President Mike Pence's chief of staff, said. Nevertheless, neither Koch nor Pence is

supporting Trump this fall—a remarkable rift, given the role that each of them has played in Republican politics.

At the same time, Trump has cultivated a new group of what might be called *MAGA* megadonors. A study conducted for *The New Yorker* by the campaign-finance expert Robert Maguire, of the nonprofit good-government group *CREW*, found that, as of this summer, more than forty of the G.O.P.’s biggest super-PAC donors during Romney’s 2012 campaign had never given to a pro-Trump super PAC, including Oracle’s co-founder Larry Ellison, the Dallas real-estate tycoon Harlan Crow, and the hotel magnate J. W. Marriott, Jr. Meanwhile, nearly sixty pro-Trump donors in the study, including Lutnick, Mellon, Perlmutter, and the Wisconsin shipping magnates Richard and Elizabeth Uihlein, had given nothing to the pro-Romney super PAC. Others have significantly increased their giving. The Adelsons, for example, donated \$53 million to the pro-Romney super PAC in 2012 and \$90 million to support Trump in 2020, when they were the largest individual donors of the cycle. By the end of September, Miriam Adelson had given \$100 million to back Trump in 2024.

With such sums at stake, Trump has pursued what the former Bush Pioneer called a “high touch” approach to the Republican billionaire class. The ex-President has all but invited donors to view their contributions as business investments, telling oil-and-gas executives who went to see him in April at Mar-a-Lago, for example, that, because he would allow unrestricted drilling, they should raise \$1 billion for his campaign—a statement redolent of Sondland’s “quid pro quo” that soon leaked to the *Washington Post*. The campaign’s strategy, another longtime fund-raiser told me, was essentially to let Trump be Trump: “He talks the same book to everybody.”



THE MONOPOLY MAN LYING AWAKE AT NIGHT, WORRYING ABOUT PLAY MONEY

Cartoon by Liana Finck

Oliver, the former Bush finance director, observed that the difference between the model of the Bush campaigns and Trump's is the difference between having a large pool of "institutional investors" which had been built up in the course of years, and a series of ad-hoc "transactional" dealings with a relatively small group of the ultra-rich.

Sean Wilentz, a historian at Princeton University, offered another key distinction. Trump's billionaires—many of whom have made their fortunes as hedge-fund managers, activist investors, and corporate raiders—tend to be highly motivated ideologues and individual operators. "It's transactional, but their end of the bargain is a lot different than just having access to the President of the United States," Wilentz told me. "They see Trump as their instrument. This is an investment for them to take power." Wilentz noted that, unlike the "traditional corporate conservative élite" dating back to the Gilded Age, this new "class of the super-rich" appears both more numerous and less civic-minded. "The other

guys might have been robber barons,” Wilentz said. “These guys are oligarchs.”

In July, after a would-be assassin’s bullet grazed Trump’s ear during a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, another wave of giving came in to the Trump campaign. Musk officially endorsed him on X within an hour of the shooting. But the following week, Biden dropped out of the race and endorsed Kamala Harris as his successor. Democrats, especially those who had been reluctant to support the eighty-one-year-old incumbent, began dumping record sums into the race: Harris brought in \$200 million in her opening week as the Party’s official candidate. In August, her first full month atop the ticket, Harris’s network raised \$361 million to Trump’s \$130 million. Her operation, the *Times* reported, was bigger than Trump’s “in nearly every discernible category.”

But, even as Trump’s momentum faded, most of the billionaires who had returned to his side were sticking with their choice. “Do they have buyer’s remorse? No,” one veteran Republican fund-raiser told me in August. He allowed that “there’s concern about Trump being able to turn to a disciplined message,” but, for this group, at least, Harris was never a conceivable option. “They view her as even further left than Biden from a policy perspective,” the veteran fund-raiser said. “There wasn’t an alternative to not be for Trump—the alternative would be for no one.”

Another possibility was for major Republican donors to switch their emphasis to the Party’s efforts to hold on to the House and win back the Senate. One Republican fund-raiser, a former Haley supporter, spoke to me from the sidelines of a summer retreat that House Speaker Mike Johnson held for big givers in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where he found a number of donors more skeptical about the White House race. “They’re just saying they’re going to sit out the Presidential for the time being and focus on the down ballot,” he said. “The races where, even if Harris wins, if we

unleash gargantuan resources in that particular race, we can still win.”

Among the donors who have reluctantly swung to Trump was the billionaire Thomas Peterffy, a Wall Street mogul and a six-figure donor to Trump in 2020, who had vowed to do “whatever I can” to make sure the G.O.P. had a different nominee in 2024. Federal campaign-finance records show that, through the summer, Peterffy donated some \$7 million to G.O.P. politicians and Party organizations, but he had given nothing publicly to Trump. In August, he donated \$844,660 to the Trump 47 joint fund-raising committee, which helps support the ex-President’s campaign.

Trump was still trying this summer to personally persuade a few remaining billionaire holdouts to get back on board. Two of his biggest targets were Kenneth Griffin, the C.E.O. of the hedge fund Citadel, and Paul Singer, the founder of the activist investment group Elliott Management—both former Haley backers who had yet to endorse him. In recent years, Griffin has been among the Republican Party’s top benefactors; as of August, he had donated nearly \$75 million to G.O.P. candidates and super PACs. But he had publicly disavowed Trump after his Presidency; according to a friend of Griffin’s, he has privately called the former President a “three-time loser” and an “idiot.” Earlier this year, he said that he would consider giving to Trump, depending on whom he chose as his running mate; according to the veteran fund-raiser, he was “not a fan” of Vance. Singer had similarly given tens of millions to Republican causes this year without formally backing Trump.

In July, Trump met with Griffin and, separately, with Singer. His lobbying effort was partially successful. On August 15th, Singer sent \$5 million to MAGA Inc. Griffin, however, eventually announced that he would not be giving any money to the ex-President. “I have not supported Donald Trump,” he said this fall. “I’m so torn on this one.” He added, “I know who I’m going to vote for, but it’s not with a smile on my face.” (Griffin told me that

“Americans enjoyed greater economic opportunity, and the world was a safer place, under President Trump’s leadership,” and that “Senator Vance has matured quickly on the campaign trail.”)

Trump’s courting of billionaires has been an explicit part of the Democrats’ campaign against him. At the Democratic National Convention, in August, Harris said that the ex-President’s populist rhetoric did not match the reality of a man who “fights for himself and his billionaire friends.” But the talking points miss an uncomfortable fact for both parties: during the Trump era, it’s the Democrats who have enjoyed a clear advantage with the nation’s wealthiest political donors. According to OpenSecrets, big donors —those who gave \$100,000 or more to just one party—contributed \$5.2 billion to Democratic causes and candidates in the last election cycle, and \$3.3 billion to Republican ones. Despite Trump’s cultivation of the crypto bros and Wall Street money, his online chats with Musk and his Mar-a-Lago fund-raisers with Big Oil executives, that trend is on track to continue this year. A recent Bloomberg survey of billionaires showed Harris receiving support from twenty-one of the country’s richest people, compared with fourteen who were backing Trump. The difference, though, is that Trump had taken in millions more from these supporters. His campaign is far more dependent on its shrinking segment of the ultra-rich.

In September, the day after the debate between Harris and Trump, I spoke again with the lobbyist Ed Rogers. “You know, I’m a Trump voter, a Trump donor,” he said, “but I think Harris is going to win.” Another Republican told me that, after Trump’s poor debate performance, he had seen similar hand-wringing from other major donors: “Can I stomach giving money to this guy and he keeps blowing it?”

In at least one notable case, Harris managed to regain a major donor who had defected to Trump, the Silicon Valley venture capitalist Ben Horowitz. Horowitz and his business partner, Marc

Andreessen, who are both longtime Democratic givers, had stunned the tech world in July by endorsing the ex-President, citing, in part, Trump's newfound support for the crypto industry. But, in October, Horowitz announced that he and his wife planned to make a "significant donation" to Harris, saying that, though the Biden Administration had been "exceptionally destructive on tech policy," he had spoken personally with Harris, a friend from California, and was "hopeful" that she would take a different approach. "There was no real engagement by the Biden world with the business community," a Democratic donor who has spoken with the Vice-President told me. "Harris has been very intentional about engaging. She's saying all the right things."

Harris's success with the moneyed class infuriated Trump. "All rich, job creating people, that support Comrade Kamala Harris," he wrote in a social-media post in September, "you are STUPID." A couple of weeks later, he posted the false claim that Jamie Dimon, the JPMorgan C.E.O., whom Trump had also mused about as a candidate for Treasury Secretary, had endorsed him. Not only was this untrue, as JPMorgan swiftly announced; it turned out that Dimon's wife had donated more than \$200,000 to the Democratic ticket and attended a dinner this summer with Harris.

As if to rebut the doubters, Trump appeared in early October at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, the scene of the first assassination attempt against him, alongside his wealthiest benefactor, Musk. Trump had outsourced much of his campaign's turnout operation—the traditional preserve of the political parties and the candidates—to Musk's America PAC. Musk, whom the *Times* called "obsessive, almost manic" in his backing of the ex-President, had all but relocated to Pennsylvania to oversee an effort to swing the crucial battleground state. In Butler, he leaped around the stage in a black MAGA hat, as the former President grinned with delight. If Trump does not win, Musk told the crowd, "this will be the last election."

A few days later, Harris's campaign made a stunning announcement: she had raised \$1 billion in a matter of weeks, the largest sum ever collected for an American politician in such a short amount of time. Harris more than doubled Trump's contributions in September alone. Will it matter? During the past two decades, the winner of the Presidential election has always been the better funded of the two candidates—with the notable exception of Hillary Clinton, in 2016. ♦



*Susan B. Glasser*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, has a [weekly column on life in Washington](#) and is a host of the [Political Scene podcast](#). She is also a co-author of “[The Divider: Trump in the White House, 2017-2021](#).”

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# Shouts & Murmurs

## • [Parent-Teacher Conference](#)

By Karen Chee | There's been a noticeable decline in Billy's homework, which leads me to believe there's some trouble at home.

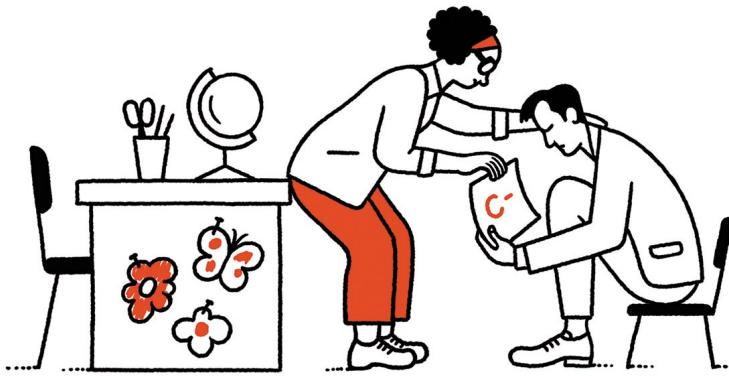
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**Shouts & Murmurs**

# Parent-Teacher Conference

By [Karen Chee](#)

October 21, 2024



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Hi, Billy's dad! Andrew, right? Thanks for meeting on such short notice. No, don't worry, this actually isn't about Billy. This is about you. Are you O.K.?

You see, I can tell when students' parents do their homework for them. Please, it's so obvious! There's no way that Billy, a seven-year-old, chose "Chicken Soup for the Depressed Man's Soul" for his book report, when—let's be honest—he's kind of dumb. I mean, the boy doesn't understand the concept of cows. He keeps calling them "bad dogs."

Look, there's been a noticeable decline in Billy's homework over the past few months, which leads me to believe there's some trouble at home. Take a look at Billy's recent history project. I picked up the first sign of your mental downturn in this collage; his

previous collages have been gorgeous—I love the way you framed each photo with construction paper. Amazing attention to detail. But after last month's alluring Cretaceous-era showcase, this month's is, well, awful. It's like you waited until the hour before it was due to work on it. The edges are all crooked. There are some splotches in the corner, like you dripped tears on it or something. Are you and your wife having some issues?

As for last week's tri-panel board on batteries—yikes! Billy usually does very well in science, thanks to you, but this time he got a C. You even wrote in the conclusion, "Positive and negative should not go together. Opposites attracting is not a good long-term partnership." And then under "Works Cited" you wrote, "She doesn't love me anymore. I don't know if she ever did." Obviously, you lost points for improper citation. It should have read, "'I don't love you anymore'—Billy's mom (Oct., 2023)." That's just standard M.L.A. formatting.

I wish I'd said something sooner, but you have to understand that I am deeply underpaid and incredibly overworked. The state of public education is even worse than your marriage.

The thing that really pushed me to reach out was Billy's shoebox diorama of "Little House on the Prairie." I've never seen an uglier, more ramshackle thing—Oh, really? He worked on this alone, without help? Hmm. Well, on the brighter side, you'll save a lot of money, because there is no way this kid is going to college.

Please stop crying. If it makes you feel any better, Billy seems oblivious to whatever is happening at home, and also to everything here at school. Plus, you were the best at collages out of all the parents in the class.

Here, take a tissue. I've scheduled a meeting for you with the school counsellor, Mrs. Barnes. I'll let her know you're heading over now. And please don't forget: Billy's next book report is due

on Tuesday, and it can't be on another "Chicken Soup" book, O.K.? ♦

*Karen Chee, a comedian and a TV writer, has contributed humor to The New Yorker since 2016.*

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# Fiction

- **[The Rich Are Different from You and Me](#)**

By Barry Blitt | Elon Musk is known to cause alarm when taking his self-driving tank out for a spin.

- **[“War Dogs”](#)**

By Paul Yoon | He doesn't even know the dog's name. No tags, nothing in the manifest the driver passed to him.

[Sketchbook](#)

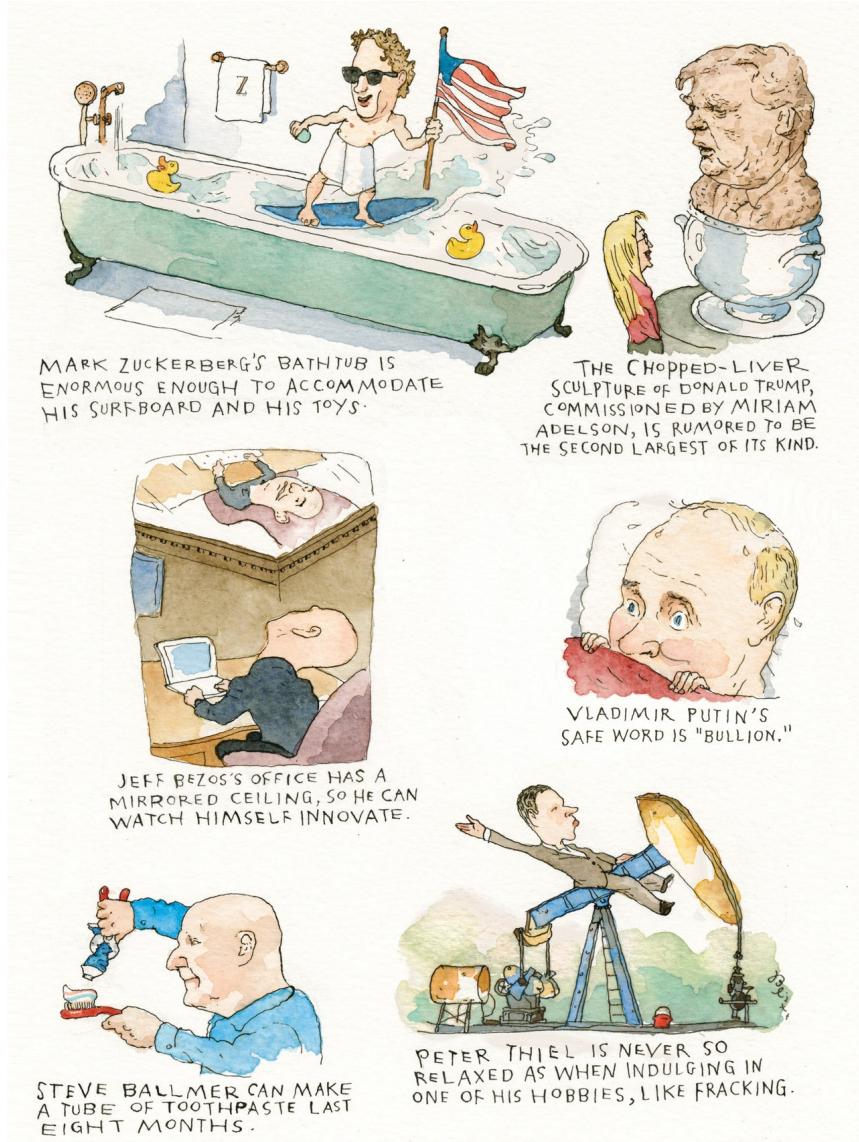
# The Rich Are Different from You and Me

*Elon Musk is known to cause alarm when taking his self-driving tank out for a spin.*

By [Barry Blitt](#)

October 21, 2024





*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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[Fiction](#)

# War Dogs

By [Paul Yoon](#)

October 20, 2024



*Illustration by Wesley Allsbrook*

## The Airport Animal Center

The facility lies two miles away from the main terminals but within the grounds of the airport, at the end of a service road that skirts a pond where geese flock during their migrations. It's in the shape of

an enormous U, and equipped with stalls, bathing areas, runs, a paddock out back, and rooms that are advertised online as suites.

Currently being boarded are: five dogs and two cats in quarantine before they move on to their final destination; three horses, including a polo pony who has finished a competition in England and will eventually head to his home, in Maryland; and ten birds in cages who by the end of the week will relocate to a renovated room that, at a certain hour of the morning, when the sun hits a wall newly papered in forest prints, has the serenity of a spa.

The day so far—an afternoon in early June—has been a quiet one. There are fifteen employees on shift, including a team of veterinarians, janitors, trainers, a driver who has gone to meet an airplane from Germany that is on approach, and two childhood friends, named Brian (twenty-two, living with his mother) and Tess (twenty, on summer break from college and staying with her parents), who are sitting together on the steps inside the delivery entrance.

Brian, who works with the dogs, is rubbing the side of his face and waiting for the driver. Tess, who works with the horses, will be two minutes late for her shift at the stables and is trying not to think about cigarettes. They’re in the middle of a discussion about whether a “war dog” is, by definition, a dog who works for the military, or if the term can be used for any dog who is in a war. They’d look it up, but the Wi-Fi is spotty out here.

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

Today, Brian has been assigned to one of two dogs coming in from a military base outside Berlin. He knows they’re originally from Afghanistan and that the one he isn’t responsible for is severely dehydrated. He pins his tablet between his sneakers and keeps checking his phone for service.

What Tess really wants to talk about is Brian's mother, who flew out on an airplane last night and is about to land, half a world away, in Seoul, but Brian wants to talk only about the incoming dogs, not his mother or his father, who has just died and whom he has no memory of whatsoever.

It annoys Tess, the way he pretends not to care. She wants him to be better than that. She wants him to be better; suddenly, all this week, every little thing he does doesn't seem good enough. Like the sandwich he made for her, an egg salad on rye with a hearty dose of paprika and parsley flakes, wrapped in tinfoil, which she holds in her hand right now as if it were a bomb.

What Brian doesn't know, because Tess hasn't told him, is that she can no longer eat what has been her favorite sandwich for all the years they've known each other, because if she opens up the tinfoil and smells the egg salad she will retch right then and there, the way she did this morning while making coffee for her dad, who, thank God, was in another room, obviously staring at his e-mails.

Brian holds up his phone; it's finally found some service. He searches for "war dog" and scrolls down, but all he sees is site after site about a movie they've never heard of. There's no answer to their question.

Honestly, Tess says, switching to Korean and standing up. Who gives a shit. They're just dogs.

What's with you? he almost says, but then he knows that it's him: he doesn't feel like talking about his father. Or his mother up there in the air, almost to South Korea. Or the fact that she'll be picked up by his father's other family, which is how he thinks of them, and taken to his father's house, where there's supposedly a taped-up box that he left for her.

It's probably some old jewelry she left behind. He returns to his phone, pretending to ignore Tess walking away, her gait different this past week, more careful, more considered—maybe that's how they walk in college, he thinks—as a plane nearby touches down.

## War Dogs

They've been in the air for seven hours, though that's only today. The dogs have been travelling for days.

They're brother and sister, and they're both mixed breeds, maybe some shepherd in there, or something more compact, like a Malinois, with a little bit of the laziness of a Labrador and the light-footedness of a Jindo. They're five years old, fifty pounds—give or take a few—each with pointy ears and the sister with a pale streak of fur across her chest.

They're in crates with no view out the sides, only the front and the back, though the brother has taken comfort in knowing that his sister is in a crate beside him—he can hear her breathing. Even in her fatigue and sickness, she is breathing, and he focusses on that while the belly of whatever they're in shakes as though the whole world is shaking and screams more awful than an animal screaming and whirs and then a light comes on and suddenly a door is being lowered and men appear, silhouetted.

He squints in the sunlight. There's a blast of air as his crate is lifted, his sister's crate is lifted, and they're both carried outside to a truck, where, briefly, as he senses the motion of a man's arm and hears the hum of electricity and smells sweat, fuel, concrete, soil, and a bird carcass near water, the crate he's in swings high up—like that child he once saw on a swing set on the television—and he catches the blue of the sky that is not the blue of the sky he knows.

## The Escalator

Roughly sixty-nine hundred miles west of the airport and thirty-six thousand feet above sea level, the flight to Seoul is about to begin its descent. Near the back sits Brian's mother, who has been woken by her row neighbor, a boy who is climbing over her to use the bathroom before the seat-belt light comes on. He says sorry, in Korean, and keeps going, hopping over her in his sweats in a way that causes Mary—she has gone by Mary for so long in New York that it is her only name—to miss being young.

She drifted off because she hasn't been sleeping. She hasn't been sleeping because in her sleep she's been having the same dream about him, her late ex-husband, almost every night since she heard. In the dream, after he collapses in the way she imagines he must have collapsed, he gets up, and continues riding the escalator in the shopping mall where he was a security guard. In the dream, Mary waits for him at the top, barefoot, in a new dress she's bought, and when he eventually appears she asks flirtatiously if he can help her with the zipper.

It's a ridiculous dream, but she keeps dreaming it, every time she shuts her eyes, and, when she opens them, she thinks about what really happened, which is that he collapsed right there on the mall escalator, heading to a higher floor. He collapsed and slid down a little on the steps. She thinks about how no one helped him right away, only moved aside, afraid that he was sick and contagious, until his shirt got caught at the top and his neck almost broke.

She had not seen him in almost two decades, since she immigrated to New York, taking young Brian with her. She hadn't even known until recently what he did for work, what his days were like, where he lived, whether in a city or on the outskirts of one or deep in the countryside. She knew that he had remarried, and he and his wife had a daughter. Mary hadn't even been sure if the girl knew of Mary's existence.

But then, just over a month ago, the girl called the apartment in Jackson Heights where Mary has been living ever since she arrived in New York. She was surprised at the ease with which they slipped into conversation. The girl's voice was steady, patient. She said someone at the local church had known Mary's parents and knew where she lived. She said that her dad had sometimes spoken about Mary, and, when Mary asked about what, the girl didn't respond. She then told Mary about the box they had found, in a drawer in the nightstand, a small box, one of those that could hold a mug, but they didn't think it was a mug; it was taped up, and had Mary's Korean name on it, and they hadn't opened it.

The girl asked what they should do with it, whether they could send it to her, and Mary hesitated. And they stayed that way for a while, not uncomfortably, each of them silent and holding a phone, at opposite ends of the world. The girl was calling from outside because she could no longer stand being inside, and Mary sat beside the half-moon-shaped table in her kitchenette, the wall covered with old crayon drawings, while water boiled in a pot.

It was at the same table, a week later, that Mary told Brian about her decision to go. Brian had just come home from eight hours at the airport. Mary had watched Tess drop him off, wondering if she was going to come up. It wasn't even a trip Mary could afford, but she was going to ask the Korean BBQ restaurant where she worked if she could take on a few extra shifts and then go. She was going to meet her ex-husband's family, and she was going to pick up the box with her name on it, and maybe visit her old neighborhood for a night.

That's fucked up, was Brian's response as he sat down, and before Mary understood what was happening in her body she had leaned over and slapped him, hand flat and tight.

She held her breath. She had never done that before. Her hand began to shake as her mind wandered: whether her son would

remember this moment forever; what her ex-husband's favorite store was at that shopping mall; whether there was a girl behind a counter he had a crush on; what could possibly be in that box; and whether he had still been alive for a few seconds after he collapsed and whether he had felt it when he got caught in the escalator.

Yeah, Mary said, and lit a cigarette. It's all fucked up. Yeah.

Brian rubbed his face. And then, to her surprise, he burst out laughing, because he always thought it was funny when his mom cursed in English.

## In the Forest

He's an Argentine polo pony, a bay, fifteen hands tall, all muscle, with a sleek coat. He doesn't mind the heat, can compete longer than most horses, and has a temper that can flare on occasion if a stranger is handling him. He's been here a dozen times, enough for the place to stay in his mind, the way the dirt from the grounds he played on is still on one hoof, so that when he leans down to smell he can picture the far hills of wherever he had been.

Ramsey—the polo pony—is in the middle stall of the Airport Animal Center stable, on the left side of the U-shaped facility. He is waiting for hay to be brought and his water to be refilled when he understands that something has happened to his vision but he is unsure what, exactly, this might be. It is like a narrowing. Like the stall walls have thickened and the ceiling has lowered and the light has dimmed. He wonders at first if there's a fly mask on him that he's forgotten about, but, as he shakes his head, he knows his face is uncovered. He tries to remember if something or someone hit him in the head during a game.

He longs to be outside. He pictures the fields he's played on. When he pictures something in his mind, it is whole, and so he stays in it—a field, a ball, the control and the chaos of the sport. How, once,

he almost stumbled in the middle of a game, smelling, inexplicably, on the wind, his mother's belly.

He hears footsteps; they belong to the young woman named Tess. She's carrying the hay in a wheelbarrow, filling the buckets hanging on their doors. He can see her only when she is very close, and in his frustration he calls to her, not realizing that she is already there, reaching out to calm him.

Tess is certain that he is hungry and bored, this horse who has passed through here so many times she wonders whether he has grown tired of the travel. She does not expect him to be so startled when she touches the space between his eyes, but he jerks away, and she looks down, wondering if something is in her palm.

Ramsey, you brat, she says, and blows him a kiss, and heads out, intending to fetch more water for the three horses. Instead, Tess finds herself in the room that has just been wallpapered, the one that will soon be the new bird room, though no one is working there today. She has begun to go there when no one is around, to sit on a stool in the middle of the room and stare at the trees on the walls. Stare so long it is like she is walking into the forest, a thought that calms her, the trees and the sunlight on the trees.

It's like there are no airplanes passing overhead.

She shouldn't have snapped at Brian. Or said what she said about the dogs. Or thrown away, untouched, the sandwich he'd made for her. She shouldn't have done this and that. She misses the two of them from a week ago, before she discovered why she was throwing up. A stark line has formed between the before and the now, and she doesn't know what to do about it. Why is it that she thinks of him differently now? A little less of him? That's unfair. The way she's certain her father thinks less of him now than he used to because Brian doesn't want to go to college.

When she is absolutely still in this room, she is free. Free to walk through the forest and think and come to a decision, because suddenly she needs to make decisions. When she is at school in the upstate town, there are moments when all she does is think of the animals here, and of her father, of taking care of these animals on their way to somewhere else, and how one day she will build a place for animals who never have to go somewhere else. And she remembers Brian, that one gentle constant in her life, the two of them meeting on the sidewalk lifetimes ago because they lived in the same neighborhood, where her father and his mother went on one date, and never again.

She smiles for the first time today. She tries to see herself as much older. And then she tries to see who is beside this older self. If she keeps walking in the forest, she believes she will see and enter a future that is clear and welcoming, where there is a fullness and clarity to the days, the way there used to be. But maybe that is what it means to get a little older. To feel less full and clear. Could that be? What did her mother feel when she saw her for the first time? Twice this week, in the afternoon, Tess has called the local library where her mother works, wanting to hear her voice, only to hang up.

She keeps walking in the forest, crossing from one path to the next, ignoring the planes passing over the canopy, until she hears the distant whinnying of Ramsey and remembers the water.

## **Slip Lead**

He doesn't even know the dog's name. No tags, nothing in the manifest the driver passed to him. "TBD," it says, in the section where there is normally an anticipated checkout date.

They are in an exam room together where the dog he's been assigned to, the healthy one, has been cleared, and Brian is supposed to take him to his suite. Brian puts a slip lead on over the

dog's head, but the dog freezes, then pulls hard, forward, as if he wants to pull a sled. Brian takes the lead off. He tries to feed the dog a treat, but the dog sniffs and looks away. He's probably wondering where his sister is.

Brian says, She's in good hands. She's with Tess's father. Tess is my . . . he pauses. He wants to say, Love of my life, in the most sincere way possible, but it gets caught down in his throat. The dog looks back up at him. Brian thinks there's a little Jindo in him, and that pleases him. He says a few words in Korean, and the dog considers him.

Brian checks his phone, thinks he heard a ping a moment ago, thinks maybe his mother has landed, but there's nothing, no notification of any kind. He points the phone at the dog, wanting to snap a photo, to text Tess and ask what to do about the lead, but the dog's ears pin back.

Fair enough, Brian says. He cracks open the exam-room door and peers down the hall. It's a quiet day. The faint whir of a vacuum comes from somewhere nearby. He says, Shit, come on, and the dog follows him out, unleashed, the two of them hurrying to the suite, where the dog sits on the dog bed and Brian, thief-like, sits cross-legged on the matted floor next to it. The dog pants. Brian slowly raises an arm and pets him. The dog lets him.

This works, Brian says, and leans back against the wall, the dog panting less, the faint whinny of a horse, an airplane.



*"Ultimately, we realized we share too many app subscriptions not to make it work."*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

He strokes the dog between his ears and down his back. Roger, he says, quietly, almost to himself. You look like a Roger. That's Tess's dad. Or a Charles. Or Egg Salad. How about Egg Salad? Egg Salad, where are you coming from? Are you going farther after this, or is someone coming to pick you up? You still have a dad?

He looks up from this vantage point at the slip lead hanging on the hook, glowing a little in the hallway light. These past few weeks, a thousand times a day, it seems, he has been trying to remember something about his father, but nothing comes to him. He doesn't even remember the trip and immigrating here or the first years. Only some faint memory of the glide of a stroller and the colorful hues of storefront signs at night.

Because he was a horrible drunk, Brian's mom used to say, when Brian asked why they'd left, but for some reason he was never angry about any of it—his father and their leaving. Maybe he will be in some future time. But he doesn't know what he feels now. He feels nothing but how he feels about Tess, truth be told, but Tess is in school upstate, and so they only really see each other in the summers, and who knows where she'll go after school. She'll start a farm in some town like Chatham and care for retired horses and

have a million dogs. Dogs like this one over here whose history he still doesn't know.

He scratches the dog's chest and imagines Tess in overalls with sweat on her brow, and then he thinks of the night he told her the news about his dad, a little over a month ago. She had just come back from college. They were sitting on the hood of Tess's car on the side of the road where they sometimes parked, facing the fence line of the facility and sharing a cigarette before she drove him home.

They said nothing else to each other, each of them thinking of death and what happens after death. And then they had another cigarette. The facility's lights were dim, and night caught in the pond water. And then she took him to the back of the car, and they made love the way they sometimes did, for years now, not knowing what exactly it was between the two of them, what to call it, just that it was; it was a kind of history, the two of them, and had always been.

## The Photograph

The sister is hooked up on an I.V. and resting while Tess's father, Roger, a vet, sits in a corner, his laptop open beside a microscope. He's gone over an aspirated sample of a bump he wanted to check on the dog's front leg—it was nothing. He swivels in his chair and reads again the little information he has on the two dogs: They understand English commands. They have an owner, a translator who worked for the Americans in Afghanistan. He doesn't know who, but someone was able to make arrangements for all three of them to get out. The owner was supposed to have come today, too, but there's been no word—he must've been delayed—and Roger is waiting to hear when the man will arrive.

They're miracle dogs, Roger thinks. It's been in the news, the troops pulling out and so many others who had been helping for

decades being left behind. He wonders what goes through people's minds when they make decisions like that, and then he wonders about the person who was able to save two dogs.

And what awaits them now? She'll recover, this one, and they'll live long lives. Maybe they'll be happy in the countryside hunting squirrels. Or maybe they'll be taken to a big American city. Which was what he had wanted when he came here forty years ago, leaving his father behind in the misery the man mired himself in, to start over again. He wanted quality shoes with sturdy soles and a big car. To walk through the advertisements in *Life* magazine: smoke cigarettes on a sidewalk under a skyscraper in Manhattan, eat cake, sail on the river, be with women who wore stockings.

Except for the occasional slice of cake, he does none of those things. Cake for his wife's birthday, or for Tess's, or when Tess comes back home on breaks during college. This child who used to run to him if she fell is suddenly a woman who wants a farm with animals. He wonders if it's because of what he does for a living or if it's for reasons unknown to him—he's never asked.

He made a promise to himself to love whatever she loves. His own father wanted him to be a doctor and then spent the rest of his life making fun of his son to his war-veteran friends, laughing about how he became an animal doctor instead.

Who cares about the animals? his father liked to say. A bomb is falling every day. You have a child on one side and a pig on the other. What do you do?

Nothing, Roger once said back. We huddle and we pray, and we all die.

Is it the memories of his father that are bothering Roger today?

He knows something is bothering Tess. It's in the way she keeps going still, not here but at home, as if she wants to step outside time for a little while. Usually, in the summers, she can't stop doing something. He's been wondering if there was an incident at school.

Or maybe it's Brian. He wishes they'd met when they were older—Brian adores her; they could marry. He'd even look past the fact that Brian seems to have no interest in college or that his mother is nuts. This woman who, on their first meeting, slid across the booth, pressed her lips against his, then burst out crying in the middle of the restaurant, all their neighbors looking.

How old were they then? Lifetimes ago. The truth was that the woman he would go on to marry, Tess's mother, had set them up. She was working at a Korean community center that Roger visited some nights to have a meal, and she would tease him about how he was getting old and getting old alone was no fun. Mary had just arrived in New York, with a young child, and knew no one. All of them were in Jackson Heights, having come from someplace else, sleeping and waking up to the sounds of languages from corners of the world he had never even heard of—nothing like those advertisements in *Life* magazine at all. Some days, most days, better.

The dog's hind leg kicks, and her lips flap; she's dreaming. He looks out the window at the small, empty fenced-in run where there's real grass for the horses, not like the artificial turf they have on the other side for the dogs. Nineteen years, almost all of Tess's life. That's how long he's been working here at the airport, the same one he flew into when he himself came to America. As though he's forever arriving. He follows the ascent of an airplane, thinks briefly of Mary again, and the kiss, then opens the e-mail from Minnesota for what seems like the hundredth time.

It begins: *Dear Mr. Park, You don't know me, and it took me a long while to find you, but I thought you might be interested in this*

*photograph. . . .*

He almost didn't click on the attachment, a part of him worried that it was malware, but the sender mentioned his father's name. He looks across at the dog still dreaming, and then he clicks again on the attachment and there he is, his father, in uniform, beside the sender's father, a pale, blond white guy also in uniform, and they are somewhere in Korea, during the war. It could be a base, or it could be near a battlefield, who knows, but it's sometime before shrapnel will rip across his father's thigh, like a burning star, almost severing his leg.

But that's not what made Roger catch his breath—that his father is not yet wounded. It's that in the photograph, between the two young men, each on one knee, is what must be a military dog, wearing a vest, tongue out and grinning. His father's hand is on the dog's scruff, and his father, too, is grinning.

The photograph came yesterday. He hasn't told Tess. Unsure, truthfully, what he would say: My father hated animals, and hated that my job was to care for them, and hated that I left him to come here to New York, and hated just about everything, including the fact that he survived, but here's a photo that tells me otherwise, don't you think?

He wrote back to the sender this morning, wanting more information about the dog, but he has yet to hear from the man again. He spent an obscene amount of time trying to find information on working dogs during the Korean War. Maybe it was a joke—the photo, that is. Maybe the dog was a stray the soldiers found and dressed up to have some fun for an hour, to keep sane for an hour in the insanity they were living in.

What say you? he murmurs softly to the dog in front of him.

He likes to imagine their reunion, the translator and his dogs. Even after all these years, it never fails to move him, the greeting after a long time. Maybe, if Roger gets to meet the man, he'll mention the area where Tess wants to end up, near her college. He has been up there only once, the time he took Tess on her first day. He remembers getting lost after dropping her off, because he has never been good with directions, and he ended up crossing a bridge over the river and seeing the vastness of the valley. He was suddenly filled with a desire to keep driving back and forth over that bridge, to stay there, high above, forever.

In the moment that his in-box alerts him to a new message, he spots Tess outside, holding Ramsey's lead, the two of them in the paddock, and then Roger jumps up or—as though he, and not the dog, were the one lying on the bed—sees himself jumping up from his chair at the same time that Ramsey rears, his front hoof catching Tess's chin like a boxer's uppercut.

## Gwisin

The sister dreams of looking for her brother. Because she doesn't know where her brother is, and where she herself is, it is in her dream that she navigates this new place, unbothered. She trots past a room full of birds in their cages who call to her and tell her to hurry. Past a man wiping another dog's piss off the shiny floor. Past another man watching something on his phone and then past a small, narrow room with two cats in open cages who drop low to the ground as she eyes them.

In an empty, sunlit room, she enters a forest. She navigates the trees and the foliage into a clearing where her owner is sitting on a chair, watching television, and she hurries over, nudging him, and then gets distracted by the water bowl beside his feet, because she is so thirsty.

So the dog drinks and drinks, ignoring the horse approaching her and the sound of another airplane, this one pulling up to a gate, having touched down in the city where Brian's mother was born. Mary hasn't slept, because she was a little afraid to, not wanting to be there by the escalator again. And because somewhere beyond customs waits a girl who has a part of her ex-husband inside her, which means she has part of Brian, too, inside her.

Mary wishes she could see herself in a mirror before entering the terminal. It feels great to stand, even if the passengers are all bumping into one another, waiting to exit, the boy who slept almost the whole way beside her accidentally grabbing her hand and not his mother's. She imagines the two kids meeting one day, her ex-husband's daughter and their son, and she thinks, as she has done for days, of everything that could possibly be in the box, as though a small box like that could hold everything. As though he'd been the kind of man who would've saved something of hers, if in fact it is something of hers.

She sees him again, much younger this time: they're walking down a sidewalk in the city past the enormous building that will one day be a shopping mall, and they're shy with each other, physically, but can't seem to stop talking. There is a softness to him on that day that she has no idea will vanish, replaced by the violence of him striking her and striking her, but she remembers this: that they couldn't stop talking to each other in their first year.

She remembers this as the cabin door finally opens and the passengers begin to disembark, and as, thousands of miles away, back in New York, Tess decides that Ramsey needs some air and grazing time, and so she slips on the lead and takes him out of the Animal Center toward the paddock.

Tess wonders if she was in the wallpapered room too long. She's groggy. As if a ghost is pressing down on her head and another is

pulling on her waistband as she tries to walk forward with Ramsey behind her right shoulder.

She ignores the almost violent sway of his head because in that moment she cannot remember the Korean word, or many words, for “ghost.” To her surprise, this upsets her greatly. It becomes a pulse deep in her chest. And then it becomes an absence, as if she’s lost some part of herself, as if some part of her just fell out while she was walking. She reaches into her back pocket for her phone, wanting to call her mother, and then realizes she’s forgotten it in the room, and she begins to cry.

She opens the paddock gate, guides Ramsey in, undoes the lead, and cries, unaware that Ramsey, from the angle he’s standing, cannot see her—Tess has vanished from his sight—but he can hear her, can hear her upset, and it confuses and frightens him, and he rears.

It’s so fast Tess doesn’t feel it. When she opens her eyes, she is on the ground in the paddock, her father looming over her, blocking the sun, asking if she is all right. And she blinks. He asks again. She looks for Ramsey, who is licking his hoof, and she covers her stomach with her hands. She tastes some blood in her mouth and says, *Gwisin, gwisin, gwisin*.

## The Spot

A few minutes earlier, on the opposite side of the facility, Brian stands by a trash can in the hallway. On the top is the foil-wrapped sandwich he made this morning. He picks it up, holds it, and looks around. A co-worker rounds the corner with another dog and nods, saying that it is beautiful outside.

*It is* beautiful outside. Carrying the sandwich, Brian heads back to the suite he has been sitting in, where the food and water bowls

remain untouched. He tries the slip lead one more time over the dog. The dog steps back, head lowered.

If I put this on you, we can go outside, Brian says. He says the word “outside” again, more slowly, and he thinks the dog understands him; the dog steps forward into the loop of the lead, and they step out into a turfed area, entirely fenced, with a view of the pond, where there are no geese today, and, farther beyond the airport fence, the spot beside the public road where Tess often parks the car so that they can have a cigarette before going home.

He unleashes the dog, who makes a zigzag path across the turf, sniffing it, then follows the perimeter of the fence. Brian unwraps the untouched sandwich. He takes a bite. He says to the dog, I don’t know what her problem is, but this is delicious.

He pets the dog and tries to smile, but something has caught inside him that makes him uncertain about the rest of the day, as if everything has gone blurry, out of focus. He rubs the side of his face and tries again to remember his father. He remembers instead that there was an elevator repairman who sometimes worked in their apartment building in Jackson Heights and was kind to him, and he wonders where that man is now, and whether he’s still alive. He remembers the headlamp the man used to flash to make Brian smile before he vanished into the bowels of the shaft.

He remembers that the dog understood “outside.”

Before he is aware of what is happening, the dog’s mouth is over the sandwich, licking it at first, and then taking a bite. Brian laughs. It’s the first time the dog has eaten since he’s come here. There’s paprika in there, he says, so careful.

But the dog isn’t careful. He eats fast, tasting the paprika but not caring. He tastes farmland from the chickens who laid the eggs. He tastes foreign water and tinfoil and this man’s hands, which pressed

the sandwich down. It all tastes good, the food, and, as he eats, a part of him returns from the journey he has taken to wherever he is now. He smells cleaning chemicals and the fumes of airplanes and cologne, that bird carcass somewhere near the pond, and he eats the rest of the sandwich.

Then he sits beside this stranger who he has not yet decided is a friend and considers the way the young man stares out at a spot behind the pond with an expression that seems like anticipation or longing of some kind. As if it is the spot where this young man will find an answer to something he has been questioning, and the spot where at long last the dog will find his owner who has been waiting for him all this time.

The dog imagines leaving this unknown place, slipping past the fence, taking with him his sister, whom he can still hear, in a corner room in the building behind him, dreaming, the way he can hear birdsong and other dogs and a vacuum and horses and music from headphones and the notification sound of a computer and a man's faint shouting and a woman saying a word he doesn't recognize.

What he can't hear are the passengers waiting for their flights in the main terminals or the people getting ready for their shift at a restaurant in Jackson Heights or the cows on a farm in upstate New York or Mary's reaction when she opens a box and looks inside or the door to his old home crashing open and his owner, who worked as a translator for the Americans, being dragged out by three men who force him to lie face down on the dirt road as they shout that he's a traitor and then fire a rifle at the back of his head.

He cannot hear any of that. He fixates on the woman in the grass on the other side of the building saying that word again as she is helped up. He waits for her to say something else. He waits for his sister to wake. Staring out beyond the pond, from where a breeze is approaching, his belly full and this young man's heart beating loudly beside him, he waits for his name to be called. ♦

*Paul Yoon is the author of books including “[The Hive and the Honey](#),” for which he received the 2023-2024 Story Prize.*

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## Sovereignty for Sale

It goes way beyond tax havens and offshore banking. Enterprising countries have figured out how to put their legal systems at the disposal of corporate interests.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

October 21, 2024



*Between renting low-tax zones to international corporations and domain names to telecommunication companies, cagey nation-states act as full-service landlords.*

*Illustration by Max Guther*

In the past few years, a secretive consortium of technologists and investors has spent almost a billion dollars to purchase about ninety square miles of farmland on the eastern reaches of San Francisco Bay. The intention is to create a bespoke suburban oasis. In circles where the terraforming of Mars is a question of when rather than why, a planned community on the order of a Levittown or an Irvine ranks as a relatively modest ambition. The mythology of Silicon Valley originates with secession—in 1957, the “traitorous eight” left one semiconductor outfit to start a competitor—and the contemporary standard-bearer of this tradition is the venture

capitalist Balaji Srinivasan. In a pep talk delivered a decade ago to graduates of an élite startup incubator, Srinivasan condemned the Paper Belt, by which he meant the centralized institutions that enforce conformity and regulate individual initiative. It was up to these aspiring entrepreneurs to make the “ultimate exit”—to found not merely a firm but an “opt-in society, ultimately outside the U.S., run by technology.” Marc Andreessen, he added, was anticipating “an explosion of countries.” In 2022, Srinivasan assembled his thoughts in a viral manifesto called “The Network State,” in reference to a concept he defined as “a highly aligned online community with a capacity for collective action that crowdfunds territory around the world and eventually gains diplomatic recognition from preëxisting states.” The new kind of citizen might happen to reside in Tokyo or Los Angeles or São Paulo, but would live by the dictates of an operating system in the cloud.

Science-fiction writers had already conjured such a scenario. In Neal Stephenson’s novel [“Snow Crash,”](#) published in 1992, the fortunate live under the private sponsorship of corporate overlords, while the unlucky drift around the ocean on a violent gang-run pile called the Raft. The novel is commonly read as dystopian, but Srinivasan seems to have drawn from it a set of concrete policy recommendations. His vision is in line with that of the Valley’s anarcho-capitalist subculture, in which maximalist thought experiments in laissez-faire governance are taken seriously. His libertarianism, however, is qualified by the belief that societies can function properly only when their members are welded together by a shared commitment to a larger cause. The “Network State” ideology is an attempt to reconcile classical liberalism’s emphasis on individual freedom with a communitarian critique of liberal atomization. The best of all possible worlds, he suggests, would resemble a fruitful competition among loose, self-supervised tribes. If some of those tribal environments require a measure of authoritarianism to survive, that would be fine; the disaffected

could always log out in favor of a more congenial option. In Srinivasan's estimation, the fatal flaw of what passes for contemporary democracy is that you can no longer vote with your feet.

From a theoretical perspective, none of these notions are particularly novel. What sets Srinivasan apart is his faith in their newfound feasibility. This claim is warranted. In fact, the network state already exists.

The journalist Atossa Araxia Abrahamian's "[The Hidden Globe: How Wealth Hacks the World](#)" (Riverhead) is a vivid, revelatory, and politically unpredictable tour of this present-day network state, which she describes as an "invisible firmament that binds a most unlikely collection of places." The subjects of this commonwealth, like the digital nomads in one of Srinivasan's cloud civilizations, do not believe they are obligated to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. The invisible firmament is sustained not by the defiance of national sovereignty, as Srinivasan recommends, but by its clever manipulation. Since roughly the Second World War, Abrahamian writes, sovereignty has figured out ways to sell its perks on the international market. Today's governments are wont to leverage their commercial faculties, hawking "something as sweeping as laws and as petty as stamps; as primeval as land and as functional as a phone number." Enterprising states act as full-service landlords: they rent low-tax zones to international corporations, domain names to telecommunication companies, and jurisdictional largesse to the highest bidder.

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In the Middle Ages, poor, ill-resourced regions such as the Alpine canton of Schwyz could press their peasantry into mercenary armies and market coercion as a service. It wasn't long before provincial regimes expanded their inventory to include not only the enforcement of rules but the suspension of them. As Abrahamian points out, the lucrative promise of freewheeling enclaves—territorial carve-outs that provide for the special treatment of outsiders—predates the nation-state itself. The independent duchies of sixteenth-century Italy established free ports, which allowed slavers safe passage and relieved import duties for transiting merchants in need of temporary storage for perishable goods like grain. Two regimes existed in parallel: one for locals, the other for foreigners. Such dual-economy arrangements later allowed the great imperial powers to make their commitment to free exchange, and to a degree of pluralism, commensurable with their ongoing subjugation of native peoples. Colonial outposts like Singapore and Hong Kong flourished as cosmopolitan hubs, honorary extensions of the metropole into alien lands. The archetype of the Mos Eisley cantina was born.

This “legal hack” has been steadily expanded and refined by the process of abstraction. Shipments of grain and bars of gold have been replaced by more shadowy cargo. In the late nineteen-thirties, a Swiss-born shopkeeper on the remote island of Mauritius sent his son José Poncini to study in Lausanne, hoping he would learn about the watchmaking business. Poncini’s greater lesson was in decentralization—the distribution of a firm’s operations to a web of contractors. Mauritian women, a renewable source of cheap labor, might be trained to do the finicky work of drilling holes into jewels for luxury watches. (These jewels, legend has it, had the added

benefit of being small enough to enter the country as undeclared stowaways in a pilot's coat pocket.) The poor island's newly independent government, eager to provide a favorable environment for enterprise in return for a piece of the action, was enlisted as a co-conspirator.

Poncini opened his first factory in 1967, and his import-export strategy became a success. Abrahamian writes, “Thanks to a clever ruse enabled by arbitraging taxes and wages, not to mention the resourcefulness of local workers, the country was making money from nothing. It was exporting holes.” Mauritius went on to formalize the scheme, divvying up parcels of its territory as a forerunner to designated “special economic zones.” (Chinese firms later set up knitwear factories to slip the bonds of European import quotas.) The plan went swimmingly: the island saw economic growth at an annual average of seventy per cent for almost a decade, and eventually elbowed its way into the ranks of the upper-middle-income countries. The same process was already under way elsewhere, from the “fishing village” of Singapore to the “fishing village” of Shenzhen. (Abrahamian asks, “What is it with capitalists and their fishing villages?”)

The special economic zone, however, is only one particularly legible facet of a global system of commoditized sovereignty. Most of us are aware, in the wake of the Panama Papers and similar leaks, of the extent to which the assets of the wealthy are sluiced offshore into tax havens. Abrahamian, to her credit, has bigger fishing villages to fry. “The Hidden Globe” ranges far beyond obscured transactions and nested shell companies to much weirder patterns of jurisdictional flexibility. These domains are populated and furnished with “legal fictions”: diplomats who park on the sidewalks of one nation with the assurance that they technically dwell under the auspices of another, buildings that function as portals between the material plane and a more vaporous one. Abrahamian explains, for example, how a dodgy art dealer rebranded an existing Swiss free port as a warehouse—a

safeguarded, climate-controlled, secrecy-preserving bunker for the storage of works sold in the British Virgin Islands to firms registered in Cyprus. Once relieved of their status as objects, these paintings and sculptures behave as tokens of untraceable exchange among oligarchical speculators. Elsewhere, Abrahamian details how Dubai inaugurated a fully parallel legal system marketed as a “court-in-a-box” product: “Its laws came from elsewhere. So did its judges. And its plaintiffs. And its defendants. The result was a state within a state within a state.”

The portability of these extrajudicial contrivances extends to turf we hardly consider “places” at all. The “ultimate offshore location,” Abrahamian writes in her account of a recent gambit by the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, requires the conceptual extension of national sovereignty to vertical extremes: the country has established its own space agency, helping corporate entities interested in asteroid mining and the like. The Luxembourgeois, who enjoy the highest per-capita G.D.P. in the world, owe their wealth to such imaginative exercises in elastic sovereignty. They helped pioneer the financial-loophole industry, crafting legislation that largely disburdened holding companies of corporate taxes and allowed for complex currency transactions outside the purview of the national banks that issue them. This wasn’t the only way to create money out of thin air. In the nineteen-twenties, Luxembourg hired out its radio spectrum to licensed broadcasters; half a century later, it further deregulated its portion of the European skies in support of the Continent’s first private satellite television. Then, a few years ago, the country passed a “finders keepers” law, protecting the spoils of companies involved in extraterrestrial excavations. In the view of one government official, Luxembourg was extending to the heavens only the courtesies it had already granted to mundane financiers: the provision of a safe arena where they could work in tandem with a coöperative state.

The outer space of the future is thus poised to resemble the seas of today. Abrahamian’s most riveting excursus tells the story of a

Soviet vessel that was launched from a Finnish shipyard in 1975. Initially a Black Sea ferry, it was reconfigured, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, into a cruise ship. In the nineteen-nineties, the U.S. Navy hired the vessel to “interdict” Haitian refugees before they could reach the American mainland, and to function as a floating jail in international waters, although it never actually served this purpose. On the run from bewildered creditors, the ship was reregistered under the “flag of convenience” peddled by Liberia. The West African country’s congenially lax maritime code had been written by an American lawyer; its ship registry, which accounts for almost fifteen per cent of the global fleet, currently provides the largest source of national revenue. The ship was finally seized in Canada. As Abrahamian explains, the crew, stranded on board with neither entry visas nor money to travel home, “found themselves, absurdly, in a bizarro slice of Liberia, which meant absolutely nothing at all.”



*“Have you tried head-butting the problem?”*  
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

The metaphysical gamesmanship of fugitive corporate interests eventually coincided with the literal limbo of wartime refugees: in 2014, the vessel, now reregistered in Cyprus, saved hundreds of Syrian asylum seekers who had been abandoned by the captain of their distressed fishing trawler. It wasn’t until the ship’s final crossing, however, that it was fully reunited with reality. Helmed by a skeleton crew flying the “funeral flag” of Palau, which tailors

its own registry to evade the otherwise onerous environmental responsibilities of proper ship disposal, it arrived in Pakistan to be broken up by men who, Abrahamian writes, “could not have been paid more than a few dollars a day.”

The hidden globe runs on the exploitation of borders: as long as a country has them in theory, they can be arbitrarily redrawn in practice. Neither political extreme is happy about this. The right would like borders to be impregnable—sacrosanct indicators of where “we” end and “they” begin. The left might prefer we do away with borders entirely. Abrahamian doesn’t conceal her sympathy for the latter attitude, and she is unsparing in her judgment of a system in which profits accrue to global citizens while everyone else is condemned to their nearby slag heap.

Although the most powerful nations, including the U.S., have made intermittently successful efforts to stem the loss of tax revenue to offshore shelters, Abrahamian identifies these dynamics as the recrudescence of colonial extraction. Take, for example, the Pacific island of Nauru, which franchised out the harvest of its phosphate reserves to a series of fertilizer interests. Its citizens were briefly among the richest in the world—until their country was strip-mined beyond recognition. (“It was like being on the moon,” one visitor tells Abrahamian.) Its sole residual “utility” was, as Abrahamian puts it, “the fact of being a state, in this case to take in unwanted people.” Australia came up with a plan to build a migrant-detention facility there—an offer Nauru literally couldn’t refuse.

Abrahamian is, however, an honest and curious reporter, and her eye for systems makes her reluctant to assign blame in a simplistic way. The leaders of countries like Mauritius and Palau were, after all, willing traffickers in legal fictions. Abrahamian is alert to the poignant ironies at play when the leaders of an impoverished former colony recognize that their only real leverage abroad lies in their ability to compromise their power at home. Mauritius may have gambled with its national dowry, but its consideration for a destitute citizenry wasn’t merely notional. These decisions, rational

from the perspective of any single international actor, produced an unstable equilibrium. The mobility of capital insured an inexorable race to the bottom for labor and the environment; vulnerable nations have been left to absorb the costly externalities.

Abrahamian is careful to point out that there are plenty of instances in which legal exemptions served righteous purposes. During the Second World War, designated enclaves were proposed as a method to circumvent immigration restrictions on European Jews. A total of nine hundred and eighty-two refugees were relocated to a “special jurisdiction” in upstate New York called Fort Ontario—an “imperfect solution,” Abrahamian writes, that nonetheless should have been much more aggressively deployed. She is, in turn, willing to concede that private “charter cities,” which have generated great enthusiasm in Silicon Valley, pose an honorable challenge to “geopolitical orthodoxy.” Próspera, on the Honduran island of Roatán, is modelled on the concept Balaji Srinivasan has popularized. Although its current implementation seems underwhelming—a tropical setting, Abrahamian dryly notes, for “wellness retreats, cryptocurrency confabs, and a conference on experimental ways to achieve longevity (having solved the problem of taxes, the only thing left, apparently, is death)” —she won’t dismiss the idea out of hand. “Such a hybrid jurisdiction could represent a new kind of place,” she writes, “with new rules for all people: a temporary, or even a permanent, city of refuge.” The experiments that have achieved prosperity at scale—Shenzhen and Singapore—were hardly “fishing villages” improved by exogenous fiat but sites where economic and legal development followed the grooves of local initiatives.

Even the unsuccessful experiments have rarely represented acts of pure cynicism. One of the things that make “The Hidden Globe” more than a political jeremiad is Abrahamian’s interest in the actual people—the economists and management consultants—who designed the architecture of these liminal bailiwicks. Many of them, she shows, were well intended in their efforts to forge

alternatives to competitive nationalism, even if they didn't do much to shore up the sorts of institutions that argued on behalf of global solidarity. They entertained positive visions of coöperation and interdependence, and it wasn't always their fault if their plans were perverted by runaway feedback cycles.

These elements of the book feel personal, if guardedly so. The figures Abrahamian profiles frequently mirror her own preference for dislocation. Her parents, who grew up in Iran, are of Russian and Armenian extraction; she herself was born in Canada and raised in Geneva, speaks four languages, and holds three passports. The Geneva of her childhood—where everybody came from elsewhere, and the rules seemed up for grabs—made her uneasy: “As a teen, I watched the children of diplomats enjoying the functional immunity that came with their parents’ station by just walking away when the police caught them speeding or smoking pot after dark. Duty-free shopping was another perk; if you fall into a certain employment category as a foreigner, the world is your airport.” She reëvaluates this in retrospect, crediting the city with having instilled in her a sense of belonging among the rootless. Geneva’s environment was strange and unstable, but it shimmered with the chaotic energy of the places in between—peripheral realms where nativism is irrelevant and misfits flower.

What bothers Abrahamian, in the end, isn’t the anarchic but the unfair; if capital is free, people deserve the same respect. Popular leaders, entrapped by the hidden globe’s illusion of positive-sum special arrangements, aren’t much use. The British writer Dan Davies uses the term “accountability sink” to describe, for example, our experiences with airlines. When we get bumped from a flight in favor of a more profitable passenger, we can complain all we want to the gate agents, but they’re impotent by design. They don’t make the rules, and they can’t change them. They are present only as receptacles for our momentary indignation. Many governments have put themselves in the position of a gate agent.

Once they've sold their sovereignty for spare parts, their response to populist rage is inert nationalist bluster.

Abrahamian often returns to Geneva as the nexus of the book. It is a city evenly divided between those who prop up the internationalist institutions of humanitarian concern and those who brazenly flout them, where U.N. workers live cheek by jowl with clandestine bankers. How can a place be at once so cosmopolitan and so parochial? This is, for Abrahamian, a “microcosm” of our contemporary paradox. Her home town, she writes, “exemplifies how a haven for money and wealth and things can also be a haven for people and justice and order; how these forces are not mutually exclusive, but sometimes even sustain one another at the expense of the world that surrounds them.”

This last observation should come as something of a warning to Srinivasan as he dreams of a network state. One of his favorite aphorisms is: “The Internet increases variance.” What he means is that the Internet hosts the full spectrum of individual idiosyncrasy, thwarting any attempts to impose a narrow monoculture from above. Like Abrahamian, he is invigorated by the eclecticism of the entrepôt. Out of this variance, he predicts, new forms of communion will take root. These assortative alliances will be fully voluntarist—to be joined and abandoned as one pleases. The desire to defect out of self-interest, however, will be tempered by the spiritual kinship of an intentional community. In August, Srinivasan announced a new milestone for his project: he'd reserved an island near Singapore to convene interested parties for an introductory “network school.” Backward-looking people, he told his followers, need not apply: “The more respect you have for legacy institutions, and the more respect they have for you, the less suitable you'll be as an applicant.”

These legacy institutions, he maintains, have abused our confidence. They have tilted the playing field in their favor. Abrahamian would not disagree. The premise of the network state

is that technology can once and for all solve the outstanding problem of trust. Cryptocurrencies, to take one of Srinivasan's most cherished examples, run on public ledgers that cannot be violated or circumvented with impunity. Social harmony and collective action will be secured, he believes, by a computational mechanism. We will be liberated from our reliance on something as fragile as the cultivation of good faith. This is likely to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Srinivasan advertises his utopia under the auspices of "exit." Such a proposition is most attractive to those who prefer to stand aloof from the web of mutual obligation. Srinivasan's citizens will be bound to one another only by contract. If freedom is defined as the ability to afford the penalty of defection, they will be unfettered.

They will represent a community, in other words, in the same way that the hidden globe represents a community. One of the subtler themes of Abrahamian's book is her understanding of the hidden globe's denizens as not just wealthy individuals but parties to a tribe of elevated hunter-gatherers. They are united in their prerogatives. They don't want total lawlessness; they would like their property rights to be construed as broadly as possible, and they will pay for enforcement. But they share above all a willingness to pick up their ball and go home—wherever that happens to be at any given time. They have resources, leverage, and a kind of honor among thieves. They vote with their feet, as Srinivasan likes to say, and, if Cyprus isn't game, Palau will be. The beneficiaries are in London, anyway, and their kids are at boarding school in Switzerland. They are, in every sense of the term, duty-free. ♦



*Gideon Lewis-Kraus* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* covering technology, academia, and books, among other topics. He is the author of the memoir “[A Sense of Direction](#).”

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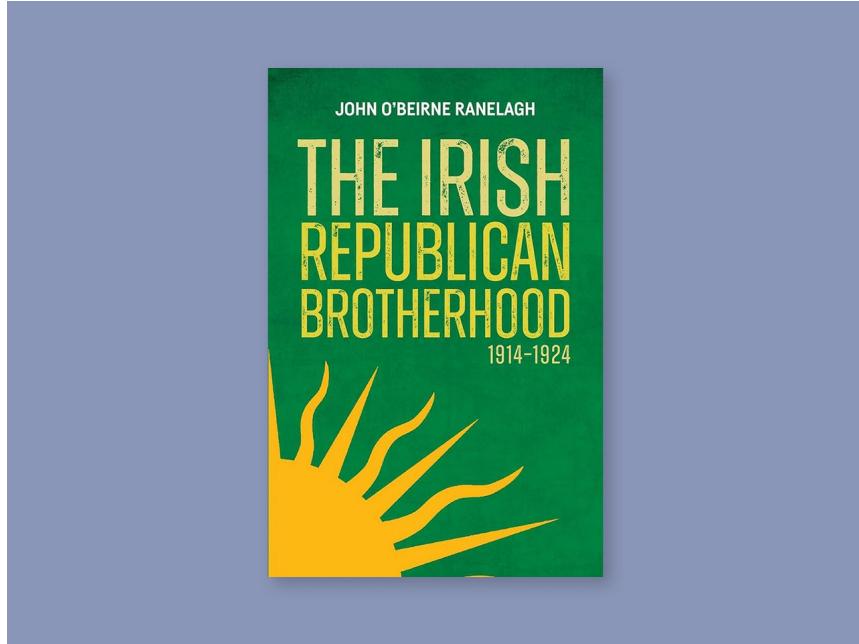
## Briefly Noted

“*Shakespeare’s Tragic Art*,” “*The Irish Republican Brotherhood 1914-1924*,” “*The Third Realm*,” and “*The Book of George*.”

October 21, 2024



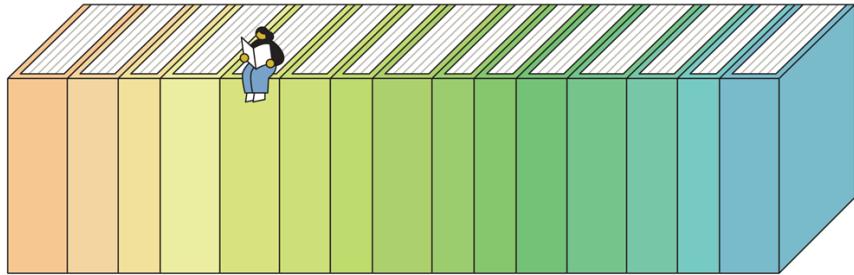
**Shakespeare’s Tragic Art**, by Rhodri Lewis (Princeton). This engaging study seeks to understand the “engine” driving Shakespeare’s tragedies, noting that no formal template binds “Hamlet” to, say, “Julius Caesar” or “Coriolanus.” Lewis finds common threads in the plays’ inner workings, most notably a delicate, calculated interplay between plot and personality. The tragic events that befall Shakespeare’s characters arise not from fate but from the characters’ feelings and thoughts—their delusions and the choices that those delusions lead them to make. Ultimately, Lewis writes, the aim of Shakespeare’s tragedies is not to moralize or to pronounce but to make audiences reflect on “human thought as an ineradicably emotional phenomenon.”



**The Irish Republican Brotherhood 1914-1924**, by *John O'Beirne Ranelagh* (Irish Academic Press). The Irish Republican Brotherhood, founded in the late nineteenth century, was a secret society devoted to the establishment—through violent rebellion—of an independent Ireland. Its members included prominent figures such as Michael Collins, who was also the director of intelligence for the I.R.A. This comprehensive history focusses on a tumultuous decade that comprised the Irish War of Independence, the wrangling over the treaty that partitioned Ireland, and the civil war fought between Irish republicans and the British-backed government of the newly created Irish Free State. Ranelagh offers an illuminating study of how the I.R.B. weighed revolutionary idealism against political realism—a negotiation whose compromises are still playing out in Ireland today.

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## What We're Reading



*Illustration by Rose Wong*

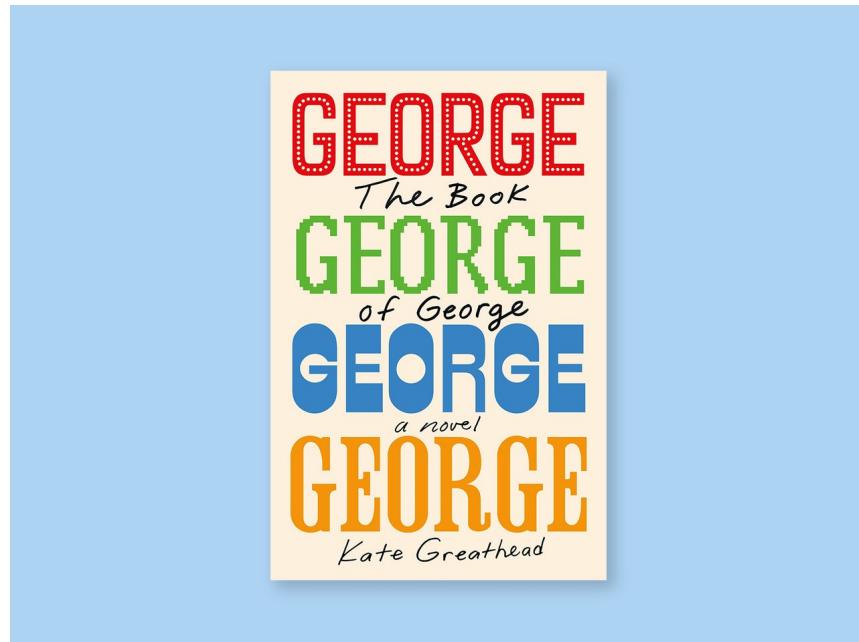
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**The Third Realm**, by Karl Ove Knausgaard, translated from the Norwegian by Martin Aitken (Penguin Press). This novel, part of an ongoing series, follows a loosely connected group of people as they navigate premonitions of doom that result from the sudden appearance of a bright new star. Despite suggestions of the supernatural (one subplot centers on a heavy-metal band implicated in human sacrifice), expectations of horror are not borne out. Instead, the book is full of the prosaic events for which its author is known. Protracted descriptions of drinking coffee or shopping at a grocery store are interspersed with philosophical musings about the

search for meaning, which, when mixed with the uncanny, become genuinely unsettling.



**The Book of George**, by *Kate Greathead* (Henry Holt). The protagonist of this comic novel is George, a millennial with vague writerly aspirations, who sustains his aimless life style by drawing on family connections and his girlfriend's trust fund. His kind impulses are hampered by a lack of self-awareness: the day a moving truck is scheduled to arrive at his mother's house, he unpacks her kitchenware to cook her an elaborate breakfast. As his girlfriend cleans his childhood bedroom while he plays with his old Game Boy, he says, "It's not right." The women in George's life, who bear the brunt of his self-absorption, confront him with his egotism in occasional moments of clarity—but whether they can cure him, this wry story suggests, is less clear.

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[Books](#)

# What Can Memoirs by Supreme Court Justices Teach Us?

We're primed to read Justices' accounts of their lives for clues to their jurisprudence. Should we?

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)

October 21, 2024



*“Lovely One,” by Ketanji Brown Jackson, belongs to a modern mini-genre of personal memoirs written by sitting Justices early in their terms.*

*Illustration by Josie Norton*

“Fools” is one of Neil Simon’s lesser plays. It involves a schoolmaster who, in some imaginary past, is sent to a Ukrainian

village whose residents are burdened with a curse of stupidity. The comedy is broad. But in the nineteen-eighties a member of the Miami Palmetto Senior High School speech-and-debate team performed an extract, complete with an Eastern European accent, to great effect. The South Florida high-school forensics circuit took note, and other students began using the same scene, but without the same comic skill or success. “It seems to me that you are not doing Neil Simon’s ‘Fools,’ ” a judge told one disappointed competitor. “You are doing Ketanji Brown doing Neil Simon’s ‘Fools.’ ”

Learning how to be, or become, Ketanji Brown Jackson was no mean feat, even at a forensics tournament. In her new memoir, “*Lovely One*” (Random House), Jackson, who joined the Supreme Court in 2022, writes that she was “fiercely” competitive. She skipped her high-school commencement to compete in the National Catholic Forensic League championships. “You will have other graduations,” her father said—the plural noun being a reflection of the family’s expectations. She won for Original Oratory, with a speech about valuing one’s time.

Along with the trophies came a realization that she was, one way or another, always on display. “I was learning to walk into rooms where hardly anyone else looked like me with my head held high,” Jackson writes, and, as she saw it, she was not in it only for her own sake. A family friend known as Ms. Kitty, who had grown up in segregated Birmingham and come along as a chaperon to a speech tournament at Ole Miss, became “more emotional than I had ever seen her” when Jackson took first place. “This is amazing. You are amazing,” Ms. Kitty told her, in tears. “I thought you were the best, and I was hoping that the judges would see that, too. And, by gosh, they did!”

## What We’re Reading

*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*



Jackson is the first Black woman—and only the third Black person, and the sixth woman—to sit on the Court, and in some ways her memoir could not be better timed. The coming election is sharpening the focus on the Court: the Justices may hear challenges to the results, and the next President may have vacancies to fill. Americans want to know Jackson better; around the time she was appointed to the Court, she realized that genealogists were scouring the records of county clerks in rural Georgia for details about her family. She decided to write her own story.

And yet the book presents a puzzle for the reader. It can't really be called a Supreme Court memoir. Although Jackson talks about the behind-the-scenes scrambling during her confirmation process, she doesn't share anything significant about her time on the Court itself. Given concerns about confidentiality and the need to get along with her colleagues-for-life, she can't exactly write a tell-all. There are no scenes of the Court's fight over Trump and immunity, despite Jackson's writing a dissent calling the majority opinion a "five-alarm fire" for democracy. The word "abortion" appears only once.

Some of her reserve is, no doubt, a lingering effect of her confirmation process. Prospective Justices' Senate hearings have become partisan spectator sports. They are exercises in entrapment punctuated by both petty cruelty and rapturous cheerleading—and, in Jackson's case, racist insinuation and Trumpist posturing. Republican senators intimated that she had, for example, intended to support terrorists when, as an assistant federal public defender, she represented Guantánamo detainees. She doesn't discuss those particular clients in her memoir. To explain why indigent

defendants have a right to a lawyer, she turns to *Gideon v. Wainwright*, which was decided in 1963, safely in the past. (She uses classic cases this way more than once.) Such elisions may be understandable, but the hearings are over. One wishes, for Jackson's sake as well as the reader's, that she could finally let her guard down. If the memoir isn't meant to reveal what's happening on the Court at a juncture when its legitimacy is being questioned, then what manner of book is this—a coming-of-age story, a D.C. career guide, a congressional thriller, or something else?

Jackson is not alone among Justices in telling her life story. There is a long tradition of memoirs, notably William O. Douglas's "Go East, Young Man," which is famously colorful and perhaps factually dubious, and his "The Court Years"; "The Memoirs of Earl Warren," published posthumously; Sandra Day O'Connor's "Lazy B," written with her brother, about growing up on a ranch in what they call "no country for sissies"; and John Paul Stevens's "The Making of a Justice: Reflections on My First 94 Years," whose subtitle bespeaks his optimism. There are also collections of speeches and interviews with a personal angle ("Scalia Speaks," "Felix Frankfurter Reminisces").

Those volumes vary in their frankness, but they all came out after or near the ends of their authors' careers, when there was less to risk or gain. "Lovely One" belongs to a modern mini-genre of personal memoirs written much earlier, by sitting Justices. Clarence Thomas pioneered the form, with "My Grandfather's Son," which appeared in 2007, sixteen years into his tenure—though the book ends with his swearing-in—followed by Sonia Sotomayor, with "My Beloved World," in 2013, four years into hers. The pace has picked up. Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett have books in the works, too. It is almost as if, along with the judicial robes and clerks, newly confirmed Justices are issued book contracts.

The advances alone may be the point. Thomas got a million and a half dollars. Sotomayor has built a franchise—with a younger-

readers version of her memoir, an audiobook read by Rita Moreno, and three picture books—that has earned her close to four million dollars. Barrett’s deal, worth a reported two million, was the subject of an open letter of protest, though only after she voted to overturn Roe. (Barrett’s book is said to be about keeping personal feelings out of judging.)

Jackson’s contract is not public, but she reported close to nine hundred thousand dollars in book income on her financial-disclosure forms for last year. (She collaborated on “Lovely One” with Rosemarie Robotham, a former editor at *Essence*.) The salary for an Associate Justice is about three hundred thousand dollars; there are caps on how much the Justices are allowed to earn for outside work, but book earnings are exempt.

The incentives might explain the slapdash quality of Neil Gorsuch’s 2019 book, “A Republic, if You Can Keep It,” which is a selection of his speeches, opinions, and public writings, padded with enough personal material to get it filed in a library’s autobiography section. It was, nonetheless, a best-seller. Gorsuch, like some other Justices—notably Stephen Breyer, whose books include “Reading the Constitution” (published in March)—has also written about policy. Gorsuch’s “Over Ruled,” which came out in August (and was co-written by Janie Nitze, one of his former clerks), is about his distaste for federal regulations—marketing material for fans of his ideological brand.

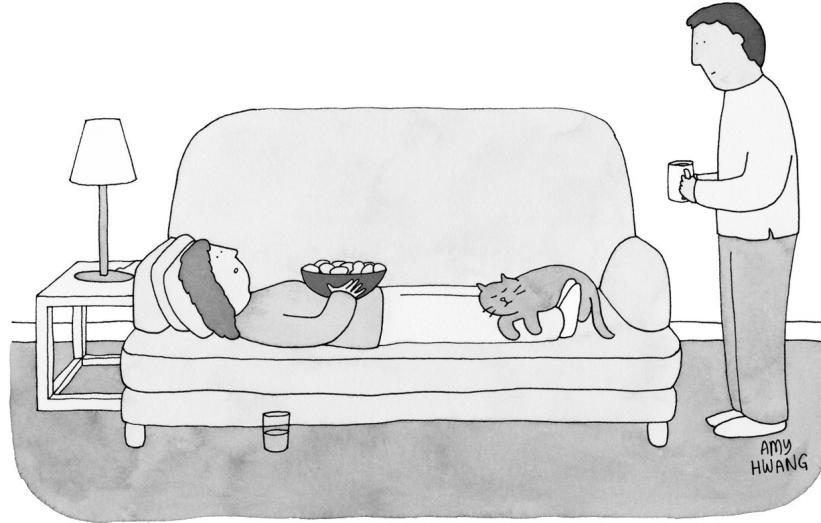
Thomas’s book is an exemplar of the genre confusion of the Supreme Court memoir: it is a revenge tragedy masquerading as a bildungsroman. Although it purports to be a tribute to his tough grandfather, who helped raise him, it is infused with anger over his confirmation hearings, at which Anita Hill, a law professor who once worked for him, accused him of sexual harassment. Thomas portrays himself as a man beset by “enemies” (i.e., liberals), and dismisses Hill as their instrument. He calls a chapter on the hearings “Invitation to a Lynching.” (One wonders what

Kavanaugh, who at his hearing parried a sexual-assault accusation dating to his high-school years, will call *his* chapter. Both Justices strongly denied the allegations.) A pivotal scene takes place with Thomas in a bathtub. The Senate is voting on his nomination, but he is too bitter about the hearings to come out and listen to the roll call. His wife, Virginia, comes in to say he's been confirmed: "Whoop-dee damn-doo," he replies, sinking back into "the comforting water."

One surprise, on reading "My Grandfather's Son" now, is how much it resembles J. D. Vance's "Hillbilly Elegy," another ambiguous memoir in which the author is rescued by a tough grandparent. (Also unexpected is the role, until he quit, in his thirties, of Thomas's heavy drinking; with some editing, and perhaps more honesty, the book could be a recovery memoir.) If one question about early-career Supreme Court memoirs is whether they can reveal a Justice's future trajectory, then Thomas partially delivers. He is resentful of women, especially those whom he regards as privileged, a harbinger of his opposition to reproductive rights. He is, by his own account, constantly short of money as a young lawyer, leading him to rely on colleagues, just as he would later turn to friends like the billionaire Harlan Crow. Then again, he's also nostalgic about his youthful affinity for Malcolm X. Treating a memoir as an encrypted judicial road map requires the extra key of hindsight. The most salient predictor of Thomas's votes on the Court may simply be that he was elevated by a Republican President, George H. W. Bush. But you don't need a memoir to know that.

Thomas, recalling the birth of his son, Jamal Adeen, in 1973, writes archly, if not ruefully, that "it had become fashionable for black parents to give their children African or Arabic names." Jackson, born in 1970, loves her name, Ketanji Onyika, which her family was told means "lovely one" in a West African dialect, and presents it as an example of how her parents "very intentionally instilled pride in our heritage, and faith in the future, in me."

Jackson's father, Johnny, a lawyer for the Miami-Dade school system, and her mother, Ellery, a teacher who became a high-school principal, extended that intentionality to her education. "Lovely One" is, in some ways, most of all a parenting book. Jackson writes that everything in her bedroom was labelled with alphabet and word cards, because her mother wanted her reading by the time she was two years old. There were also Wildlife Treasury cards, piano lessons, limits on television viewing, and a question for her if she ever hesitated: "Can this be done, Ketanji?" her mother would say. "Have you seen other people do it?" If the answer was yes, then she would be told, "Well, if it is possible for a person to do this thing, then you can do it, too."



*"It's impossible to relax knowing my time to relax will soon be over."*

Cartoon by Amy Hwang

In Jackson's telling, her family did not so much shield her from racism as give her a sense of her own strength. "Oh, honey, those people have nothing to do with your life," her grandmother told her after she was followed by wary salespeople in a store. "Guard your spirit, Ketanji," her mother said. Heeding their "beloved voices," Jackson writes, "I embraced all the places in my life where I could dwell in the light." She was the president of her majority-white high-school class, and, as she did everywhere, built enduring friendships. When she and three classmates got into Harvard early,

the Palmetto principal announced that fact over the P.A. system, and other students cheered. “We were all so happy for you,” she recalls a classmate telling her. “Nobody was jealous or resentful, and absolutely nobody was surprised by your achievement—because you are Ketanji!”

What keeps the book from veering into “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother” territory is the arrival of Jackson’s first child, her daughter Talia. Jackson had, as those around her expected, flourished at Harvard. (I was there at the same time.) During her sophomore year, she met Patrick Jackson—he is white, and their love story is a large part of the book—and went to Harvard Law as he attended Columbia’s medical school. She became pregnant while holding down a Supreme Court clerkship. But the Big Law position she took next was not amenable to mothers of young children. Patrick, though unstintingly supportive, had a demanding job, too. Jackson left her firm and embarked on what she calls “my odyssey as a professional vagabond.”

Jackson being Jackson, it was pretty high-level vagabondage—a federal public defender’s office, a boutique firm, the U.S. Sentencing Commission. She is transparent about the fact that a lot of paid caregivers were involved, especially once a second child, Leila, arrived.

But Talia, whose room, like Jackson’s, is festooned with Wildlife Treasury cards, had meltdowns in preschool, then seizures, and was eventually diagnosed as having autism. Being Talia’s mother, Jackson writes, meant changing her idea of what it meant to be a good parent. “The only script I had when it came to personal achievement was: No excuses; don’t allow doubts to overtake you,” she writes. Jackson remembers, with regret, exhorting Talia to finish her math homework, just as her mother once had:

“What do you mean?” I said, standing at her elbow. “Of course you can do it, Tal. You can do anything you set your

mind to.”

“No, I really can’t!” she sobbed, her little body crumpling.

In the end, the Jacksons embrace Talia’s neurodiversity. It may be too much to say that the experience has made Jackson a better Justice. But it makes her memoir more powerful than if it were just a success story. When the Biden White House informs Jackson that she is being considered for the Court, she and Patrick worry about the girls, particularly Talia, and leave the decision about whether to proceed up to them. “I really don’t mind the world knowing that I’m autistic,” Talia says. “So what? It’s just who I am.”

An intriguing part of reading various Supreme Court memoirs is seeing how parallel moments in Justices’ lives compare. There is a scene, in Sotomayor’s “My Beloved World,” in which word goes around Cardinal Spellman High School that Sonia has received a card from Princeton saying that she will likely be admitted. There is no P.A. announcement, as there was at Palmetto High. The school nurse, with a “baleful gaze,” calls her over and asks, “Can you explain to me how you got a ‘likely’ and the two top-ranking girls in the school only got a ‘possible’?”

Sotomayor’s memoir is a reminder that there may be fewer rules for how to end up on the Supreme Court than there are for Supreme Court memoirs. Her parents moved to the Bronx from Puerto Rico. Her mother was a practical nurse; her father, who died when she was nine, was an alcoholic factory worker. In “My Beloved World,” Sotomayor describes how, when she was given a diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes, at the age of seven (this was in 1962), she learned how to inject herself with insulin, because her mother worked long hours and her father’s hands shook too much. She was directed to the Ivy League not by her mother but by a Chinese American debate teammate who—in one of the New York-specific details that make her memoir enjoyable—“should have gone to

Bronx Science, but his mother made him come to Cardinal Spellman to keep an eye on his sister.”

Sotomayor, like the other judicial memoirists, exhibits a certain amount of discretion—her narrative essentially ends with her confirmation to her first judgeship, on a district court. But she is relatively open, both about her cases as a young prosecutor and her mistakes. And no one reading, for example, a passage in which she discusses, with great delicacy, how her diabetes influenced her decision not to have a child would be surprised by her withering questioning in the oral arguments, this spring, in *Moyle v. United States*, about an Idaho law that denied women access to abortion care in a medical emergency. (Sotomayor, like Thomas, married just before starting at Yale Law School. She was working as an Assistant District Attorney in New York when she got divorced; there’s not always a Patrick in the picture.)

These memoirs, though, also demonstrate the limits of biographical interpretation. Both Sotomayor and Thomas experienced material poverty and spent their early childhoods in homes where English was not the first language (it was Gullah in Thomas’s case), yet she, by many measures, is the most liberal current Justice, whereas he vies with Samuel Alito for the most conservative. Parallel lines can begin to zigzag once ideology is factored in.

The Justices’ views on affirmative action are an example of how much and how little one can learn from memoirs. Sotomayor, who graduated from Princeton summa cum laude, concludes in hers that she had nothing to apologize for with regard to how the policy may have helped her; Thomas, in his, presents race-conscious admissions as another malevolent plot by liberals to bring a person like him down, by adding a layer of doubt to his achievements. Last year, each rendered an opinion, in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* and a paired case, *S.F.F.A. v. University of North Carolina*, in line with those reflections: Thomas wrote a concurrence in the majority ruling that found racial preferences in

admissions unconstitutional, and Sotomayor wrote the main dissent. Jackson, in contrast, hardly mentions affirmative action in her memoir—and why should she have to?—although she notes the importance of having a critical mass of Black students at Harvard. But she didn’t hold back in a dissent she wrote in the U.N.C. case. (She recused herself in the Harvard decision.) Her dissent passionately defends the practice’s role in righting past wrongs and protecting “the dignity of those students for whom race matters.”

Jackson is, broadly speaking, a liberal Justice—and a fearless questioner in oral arguments—but the exact kind of liberal she will be is not yet obvious, perhaps not even to Jackson. (The same might be said, on the conservative side, of Barrett.) Memoirs can help with the guessing game, but only so much. The Justices are a tiny group whose selection is highly politicized and contingent. Some of their differences may be generational or regional. Others are a matter of character—it’s just who they are—or of differing capacities for joy. The day after she was confirmed, Jackson said, on the White House lawn, “We’ve made it—all of us!” It’s a far cry from Thomas’s whoop-dee damn-doo.

So what, then, are these books for? Justice Stevens, in his memoir, writes of his fondness for Sotomayor, whose first year on the Court overlapped with his final one, and his admiration for her outreach to the public, “including an appearance on *Sesame Street*.” (She settles a dispute between Baby Bear and Goldilocks.) One use of a shelf of Supreme Court memoirs is as a set of “*Sesame Street*” segments in written form, meant to humanize a mysterious profession whose practitioners have been turned into distant icons. More cynically, these books are celebrity autobiographies for a polity that has seen healthier days.

The Justices function as jumbo partisan chess pieces and have their images stamped on T-shirts. There is a dark side to their outsized power and visibility, including serious death threats. The transformation of confirmation hearings into public ordeals already

means that almost any contemporary Justice's memoir has room for a trauma plot. Jackson, although she is gracious and refrains from score-settling, makes it clear that her hearing was a wrenching slog.

In a conversation with Leila and Talia, Patrick asks them whether they are ready for “other people emotionally associating themselves with your mother,” in ways good and bad. “She will be stepping onto such a huge stage that other people will start to feel as if they ‘own’ her.” It was a wise talk to have, precisely because there clearly is something out of joint in the way we idolize or scorn various Justices—and in the Court itself. ♦



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**On and Off the Menu**

## The Unexpected Pleasures of a Dirty Soda

Fountain drinks spiked with syrups, creamers, and fruit purées became a sensation among Mormon mothers in Utah. Now they're finding fans across America.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

October 21, 2024



*For many in Utah, there's nothing unusual about pulling up to a drive-through as early as 7:30 A.M. to order a fizzy beverage as large as forty-four ounces.*  
*Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin*

The other day, while exploring Saratoga Springs, Utah, a small city between Provo and Salt Lake, I wandered into an outpost of Deseret Book, a chain of religious-goods stores run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Among rows of scriptural texts and other missionary essentials (neckties, journals, L.E.D. bike lights) was a display of graphic T-shirts, including one printed with a list of foods that Utah is known for: “Fry Sauce & Casseroles & Funeral Potatoes & Green Jello.” Fry sauce, I had recently learned, is a mixture of ketchup and mayo, and funeral potatoes are themselves a casserole, made with cheese and cornflakes and so named because they’re often served at community gatherings after someone dies, though you can also find them at restaurants. Jell-O—wholesome, shelf-stable, inexpensive enough to feed even the largest of families—is so beloved by Mormons that Utah and parts of the surrounding states have been nicknamed the Jell-O Belt. The lime flavor is the base of many a “green salad.”

The shirt had one glaring omission: dirty soda, a Utah phenomenon that’s become a national curiosity. If “funeral potatoes” makes for sorry marketing copy, Don Draper might have come up with “dirty soda,” which refers to a fountain drink—any of the name-brand heavy hitters—that’s been doctored with syrups, fruit purées, and creamers. Swig, a chain founded in 2010, coined and later trademarked the term. But, in the years since, an astonishing number of copycats—Thirst, FiiZ, Sodalicious, Quench It!, to name a few—have cropped up all over the state. You can even make a dirty soda at the gas station, where you’re likely to find a selection of syrups and creamers by the self-serve fountain.

For many in Utah, dirty soda is not just a regional specialty; it’s an organizing principle of everyday life. There’s nothing unusual about pulling up to a drive-through as early as 7:30 A.M. to order a fizzy beverage between twelve ounces (considered to be child-size) and forty-four (roughly equivalent to a Super Big Gulp, at 7-Eleven), plus a cup of warm pretzel bites or a sugar cookie. Soda features prominently in the new Hulu reality show “The Secret

*Lives of Mormon Wives*,” which follows the comings and goings of a group of TikTok-famous young women. In one episode, a cast member named Layla declares that she has at least one forty-four-ounce soda “six out of seven days of the week,” and orders a Swig drink known as a Bloody Wild (Mountain Dew spiked with mango and strawberry purées). In another scene, at a graduation party, the group enjoys a Thirst-catered soda bar complete with pebble ice, the soda-shop standard.

A daily soft drink is not uncommon for the average American, but for a practicing Mormon it may take on greater significance. In 1833, in Kirtland, Ohio, Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Latter-day Saints, considered by Mormons to be a prophet, received a revelation known as the Word of Wisdom, which proscribed tobacco, alcohol, and “hot drinks,” without further elaboration. Most Mormons do not drink coffee of any temperature, nor caffeinated tea, though herbal tea, hot or cold, is thought by many to be acceptable. Ruling out caffeinated soda might stand to reason, but according to an official church statement released in 2012—two years after Swig was founded—it is not prohibited. In the absence of coffee runs and barhopping, members of the Church have embraced souped-up soft drinks and novelty desserts such as Crumbl cookies, which also originated in Utah. “It’s not like when you go to Seattle and everyone has a morning cup of coffee, or Italy and everyone has a glass of wine with dinner,” Brooke Eliason, a food blogger and church member who grew up in Salt Lake City, told me. “And yet we still enjoy rituals and things that are fun.”

I arrived at the Swig in Saratoga Springs around 3 P.M., in the middle of the after-school rush. Outside, as a dozen or so cars waited their turn at the window, a small team of cheerful young employees were acting as an advance guard, approaching each vehicle to take orders. Inside, another group pulled and mixed drinks with impressive speed, while singing along loudly to Natasha Bedingfield’s “Unwritten.” Though there was a small

counter where, theoretically, a customer could order and pay on two feet, almost no one did, and there was minimal seating. “We’re really fitting into people’s busy days,” Alex Dunn, the company’s C.E.O., told me as we surveyed the scene. “This is not a destination. It’s a treat. It’s a break.”

Life in Utah involves a considerable amount of driving. It’s not unpleasant to spend hours in your car, surrounded by striking mountain ranges, but you might need a pick-me-up if you’ve got a gaggle of kids in the back seat. More than one person I spoke to identified mothers as a top market for the dirty-soda business, showing up in minivans on the way home from sports practice or getting together for midmorning drive-through dates. Swig’s founder, Nicole Tanner, a Mormon mother of five, made daily stops at Sonic for Diet Coke before she came up with the idea for a more exciting, customizable experience. Fourteen years later, Sonic’s menu includes a Dirty Dr Pepper.

In a back room, Dunn and several of his team members presented me with a sampling of best-sellers, including the Founder, Tanner’s signature concoction of Diet Coke with sugar-free coconut syrup, coconut cream, and a squeeze of fresh lime; the Happy Camper, made with root beer, toasted-marshmallow syrup, and half-and-half; and the Fresca-based Island Time, featuring passion-fruit syrup, mango purée, coconut cream, and a wedge of fresh orange—a favorite of the Mormon models and influencers Lucky Blue and Nara Smith. I’d been skeptical of the idea of adding something milky to a soda, but any doubt was washed away with my first sips. As with coffee or tea, the mellow lusciousness of the cream played off the acidity of Coke and Dr Pepper especially, offsetting and enhancing each soda’s darkest, spiciest notes. In the Founder, the combination of coconut and lime brought to mind a piña colada.

As outré, or even profane, as dirty soda might sound, there are plenty of precedents: ice-cream floats; Italian sodas; egg creams, which despite the name contain only seltzer, chocolate or vanilla

syrup, and milk. As it happens, you can find an egg cream in Salt Lake, at Feldman's, the city's single Jewish deli. Michael Feldman, a New Jersey native who opened it with his wife, told me that many of his customers are Jews (there are an estimated six thousand in Utah, a population that dates back to the nineteenth century), but he'd been surprised to find that at least half are Mormons. Though egg creams have not been a particular draw—he laughed off my suggestion to rebrand them as Jewish dirty sodas—some church members, he said, become adventurous eaters after seeing the world on missions. "If you asked a Mormon, 'When you travel, what food do you miss?,' there wouldn't be much," Feldman surmised.

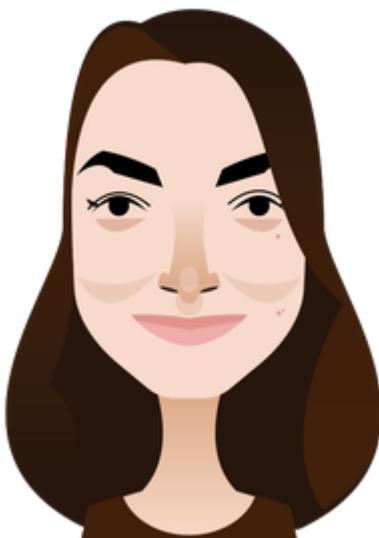
As a concept, dirty soda might prove to be the state's most successful culinary export. Swig is growing rapidly, with eighty locations in nine states. In Millcreek, Utah, I met Ethan Cisneros, the bushy-tailed twenty-seven-year-old co-founder of Thirst, a chain that will open its seventh location this month, in the Salt Lake City airport. On his phone, Cisneros showed me a new product called Bevfix: shelf-stable packets containing a mix of syrup and creamer, to turn any soda dirty, on the go. (Coffee Mate released a similar product, a coconut-and-lime-flavored creamer promising the "ultimate dirty soda sensation.") Earlier this year, the trend reached New York: Manhattan is now home to two locations of Cool Sips, which offers drinks, such as the Montauk (Dr Pepper, mint, and vanilla cream), that max out at a chaste twenty-four ounces.

Soda, of course, can also be a vice. New Yorkers will recall Bloomberg's short-lived attempt to restrict it. "You can see that lady is literally finishing her other forty-four," Cisneros said, laughing, as he watched a customer pull into his drive-through to get her next fix. As a parting gift, he gave me a Thirst tumbler: a neon-orange, forty-ounce facsimile of a Stanley cup, the enormous insulated mug whose explosive nationwide popularity originated with Mormon moms. I was reluctant to fill it with soda, especially

after I had learned the hard way that Dr Pepper, a top seller in Utah, is caffeinated: my after-dinner Dr Spice—a Swig seasonal special featuring cinnamon and coconut syrups, half-and-half, and a cinnamon stick—left me so wired that I lost a night of sleep.

“It totally can get out of hand—I have been addicted to Diet Coke!” Eliason, the food influencer, told me. “Our current prophet has talked a lot about addiction. You can go to the temple if you drink energy drinks, and Diet Coke, but we have been asked to not be over the top.” I wondered about the growing market for non-alcoholic imitations of drinks like Negronis and I.P.A.s. Had they taken off among Mormons, too? Eliason said that, in her experience, they hadn’t, citing a verse from First Thessalonians —“abstain from all appearance of evil.”

A server at Oquirrh, a Salt Lake restaurant with a full bar where I ate dinner one night, told me that he was somewhat surprised that zero-proof substitutes aren’t more popular with church members. “But nobody wants to pay fourteen dollars,” he said, “and if you don’t know cocktails it’s kind of, like, ‘This is a weird-tasting drink.’” ♦



*Hannah Goldfield*, a staff writer covering restaurants and food culture, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her *Profile of the chef Kwame Onwuachi*.

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[The Art World](#)

## The City Where Paint Became Art

The Met's new exhibition on Siena—the first of its kind in America—shows how the possibilities of strange, colorful ooze sparked the Renaissance.

By [Jackson Arn](#)

October 16, 2024



*"The Raising of Lazarus"* (1310-11), by Duccio di Buoninsegna.  
Art work by Duccio di Buoninsegna / Courtesy Kimbell Art Museum

Chop down a poplar tree. Other kinds of wood could work, too, but poplar is an especially soft one, and your task is to trim it into thin planes. These you'll need to coat in a barrier of plaster and animal glue—naked wood is highly absorbent, and you can't have it drinking down everything you put on it. Wait until the barrier has dried. Sand. Repeat until you have a perfectly smooth surface. Sketch your preferred silhouettes with a stick of charcoal, slather the negative space in a gluey reddish mixture, cover that in

translucent gold leaf (glueless, the metal has a queasy green tinge), and burnish *that* with a wolf's tooth. Now, and only now, you may pick up your brush.

The Met's new show about what happens next, "Siena: The Rise of Painting, 1300-1350," makes clear how astonishing it is that paint, of all things, became the center of Western art. Gold was prettier. Wood was tougher. Textile and ivory, both well represented here, travelled from city to city more freely. Nobody ever looked at an egg yolk, the signature ingredient in tempera, and thought "sublime," let alone "enduring," but here we are, seven centuries later. There may never be another big American exhibition about this freakish little era, when artists figured out how to make colorful ooze do their bidding.

My advice, besides "Go," is "Take nothing for granted." We can't feel the full trecento shock of axial perspective anymore, but even the most familiar parts of these images still land with a slap. That's the power of Duccio di Buoninsegna, the most famous painter here as well as the most influential, having likely employed some or all of the other big ones, Simone Martini and the brothers Pietro and Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Notice, in a tempera-on-panel Crucifixion (ca. 1311-18), how much he does with ordinary, earthly gravity: the same force that tugs Jesus' blood to the base of the Cross makes the figures on either side lurch and keel. Later Renaissance masters were savvier about how gravity works on the human body, but no one was better at painting the harsh, mindless pull of it, or hinting at the secret exertions in the act of standing. To the lower left, a crowd of women holds the staggering Mary the way she wants to hold her son. One of them manages to bend her face into a consoling smile that might as well be a Munch scream. Almost smiling and almost standing—the deepest emotions in the simplest things, slightly askew, in broad daylight. The Sienese understood grief.

They understood triumph, too, at least for a while. Around the time that paint was busy outclassing its peers, Siena was attempting much the same, with iffier results. Florence, its Tuscan archrival, had a river and better natural resources, and won a crucial military victory in 1269. Siena's secret weapon was its location along the Via Francigena, the pilgrimage route that links Rome to Canterbury. Islamic rugs and French carvings and Scholastic learnings flowed in, leaving behind a style of decorative excess and frank mysticism. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, painting became one of the city's key exports. Duccio was commissioned to paint an altarpiece at the Santa Maria Novella in—rivalry be damned—Florence. Pietro swept his brush all over Assisi, Cortona, and Arezzo, and Simone was summoned to the papal court in Avignon. Then the Almighty played one of his nasty tricks. In the thirteen-forties, Simone died (Duccio was long gone by then) and the Black Death tore through Siena. By the time it subsided, both Lorenzetti brothers were dead, too. So was half of the city.



*“The Crucifixion; the Redeemer with Angels; Saint Nicholas; Saint Clement”* (ca. 1311-18), by Duccio.

Art work by Duccio Di Buoninsegna / Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The disgraces were only beginning. While Siena recovered, Florence came into its own, artistically and politically, meaning

that it got to write all the history books, not just paint all the pictures. In his “Lives of the Artists” (1550), Giorgio Vasari insisted that Duccio’s Santa Maria Novella commission was the handiwork of Cimabue, who just so happened to be Florentine. (Vasari did praise Ambrogio and Pietro, though he failed to notice that they were brothers.) With realism booming, it was easy to dismiss the Sienese school as a doorway, not a destination. In the late nineteenth century, when changing tastes made the early Renaissance newly chic, critics teased even when they praised: the British writer Vernon Lee thought Sienese painting had exquisite charm, though it was “the charm of the backwater,” its “loveliness of colour” rooted in innate “childishnesses.” Throw in the difficulty of transporting frescoes and the curatorial nightmare of haggling with Italian municipal and Catholic bureaucracies, and you begin to see why no American museum had hosted, until this month, a major show on the subject.

Now that ninety-five works are installed in Manhattan, here are some things that the Sienese painted as inventively as anyone, before or since: angels (galactic errand boys without a trace of cuteness), silhouettes (note the architectural swoop of Mary’s body in various Annunciations), earth (sometimes brittle, sometimes lushly squished), and smallness (some of the finest sights on display are under a foot tall and sparingly lit, but seem big and bright). Many artists in this show are great with buildings, but Pietro gets the top prize for scenes such as “Christ Before Pilate,” in which arches and pillars circle Jesus like starved hyenas. Elsewhere, you find whole cities. The pretty toy-shop ones in “The Temptation of Christ on the Mountain” invite thoughts of people trudging through their days, unaware that at any second they could be stomped by the gigantic Devil above. Siena got dramatic irony right, too.

That panel, along with several others here, comes from the Maestà, an altarpiece whose dozens of small scenes were pried loose and scattered through collections, or lost. It was painted by Duccio,

although he must have had help from a pack of technicians, and this show worries the distinction between one kind of artist and the other. We seem to prefer our Old Masters full-throated and free-spirited, making a personal vision public or smuggling one in under the Pope's nose. The handful of facts about Duccio that survive (that he was punished for failing to pay taxes, or that he may have been accused of witchcraft) make him sound like this kind of fiery ur-bohemian. In his art, however, Duccio seems most himself when he's subdued, finding odd pockets of wiggle room in Christian iconography. That's why it matters to see parts of the *Maestà* reunited, and to see a full exhibition of variations on the same half-dozen scenes: you become attuned to the games of inches the artists are playing with one another. Ambrogio's Crucifixion, from 1345 or so, has any number of motifs in common with Duccio's version, but he takes the idea of a broken, unbalanced Mary and pushes further, all the way down to the dirt, while keeping the mood so hushed it's almost unbearable. Subdued does not mean sedate.



*“Madonna del Latte” (ca. 1325), by Ambrogio Lorenzetti.  
Art work by Ambrogio Lorenzetti / Picture Art Collection / Alamy*

Centuries of anti-Sienese bias have failed to hide the fact that Ambrogio deserves to be many times more famous. His “Madonna

del Latte,” from about 1325, has no idea that it is attempting the impossible, and thereby succeeds. The infant in Mary’s arms looks both heavy and lighter than air; his plump left leg reacts with flowy pink cloth to create movement that is also a palpable sag. That’s just Christ, though: deity and man, weightless word converted to meat. Other, similar paradoxes make for a painting of hypnotic weirdness. Are we looking at perfection or sin? A stately or a casual scene? The child’s greedy lips suck the mother’s nipple while one eye stares straight out and commands us to worship. Later, self-consciously naturalistic painters would work hard to resolve these kinds of tensions, which run through figurative art and Christianity both. But I love how little the Sienese artists bother with smoothing things out, how they wallow in contradiction. Vernon Lee was not wrong to see something childish in this sort of painting; it’s just that childishness, with its total indifference to either-or choices, might be the most sophisticated thing about it.

Here is something that the Sienese school did not always handle well: the human face. The problem comes down to another tension in the paintings—are we looking at detailed, individuated moments or timeless, archetypal scenes? The answer, as ever, is a little of both. A Sienese Crucifixion gives you a shudder of familiarity as you meet the forms you already know, followed by the panged surprise of a shrub or a fluttering robe. The two-pronged approach doesn’t really work with faces, probably because there is no such thing as a timeless, archetypal face. And yet Sienese painters can’t always get theirs to look powerfully specific, either—with few exceptions, you tend to feel emotions radiating from bodies or hands or clothing more intensely than from eyes or mouths. It’s a lack but not necessarily a flaw. Considering how it might have driven Duccio and his followers to compensate with expressive bursts of line and color, you could even spin it as a virtue, if you were so inclined.

The last work in this show, Simone’s “Christ Discovered in the Temple” (1342), inclines me. The painting’s three faces have none

of the usual Sienese gawkiness. Joseph glares at his tween-age son, reunited with his family after a few solo days in Jerusalem (“Your mother was sick with worry!”); Mary tries to hide her pain; and the Saviour himself scowls like a brat who’s stayed out past curfew. It’s extraordinary, without a doubt, but it made me miss the earthier charms of its predecessors. As the wall text suggests, the image’s suave vividness “signals a new age of independent painting in Western art,” but also the end of a different era, when austerity and exuberance briefly declared a truce. I almost felt like Marlene Dietrich, who, the story goes, reached the supposedly happy ending of Jean Cocteau’s “*La Belle et la Bête*,” took a look at the prince’s transformed face, and cried, “Where is my beautiful beast?” ♦



*Jackson Arn*, a staff writer, is *The New Yorker's* art critic.

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[Pop Music](#)

## The Decline of the Working Musician

You used to be able to make a living playing in a band. A new book, “Band People,” charts how that changed.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

October 21, 2024

*“Musicians,” the author Franz Nicolay argues, “were the canaries in the coal mine of the precariat.”*

*Illustration by Rob en Robin*

Before the gig economy consumed a third of the workforce, it was mostly musicians who worried about gigs. There are debates about the origins of the word—some believe it derives from an eighteenth-century term for horse-drawn carriages that may have doubled as stages for performers, while others contend that it was adapted from a Baroque dance called the gigue. But the “gig,” as shorthand for a casual, one-off paid performance, entered the popular lexicon during the Jazz Age of the nineteen-twenties and thirties. There was a mystique to the gigging musician wandering the big city in search of work, because this work was creative, improvisational, at times transcendent.

Young people who came of age before the twenty-first century, Franz Nicolay argues in a new book called “Band People: Life and Work in Popular Music,” could be forgiven for assuming that working one’s way up from gigs to a steady job in music was a plausible career path. You might not make it as a chart-topping star, but there were still opportunities for “band people”—the “hired guns” or “side-of-the-stagers” who offered structure and support. Music was everywhere, and there had to be people to play it. Nicolay’s book details the lives of working musicians, especially those far from the spotlight: background vocalists hired for uncredited recording sessions, rhythm guitarists playing on

freelance contracts. Not that the spotlight in question shines all that brightly to begin with; most of the dozens of artists Nicolay spoke to work in commercially tenuous realms, such as indie rock or punk, in which a band like Sonic Youth represents the imagination's zenith.

But anyone who has streamed a song on their phone for free can sense that something has changed. “Musicians,” Nicolay argues, “were the canaries in the coal mine of the precariat”—the original freelancers making do. “Band People” might be one of the least bacchanalian books ever published about the rock-and-roll life style, but also one of the most honest. It’s a collection of stories about how musicians who have made contributions to songs beloved by millions, and who have played alongside David Bowie or Madonna, simply get by.

Nicolay understands the industry’s highs and lows, having been a member of the Hold Steady, a rock band known for its elaborate storytelling, and of the carnivalesque punk band the World/Inferno Friendship Society. In 2016, he published “The Humorless Ladies of Border Control,” a funny and sharply observed account of touring in Eastern Europe. He is particularly lively when discussing the alchemy of bands in his own terms. “Every band is a foreign country,” he writes, “with its peculiar customs and dialects, slang and standards. But every band is also (when it works) a small business, a romance, an employer/employee dynamic, a hierarchy, a creative collaboration, and something between a family—siblings or cousins, sometimes literally—and a gang.”

Nicolay makes these gangs sound like a lot of fun, while also demystifying them. Some band people prefer hierarchy and assertive decision-makers; others aspire to a more chaotic kind of democracy. Some envy the star; others feel sorry for him. Jon Rauhouse, a musician who tours with the singer Neko Case, is glad not to be the one that interviewers want to speak with—he’s free to “go to the zoo and pet kangaroos.” Band people are often asked to

interpret cryptic directives in the studio. The multi-instrumentalist Joey Burns recalls one singer who, in lieu of instructions, would tell him stories about the music—he might be told to imagine a song they were working on as “a cloud in the shape of an elephant, and it’s trying to squeeze through a keyhole to get into this room.”

Many musicians prefer the “emotional life” of the band to be familial, rather than seeing their bandmates as “a handful of co-workers.” And despite the collective dream that brings artists together, the critic and theorist Simon Frith argues, “the rock profession is based on a highly individualistic, competitive approach to music, an approach rooted in ambition and free enterprise,” which feeds perfectly into a quintessentially American zero-to-hero dream. This, Nicolay suggests, is what makes the prospect of, say, “a hypothetical union,” which might negotiate fees with a club on behalf of musicians, unimaginable.

“The idea that openly discussing money is coded as ‘uncool’ is one of the tells of economic privilege,” he writes, “especially in indie rock.” (He leaves open the possibility that these dynamics may differ in spheres outside his expertise, including hip-hop.) But some of the musicians Nicolay interviewed seem hopeful that they might defer the discussion altogether. “I was afraid of maybe not enjoying drumming or music as much if I monetized it,” Ara Babajian, who has played with Leftöver Crack and the Slackers, admits. But there’s a deeper issue around how songs function as commodities. “The original sin of song copyright in America is that it wasn’t set up for a context of collective creativity,” Nicolay writes. Songwriting credits are often split between lyrics and music. Drummers, for example, traditionally have a much harder time getting credit for their contributions, because the cultural and legal framework for pop music values melody and harmony over rhythm. Nicolay notes, “Credits on a song that remains popular even as an act breaks up or retires is as close to a 401(k) as a band person is likely to get.”

The book is unusual for the music genre in that it doesn't compel you to seek out the songs of all the people Nicolay spoke to. But you come away wishing that they could all succeed, at least on their own terms. Some of the musicians have mixed feelings about their chosen careers. "It depends on the day," Babajian tells Nicolay. "Today I feel like a tired old whore. Some days I feel like a god. Most of the time I feel like an ambitious T-shirt salesman with entitlement issues."

Except for a few afternoons in my late teens and twenties, hunched over guitars and samplers, I've never really played in a band. This makes me precisely the type of person who has glamorous assumptions about what it must be like to be in one. Working as a journalist, with occasional glimpses into life on the road, in the studio, or backstage, has done little to disabuse me of my fascination. Even the boring parts—watching people kill time, waiting around to play or for inspiration to strike—seem freighted with possibility. The fact that people make music together has always appeared to be proof that community is possible. Reading "Band People," I was struck by the amount of work required simply to stay collegial with one another—the division of labor, the sheathing of ego, the grace.

Nicolay, who is in his late forties, acknowledges that these are all rather "bloodless and unromantic" approaches to thinking about rock—an art form that remains synonymous with a kind of excess even though it has surrendered its status as the lingua franca of youthful rebellion. He identifies what he sees as the "apparent prudishness of younger musicians." Where rock music once rationalized devilish behavior, he writes, "a generation raised on new language about sexual propriety and fearful of online public shaming for off-the-clock behavior" is more cautious than debauched. There's a hint of judgment there. But the pragmatism of young artists could be, in part, the product of growing up in uncertain times, with a hollowed-out and faddish music industry, which forces them to shoulder more responsibility for their careers,

from the logistics of booking their own shows to the consequences of their bad behavior.

Many of Nicolay's interviews took place in the mid-twenty-tens, and, although the musicians he spoke to are honest about the particularities of their situations, they seem to have had little sense of the changes still to come: the complete domination of Spotify and the shrinking of streaming royalties, the pressures of social media and its near-constant demands for engagement. There's still money in music today, at least at the very top. Spotify reported its most profitable quarter ever this summer, Taylor Swift is winding down the highest-grossing concert tour in history, and, in the past few years, superstar artists have found new revenue by selling the rights to their music. Hipgnosis Songs Fund, a company based in the U.K., made news for paying hundreds of millions of dollars for the back catalogues of Justin Bieber and Shakira, among others.

But, for those just starting out, the opportunities for a sustainable career—for joining Nicolay's “musical middle class”—appear to be vanishing. There's probably never been a better time to share a song you've made, and yet it's harder than ever to get paid for it. A stream on Spotify nets a performer about a fraction of a penny—and those royalties accrue only if a song meets a minimum threshold of a thousand streams in the previous twelve months. Last year, it was estimated that about two-thirds of the songs on Spotify would not reach that threshold. For some, access to the world's listeners is a worthwhile trade-off. Music can remain a cherished hobby; you can't sully a passion with money when there is none to be made.

And yet the dream of leaving gig work behind for long-term work still appeals to many. One of my favorite albums of the year so far is “Mucho Mistrust,” by Fake Fruit, an Oakland band that always seems to be hurrying through its twitchy, shambolic songs. Its singer, Hannah D'Amato, has spoken of managing her band during breaks from her day job as a nanny. One moment, in the band's

songs, she is brash and unfazed, stridently commanding the punk chaos; seconds later, she surrenders to the harsh swells around her, angling her voice into a scream or a yodel. She sounds as though she's been conditioned to prepare for anything. "My well of patience has run dry / Don't even try to ask me why," she sings coolly, the sources of her distress too numerous to name. Instead, she turns the blame inward, a common response to losing at a game that's rigged. "The fault is no one else's but mine / Don't think I haven't tried," she continues, repeating the last word seventeen more times, until it sounds futile. ♦



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# Poems

- **[“As We Made Him”](#)**

By Elizabeth Metzger | “It’s his fourth birthday again in the land of forgetting.”

- **[“Meaning of the Word ‘Never’ ”](#)**

By Deborah Garrison | “My childhood room, / hippie flowered spread folded down / at the single pillow.”

[Poems](#)

## As We Made Him

By [Elizabeth Metzger](#)

October 21, 2024

It's his fourth birthday again in the land of forgetting.  
Humongous balloons sway and pop in the wind.  
The trick candles pop and sway as I pass them in front of his  
breath.  
I have such a sweet tooth for family I deny he is missing.  
Regression means he is closer to where we made him.

Thin mist from his first night home from the hospital still haunts  
us.

Sometimes I sleep in the position I was in when we made him.  
French-blue curtains in the guesthouse lit our skin blue.  
Sometimes I hang off the bed for an hour after,  
longing to return to his birth or before we made him.

It's his fourth birthday and the candles trick us again.  
A few balloons re-inflate from their shiny torn skins. Impossible.  
The mist hides nothing, leaves us. Ordinary sky closes in.  
I am so afraid I'll leave then haunt my family, I kiss and kiss them.  
If he were to forget us, would we still be the ones who made him?

*This is drawn from “The Going Is Forever.”*

[Elizabeth Metzger](#) is the author of “[Lying In](#)” and “[The Spirit Papers](#).” She is a poetry editor at the [Los Angeles Review of Books](#).

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[Poems](#)

## Meaning of the Word “Never”

By [Deborah Garrison](#)

October 21, 2024

My childhood room,  
hippie flowered spread folded down  
at the single pillow,  
wood dresser with battered corners  
breathing out  
scents of other rooms;  
owlish bedside clock whose  
trusting face met mine  
as it shirred the seconds; fearsome  
length of the closet, holding  
silence, its sliding panels  
overlapping slightly,  
like sisters, and brother window  
at whose sill I pressed my case on stars  
in the night’s steep middle.

Then the wee hours  
awake in bed,  
rocking and meditating,  
strangely blissful loneliness  
and insomnia, the sound of my own  
humming and the house ticking,  
the first tears after  
the first death—

# I'll never go back there.

*Deborah Garrison* is the author of the poetry collections “*A Working Girl Can’t Win*” and “*The Second Child*.”

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# Cartoons

- **[Cartoon Caption Contest](#)**

Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.

- **[Cartoons from the Issue](#)**

Drawings from the October 28, 2024, magazine.

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# Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Monday, October 21, 2024](#)**

By Rebecca Goldstein and Adam Wagner | Today's theme: World food bank.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Monday, October 21, 2024

*Today's theme: World food bank.*

By [Rebecca Goldstein](#) and [Adam Wagner](#)

October 21, 2024

*Rebecca Goldstein* is a scientist and a crossword constructor in the Bay Area.

*Adam Wagner* is a creative lead at Patreon, as well as a keeper of about twenty thousand honeybees.

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