

PRICE \$8.99

THE

# NEW YORKER

SEPT. 16, 2024



Ulriksen

# The New Yorker Magazine

[September 16, 2024]

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

## Goings On

- **Basil Twist’s “Dogugaeshi,” and More Exhilarating Theatre from Abroad**

Also: The intuitive rap of Mavi, New York City Ballet’s new season, Jackson Arn’s top Prospect Heights spots, and more.

- **Teen-Age Alienation, on Display**

By Naomi Fry | In the nineteen-eighties, Andrea Modica took photos of the students at her Catholic alma mater. “I recognized something there that I had to deal with about my time in high school—something both horrible and wonderful,” she said.

[Goings On](#)

## Basil Twist's "Dogugaeshi," and More Exhilarating Theatre from Abroad

*Also: The intuitive rap of Mavi, New York City Ballet's new season, Jackson Arn's top Prospect Heights spots, and more.*

September 6, 2024

**Helen Shaw**

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.***

**Catching the fleeting** international theatre offerings in New York can be like chasing after fireflies—the minute someone points out some wonderful work, the brief engagement is already dark and gone. These are the shows *most* worth the hunt, though; some of the world's most adventurous, exhilarating, and galvanizing work will be in town for only a couple of days.



*Illustration by David Huang*

To catch the best of these rare finds, focus on a few theatres: Brooklyn Academy of Music, N.Y.U. Skirball Center (which has a superb season over all), and Japan Society, which kicks off its “**Ningyo! A Parade of Puppetry**” series with a remounting of “**Dogugaeshi**” (Sept. 11-19), Basil Twist’s spectacular 2003 collaboration with the shamisen composer Yumiko Tanaka. The small-is-powerful lineup operates as a portal to other realms: Twist’s micro-masterpiece is named for a Tokushima tradition of intricately sliding painted panels that trick the eye, and one of the other offerings, a long-awaited visit from Japan’s National Bunraku Theatre (Oct. 3-5), includes scenic design by Kazuo Oga, the art director of “Princess Mononoke.”

Meanwhile, at N.Y.U. Skirball, you’ll find Milo Rau, a Swiss director who is the most influential artist working in political theatre today—“My leadership model is a permanent revolution,” he has said of his several artistic directorships. His “**Antigone in the Amazon**” (Sept. 27-28) refracts Sophocles’ story of state murder through the true events of the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement massacre, in 1996.

Skirball is also participating in the multi-venue “**Crossing the Line**” series (a project of L’Alliance New York, through Dec. 7) this year, so you’ll find several of the wide-ranging festival’s projects there. I’m particularly dizzy over the chance to see the Belgian creator Miet Warlop’s superhit “**One Song**” (Skirball, Oct. 3-5), in which a company performs a single song over and over while undergoing escalating tests of endurance, and Marlène Saldana and Jonathan Drillet’s “**Showgirl**” (Skirball, Oct. 18-19), which uses delulu cabaret exuberance to reinterpret Paul Verhoeven’s so-bad-it’s-opera movie from 1995. The unifying factor seems to be intensity—many of the offerings emphasize that we are in a moment of hot iron, when *something* must be struck. Only Tiago Rodrigues takes this to its grim but logical extreme: his “**Catarina and the Beauty of Killing Fascists**” imagines a Portuguese family with a tradition of conscientious violence. If you

can bear thinking about such things, the show will be at *BAM* Nov. 13-17.

---



## About Town

### Classical

Anthony Roth Costanzo's rambunctious, head-spinning, hundred-minute version of "**The Marriage of Figaro**"—in which the countertenor Costanzo sings every part—approaches Mozart's comic masterpiece like a golden retriever approaches a Frisbee. Tackling the opera's challenges with palpable gladness, Costanzo sings the servant Figaro, his betrothed Susanna, and a whole palace worth of erotic schemers, as virtuosic lip-synching performers act out the scenes. Aided (abetted?) by the director Dustin Wills and the arranger Dan Schlosberg, Costanzo piles wonder on wonder: for instance, somehow, in "Riconosci in questo amplesso," six voices soar out of one man (and his looping pedal). Later, Costanzo and his avatar-Susanna, Emma Ramos, commune ecstatically—it's the "marriage" Costanzo seems most interested in, of song to body, music to flesh.—*Helen Shaw (Little Island; through Sept. 22.)*

---

### Art

There are only five black-and-white photographs, two hefty, incised limestone blocks, and a video in **Mark Armijo McKnight's** museum début, but their effect is far from minimalist. If the work comes with a lot of conceptual baggage, you don't have to bone up on Simone Weil to appreciate the artist's meditation on time, death, the body, and the beauty of a desolate landscape. A female nude opens her legs wide in a field of tiny daisies, an earthy

take on Courbet's "Origin of the World" that suggests fertility and rebirth, balancing an image of the skeleton of a mountain goat nearby. In the wall-filling video, synchronized metronomes tick away on the ledges of the New Mexico badlands, as relentless as the wind on the soundtrack, as reassuring as your heartbeat.—[Vince Aletti](#) (*Whitney Museum; through Jan. 5.*)

---

## Hip-Hop



*Photograph by Vivian Khanounsay*

The Charlotte rapper **Mavi** was exploring neuroscience at Howard University when his 2019 début album, "Let the Sun Talk," opened a doorway to a different kind of sensory study. His music was both curious and stimulated, as clearheaded and philosophical as it was intuitive, unfurling before the listener as knots of spiralling rhymes

touched by soul. His rich 2022 follow-up, “Laughing So Hard, It Hurts,” delved into familial loss, addiction, and trying to stay steady amid an ego-inflating rise. His latest, “Shadowbox,” is a plaintive album of gutting self-scrutiny that takes his flows to new depths. “I don’t think failure scare me as much as my talent,” he raps, pointing to an existential challenge.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)* (*Music Hall of Williamsburg; Sept. 12.*)

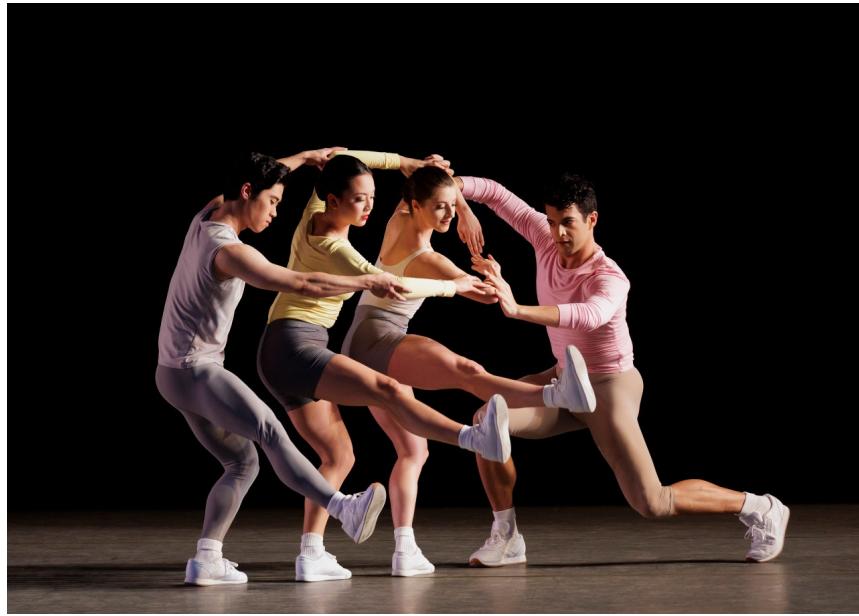
---

## Theatre

Two years after a breakup, your ex reaches out, wanting to get dinner. It’s a dubious proposition, both in real life and as a dramatic premise. But Douglas Lyons’s world-première play “**Table 17**,” which moves to a rhythm all its own, confounds expectations. The reconnection of Jada (Kara Young) and Dallas (Biko Eisen-Martin) is interlaced with scenes of their relationship’s defining moments, much as their heated dialogue is punctuated by tender asides. The pivoting works thanks to a talented cast—particularly Michael Rishawn, who turns several supporting parts into a larger-than-life presence—and to Zhailon Levingston’s inspired direction, which treats the fourth wall like a door. Everyone involved seems to have chemistry.—*[Dan Stahl](#)* (*Robert W. Wilson MCC Theatre Space; through Sept. 29.*)

---

## Dance



*Justin Peck's "Partita."*  
*Photograph by Erin Baiano*

When George Balanchine and his friend Alexandra Danilova were young dancers in pre-Revolutionary St. Petersburg, they performed in the rousing Mazurka in Act I of “Coppélia.” Many years later, in 1974, Balanchine asked Danilova to help him stage a new version, for **New York City Ballet**. The production—sweet and funny and packed with dance—turns fifty this year, and will be presented during the fall season, which also includes an all-Justin Peck program, to mark his tenth anniversary as choreographer in residence; new works by the young choreographers Gianna Reisen and Caili Quan; and the company première of a lyrical pas de deux for two men, “Each in Their Own Time,” by the veteran dancemaker Lar Lubovitch.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; Sept. 17-Oct. 13.)*

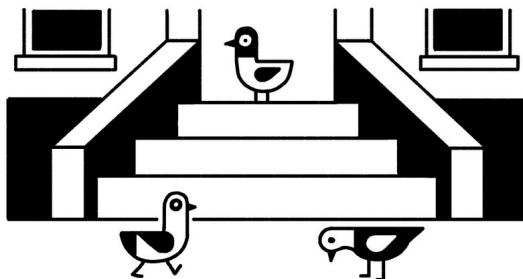
---

## Movies

In the daring and inventive documentary **“The Mother of All Lies,”** the Moroccan filmmaker Asmae El Moudir’s fine-grained exploration of family history yields revelations of large-scale historical crimes. Frustrated in her search for childhood family photos, she learns that they were destroyed by her grandmother,

who has an obsession with secrecy, and whose ferocious presence dominates the film. In order to reimagine the suppressed past, the director calls upon her father, a skilled craftsman, to construct figurines of the family and friends, plus a diorama-like set of the neighborhood. This restaging brings to light long-silenced memories of a government massacre of strikers, in 1981; El Moudir makes clear its devastating effect on the family, the community, and the country at large, and gives voice to repressed trauma and grief.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In limited release.*)

---



## In the Neighborhood

*[Jackson Arn](#)* on *Prospect Heights*.



Illustration by Josh Cochran

Earlier this year, I realized that most of the art critics I know live a few blocks from me in Prospect Heights. This may strike you as a good reason never to set foot here again, but I promise we haven't ruined everything. If I had to stake my neighborhood's reputation on one item, I'd choose the barbecue-shrimp sauce at **Lowerline**, a Creole restaurant artery-threateningly close to my apartment.

Notice that I didn't say the shrimp, which is excellent but mostly a way of ingesting the dark nectar of Worcestershire, black pepper, and butter it comes soaked in. If you don't sop everything up with French bread you are allergic to either gluten or happiness. As long as I'm on the subject of bloat, allow me to say a few words about Nereus. You know, the Greek sea god? Son of Pontus and Gaea? Yeah, I wasn't too familiar with him, either, but there he is, compliments of the sculptor Eugene Savage, on the southern side of the **Bailey Fountain**, at Grand Army Plaza. Leonardo thought that Michelangelo made flesh look like a sack stuffed with nuts; Savage makes it look like a Boar's Head ham bulging through its string casing. He even makes Nereus's beard look this way, and

although that may not be everyone's idea of sublime artistic achievement, it is decidedly mine. **Culture Fusion Books** (I didn't know the name until I wrote this—to me, it's always been That Place on Washington) is run by a preternaturally kind woman named Patricia, who asks great questions and tells better stories. Most of her merchandise is stacked, not shelved, into dusty Jenga towers with some mysterious architectural and organizational logic. Before I moved to New York, I imagined bookstores like this on every street, but I'll settle for the one.

---

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

- “The Crane Wife,” by CJ Hauser
  - Laufey’s Tiny Desk concert
  - W. S. Merwin on September
- 

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/basil-twists-dogugaeshi-and-more-exhilarating-theatre-from-abroad>

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

**Photo Booth**

## Teen-Age Alienation, on Display

In the nineteen-eighties, Andrea Modica took photos of the students at her Catholic alma mater. “I recognized something there that I had to deal with about my time in high school—something both horrible and wonderful,” she said.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

August 24, 2024



*Photographs by Andrea Modica*

In the short autobiographical vignette “Alien—1965,” the late writer and actress Cookie Mueller offers what might be a perfect snapshot of teen-age girlhood. “I was always leaving,” she writes.

“Every time I left I had a different hair color and I would be standing on the porch saying goodbye to the older couple in the living room.” Mueller’s parents—with whom she had nothing in common except “a few inherited chromosomes, the identical last name, and the same bathroom”—would scream and protest, but Mueller would ignore them, speeding off to who knows where or for how long in her friends’ cars. And yet, her relief at being away from home was always short-lived. “At this point it would always dawn on me that there was another problem,” she continues. “Not only was I alien to my parents, but I was an alien to my friends.”

Not every youth is as tumultuous and itinerant as Mueller’s, whose frequent leave-takings had her living hard from Baltimore to San Francisco, Orlando to Provincetown. But the sense of estrangement she describes—from one’s environment, one’s family, one’s peers—is, I’d argue, a reliable marker of even the most conventional teen-girl experience. It’s the kind of alienation we can identify in the black-and-white photographs made in the mid-eighties by Andrea Modica, and now collected in “[Catholic Girl](#),” a handsome, recently published volume from L’Artiere.

Modica, a professor at Drexel University in Philadelphia, whose photography career has spanned forty years, was a young graduate student at Yale’s School of Art when she embarked on the project that would become “Catholic Girl.” On an unseasonably snowy day in the spring of 1984, she decided to take the subway to visit an old art teacher at her alma mater, an all-girls Catholic high school in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. She was lugging with her, as she almost always was, her large-format eight-by-ten camera, and, when she arrived at the school, she decided to ask some students if she could take their portraits.

“There are people who know instinctively how to take a picture, and I wasn’t one of those people,” Modica told me, when we spoke over the phone recently. “And so I was always taking pictures very diligently, always learning.” However, she seemed to instinctively

sense that photographing these schoolgirls, who were only a handful of years younger than her, would make for a fruitful experience. “I recognized something there that I had to deal with about my time in high school—something both horrible and wonderful,” she said. “And I had the privilege of dissecting it through these pictures.”





The first photograph Modica took at the school was of two girls: one a tween, the other perhaps sixteen or seventeen. In the picture, the girls balefully face the camera as they pose against a building's wall; the path below them is lined with the dregs of the recent snow. The younger of the two wears a kilted dress, black knee socks, and a plain headband—a textbook illustration of a Catholic schoolgirl. The teen, however, has already begun to disentangle herself from the expectations of her environment. With her hair sprayed into a nineteen-eighties pouf, long earrings, and unevenly scrunched socks tucked into ballet flats, she is almost a woman, negotiating her emerging role. Standing side by side, the two students read as two adjacent points on a girlhood timeline. (Could the next point be the unseen young photographer taking the picture —a onetime Catholic schoolgirl herself?)

Modica continued to take pictures at the Bay Ridge school, and at a few Catholic schools in New Haven. She often photographed the students she encountered in pairs. Like Diane Arbus's well-known picture from 1967, in which two seven-year-old identical twins, dressed in dark dresses, face the camera head on, Modica's photographs of pairs tease out the tension between individuality and sameness. The girls in her pictures are not twins, but they are twin-like: sharing hair styles, uniforms, accessories. And yet, one can also feel each girl's pulling away from the other. In one image, we see two girls, their dark hair similarly feathered, wearing Members Only-style jackets and plaid skirts. With their hands buried deep in their pockets, they stand with one's bare, bended knee very nearly touching the other's. It is as if they are drawn to each other by a magnetic force, whose power somehow stops short, halted by each girl's own impenetrable force field. In another image, two students wearing matching winter coats, skirts, and black tights are only distinguishable by their hair styles—one short, one long—and by their shoes, one pair of which has white laces. The picture is reminiscent of a "Spot the difference" puzzle, leading us to ask ourselves not just what makes a person but what makes a girl.



When I spoke to Modica, she emphasized the importance of the eight-by-ten camera to her practice. It's a bulky, unwieldy implement, but using it allows for incredibly precise, luminous results. (Modica also develops her own film and produces her own platinum prints.) Since each shot requires a lengthy setup time, the camera also gives its subjects the sense that they are sitting for an official portrait. This was certainly the case with the "Catholic Girl" series. "It was such a slow and collaborative process," Modica told me. "And the girls were so generous." Looking at the pictures, we can see this gravity marking the students' faces, as if realizing that their encounter with Modica was giving them a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to be seen and understood, no matter how alien they might have felt, even to their own selves.



*Naomi Fry* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/teen-age-alienation-on-display>

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

# The Talk of the Town

- **[“In the Dark” Reports on the Lack of Accountability for a U.S. War Crime](#)**

By Willing Davidson | The podcast investigates the events in Haditha, Iraq, and compiles a database to show the inherent problem of the military judging its own members.

- **[“Shrek” v. Perry the Donkey](#)**

By Sarah Chatta | A Stanford Law student and donkey-rights advocate infiltrates NBCUniversal’s headquarters in a bid for recognition for Perry, the donkey model for Eddie Murphy’s character.

- **[Natasha Rothwell Wants You to Consider the T.S.A. Screener](#)**

By Michael Schulman | The “Insecure” and “White Lotus” actor heads to J.F.K. to explain why she set her new show, “How to Die Alone,” in an airport.

- **[To the Moon and Back, and Then Into Filing Cabinets](#)**

By Matthew Hutson | NASA’s lunar-sample curator gives a tour of the vault where the agency will house the material it brings back from its manned moon mission in 2026.

- **[You’re Invited to a Dada Dinner!](#)**

By Zach Helfand | For the opening of his show “Searchers III,” the artist Hadi Falapishi throws a dinner at the Breakers, the Vanderbilts’ mansion, where your face serves as a plate.

[Comment](#)

## **“In the Dark” Reports on the Lack of Accountability for a U.S. War Crime**

The podcast investigates the events in Haditha, Iraq, and compiles a database to show the inherent problem of the military judging its own members.

By [Willing Davidson](#)

September 9, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On November 19, 2005, a convoy of U.S. Marines was travelling down a road in Haditha, a town on the Euphrates River in western Iraq, when one of their Humvees hit an improvised explosive device. A Marine was killed, and two were injured. The Marines

had just pulled over a car carrying five men on their way to a college in Baghdad; after the explosion, they shot them to death. They then went into a nearby area and, in the course of a few hours, killed at least nineteen more people—men, women, and children. The oldest victim was a seventy-six-year-old grandfather; the youngest was a three-year-old girl. Some of them were shot in the head at relatively close range, inside their houses.

The events of that day came to be known as the Haditha massacre, and, after they came to light, President George W. Bush promised a full investigation. Four Marines were charged with murder. The massacre was no secret: a report in *Time* had helped bring it to public attention. But, in the end, only one of the Marines was convicted, of the minor crime of negligent dereliction of duty. He served not one day in prison. By the time that case ended, in 2012, few people had the appetite to engage with the continuing legacy of the Iraq War. The country had moved on.

Four years ago, the “In the Dark” podcast, produced by a team of six people led by the investigative reporter Madeleine Baran, began looking into the Haditha massacre. They interviewed more than a hundred sources, both Iraqis and Marines, and repeatedly sued the military for the release of thousands of records, in order to learn why a well-documented mass killing had gone virtually unpunished. Last year, “In the Dark” joined *The New Yorker*, and this summer, in nine episodes, the team laid out the maddening, appalling conclusions of their reporting. Though the shooters had claimed that the victims included insurgents, the team found that they were all civilians. The podcast features a lawyer in Haditha who lost fifteen members of his family that day, and who has spent the past nineteen years searching for justice.

### **Listen to “In the Dark”**

*Season 3 of the investigative podcast asks what happened in Haditha and why no one was punished.*

In the calculus of modern warfare and international law, killing a civilian is not necessarily a crime. But the podcast uses the events in Haditha to underscore the inherent problem of the military using its own legal mechanisms—an array of self-protective reflexes, presumptions, and conditions—to hold its members to account. Investigations were conducted, and one was quite thorough, but, when it came time to bring the Marines to trial, the inadequacy of the military-justice system was laid bare. Only one of the Marines charged with murder was brought to trial; the charges against the others were dropped. As in other such trials, the jury was made up of fellow-Marines, and they made it plain that they would trust the testimony of a Marine over that of an Iraqi.

In fact, “In the Dark” ’s reporting showed that much of the Iraqis’ testimony was simply cast aside; survivors gave sworn depositions, but they were not used in court. When the officer in charge of another proceeding in the investigation was asked if he placed value on that testimony, he told our reporter, “No.” The victims were not even named during the trial; instead, they were referred to by the numbers that Marines had scrawled on their bodies, visible in photos taken in the aftermath of the killings. (Last month, with the permission of the families, *The New Yorker* published [a selection of these photos](#), to help expose the brutality of the incident.)

One of the Marines whose murder charges were dropped had been accused of killing three men, unarmed civilians who were shot in the head. The Marine Corps general who dismissed the charges, James Mattis, wrote to him, “You willingly put yourself at great risk to protect innocent civilians.” In 2017, Mattis, who had become Donald Trump’s Secretary of Defense, told *The New Yorker*’s Dexter Filkins, “You can’t criminalize every mistake.”

If this was the outcome of a widely publicized mass killing, what happens to the incidents that don’t get mentioned by the President or receive extensive media attention? In theory, reporters, members

of Congress, and others should be able to request the records of such cases, which each branch of the military is required to keep. Yet, after repeatedly suing for access, “In the Dark” found that one of the branches could not provide any records; for others, only limited information was available, and much of that was heavily redacted, making it nearly impossible to assess how the military investigates allegations of war crimes.

The team decided to create its own database. By combing through thousands of old news stories, human-rights reports, and detainee-abuse records, and by suing the military for additional information, they amassed what appears to be the largest collection of possible war crimes investigated by the U.S. military—seven hundred and eighty-one in all—from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. The database, which will be published on [newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com) this week, allowed “In the Dark” to analyze how the military treats allegations of war crimes. The findings are dismal. More than sixty-five per cent of investigations were dismissed. In the remaining incidents—those which were determined to be criminal—fewer than one in five perpetrators appeared to receive any kind of prison sentence.

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq left more than two hundred thousand civilians dead. It’s a numbing figure, almost impossible to contemplate. Within this number, it’s easier to focus on specific events: the battles for Falluja, in which more than a thousand civilians were killed; the battle for Baghdad, in which an estimated several thousand Iraqis died. And then there are the atrocities with smaller yet more vivid death tolls: in Baghdad, U.S. soldiers bound and blindfolded at least four men, then brought them to a field outside the city, shot them, and dumped their bodies in a canal; in Mahmudiyah, five soldiers were involved in the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl, after which they murdered her and her family, to cover up their actions. Such incidents are often referred to as war crimes, a term that, amid the horror of conflict, aims to outline the unthinkable. A nation is judged in many ways; surely one is by how it deals with the war crimes it commits.

“In the Dark” ’s reporting leaves little doubt that, in the case of the Haditha massacre, the United States failed a grave moral test. The killings were a tragedy. The aftermath may have been worse. ♦

*Willing Davidson* is a senior editor at *The New Yorker*, and an editor of the podcast *In the Dark*.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/in-the-dark-reports-on-the-lack-of-accountability-for-a-us-war-crime>

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

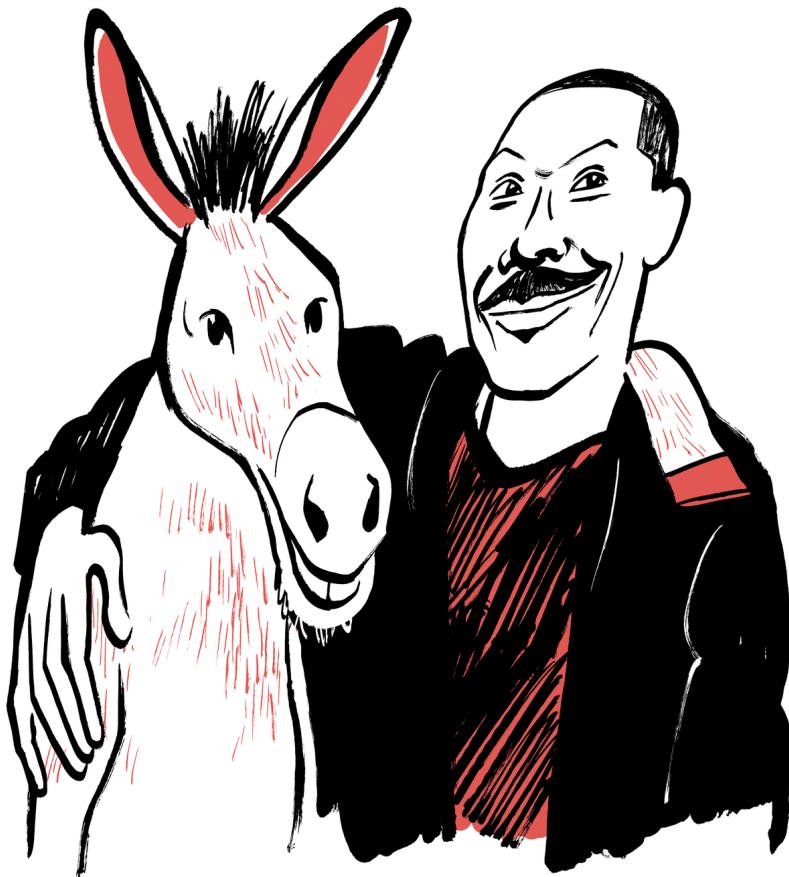
[Full Credit Dept.](#)

## “Shrek” v. Perry the Donkey

A Stanford Law student and donkey-rights advocate infiltrates NBCUniversal’s headquarters in a bid for recognition for Perry, the donkey model for Eddie Murphy’s character.

By [Sarah Chatta](#)

September 9, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

This summer, DreamWorks Animation announced that a fifth installment of its multibillion-dollar “Shrek” franchise was in the

works. Eddie Murphy, the voice of Shrek's sidekick, Donkey, also broke the news that a spinoff starring his character was on its way. The headlines caught the attention of a group of Stanford Law students; months earlier, they'd helped draft a letter to Murphy in a bid to recognize the contributions of a donkey named Perry, who, in 1999, had been sketched and studied by the animators who created Donkey. "Donkey in *Shrek* not only looks like Perry but possesses his temperament, behavior, and mannerisms," the letter said. DreamWorks paid the cartoonist William Steig half a million dollars for the rights to his picture book "*Shrek!*," but, according to his handlers, Perry received only seventy-five dollars for his modelling work, and hasn't been formally credited.

"It would just be nice if there was, like, the slightest sign that they appreciated Perry," Frishta Qaderi, one of the letter's co-writers, said recently, while sitting on a bench in Rockefeller Center. She was in New York to tour Cleary Gottlieb for a summer associateship, but she couldn't stop thinking about the donkey. Qaderi had encountered him at Bol Park, the Palo Alto donkey pasture where he lives, shortly after she arrived at Stanford. Since last fall, she has been recruiting other law students to raise awareness about Perry's plight, often via in-person meet and greets with Perry himself. ("The donkey's eyes can really tell a story," one of the students observed.)

Qaderi has long advocated for donkey rights. "I grew up partly in Afghanistan," she said, "in a culture that plays *buzkashi*"—a Central Asian sport similar to polo. "Men sit on horses and compete over a goat carcass." She went on, "Growing up in a culture that really venerates horses, I always thought that donkeys were neglected." *Buzkashi* is a men's sport, and Qaderi dreamed of a separate league made up entirely of women who rode on donkeys.

The campaign for Perry, who is thirty, picked up after he was rushed to a vet at U.C. Davis with abdominal problems. This

spring, Perry was diagnosed with laminitis. “The same condition that took Secretariat,” Qaderi said glumly. Volunteers started fund-raising to cover Perry’s medical bills. They successfully convinced the Palo Alto City Council to chip in. But didn’t Perry deserve more for his “Shrek” work? Terry, the cairn terrier who played Toto in “The Wizard of Oz,” received full credits and was reportedly paid better than many of her co-stars.

Qaderi hoped that the letter to Murphy might inspire him to visit the pasture and meet Perry. But months passed and she heard nothing, so she wrote another letter—“As he nears the end, it would be wonderful to get Perry the recognition he deserves”—addressed to Margie Cohn, the president of DreamWorks. In a bid to hand-deliver her letter, she signed up for a tour of Rockefeller Center, where DreamWorks’ parent company, NBCUniversal, is headquartered.

Qaderi had arrived for the tour wearing a black windbreaker and a green linen dress. While the tour guide, Jonathan, held forth on stone carvings of naked women made by Leo Friedlander, Qaderi dropped her voice to a whisper. “We can try to sneak into NBC Studios next door,” she said. She scoped out the lobby—too touristy. She would have to breach 30 Rockefeller Center directly. Jonathan said that they’d be going inside soon. But first he took them past a Magnolia Bakery. “If you’ve ever willingly, or been forced to watch ‘Sex and the City,’ it’s in one episode,” he said.

Inside the building, Qaderi surveyed the lobby and spotted a receptionist at a gigantic black-and-gold desk surrounded by several security guards. As Jonathan talked on, Qaderi slipped away. “I’d like to deliver this letter to NBC,” she told the receptionist.

“You can try NBC guest services,” the receptionist replied.

Qaderi went down a black-and-gold hall and turned left. “Is it possible for me to deliver a letter to NBC here?” she asked a woman at the guest-services desk.

“Uh, no,” the woman said. She suggested that Qaderi try the NBC messenger center at 600 Fifth Avenue.

At the messenger center, an employee looked bored. “We can’t take personal letters,” he said. “You have to go to the post office.” For a moment, Qaderi seemed dejected. Was Perry ever going to get his due? Then she remembered something she’d seen on the tour: there had been a mailbox near the elevators in 30 Rockefeller.

Several minutes later, after a detour through the diamond district to pick up some stamps, she was back inside the lobby, standing before a gold letter box affixed to the wall. A security guard looked over curiously. Qaderi dropped her mail and walked away. To date, she has not received a reply. ♦

*Sarah Chatta is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/shrek-v-perry-the-donkey>

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

[Frequent Fliers Dept.](#)

## Natasha Rothwell Wants You to Consider the T.S.A. Screener

The “Insecure” and “White Lotus” actor heads to J.F.K. to explain why she set her new show, “How to Die Alone,” in an airport.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

September 7, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

“Airports are, like, my favorite place,” the actor Natasha Rothwell said the other day. She was at J.F.K., but not to fly anywhere. She sat in a ketchup-colored sunken lounge in the lobby of the T.W.A.

Hotel, the chic mid-century-modern destination repurposed from the former T.W.A. terminal. The Beach Boys blasted from speakers, and an old-school departures board clattered overhead. She ordered the Clear Skies Sangria.

Rothwell, who is best known for playing an outspoken accountant on “Insecure” and a spa manager on “The White Lotus,” chose J.F.K. as the setting for her new Hulu sitcom, “How to Die Alone.” She plays Mel, a beleaguered accessibility driver who, despite working at the airport, has never been on a flight. “There’s something poetic, albeit cliché, about starting to live and take off in your life,” Rothwell said. Airports, which are not most people’s favorite places, appeal to her as a voyeur. Plus, she wanted to shine a spotlight on airport workers: T.S.A. screeners, baggage handlers. “We overlook the people who help us get to where we’re going,” she noted.

Unlike Mel, Rothwell is a frequent flier. Her father was in the Air Force—he retired as a commander at Fort Dix—and she grew up all over: Florida, Maryland, Illinois, Turkey. “I was too young to marvel at being in Incirlik, but there are pictures of me looking very distraught in front of gorgeous ruins,” she said. She tends not to miss flights—“I’m a military brat, so early is on time”—but she’s had close calls. “I’m a little neuro-spicy, so loud noises and lots of people can give me anxiety,” she explained. “I have my noise-cancelling headphones, and so the gate will change, and I won’t know, because I’m into an audiobook.” She’d just been at the Essence Festival of Culture, in New Orleans, and missed a connecting flight back to L.A., so she and the d.j. D-Nice were stranded at a Radisson in Minnesota. “I went to a Chili’s and made the best of the night,” she said brightly.

Growing up, she recalled, she saw each move as an “opportunity to reinvent myself.” Those transformations led her to acting. She studied theatre at the University of Maryland, then spent a year in Japan, teaching English and performing at Tokyo Comedy Store

shows. “There was a lot of reclamation of travel in adulthood,” she said. When she settled in New York, in 2008, it was her first home that “wasn’t dictated by a military move.” For four years, she taught theatre at a Bronx charter school by day and did comedy at the Upright Citizens Brigade by night. When she realized that she was urging her students to chase their dreams but shortchanging her own, she quit. In 2014, she auditioned for “Saturday Night Live,” playing a drunk Maya Angelou, and was hired as a writer. She moved to L.A. to write for “Insecure,” and Issa Rae picked her from the writers’ room to join the cast.

“How to Die Alone” is Rothwell’s first time creating and starring in her own show. “In real life, I don’t have main-character energy at all,” she admitted. “For me, it’s, like, give me my dog and the *Times* crossword and a murder doc, and I’m happy. And a fistful of edibles, but that’s a different story.” She’d recently flown back from Thailand—with layovers in Dubai and Texas—where she spent almost five months filming the third season of “The White Lotus”; her character, a fan favorite from Season 1, is making a much anticipated return. “I was able to see some temples and explore a little bit,” she said. At one point, she and her co-star Parker Posey both got *COVID* and were stuck in their hotel rooms. “She was, like, ‘Do you want some nuts? I’m feeding the birds!’ ”

Up a swooping staircase, Rothwell checked out a display of vintage T.W.A. uniforms. “This is so cool,” she said. “I did this sketch character at U.C.B. called the Flight Attendant. Her previous flight crash-landed, but now she’s back at work, and she’s, like, ‘Do you have the capacity to open that door if we land in the ocean? *Don’t lie to me.*’ ” She gasped at a modish sky-blue hostess uniform from the late sixties: “Balmain? Shut up! It’s a lewk.”

As she headed out, a young Black woman approached her for a selfie, beaming: “This makes my three-day trip back home awesome!” Her name was Glory, and she was on a layover between Oxford, where she studies, and Houston. “I did the cheapest way,

not the most efficient way,” she told Rothwell. “But I’ll get home eventually.”

“Safe travels!” Rothwell said, and smiled as Glory walked off. “I just love seeing brown people travel,” she added. “We’re *doin’* it! Yeah!” ♦



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

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/natasha-rothwell-wants-you-to-consider-the-tsa-screener>

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

[Extraterrestrial Dept.](#)

## To the Moon and Back, and Then Into Filing Cabinets

NASA's lunar-sample curator gives a tour of the vault where the agency will house the material it brings back from its manned moon mission in 2026.

By [Matthew Hutson](#)

September 9, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Earlier this year, an American-built spacecraft, Odysseus, landed on the moon for the first time in fifty-two years. The craft was

launched in advance of Artemis III, a NASA effort to send a human mission to the moon, in 2026, in part to collect samples of soil from the lunar south pole. Rocks and regolith from that mission will join the three hundred and eighty-two kilograms of material collected by the Apollo astronauts, which is housed mostly at the Johnson Space Center, in Houston.

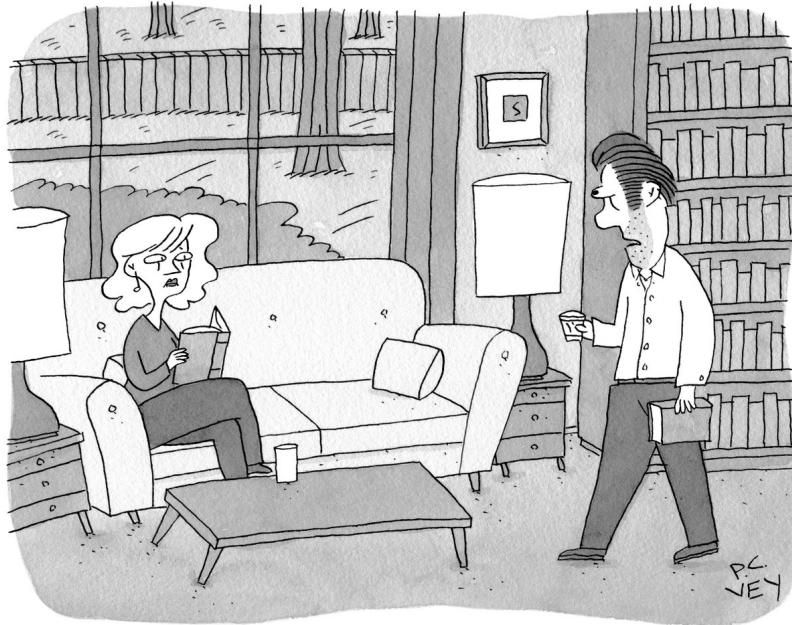
Recently, Ryan Zeigler, NASA's lunar-sample curator, gave a private tour of the collection to a visitor. Zeigler had a bushy beard and wore a T-shirt with the NASA "meatball" logo, but with "SHINY" in place of "NASA"—a meme from the sci-fi show "Firefly." He has been working with lunar samples since he started graduate school, in 1998; he used to take trips to Antarctica to collect meteorites.

Zeigler and the visitor put on white protective "bunny suits" and stepped through a series of sealed doors, including two that enclosed an air shower. Zeigler explained that, in 1969, every sample collected by the Apollo 11 team, along with the astronauts themselves, went next door to a different building with a negatively pressurized lab. "Anything that might have been contaminated by space bugs from the moon, they put it in quarantine over there, to make sure it didn't, you know, accidentally kill all life on Earth," he said. The scientists were being safe, but they'd suspected that the moon couldn't support life. Their theory was confirmed when they saw that the samples had no traces of water. "And then they're, like, Great, we have the wrong kind of facility," Zeigler said. The new quarantine lab has positive rather than negative air pressure, to keep contaminants out, rather than in.

The lab includes a central room, a vault, and a smaller room to conduct tests. The central room is dominated by nine cabinets that resemble large neonatal incubators. They're filled with nitrogen, and, like incubators, have neoprene gloves attached for manipulating the materials inside. One cabinet shows off five large rocks, including a mostly white specimen (Lunar Sample 60015)

that is 4.42 billion years old, part of a rockberg in a sea of lava which dates to shortly after the moon's formation. A black layer, resulting from a lunar impact two million years ago, covers its exterior. "And so that is both the oldest and the youngest rock from the moon," Zeigler said.

He proceeded into a hallway between the central room and the vault, past a trash bin labelled, suspiciously, "*NORMAL TRASH ONLY*." Another one nearby said "*LUNAR TRASH ONLY*." That one holds gloves and other things that have touched lunar material, which are scrutinized for stray fragments before the trash is "destroyed in a secret and secure way," Zeigler said. "We don't want anyone doing any dumpster diving."



*"The hardest thing about giving up a life of crime is getting used to relaxing at home with a good book."*

*Cartoon by P. C. Vey*

Above the bin is a window into a viewing area. "That's as far as we let the Vice-Presidents go," Zeigler said. V.P.s tend to be accompanied by people with guns, which are not allowed in the lab. One time, the Secret Service wanted to bring in a bomb-sniffing dog. "I was, like, 'O.K., well, we gotta put him in a bunny

suit,’ ” Zeigler said. “And they’re, like, ‘That’s just ridiculous.’ ” He asked them for an alternative. The officers said, “Shave him.”

Zeigler continued: “Most of the discussion with the Secret Service was about aliens. They didn’t believe that we didn’t have aliens, or they were messing around, and they’re, like, ‘Will the glass protect the Vice-President?’ ” He went on, “All of a sudden, their supervisor walks in and everyone gets real quiet. He’s, like, ‘Not this conversation again.’ And there was this whole argument about what we do if the aliens get loose.”

Hannah O’Brien, a lunar-curation scientist, arrived and helped unlock the vault, which has a four-and-a-half-ton door that requires two codes. “That is a U.S. Federal Reserve Bank vault from 1978,” Zeigler said.

The vault contains more than a hundred thousand numbered samples. Zeigler walked over to the Apollo 11 holdings. “Everything Neil and Buzz collected is right here,” he said. There’s plenty of room for samples from Artemis III and IV. After that, plans are uncertain.

Zeigler made his way back out of the airlock and began stripping off his bunny suit. He reminded the visitor to remove his booties: “Earlier this week, I was standing in line at Jimmy John’s, and I look down, like, Damn it.” ♦



*Matthew Hutson* is a contributing writer at The New Yorker covering science and technology.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/to-the-moon-and-back-and-then-into-filing-cabinets>

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

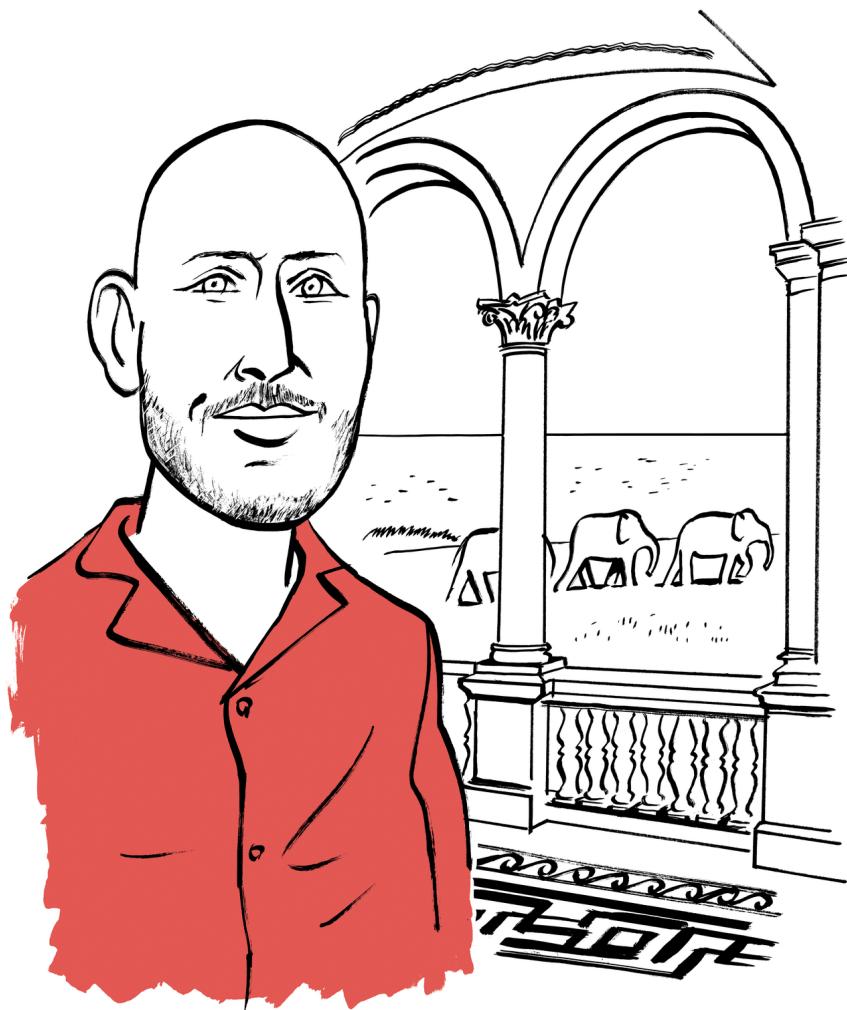
[Newport Postcard](#)

## You're Invited to a Dada Dinner!

For the opening of his show “Searchers III,” the artist Hadi Falapishi throws a dinner at the Breakers, the Vanderbilts’ mansion, where your face serves as a plate.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

September 9, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Have plans on Friday? No? Fantastic! Your new friend, the artist Hadi Falapishi, is throwing a dinner party. You haven’t met him, but you’ll love him. The dinner’s in Newport, Rhode Island, at 6:30

P.M. You must come. It's at the Breakers, the Vanderbilts' little hundred-and-forty-thousand-square-foot cottage on the water. Dress code: fancy.

Falapishi has a new show at the mansion, "Searchers Act III," with the local arts organization Art&Newport. The dinner is opening the show. The show is accompanying the elephants. Have we not mentioned the elephants? There are a hundred and three of them around the Breakers. Not real elephants; artisans in India crafted them from *Lantana camara*, an invasive weed. They're a travelling installation called the Great Elephant Migration, whose supporters include Cher, Padma Lakshmi, and Diane von Furstenberg. The elephants migrated, via boat, from India. Next they're coming to New York, to the meatpacking district.

Still following? Elephants are migrants. They are a little scary to the locals, and a little scared themselves. They are misplaced. Falapishi has felt the same; the show reflects that disorientation. Maybe the dinner will, too.

There's Falapishi now, setting up for the event on a big colonnaded loggia. He's the bald guy with the scruffy beard and the orange T-shirt, explaining, "I came here from Iran ten years ago." He'd grown up in Tehran, but wanted to go to art school in New York City. He chose Bard: "I didn't know Bard was upstate. I landed at J.F.K., and I got in the cab, and the guy said, 'This is going to be five hundred dollars.' "

After he graduated, Falapishi got a place farther upstate, in part to avoid the immigration authorities; his visa had expired. Falapishi: "I made the mistake of knocking on my neighbors' doors the first week I arrived, giving them a little chocolate gift, telling them, 'I'm an Iranian artist and I'm going to be your neighbor while I'm waiting for my visa.' They were Trump supporters, and they became extremely aggressive and cruel to me." This was during the 2016 election. Afterward was worse. "It became clear I have to

leave the States. But I thought, I'm not going to leave like this. So, instead of buying my ticket back to Iran, I bought two dozen bottles of Trump wine. Every day, I'd drink the wine—very depressing evening—and then I'd bike to a gas station, fill the bottle with gas, bring it back home, and make a Molotov out of it. My plan was to make a performance at Trump Tower, to throw them at his tower. That was my plan—my art will send me back." He was eventually persuaded that this was a bad plan. (This fall, he is publishing a book, "Truth Has Four Legs," about the art he made during that time.)

Falapishi has a lot to do to get the dinner ready. He has to deal with the facilities guys. ("There's a lot about the dinner we haven't told the Breakers. From the institution's standpoint, they mostly care about knowing 'What is the art?' Because of insurance. A lot of versions of breaking will happen.") He has to coördinate with the caterers. ("I want to serve something very liquid for a starter, and the reason is that I made a hole in all the spoons.") He has to confer with the maître d', Neal Medlyn. ("You will be a butler who is a tiny bit melancholic, maybe, or a tiny bit stressed, or you're dating someone new and really excited. Those emotions should come guest to guest.")

Time for dinner! Have a canapé. Mingle, mingle! There's the artist Cy Gavin, wearing chain mail. (Gavin: "I dressed as a Ruth Asawa sculpture.") That man in the cream-colored sherwani is named Ganesh. (Ganesh: "I was told to dress 'Indian.' ") That woman is a real Vanderbilt. Sarah Ferguson, the Duchess of York, was invited, but the timing didn't work out.

The dining table is the shape of a spread-eagled body, with a self-portrait of Falapishi at the head. Big cardboard-and-resin paintings, representing each guest, surround the table, and elephant-related works hang from posts above it: a shirtless Falapishi riding an elephant and stabbing a surveillance drone; a pantsless Falapishi with an easel, being attacked by an elephant he's painting.

Find your seat. It's the one with the clay orb with your face on it. You'll be sitting next to Cindy Sherman, who is wearing a full-body nude suit, and Anna Weyant, in a kimono and big Gucci glasses. Don't mind the hovering waiters, shining flashlights in your face.

Your plate? Falapishi will smash your face-orb with a hammer. Voilà—now the shards are plates. Need a drink? Weyant has requested wine to go with the main course of frog legs and rattlesnake, but she only has a champagne flute. Server: "I can bring you a new glass."

Weyant, waving a hand: "I'm eating out of a head."

Is Medlyn, the maître d', acting erratically? He just excused himself and returned in a fur coat, with no pants. Oh, dear, now he's atop a precarious ledge, looking like he's about to jump. (Falapishi: "This is one of the things we haven't told the Breakers.") Time to go! Sorry, no, you can't keep your face-orb. It is now part of the art. ♦

*Zach Helfand* is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/youre-invited-to-a-dada-dinner>

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

# Reporting & Essays

- **[The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents](#)**

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus | A little magazine wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness.

- **[Are Your Morals Too Good to Be True?](#)**

By Manvir Singh | Scientists have shattered our self-image as principled beings, motivated by moral truths. Some wonder whether our ideals can survive the blow to our vanity.

- **[Russia's Espionage War in the Arctic](#)**

By Ben Taub | For years, Russia has been using the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, which borders its nuclear stronghold, as a laboratory, testing intelligence operations there before replicating them across Europe.

- **[Land of the Flea](#)**

By Paige WilliamsPhotography by Leonard Suryajaya | A road trip though America's annual celebration of other people's stuff.

- **[Richard Powers on What We Do to the Earth and What It Does to Us](#)**

By Hua Hsu | “Playground,” Powers’s new novel, aims to do for the oceans what “The Overstory” did for trees.

[The Publishing World](#)

## The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents

A little magazine wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness.

By [Gideon Lewis-Kraus](#)

September 9, 2024



*Arielle Angel, the editor of the magazine, said, “People want us to be their day school, synagogue, everything.”*

*Illustration by Pete Ryan*

In June, the small left-wing magazine *Jewish Currents* summoned its donors and close confederates to a private event in a penthouse apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Kathleen Peratis,

a stylish human-rights advocate who co-chairs the publication's board, pressed refreshments on the guests with the warm, fluttering anxiety of a doting Jewish grandmother. This particular crowd, especially since October 7th, isn't often the beneficiary of such Jewish hospitality, and a few attendees sparred amiably about who among them was the most despised within the broader community. The magazine's most prominent contributor is Peter Beinart, an observant Jew whose public opposition to a Jewish state has rendered him a moral hero to some and a turncoat to others. A few years ago, Beinart recalled, he turned on his computer after Yom Kippur, a day on which observant Jews abstain from electronics, to find an e-mail calling him a self-hating Jew. He said, with boyish good cheer, "Imagine considering me such a bad Jew that you feel compelled to tell me in a way that desecrates the holiest day of the Jewish calendar."

The featured guest was the *Haaretz* columnist and reporter Amira Hass, the rare Jewish Israeli journalist to live in the Palestinian territories—previously in [Gaza](#) and now in the West Bank. Hass spoke for almost two hours, and no one so much as glanced at a phone. Her mother, Hass recalled, had been shocked to read in one of Simone de Beauvoir's memoirs a passage about a pleasant bike ride in the mountains during the Second World War—when Hass's mother was in the Bergen-Belsen [concentration camp](#). "I realized that it is possible to live well while a genocide is being committed," Hass said. Since the [Hamas attacks](#) on October 7th and Israel's retaliation, she had been "filled with the realization that now this was my people doing this. Now we're the ones riding our bikes."

Hass had been invited by *Jewish Currents* not to speak of solutions—for now, she said, any "solution" was fanciful—but to provide her American counterparts with a sober perspective on what could be done. She was aware of the mood among fellow "hard-core leftists," and she warned them against certain tendencies—joining the "cult of armed struggle," for example, which glorified violence as a form of resistance. But if they could keep their heads, she

continued, they might exert meaningful pressure. She told them, “If Jewish communities in the diaspora care for the future and well-being of Jews in the land between the river and the sea, they should act against Israeli policies and its war of destruction in Gaza.”

*Currents* offers sanctuary and a place of instruction for a generation of Jews who love their parents but have split with them. This cohort was raised to admire Israel as a beacon of light unto the nations, but has only ever known the regime of [Benjamin Netanyahu](#), Israel’s longest-serving Prime Minister, and the normalization of settler politics. In 2021, a survey found that almost forty per cent of American Jews under the age of forty believe that Israel is an “apartheid state.” Polls taken since October 7th reflect a widening generational gyre: many older Jews have grown more intensely attached to Israel, but only about fifty per cent of those under thirty-five support military and financial aid to the country. In the past ten months, even without a paywall, *Currents*’ subscriber base has nearly doubled, though it’s still only about ten thousand—a circulation close to half that of the right-wing Jewish magazine *Commentary*, and in line with that of *n+1*. The magazine’s only authority derives from its commitment to substance and clarity, qualities that have attracted an ardent readership.

The animating spirit of the enterprise is its thirty-nine-year-old editor-in-chief, Arielle Angel. She is of Sephardic descent, with an olive complexion and almond eyes; she wears smart thrift-store clothes and radiates a prickly charisma. A few days after Hass’s talk, I accompanied Angel and her rescue Shih Tzu, Lola, on a walk in Prospect Park, where I watched the dog, in the family tradition, provoke larger animals. Angel had just returned from a series of meetings with Jews in Europe, many of whom regard *Currents* not just as a media property but as a model of a potential rival to the existing Jewish power structure. Angel often speaks in a prophetic register of fiery gloom; one former staffer matter-of-factly described her as akin to a “medieval mystic.” She told me that left-

leaning Jews find the official Jewish world alien, and that “*Currents* is the thing people are holding on to. People want us to be their day school, synagogue, everything, and sometimes I think we should give up the magazine and just do something to meet those needs, because we have an audience that needs us.” She laughed. “I don’t know if they *read* us, but they need us.”

The magazine has published extensive reporting on Israeli evictions of Palestinians in the West Bank. Wikipedia editors recently demoted the Anti-Defamation League’s credibility as a source, citing *Currents* investigations. (The A.D.L. called the decision “deeply disturbing.”) Angel has contributed essays that examine, with rigorous ambivalence, the political and emotional questions that contemporary Jews can be reluctant to ask themselves. Beinart, one of the few Jews able to reach coreligionists who might not otherwise listen, has elaborated arguments for the transformation of Israel-Palestine into an equal binational state. *Currents*’ core contributors and advisers include many Palestinians. As the contributor Raphael Magarik told me, of the magazine’s ethos, “If it’s not a shared Jewish-Palestinian project, it’s bankrupt.”

The magazine’s broader ambition, at what feels like an inflection point in American Jews’ relationship to Israel, is to remind readers that Jewish identity has always been in flux. Mainstream Jewish institutions, in the staff’s view, have supplanted an expansive tradition with a narrow ethnic tribalism: Jews can be atheists or Buddhists or connoisseurs of pepperoni pizza, but Israel’s status as a Jewish democracy remains sacred. *Currents* is an experiment in the cultivation of a Jewish public untethered from Zionism. Readers come for the anti-occupation politics, but they stay for the roundtable discussions of “texts” like “Curb Your Enthusiasm” and the regular consultations with traditional sources. What might we learn, for example, from the Jewish calendar’s cyclical notion of time?

After October 7th, the magazine found itself in an agonizing double bind. On October 13th, it ran a piece by the Israeli historian Raz Segal, who was already prepared to identify Israeli reprisals as a “genocide.” This past winter, Yehuda Kurtzer, an influential liberal Zionist, wrote, in the *Forward*, that *Currents* appeared to be “entirely disinterested in the claims of Jewish peoplehood and solidarity.” The editors are accustomed to such censure from Jews to their right but remain sensitive to Palestinian reproach. Amid the suffering in Gaza, the magazine hesitates to prioritize Jewish feelings. Still, this spring, Kaleem Hawa, who has written for *Currents*, criticized its disposition as narcissistic. The task at hand, he [wrote](#), is not “a ‘redemption’ of Judaism, not the salvation of the Jewish kids spiritually disfigured by their parents—it is Palestinian freedom, which necessarily requires a militancy in withdrawing, confronting and creating contradictions within these institutions.” Daniel May, the magazine’s publisher, said, “No matter what we do, it’s a given that we’ll be called either Hamas supporters or Zionist apologists—and most likely both, simultaneously.”

Hass, in the end, gave in to a reluctant fatalism: Jewish-Palestinian solidarity might be too fragile to withstand the war. But even Jewish-Jewish coalitions have proved ungovernable. At times, the *Currents* masthead has seemed on the cusp of disintegration. Angel has fought to keep it intact. “It’s difficult, in the most intense moment of our lives, even to get people into the room for the conversation,” she said. She has led with her own vulnerability: “The period after October 7th was the most acute grief I’ve ever felt, before my father died. And my unequivocal orientation post-October 7th was that I had to keep everyone in.”

The Jewish literary critic [Alfred Kazin](#) once wrote, “The ‘people of the book’ are now the people of the magazine.” By the middle of the twentieth century, American Jews had developed an almost compulsive habit of starting periodicals. They were characteristically quarrelsome and delusionally self-confident, certain that their parochial disagreements would prove relevant to

the wider culture. For early generations of Yiddish radicals, these arguments revolved around the Communist Party. In 1946, Party members founded *Jewish Life*, a journal that ritually commemorated the birthday of Stalin, ran ads for “holiday rates” at Catskills retreats, and included interminable essays denouncing the “Big Lie” that antisemitism existed in the Soviet Union. By the fifties, however, Stalin’s crimes could no longer be rationalized. The grand tradition of Jewish politics is patricide, the historian Yuri Slezkine has observed, and by then magazines such as *Commentary* and *Dissent* had been founded by a new generation eager to repudiate their parents. *Jewish Life* was rebranded as *Jewish Currents*, and it withdrew into shame and recrimination.

Some early issues of *Currents* are preserved at *yivo*, a Jewish cultural institute, which is bountifully staffed by archivists who help elderly Jews log in to genealogy Web sites. I recently visited with May, a former organizer and lapsed academic in his forties with an athletic build, horn-rimmed glasses, and a dry sense of humor. The contrast with *Currents'* relative destitution was a little, to echo the title of the magazine’s podcast, on the nose. The archival parcels were yellowed and frail. We turned their pages with a slender “microspatula,” which resembled the silver *yad*, or hand, used to track one’s position while reading Torah. Our table was soon littered with paper fragments and dust.



*“The recipe says if I have these nine thousand things in my kitchen I can just throw it together in a few moments.”*

*Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

After the magazine’s belated break with the Party, May said, its management had to wrestle with the fact that “the bedrock of American Jewish politics was an immoral regime.” *Currents* redirected its radicalism into civil rights, and paid homage to the old Yiddishkeit with schmaltzy nostalgia. As Mitchell Abidor, a longtime contributor, told me, “Every June there was an article about the Rosenbergs, every April one about the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.” Enthusiasm for Israel generally focussed on the country’s early socialist ethos. “I was a Zionist for twenty minutes in 1974,” Abidor said. “I went over to the Jewish Agency and said, ‘Send me to the most left-wing kibbutz you got,’ which was the one that Chomsky went to.”

In 2017, a labor organizer named Jacob Plitman was walking a picket line in Manhattan when a friend told him that he’d been paid five hundred bucks to recruit Jewish millennials for an unspecified event with free beer. Plitman told me, “I went up to the old garment district in my filthy suit to meet Larry Bush, who told us this very crazy story about a magazine I’d never heard of.” Bush, a writer and a former puppeteer, had long been *Jewish Currents*’ steward, and didn’t want it to die with him. Plitman said, “It was, like, ‘Here’s this thing I love that’s like my house. You wanna come live here?’” Plitman wrote a “ludicrous” seven-page application about how the energy bottled up in his group chats required “a place to think.” Bush threw him the keys to the magazine. Plitman soon stumbled on a digressive [essay](#) about hallucinogens, Torah, and the sublime, written by Arielle Angel.

Angel had grown up in a liberal home in the conservative and fervently Zionist Jewish environment of Miami. Her mother was a judge and, later, a prominent reproductive-rights activist, and her father was a serial entrepreneur who struggled to reckon with the darkness of his childhood. His parents came from Salonika,

Greece, where ninety per cent of the Jewish population was deported and exterminated. Angel's grandparents survived, but they both lost virtually their entire families. They rarely spoke about it, and Angel's father never questioned them. At one point, he asked Angel, "Do you really think the Holocaust affected me?" She told me, "To have had his childhood and ask that question is insane," adding, "I spent my whole life microdosing this enormous loss, this entire thing taken from me—history, culture, stability—that destroyed my family." She daydreamed about killing Nazis: "My childhood was so deep in fear. I was afraid of gas chambers everywhere, I couldn't get into an elevator, I had night terrors, I used to pull out my hair."

She attended a traditional Jewish day school through eighth grade, but after some rebellious misdemeanors she was ushered out. At her new public school, she was serially truant but showed up every afternoon to edit the newspaper. A few of her childhood friends succumbed to overdoses, while others cleaned up their acts and joined Chabad, a proselytizing Orthodox sect. When Angel was sixteen, she and her mother embarked on a March of the Living trip to visit former concentration camps in Poland. The trip ordinarily culminated in a flight to Israel, where participants were wrapped in Israeli flags, but the second intifada had just begun, and their group never made it out of Europe. Angel, who is not wholly immune to the dream logic of signs, attributed some meaning to the fact that she'd witnessed the horror but been denied the theatrical redemption.

Angel went to art school in New York. She based one conceptual piece on her Ladino-speaking grandmother, whose linguistic community had been largely extinguished. She opposed the Iraq War, but anti-Zionist placards, which connected American imperialism with the Israeli occupation, spoiled her experience at rallies. She fought with a boyfriend about it at the time. ("You just don't understand—the Holocaust! Everyone hates us!") During the 2014 war in Gaza, however, she encountered two *Times* photos—

one of Israelis sitting on couches on a hilltop watching bombs fall, the other of Gazan children killed on a beach—and, she told me, “something didn’t add up, and then everything collapsed.” She cried in her room for days. She went by herself to a protest for Gaza, which felt, she later wrote, “like a betrayal of everything I’d ever known and loved.” She lasted for thirty minutes, then wept on a bench. “There was just this sense that if you broke with Israel you had nowhere to go,” she told me.

Like-minded Jews had come together to form an activist group called IfNotNow. At the group’s meetings, recounting one’s deconversion narrative became “a ritual, like people tell their ‘come to Jesus’ moments,” she said, adding, with a mischievous smile, “You know, their roads to Damascus.” But after a few years she realized that she was too tetchy and independent-minded for activist sloganeering. For almost a decade, she had labored on a novel based on her Chabad friends, which was rejected by agents as too theological for the average reader. When *Currents* was given new life, like some golem in a Prague attic, she told me, “it was like I had manifested it.”

Plitman hired her as the literary editor, but upon her arrival she imperiously revised the entire inaugural issue. Plitman, who became the publisher, said, “The relaunch was a *kampf*, man—tears, screaming, like the birth sequence out of ‘Rosemary’s Baby,’ for four straight months, seven days a week.” He used to joke with Angel that, if they succeeded, it would erase the Holocaust, “because that’s how it felt the stakes were for her. That level of ferocity and vengeance and redemption, the nuclear power of mid-century Jewish life, the movie ‘Exodus’—that’s alive in her. It’s like this cross that she bears, and I could tease her because that’s what I’m like, too.” In the spring of 2018, the magazine threw a relaunch party. Nearly five hundred people showed up; the line to get in snaked around the block. Klezmer music was played, and a spontaneous drunken hora broke out. (Plitman thought, “Weird,

but, all right, if that's the vibe.") There was warmth among the orphaned, and a collective hope that felt vaguely messianic.

For decades, affiliation with synagogues and other Jewish organizations has seemed to be in irreversible decline, and there is anxiety everywhere that Jews are assimilating themselves out of existence. Much of the *Currents* staff has been astonished to find themselves at a magazine with "Jewish" in the title. Nora Caplan-Bricker, the executive editor, told me, "I've now spent going on four years of my life in the Jewish world professionally, and it still surprises me every day."

*Currents* was a response to a Jewish discourse that seemed in perpetual crisis. Arguing about Israel—often caustically—had been customary among American Jews before the state was founded. By the end of the Yom Kippur War, in 1973, the remainder of that debate was crushed by what came to be known as the "Zionist consensus." Right-wing Jews embraced Israel as their tribal enclave, and didn't always care whether it was a true liberal democracy. Mainstream liberal Jews did care, although they also believed that the Holocaust had made Jewish sovereignty a necessity: Israel, like many other countries, may have been born in "original sin," but it might yet be brought into line with Americanized "Jewish values." Major Jewish institutions, however, became increasingly accountable to large donors who skewed conservative, and the pervasive threat of the "new antisemitism"—which included almost all criticism of Israel—served to discipline liberal misgivings. "You probably remember the so-called Ground Zero mosque, which was neither at Ground Zero nor a mosque," Mark Egerman, the co-chair of the *Currents* board, told me. "The A.D.L. opposed that instead of standing up for religious freedom." Since the seventies, *Commentary* had been the house organ of disgruntled neoconservatives; by the nineties, left-leaning Democrats who were stalwart on Israel found a haven at *The New Republic*. Since Donald Trump's election, *Tablet* has preoccupied

itself with the “woke” threat, which for its editors includes anti-Zionist Jews—or “un-Jews.”

Beinart, who served as the editor of *The New Republic* in the early two-thousands, became known as a liberal advocate for the Iraq War. In the next decade, he gradually evolved into perhaps America’s highest-profile liberal Zionist critic of Israel. In 2010, he published an [essay](#) in *The New York Review of Books* indicting the “Jewish establishment” for its shortsighted hypocrisy. For several decades, Beinart warned, it has “asked American Jews to check their liberalism at Zionism’s door, and now, to their horror, they are finding that many young Jews have checked their Zionism instead.” By the time Plitman and Angel became politically conscious, the Netanyahu era no longer seemed to them like the hijacking of an imperfect democracy but instead like the completion of a fundamentally illiberal national project. In 2020, Beinart joined *Currents* and relinquished what lingered of his liberal Zionism. Now fifty-three, he’s an elder statesman of a renewed Jewish left, which encompasses such figures as Sam Adler-Bell, of the popular podcast “Know Your Enemy,” and the writer John Ganz.

When the *Currents* editors applied themselves to the enigma of what a novel Jewishness for the diaspora might look like, they resorted both to metaphor—the managing editor, Nathan Goldman, quoted the late writer Susan Taubes’s [description](#) of Jewishness as “a sealed box containing I don’t know what, maybe dynamite, maybe just stones”—and to jokes. On one episode of the *Currents* podcast, Angel wondered aloud how she could in good conscience celebrate Jewish Christmas when she liked neither Chinese food nor movies. At the very least, the staff reasoned, Jews could ground themselves in collective textual interpretation. Each issue has a column called “Responsa,” which is hashed out with Talmudic deliberation; in one issue, it [promotes](#) the observation of Shabbat as an anti-work ritual, only to confess that the magazine’s editorial Slack channel scarcely rests. After the première of “Uncut Gems,”

a film that features Adam Sandler as a degenerate gambler, the staff convened an emergency meeting. Sandler’s striving antihero inspired some generative discomfort, Angel said, in a published transcript: “ ‘Maybe this is antisemitic?’ but also ‘I know that guy.’ ”On a scale of one to ten, Plitman awarded the film a score of eighteen, which in Jewish numerology means “life.” “He doesn’t speak for all of us,” Angel said. Plitman replied, “Actually, I do.”

At the outset, *Currents*’ Israel coverage had two audiences in mind. Some readers already agreed with them; others had a vestigial commitment that was just beginning to loosen. Reporters on the ground documented the realities of an occupation that could no longer be bracketed as “temporary.” Beinart braided Palestinian and Jewish arguments in favor of the Palestinian right to return. (Palestinians, he noted, were no more likely than Jews had been to abandon their yearning in exile.) Angel and Plitman appeared on Kurtzer’s podcast for a congenial discussion, during which he half joked that he loved to hate-read the magazine.

In time, these relationships began to fray. One *Currents* piece, by the Palestinian Jewish contributing editor Dylan Saba, criticized Israel’s Iron Dome air-defense system for underwriting Israeli aggression by lowering the cost of Palestinian reprisals. Another, by Kaleem Hawa, advocated resistance “by any means necessary.” Kurtzer tweeted that the appearance of Hawa’s essay “in a Jewish publication is absolutely indefensible.” In a response, Angel considered Kurtzer’s implication that she lacked *ahavat Yisrael*, or love for the Jewish people. She acknowledged that the magazine’s “omission” of concern for Israelis had “a parallel expression” in her private life. “I had not reached out to see how my great-aunt and -uncle, in their mid-90s and not entirely mobile, were making it down to the bomb shelter in the middle of the night,” she wrote. She might not love all Jews, but she was stuck with them as an extended family. It had taken her five years of affectionate debate to change her own mother’s views on Israel. Perhaps that kind of

loving stuckness, she allowed, can be the fulcrum for geopolitical transformation.

Not everyone affiliated with the magazine agreed. Saba, who considers Angel a friend, told me, “I’m not interested in thinking about politics through the lens of Mommy and Daddy. In peacetime, you can chip away at that, but we are not in peacetime.”

One evening in the summer of 2022, in Berlin’s scruffy Görlitzer Park, Angel and her close friend and colleague Joshua Leifer spoke of the inevitability of escalation in Israel-Palestine. Leifer had been reporting on the occupation for years. He told me, “We said we have to draft now an advance plan for what will happen after an event like October 7th.” Most Jews, including liberals, would probably find their hearts hardened against Palestinian misery. The magazine, however, had to remain steadfast. On the morning of October 7th, Angel collapsed into lamentation. “What I saw in the moment was mass death and the sadness of the whole sweep of it,” she said. “This long Jewish story, this long Palestinian story, and the movement ecosystem that had been trying to build something better.”

The staff hardly slept. One contributor’s son was a hostage. Every day, Daniel May heard from someone who knew a victim of the attacks. They updated a basic explainer about the crisis, and solicited contributions from writers on the ground. One of the magazine’s first [dispatches](#) from Gaza came from the Palestinian scholar Khalil Abu Yahia. He was [killed](#) two weeks later. Palestinian contributors e-mailed to ask if they would live to see their words in print. After five days that felt like an eternity, Angel published an [editorial](#) called “We Cannot Cross Until We Carry Each Other,” describing the attack and its consequences as an “enormous failure” of “Jewish movements for Palestine,” which had never amassed sufficient power to prevent Israeli violence, protect peaceful Palestinian protest, and transform two national

narratives of injury into “a shared struggle able to credibly respond to these massacres of Israelis and Palestinians.”

Angel characterized October 7th as a “retrenchment moment” for those on the fence. Rabbi Sharon Brous, an influential leader in Los Angeles’s Jewish community, who had used her pulpit to direct attention to the injustice of the occupation, spoke for the many Jews who felt that Israeli loss had been met with indifference and, in some quarters, jubilation. In an [op-ed](#), Kurtzer declared that Jews were witnessing the “reversal of decades of assimilation and decline, and coalescing back into a big tent.” Almost three hundred thousand people convened in Washington to march in support of Israel, where they made common cause with conservatives and evangelicals.

The American Jewish world seemed to be realigning itself. In *Dissent*, the labor historian Gabriel Winant argued that the lost Israeli lives had been “pre-grieved”—sanctified in the form of “bombs falling on Gaza.” Angel had little patience for these arguments. “This sense that grief is a dangerous thing, that felt wrong to me,” she said. “To try to shut down people’s grief makes people reactionary, because you can’t stop people from grieving.” She added, “Grief for Jews is communal.” *Currents* tried to provide asylum for mourning that was not a prelude to vengeance. In a [letter](#) to readers, May described the shiva, the traditional Jewish mourning period, as a deliberate incapacitation: “Now is not the time, shiva says to the mourner, for anything at all.” Magarik presided over text studies in Chicago and New York. He recounted the story of King David, who is surprised by the chaotic immensity of his bereavement following the death of his wayward son Absalom. “People were really hungering for something, and it might not necessarily have been Torah, but it actually worked,” Magarik said.

“We love each other and like one another, and it’s very beautiful, but everyone is exhausted and heartbroken,” Angel said of the

*Currents* staff. “There’s a privilege in the fact that this is our job. If not, what the fuck would I be doing?” They’ve found some consolation in newsroom professionalism. During a recent editorial meeting over Zoom, Angel oversaw a discussion on how to cover recent protests outside an L.A. synagogue. The mainstream media, they agreed, had neglected to report that this particular house of worship was hosting a real-estate agency that advertised property in Israeli settlements. Angel came down in favor of publishing a simple corrective—“for the parents.”

Angel had issued a rule against social-media drama: her staff’s work was within the magazine, not in the online fray. But she couldn’t control every contributor. Joshua Leifer, home sick from synagogue on October 7th, didn’t see the news until sundown, when he could finally turn on his phone. In his new book, “Tablets Shattered,” he writes that he and his wife—who had friends killed at the Nova festival—spent days “glued to a livestream of Israeli TV,” crying. His political community, he believed, had two obligations: to denounce both the murder of innocent Israelis and the disproportionate Israeli response that he was sure would come. In his view, the Jewish left—including *Jewish Currents*—failed this test. Dylan Saba, the Palestinian Jewish contributor, tweeted on the morning of October 7th, “I could not be more proud of my people.” The magazine didn’t condemn Hamas. As Leifer saw it, *Currents* was deferring to the fraction of extreme pro-Palestine activists who believe that there is no such thing as an Israeli civilian, and ignoring the newfound sense of vulnerability that he and many Jews felt.

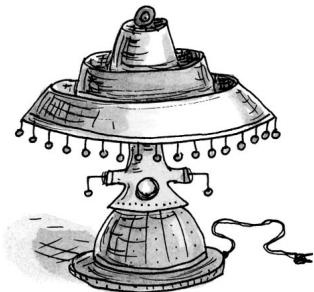
ON PERMANENT EXHIBIT IN APARTMENT 3-N



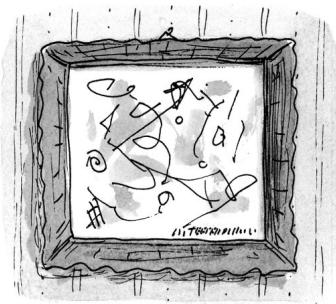
"Very valuable" vase,  
gift of Judy Butterworth



Bird-figurine collection,  
gift of Brent Slaw



Handcrafted lamp,  
gift of Harley Entwhistle



Abstract painting,  
gift of Myrtle Teeterborough

R. Chast

Cartoon by Roz Chast

Angel didn't necessarily share all of her contributors' instincts. But she emphasized that Saba's tweet had appeared before the extent of the civilian deaths became clear. The feelings expressed may have been raw and unruly, but each deserved to be taken seriously as part of the political terrain. "Josh's emotional reaction, as someone in mourning for people he felt connected to, and Dylan's, who felt a sense of possibility in the disruption of the violent status quo, were both real," Angel told me. "We needed to contend with both of them." But for Leifer, in Angel's estimation, "it was zero-sum—as if only his feelings were morally defensible and the very human reactions of many Palestinians were proof of their untrustworthiness." This, she felt, undermined any basis for a shared politics. Among staff members, personal perspectives on the attacks varied tremendously—the spectrum ran from "unconscionable" to "inevitable"—and, by custom, the magazine

never enforced a party line on anything. But the prevailing opinion was that any blunt condemnation would only reinforce the notion that these “unprovoked” attacks had occurred in a historical vacuum.

Angel and May pleaded with Leifer “to stay on and work it out with us on the page,” but he thought that the magazine had crossed a line, and he requested that his name quietly disappear from the masthead. Ten months on, Angel conceded that the political differences between them had become insuperable. Leifer attributed this to the brutally Manichaean dynamics at play. He told me that he kept thinking of Albert Camus’s famous line during the Algerian war for independence: “People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. If that is justice, then I prefer my mother.” He was still wounded; he told me, of *Currents*, “It was my entire life.”

An older cohort of Israel skeptics criticized *Currents* more gently. Shaul Magid, a professor of modern Judaism at Harvard, found the magazine’s position foolish but generationally understandable. “If you ask me, the left fucked up,” he told me. “But my own son thinks I’m an Israel apologist for saying so.” David Myers, a scholar of Jewish history at U.C.L.A., gave up his seat on the *Currents* board in 2022, but his millennial daughter kept hers. Myers told me that he is “no longer certain of the ultimate sustainability or even morality of a self-described Jewish state.” He paused. “But I am concerned about dismantling it now because I believe the physical safety of Israeli Jews would be endangered. I belong to the last generation—really the last—raised in the shadow of the Holocaust, for whom the existential question of how we will survive is sort of the question of my life. The existential question for my daughters is: how can we possibly justify that degree of oppression, dehumanization, and brutality in our name? We can’t.” But, he told me, his tortured “soul” was in Israel: “How did that once necessary and glorious idea go so wrong? Turns out it wasn’t such a glorious idea after all, but it was a project of both conquest

*and salvation, one that rescued Jews from great harm and certain death. I may be a millimetre apart from my daughters, but in the heat of fire that millimetre becomes magnified.”*

The politics of the situation were unforgiving. The bare-minimum ask for one party was beyond the pale for the other. Some Jews regarded any sympathy for the Palestinian cause as treason. The prominent American-born Israeli writer Yossi Klein Halevi said that, because Beinart had “aligned himself with those who want to destroy our ability to defend ourselves,” he is now “my enemy, and I don’t care if he goes to synagogue five times a day.” Some Palestinians share this us-or-them attitude. When one Jewish anti-Zionist activist recently questioned the strategic rationale behind a particular protest, a Palestinian organizer went after him on Twitter: “Weren’t you already called out for being a liberal Zionist? Do you need to be dog-walked again?” Many Jews who stood in solidarity with Palestinians—the writers Adam Shatz, Masha Gessen, and Nathan Thrall, along with Beinart and Leifer—were nevertheless impugned as closet “liberal Zionists,” which seemed to flirt with the antisemitic motif of the wolf in sheep’s clothing.

In August, I arrived at a Brooklyn bookstore for Leifer’s book launch, only to discover that it had been cancelled owing to what a posted sign said were “unforeseen circumstances.” A small and confused crowd gathered. When Leifer and his wife arrived, he pushed his way into the shop, and I followed. A store manager announced that she had determined, at the last minute, that the event’s moderator—Andy Bachman, a Reform rabbi with a large following—was “a Zionist,” and “we don’t want a Zionist on our stage.” Leifer asked her what a Zionist was; when she couldn’t answer, he explained that the complicated history of American Zionism was the heart of his book. (The bookstore issued an apology.) For Leifer, the irony—that Jews, who had long been pressured by the right to police anti-Zionism, now faced pressure from the left to disavow Zionism in any form—was bewildering.

Today, Beinart identifies himself with the heritage of “cultural Zionism,” the faith that a Jewish community can flourish alongside a Palestinian one. He told me, “I believe in the principle of full equality in Israel-Palestine, and I hope that acknowledging a Zionist tradition that opposed a Jewish state might make it easier to reach Jews for whom the term ‘Zionist’ is precious.” He remains invested in the mainstream community. (Beinart cannot do otherwise: he prays at an Orthodox minyan, alongside people with whom he passionately disagrees.) I asked the Palestinian writer Tareq Baconi, a close friend of Angel’s, for his perspective. He said, “If Peter and other Jews think strategically calling themselves ‘cultural Zionists’ is the more impactful way to intervene, then they should go and prosper. But don’t expect Palestinians to come and pat you on the back for it, because as far as Palestinians are concerned Zionism is only one thing.”

For years, Angel said, the word “anti-Zionist” felt like a repudiation of her ancestors. When the concentration camps were liberated, Angel’s great-aunt took refuge in Israel—a decision that Angel felt hardly able to judge. But she has now adopted the label on the basis of principled commitment to Palestinian liberation, although it also functions as a signal of her allegiance. May, who can’t quite shake his residual commitment to a Jewish homeland, said, “Our position has been painful to some Jewish allies, readers, and staff. In the context of tens of thousands of deaths in Gaza, however, it’s clear the side we needed to be on.” Last week, Brooklyn College abruptly cancelled a long-planned *Currents* festival, with sixty-five speakers and an expected crowd of up to a thousand. Previous sudden cancellations led May to suspect political skittishness. (A Brooklyn College representative denied this, saying that a building-safety issue at the venue required the cancellation of all events through October.) May said, of the magazine’s stance, “It certainly hasn’t been cost-free.”

Since October 7th, *Currents* has delved into more explicitly religious content. Every Shabbat, it e-mails out a commentary on

the weekly Torah portion, often applying it to current events. The *alte kakers*, or old-timers, have been driven to distraction. On one podcast episode, Abidor, who speaks with a near-extinct Brooklyn accent that belongs in some holy reliquary, barked at Angel that the founding values of the Jewish left lay in “escaping the dead hand of the rabbis. And now you’re quoting Rabbi Ish Kabibble Meggibeheimer?”

October 7th inspired a groundswell of recommitment among Jews in the center and on the right, but it has had a similar effect on the left. The difference is that the “big tent” mainstream can rally around Israel, while the left has had to affirm the relevance of a fuzzier diasporic tradition. During Passover, I attended an intimate seder organized by a dozen twentysomethings, including a former *Currents* fellow. It was spirited and heartfelt—and strikingly traditional. The host joked about hiding her father’s back issues of *Commentary*, but she had used her mother’s recipe for the charoset. Angel told me, “If I convinced some of the people I grew up with that there was something really wrong with Israel, it would shatter their worlds. I can’t be offering them nothing on the other side but loneliness.”

One Saturday evening in June, a hundred *Currents* readers crammed into a loft in Brooklyn for an all-night text study to celebrate the festival of Shavuot. If an unaffiliated Jew could tell you anything at all about the holiday, it would likely be something about consuming dairy products, and the magazine had furnished cheesecake. The room, gently lamplit, had a consecrated air. Avi Garelick, a Jewish educator, tugged on a long black rabbinical beard. He taught a series of Biblical and Talmudic texts that examined the question of which kinds of infractions merit forgiveness, which rebuke, and which excommunication. As a warmup, he asked those in the audience how they currently relate to other Jews. One student said, “It feels like everything is heightened, like there’s this deeper sense of dread if we’re not morally aligned, but a deeper sense of love if we connect.” It went

without saying that people were thinking about their parents. Sarah Aziza, a Palestinian American writer who has contributed to *Currents*, told me, “Sometimes I feel like it’s almost a luxury to be a Palestinian in this moment, as opposed to being Jewish, because it’s easy to be clear.” At the same time, she continued, “breaking up with half your family is nothing compared to losing half of it.” Two hundred members of her extended family, she said, had been killed in Gaza.

A few days later, Angel and I took another walk with Lola in Prospect Park. The last few years have exacted a toll, and she plans to take a long-deferred sabbatical to regroup. She said, “There is an entire apparatus supporting the most heinous things happening in the world right now and calling it Judaism.” Angel carries the burden, at times, as if it were hers alone. When the cult singer-songwriter David Berman, the front man for the indie-rock band Silver Jews, died by suicide in 2019, she and her colleague Nathan Goldman wrote an elegy in his memory. Berman had attributed his misery and fury to his father, a major lobbyist for the oil industry. Although Angel didn’t know Berman, she felt tragically belated in her attempt “to revive a prophetic, leftist, literary Jewishness” where he would have felt at home. They saw in his story “a familiar Jewish intergenerational struggle—a push against a previous generation, against Jews who’d been seduced by sudden access to power into forgetting themselves.”

Angel’s own father wasn’t powerful; he was gentle, kind, beloved. He had been raised among the shards of a lineage fractured beyond repair. She had “tried to hold his history and his family story for him,” but, when she once proposed that they visit a Greek Jewish synagogue, he couldn’t cross the street to enter. Three months after October 7th, Angel’s father died by suicide. At his shiva, in February, she felt that all her mourning since October was connected. Both Saba and Leifer were there. “I’m not sure how intertwined these stories are, if at all, but it feels that way,” she told me. She couldn’t free herself of a profoundly dark apprehension.

She said, “In seventy-five years, the child of someone in Gaza now will commit suicide.” ♦



*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](#).”*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/the-angst-and-sorrow-of-jewish-currents>

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

[Annals of Inquiry](#)

## Are Your Morals Too Good to Be True?

Scientists have shattered our self-image as principled beings, motivated by moral truths. Some wonder whether our ideals can survive the blow to our vanity.

By [Manvir Singh](#)

September 9, 2024



*When science started to supplant the supernatural in the nineteenth century, some people decided to forge their own values and act in accordance with their conscience. More recently, the evolutionary study of morality has reduced conscience to a biological artifact.*

*Illustration by Ricardo Tomás*

I spent the summer of 2011 as an undergraduate researcher at the Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory, in Colorado. My job was to collect burying beetles—necrophagous critters with wing cases the colors of Halloween—using traps made out of coffee cans and chicken flesh. Behavioral biologists are fascinated by burying beetles because of their biparental model of care: males and females prepare meaty balls from carcasses and then coöperatively raise larvae on them. I was a matchmaker, charged with setting up pairs of beetles and watching them co-parent.

That summer was a dream. I lived in a community of more than a hundred scientists, students, and staff. The research station, based at the site of a deserted mining town, was a magnet for weirdos and plant lovers, naturalists and marmot chasers, flower people and climate watchers. It consisted of dozens of cabins—some Lincoln Log style and more than a century old, others retrofitted into modern laboratories—encircled by spruce and aspen forests, montane meadows, and monumental peaks. I was more accustomed to sidewalks than to summits, but now I saw elk and black bears and woke up one night to a porcupine gnawing on my cabin. For the first time in my life, I found love, or something close to it. In spare moments, I retired to my room, where I drew and wrote in my journal. On the weekends, we scaled the Rockies.

A part of me wanted that summer to be my forever. I envisioned a career as a collector of coleopterans, sneaking off to the mountains to cavort and observe. Another part of me worried that I was being frivolous. Back in college, my classmates had high-minded ambitions like fighting climate change, becoming human-rights lawyers, and starting microfinance firms to alleviate poverty. To spend time with books and beetles in wildflower country seemed the pinnacle of self-indulgence. Adding to the internal tension was something I'd observed among my beetles: the spectre of evolved selfishness. What looked like coöperation was, I discovered, laced with sexual conflict. The female beetles, when they had a size advantage, ejected their male partners; the males evidently stuck

around less to help than to insure future mating opportunities. Where I first saw biparental collaboration was instead a complicated waltz of organisms seeking to perpetuate their own interests. Was I one of them—another gene machine bent on favoring itself?

I had, to that point, considered myself a mostly decent person, moved by empathy and committed to self-expression. Was all this actually vanity and delusion, selfishness masquerading as morality? The prospect was unsettling. So I hid away in a one-room library that smelled faintly of old textbooks and the alcohol used to preserve animal specimens, and there I started to work out a response. We're evolved organisms, I figured, but we're also an intelligent, cultural species capable of living by ideals that transcend our egoistic origins. What emerged from my musings was a personal ideology, at the core of which was an appreciation of creation—including artistic and scientific work. Even an awkward scribble, I supposed, expresses an incomprehensibly epic causal history, which includes a maker, the maker's parents, the quality of the air in the room, and so on, until it expands to encompass the entire universe. Goodness could be reclaimed, I thought. I would draw and write and do science but as acts of memorialization—the duties of an apostle of being. I called the ideology Celebrationism, and, early in 2012, I started to codify it in a manic, sprawling novel of that name.

I had grown up a good Sikh boy: I wore a turban, didn't cut my hair, didn't drink or smoke. The idea of a god that acted in the world had long seemed implausible, yet it wasn't until I started studying evolution in earnest that the strictures of religion and of everyday conventions began to feel brittle. By my junior year of college, I thought of myself as a materialist, open-minded but skeptical of anything that smacked of the supernatural.

Celebrationism came soon after. It expanded from an ethical road map into a life philosophy, spanning aesthetics, spirituality, and purpose. By the end of my senior year, I was painting my

fingernails, drawing swirling mehndi tattoos on my limbs, and regularly walking without shoes, including during my college graduation. “Why, Manvir?” my mother asked, quietly, and I launched into a riff about the illusory nature of normativity and about how I was merely a fancy organism produced by cosmic mega-forces.

After college, I spent a year in Copenhagen, where I studied social insects by day and worked on “Celebrationism” the rest of the time. Reassured of the virtue of intellectual and artistic work, I soon concluded that fictional wizards provided the best model for a life. As I wrote to my friend Cory, “They’re wise, eccentric, colorful, so knowledgeable about some of the most esoteric subjects, lone wolves in a sense, but all of their life experience constantly comes together in an exalting way every time they do something.” When, the following year, I started a Ph.D. in human evolutionary biology at Harvard, I saw the decision as in service of my Celebrationist creed. I could devote myself to meditating on the opportune swerves that produced us.

I was mistaken. Celebrationism died soon afterward. Just as observation and a dose of evolutionary logic revealed male burying beetles not as attentive fathers but as possessive mate guarders, the natural and behavioral sciences deflated my dreamy credo, exposing my lofty aspirations as performance and self-deception. I struggled, unsuccessfully, to construct a new framework for moral behavior which didn’t look like self-interest in disguise. A profound cynicism took hold.

Skepticism about objective morality is nothing new, of course. [Michel de Montaigne](#), in the sixteenth century, remarked that “nothing in all the world has greater variety than law and custom,” a sign, for him, of the nonexistence of universal moral truths—and he had predecessors among the ancient Greeks. David Hume chimed in, two centuries later, to argue that judgments of right and wrong emanate from emotion and social conditioning, not the

dispassionate application of reason. Even the more pious-sounding theorists, including Kant and Hegel, saw morality as something that we derive through our own thinking, our own rational will. The war between science and religion in the nineteenth century brought it all to a head, as a supernatural world view became supplanted by one that was more secular and scientific, in a development that Nietzsche described as the death of God. As the pillars of Christian faith crumbled, Western morality seemed poised to collapse. Nihilism loomed. “But how did we do this?” the madman in Nietzsche’s “The Gay Science” asks. “How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained the earth from its sun?”

Nietzsche’s response to a godless world was a moral makeover: individuals were to forge their own precepts and act in accordance with them. More than a century later, such forays have matured into an individualist morality that has become widespread. We behave morally, we often say, not because of doctrine but because of our higher-order principles, such as resisting cruelty or upholding the equality of all humans. Rather than valuing human life because an omnipotent godhead commands it, or because our houses of worship instruct it, we do so because we believe it is right.

At its core, this view of morality assumes a kind of moral integrity. Although some people may embrace principles for self-interested ends, the story goes, genuine altruism is possible through reasoned reflection and an earnest desire to be ethical. I told myself a version of this story in the Rockies: rummage through your soul and you can find personally resonant principles that inspire good behavior. The Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg turned a model like this into scholarly wisdom in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, positioning it as the apex of the six stages of moral development he described. For the youngest children, he thought, moral goodness hinges on what gets rewarded and punished. For actualized adults, in contrast, “right is defined by the decision of conscience in

accord with self-chosen ethical principles appealing to logical comprehensiveness, universality, and consistency.”

All this may sound abstract, but it is routine for most educated Westerners. Consider how moral arguments are made. “[Animal Liberation Now](#)” (2023), the Princeton philosopher Peter Singer’s reboot of his 1975 classic, “Animal Liberation,” urges readers to emancipate nonhuman animals from the laboratory and the factory farm. Singer assumes that people are committed to promoting well-being and minimizing suffering, and so he spends most of the book showing, first, that our actions create hellish existences for many of our nonhuman brethren and, second, that there is no principled reason to deny moral standing to fish or fowl. His belief in human goodness is so strong, he admits, that he expected everyone who read the original version of his book “would surely be convinced by it and would tell their friends to read it, and therefore everyone would stop eating meat and demand changes to our treatment of animals.”

From an evolutionary perspective, this could seem an odd expectation. Humans have been fashioned by natural selection to pursue sex, status, and material resources. We are adept at looking out for ourselves. We help people, yes, but the decision to give is influenced by innumerable selfish considerations, including how close we are to a recipient, whether they’ve helped us before, how physically attractive they are, whether they seem responsible for their misfortune, and who might be watching. A Martian observer might, accordingly, have expected Singer’s arguments to focus less on the horrific conditions of overcrowded pig farms and instead to appeal to our hedonic urges—more along the lines of “Veganism makes you sexy” or “People who protest animal experimentation have more friends and nicer houses than their apathetic rivals.”

But Singer has always known his audience. Most people want to be good. Although “Animal Liberation Now” is largely filled with gruesome details, it also recounts changes that growing awareness

has spurred. At least nine states have passed legislation limiting the confinement of sows, veal calves, and laying hens. Between 2005 and 2022 in the U.S., the proportion of hens that were uncaged rose from three per cent to thirty-five per cent, while Yum! Brands—the owner of such fast-food franchises as KFC, [Taco Bell](#), and Pizza Hut, with more than fifty thousand locations around the world—has vowed to phase out eggs from caged hens by 2030. These changes are a microcosm of the centuries-long expansion of moral concern that, throughout much of the world, has ended slavery and decriminalized homosexuality. Could there be a clearer instance of genuine virtue?

I wasn't yet thinking about any of this when I started graduate school. Instead, my mind was on monkeys. I had proposed studying the Zanzibar red colobus, a creature notable for retaining juvenile traits like a short face and a small head into adulthood. Our species underwent a similar juvenilization during our evolution, and the hope was that something might be learned about our past by studying this peculiar primate.

Still, I couldn't read about monkeys all day. To start a Ph.D. at a major research university is to have proximity to countless intellectual currents, and I began to drift through the scholarly worlds on campus, which is how I found Moshe Hoffman. Moshe is intense. A curly-haired game theorist with a scalpel-like ability to dissect arguments and identify their logical flaws, Moshe was raised in an Orthodox Hasidic community in Los Angeles. He grew up wearing a kippah and spending half of each school day studying the Talmud and other religious texts until, at the age of fifteen, he forsook his faith. He had a chance conversation with an atheist classmate, then picked up Richard Dawkins's "The Selfish Gene." The book exposed him to game theory and evolutionary biology, setting him on a lifelong quest to solve the puzzles of human behavior.

When we met, near the end of my first year, Moshe was a postdoctoral researcher fixated on the nature of trust. We all depend on trust, yet it works in tricky ways. On the one hand, we trust people who are guided by consistent ethical precepts. I'd rather go to dinner with someone deeply opposed to stealing than a jerk who pockets my valuables as soon as I get up to pee. On the other hand, we're turned off when people's commitments seem calculated. The ascent of terms like "slacktivism," "virtue signalling," and "moral grandstanding" bespeaks a frustration with do-gooders motivated more by acclaim than by an internal moral compass. The idea is that, if you're in it for the reputational perks, you can't be relied on when those perks vanish. In "[The Social Instinct](#)" (2021), Nichola Raihani, who works on the evolution of coöperation, refers to this issue as the "reputation tightrope": it's beneficial to look moral but only as long as you don't seem motivated by the benefits.



*"Shred the plank."*  
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Moshe argued that humans deal with this dilemma by adopting moral principles. Through learning or natural selection, or some combination, we've developed a paradoxical strategy for making friends. We devote ourselves to moral ends in order to garner trust.

Which morals we espouse depend on whose trust we are courting. He demonstrated this through a series of game-theoretic models, but you don't need the math to get it. Everything that characterizes a life lived by moral principles—consistently abiding by them, valuing prosocial ends, refusing to consider costs and benefits, and maintaining that these principles exist for a transcendental reason—seems perfectly engineered to make a person look trustworthy.

His account identifies showmanship, conscious or otherwise, in ostensibly principled acts. We talk about moral principles as if they were inviolate, but we readily consider trade-offs and deviate from those principles when we can get away with it. Philip Tetlock, who works at the intersection of political science and psychology, labels our commitments “pseudo-sacred.” Sure, some people would die for their principles, yet they often abandon them once they gain power and no longer rely on trust. In [“Human Rights in Africa”](#) (2017), the historian Bonny Ibhawoh showed that post-colonial African dictators often started their careers as dissidents devoted to civil liberties.

Moshe wasn't alone in this work. Around the time that he and I began chatting, researchers at Oxford, the École Normale Supérieure, and elsewhere were disrobing morality and finding performance underneath. Jillian Jordan, then a graduate student at Yale and now on the faculty of Harvard Business School, conducted a series of landmark studies demonstrating how people instinctively use moral behavior to cultivate laudable personas. A 2016 paper in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* —which Jordan wrote with Moshe and two other researchers—studied uncalculating coöperation, the tendency to willfully ignore costs and benefits when helping others. It's a key feature of both romantic love and principled behavior. The authors found not only that “coöoperating without looking” (a phrase of Moshe's) attracts trust but that people engage in it more when trying to win observers' confidence. The motivations that we find so detestable

—moral posturing for social rewards—may, in fact, be the hallmark of moral action.

Invested as I was in my own goodness, whether achieved or aspirational, I found Moshe’s ideas both alarming and mesmeric. To engage with them was to look in a mirror and find a sinister creature staring back. The more I sought Moshe out—first by taking a course he co-taught, then by meeting up for Indian food after class, then by working as his teaching assistant—the more I felt trapped within my self-interest. Celebrationism was exposed as a beautiful lie. The search for personally resonant principles was reinterpreted as a tactic not to overcome self-interest but to advance it. Any dignified motivations that had once held sway—making art for art’s sake, acting to minimize suffering—became smoke screens to distract others from my selfishness. Here were hard truths that I felt compelled to confront. I wanted to escape the performance, to adopt values for reasons other than their social utility, but even that urge, I recognized, reflected the same strategic impulse to appear good and consistent. It was like forcing yourself to wake up from a dream only to realize that you’re still dreaming.

Yes, there were venerable antecedents to all these arguments, but what had once been the province of the provocateur was now something of a scholarly consensus. The new, naturalistic study of morality stemmed from an array of converging disciplines and approaches, spanning sociology, biology, anthropology, and psychology. It was set forth in popular books like Matt Ridley’s “[The Origins of Virtue](#)” (1996), Joshua Greene’s “[Moral Tribes](#)” (2013), and Richard Wrangham’s “[The Goodness Paradox](#)” (2019). Not everyone in this field understands ethical behavior the way Moshe does. Still, they tend to employ a framework grounded in evolutionary theory—one that casts morality as a property of our primate brains and little else. Appeals to pure selflessness have become harder to defend, while a belief in objective moral truths—existing apart from our minds and discoverable through impartial judgment—has grown increasingly untenable.

Darwin himself sensed the implications. In “[The Descent of Man](#)” (1871), he suggested that studying the “moral sense” from “the side of natural history” would throw “light on one of the highest psychical faculties of man.” It took another hundred years for scholars of evolution to appreciate the extent to which a Darwinian world view can explain morality. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, philosophers like Sharon Street, at N.Y.U., were taking note. “Before life began, nothing was valuable,” Street wrote in a now classic article. “But then life arose and began to value—not because it was recognizing anything, but because creatures who valued (certain things in particular) tended to survive.” In other words, moral tenets—such as the rightness of loyalty or the wrongness of murder—do not exist unless natural selection produces organisms that value them.

In recent decades, all sorts of philosophers have added to the pool of adaptive theories about morality. Allan Gibbard argues that moral statements (“Killing is bad”) actually express attitudes (“I don’t like killing”), allowing us to coördinate on shared prescriptions (“No one shall kill”). Philip Kitcher sees ethics as an ever-evolving project invented by our remote ancestors and continually refined to help societies flourish. Richard Joyce has proposed that moral judgments help keep us out of trouble. Given normal human hedonism, we may struggle to stop ourselves from, say, stealing a brownie; the feeling that it’s morally wrong provides us an emotional bulwark. Non-moral explanations like these, whatever their differences, obviate talk of moral truths, construing them as dreamlike delusions.

Like the decline of religion, what’s often called the evolutionary debunking of morality can induce existential panic and strenuous efforts at circumvention. The eminent philosopher Derek Parfit, the subject of a recent biography by David Edmonds, spent decades writing “[On What Matters](#),” a book that sought both to build a unified theory of objective morality and to defend it against challengers, including evolution-inspired skeptics. In 2015, at

N.Y.U., Parfit and Street taught a course together on meta-ethics. On the last day of class, a student asked them whether they had learned anything from their collaboration. “My memory is that both of us said ‘No!’” Street told Edmonds. “He thought my position was nihilistic. He was worried about it being true and felt it needed beating back with arguments.”

What troubled me was less the notion that morality was our own creation than the implication that our motives were suspect—that evolutionarily ingrained egoism permeated our desires, including the desire to overcome that selfishness. Sincerity, I concluded, was dead. Just as the natural sciences had killed the Christian God, I thought, the social and behavioral sciences had made appeals to virtuous motivations preposterous. I became skeptical of all moral opinions, but especially of the most impassioned ones, which was a problem, because I was dating someone who had a lot of them. (It didn’t work out.) A close friend, a punk physicist with whom I often went dancing late at night, found my newfound cynicism hard to relate to, and we drifted apart.

Many theorists are skeptical of such skepticism. When I asked people on X how they have dealt with evolutionary debunking, Oliver Scott Curry, a social scientist at Oxford and the research director at Kindlab, which studies the practice of kindness, warned me not to confuse the selfishness of genes with the nature of our motivations, which apparently are more gallant. He was echoing a distinction often drawn between a behavior’s “ultimate” causes, which concern why it evolved, and its “proximate” causes, which include psychological and physiological mechanisms. The cognition underpinning moral judgment may have evolved to make us look good, these scholars grant, but that doesn’t count against its sincerity. In [“Optimally Irrational”](#) (2022), the University of Queensland economist Lionel Page explains, “There is no contradiction between saying that humans have genuine moral feelings and that these feelings have been shaped to guide them when playing games of social interactions.”

Such arguments make sense to some degree. An impulse can exist because of its evolutionary utility but still be heartfelt. The love I feel for my spouse functions to propagate my genes, but that doesn't lessen the strength of my devotion. Why couldn't this shift in perspective rescue goodness for me? A major reason is that the proximate-ultimate distinction leaves intact the unsavory aspects of human motivation. As anyone who has spent more than twenty minutes on social media can attest, humans are remarkably attentive to which moral proclamations garner esteem and attention. We weigh the status implications of claiming different principles. It's true that we often assure ourselves otherwise and even internalize positions once we espouse them enough. Yet this fact didn't redeem moral sincerity for me; it corrupted it.

I eventually ditched monkeys. Humans, complicated and enculturated, had a stronger appeal than tiny-headed primates. After my first year of graduate school, in 2014, I travelled to the Indonesian island of Siberut and stayed with its Indigenous inhabitants, the Mentawai. I returned for two more months in 2015 and then spent much of 2017 with a Mentawai community, studying traditions of justice, healing, and spirituality. As I learned more of the language, I saw how rarely Mentawai people invoke abstract concepts of right and wrong. Instead, they reason about duties and responsibilities in a way that seems both blatantly self-interested and refreshingly honest, and which I've since adopted when speaking to them.

A Mentawai man who had previously worked for me as a research assistant once asked me over WhatsApp to help pay his school fees. I agreed but then struggled to wire the money from the United States, and he was forced to drop out. When I visited again in 2020, I handed him a wad of cash. "Why are you doing this?" he asked. My reply came automatically: "Because, if I don't pay you, people will think that I don't keep my promises." He nodded. The answer made sense.

How does one exist in a post-moral world? What do we do when the desire to be good is exposed as a self-serving performance and moral beliefs are recast as merely brain stuff? I responded by turning to a kind of nihilism, yet this is far from the only reaction. We could follow the Mentawai, favoring the language of transaction over virtue. Or we can carry on as if nothing has changed. Richard Joyce, in his new book, “Morality: From Error to Fiction,” advocates such an approach. His “moral fictionalism” entails maintaining our current way of talking while recognizing that a major benefit of this language is that it makes you likable, despite referring to nothing real. If you behave the way I did in grad school, going on about the theatre of morality, you will, he suggests, only attract censure and wariness. Better to blend in.

Intellectually, I find the proposal hard to swallow. The idea of cosplaying moral commitment for social acceptance would surely magnify whatever dissonance I already feel. Still, a decade after my first meeting with Moshe, experience forces me to acknowledge Joyce’s larger point. It’s easy to inhabit the fiction.

I still accept that I am a selfish organism produced by a cosmic mega-force, drifting around in a bedlam of energy and matter and, in most respects, not so very different from the beetles I scrutinized during that summer in Colorado. I still see the power in Moshe’s game-theory models. Traces of unease linger. But I no longer feel unmoored. A sense of meaning has reestablished itself. Tressed, turbanned, and teetotalling, I am, at least by all appearances, still a good Sikh. I have become a teacher, a husband, and a father to a new baby daughter. When she smiles, a single dimple appears in her left cheek. Her existence feels more ecstatic and celebratory than any ideology I could have conceived, and I hope that she’ll one day grow up to be empathetic and aware of others’ suffering. I have moral intuitions, sometimes impassioned ones. I try to do right by people, and, on most days, I think I do an O.K. job. I dream on. ♦

*Manvir Singh*, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of California, Davis, has written for *The New Yorker* since 2022 on topics including anthropology, cognitive science, and evolution. He is the author of “*Shamanism: The Timeless Religion*.”

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
[https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/are-your-morals-  
too-good-to-be-true](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/are-your-morals-too-good-to-be-true)

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

[A Reporter at Large](#)

## Russia's Espionage War in the Arctic

*For years, Russia has been using the Norwegian town of Kirkenes, which borders its nuclear stronghold, as a laboratory, testing intelligence operations there before replicating them across Europe.*

By [Ben Taub](#)

September 9, 2024



*"The whole Russian plan is that, if things really heat up with NATO, they need to create a buffer" to preserve the capability to carry out nuclear strikes, a regional counterintelligence chief said. That buffer starts in Kirkenes.*

*Photographs by Paolo Pellegrin / Magnum for The New Yorker*

It was polar winter, one long night. The lakes had frozen in the Far North, and the foxes and the grouse had shed their brown fur and feathers in favor of Arctic white. To survive the months of snow and ice, predators resort to camouflage and deception. But so do their prey.

This piece was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

In the small town of Kirkenes—in the northeastern corner of Norway, six miles from the Russian border—the regional

counterintelligence chief, Johan Roaldsnes, peered out his office window at the fjord below. There were eight Russian fishing trawlers docked outside, housing at least six hundred Russian sailors.

The phone rang. The caller was a government employee who worked at the local port. It was not uncommon for Russian trawlers to stop in Kirkenes, but some of these were not among the usual ships. One of them, a fish-processing vessel named Arka-33, had docked weeks earlier and hadn't left.

"Seems a bit much," the caller said.

"Might be," Roaldsnes replied. Uncertainty was his profession.

He walked out of his office, into the cold, and past the church from which the town had taken its name: Kirkenes, "church on the promontory." There were two clocks on the spire. They showed different times, neither of which was correct.

It was late December, 2022, almost a year since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Roaldsnes had not seen the sun in a month; it wouldn't rise again for another. Locals call these months the *mørketid*—the dark time. Most of the time, you can't see what's around you, even if you know that it's there.

Arka-33 was larger than many buildings in town. Before docking, its captain had given only the required twenty-four hours' notice to Norwegian port authorities. The ship belongs to a Russian crab-fishing company whose C.E.O., according to the OpenSanctions database, used to run at least two private security companies. His wife—who was previously listed as C.E.O.—is a member of the Russian parliament and appears on various sanctions lists. As Roaldsnes drove through the dock yard, he noted that Arka-33 was moored in a position that is used by the Norwegian military's

primary electronic-intelligence-collection vessel when it stops in Kirkenes.



*“What’s the new threat that we don’t see?” Johan Roaldsnes, the head of counterintelligence for the region, asked.*

A fishing boat was no longer just a fishing boat, in the eyes of Norwegian authorities. That summer, the Russian government had declared that commercial vessels could be co-opted by the military for any purpose. The fjords of Kirkenes open up to the Barents Sea, just a few miles from where the Russian Navy’s Northern Fleet has engaged in espionage and nuclear-war preparations since the earliest days of the Cold War. Locals in Kirkenes, a town of thirty-five hundred people, noticed that Russian fishermen were younger than those who had come before the war in Ukraine, and that they sometimes did physical-training exercises on the decks of their ships.

Russian sailors carry handwritten seafarer passports. “You don’t actually know who is on board,” Roaldsnes told me. “If you do a deep dive on a bunch of sailors, you will eventually find somebody linked to the Northern Fleet.”

Recently, crew on a vessel that had been associated with the destruction of subsea communications cables had steered a

motorboat into restricted waters near a Norwegian Army garrison. Were they testing their equipment, or the speed of the Norwegian response? A search of two trawlers had revealed radios that could tune into military frequencies which are used by the Northern Fleet. I asked Roaldsnes whether the trawlers were effectively functioning as intelligence vessels. “No, they’re fishing vessels,” he said. “Well . . .” He winced, and rephrased his assessment: “They fish.”

For the past few years, civilian life in northern Norway has been under constant, low-grade attack. Russian hackers have targeted small municipalities and ports with phishing scams, ransomware, and other forms of cyber warfare, and individuals travelling as tourists have been caught photographing sensitive defense and communications infrastructure. Norway’s domestic-intelligence service, the P.S.T., has warned of the threat of sabotage to Norwegian train lines, and to gas facilities that supply energy to much of Europe. A few months ago, someone cut a vital communications cable running to a Norwegian Air Force base. “We’ve seen what we believe to be continuous mapping of our critical infrastructure,” Roaldsnes told me. “I see it as continuous war preparation.”

The aberrant trawlers left as quietly as they had come. Roaldsnes had spent Christmas privately agonizing over the possibility that there was a special-forces unit scattered among the ships. Was this a dry run for a potential attack? Or was the threat mostly imaginary —a “wilderness of mirrors,” as a former C.I.A. counterintelligence chief once described such things?

After a decade in the P.S.T., Roaldsnes considered it professionally important to never fully make up his mind. Counterintelligence, he later told me, “is like playing tennis without seeing your opponent or whether it’s actually a ball being served to you. It might behave as a ball. But, when you get close, it’s an orange.”

Most Western governments do not appear to think of themselves as being at war with Russia. Russia, however, is at war with the West. “That’s for sure—we are saying that openly,” the Russian representative to the United Nations recently declared. Most attacks are deliberately murky, and difficult to attribute. They are acts of so-called hybrid warfare, designed to subdue the enemy without fighting. The strategy appears to be to push the limits of what Russia can get away with—to subvert, to sabotage, to hack, to destabilize, to instill fear—and to paralyze Western governments by hinting at even more aggressive tactics. “They do it because they can do it,” an air-traffic controller told me, of an electronic-warfare attack that imperils civilian aviation. “Then they deny everything, and they threaten you, saying that, if you don’t stop accusing them of what you know they’re doing, bad things will happen to you.”

Ever since Russia annexed Crimea, in 2014, its military and intelligence services have been experimenting with hybrid warfare and influence operations in Kirkenes, treating the area as “a laboratory,” as the regional police chief put it to me. Some attacks were almost imperceptible at first; others disrupted everyday life and caused division among locals. To understand what was happening in her district, she started reading Sun Tzu.

Then, in early 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. The conversations inside Roaldsnes’s office, in Kirkenes, took on an existential tone, because Vladimir Putin has shown himself to be willing to risk it all over relatively small, strategically important areas. The Article 5 policy of collective defense states that an attack on one *NATO* member is an attack on all. But would the United States engage in thermonuclear war over a sparsely populated swath of Arctic Norway?

Countries throughout Europe now acknowledge that their people and infrastructure are under ceaseless attack. Yet each incident is, by itself, below the threshold that would require a military response

or trigger Article 5. In recent months, agents of Russian intelligence are believed to have assassinated a defector in Spain, planted explosives near a pipeline in Germany, carried out arson attacks all over the Continent, and sabotaged subsea cables and rail lines. A Russian operative injured himself in Paris while preparing explosives for a terrorist attack on a hardware store, and U.S. intelligence discovered a Russian plot to assassinate the C.E.O. of one of Europe's largest arms manufacturers. Poland's interior minister said, "We are facing a foreign state that is conducting hostile and—in military parlance—kinetic action on Polish territory." Every European country that borders Russia is preparing for a wider war in the event of a Russian victory in Ukraine. Poland and the Baltics are digging trenches at their borders and fortifying them, often with antitank obstacles known as "dragon's teeth." Finland cast aside seventy years of neutrality and nonalignment to join *NATO*; Sweden cast aside two hundred.

Russia's low-grade attacks are accompanied by threats of nuclear annihilation, both by Kremlin officials and by pundits on state television. In May, the Russian military carried out an exercise in which it practiced initiating a tactical nuclear war. In the context of nuclear escalation, Kirkenes is in one of the most strategically sensitive regions on earth. The other side of the border is the Kola Peninsula, which is filled with closed military towns and airfields, nuclear-weapons storage facilities, and nuclear-submarine ports. "Within a radius of, let's say, two hundred kilometres of this table, there could be a thousand nuclear warheads," Thomas Nilsen, a journalist in Kirkenes, told me, over a dinner of reindeer and arctic char. Russia is also using the Barents Sea for research and development of new delivery systems for nuclear weapons, including a subsea nuclear torpedo that could flood a coastal city with a radioactive tsunami, and a nuclear-powered cruise missile with global reach.

"The Kola Peninsula is their strategic security against the West," Roaldsnes told me. "The whole Russian plan is that, if things really

heat up with *NATO*, they need to create a buffer,” to preserve the capability to carry out nuclear strikes. “That means the ability to control their closest neighboring territory”—the region that includes Kirkenes—“and control access to the waters, to prevent anyone from getting close.” The goal is “the ability to deny access to the Barents Sea,” to protect the Northern Fleet.

But the control of territory is not only a matter of weapons systems. It’s also about people. And here, at the point of contact between *NATO* and Russia’s nuclear stronghold, it seems that the Kremlin is quietly waging a parallel battle for public sentiment in a small fishing town, geographically isolated from the rest of Norway and the West. As Sun Tzu writes, the path to victory is to win first, and then go to war.

In March, 2022, a few weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, I set off for northwestern Norway to attend a *NATO* military exercise called Cold Response, in which some thirty thousand troops were practicing Arctic warfare. The exercise involved a staged invasion of Norway, with the Nordic nations defending the area as soldiers from the U.S., Britain, France, and other *NATO* countries attempted an amphibious assault from the sea. Although no one officially acknowledged it, each country was practicing its likely role in the event of a Russian invasion—and sending a message about *NATO* unity. “What we are trying to do here is to make sure that there will never be a war in Norway,” one of the top commanders told me. “And the deterrence part of the operation is not really effective if we are the only ones who know it.”



*"You had the power to leave all along—just click your heels three times, grab your coat, and sneak out without saying goodbye."*

Cartoon by Ali Solomon

The Russians were invited to send observers to the exercise, partly as a gesture of transparency. They declined, but that doesn't mean they weren't there. During the exercise, men with Eastern European accents reportedly tried to buy Norwegian military I.D.s from drunk conscripts at a bar. (During another *NATO* exercise, a "tourist" who had logged into his hotel's Wi-Fi appeared to have been sent by the Russian security services to help in the deployment of a cyberattack.) The paucity of accommodations in remote Arctic towns makes them ripe for spontaneous encounters with high-value targets and their devices; once, as I was having a reindeer burger at a crowded hotel bar, the heads of both the Norwegian and the Swedish Armed Forces brushed past my chair.

One morning, a Norwegian Army spokesman led me through a few checkpoints to a tent, where Pål Berglund, the commander of Norway's Northern Brigade, was changing his socks. For almost two weeks, he had been living in the back of an infantry vehicle, from which he was running the Norwegian defense. Berglund's

brigade is among the northernmost ground forces on earth. As such, his soldiers were also training allies to endure the challenges of Arctic conditions: cables freeze, lubricants harden, guns jam, vehicles get stuck in the snow. “If you do everything wrong and you’re in the jungle, you will still survive a week or so,” Berglund said. “But if you do everything wrong in the Arctic, it’s a matter of hours before you will freeze to death.”

At a gas station, I ran into the commander of the battalion that guards Norway’s border with Russia. He invited me to Kirkenes, and a few weeks later I travelled there for the first time. It was mid-April, and the air was well above freezing—unseasonably warm for two hundred and fifty miles north of the Arctic Circle. Rain pelted the windows on the bus from the airport into town. One of the company commanders, Fredrik Hodnefjell, arranged to take me on a patrol along the Pasvik River, which marks the border with Russia. He’d originally planned for us to travel on the river’s frozen surface, but it was no longer safe. The ice should have held for another couple of weeks. But the Arctic is warming four times faster than anywhere else on earth.

Hodnefjell picked me up in town, and we drove toward the river. A road sign in both Norwegian and Russian showed that we were heading in the direction of Murmansk, Russia, home to the Northern Fleet. About ten minutes into the drive, we climbed out of the car. Before us were two border posts, four metres apart: yellow and black on the Norwegian side; red and green, with a silver Russian coat of arms, on the other. In the distance, we could see the onion dome of a Russian Orthodox church.

The area was completely silent. There were no signs of people, no animal tracks in the snow. “We are being watched now,” Hodnefjell said.

“By the Russians?” I asked.

“By our own.”

Later that afternoon, we climbed onto a snowmobile and set out into the pine forest, to visit a watchtower that overlooks the Russian town of Nikel, named for the metal its residents once mined. Huge smelting towers burst through the tree line. Not long ago, their fumes polluted the air on both sides of the river, but now the mine is closed. We climbed the watchtower, where a small group of conscripts spends every hour of every day monitoring the border. One of them noted the strangeness of knowing so well what Nikel looks like without ever having been there.

Hodnefjell handed me a pair of binoculars and pointed out a collapsing concrete structure on the Russian side. Beneath it lay the site of the Kola Superdeep Borehole, a nine-inch-wide hole dug more than seven and a half miles down, in an attempt to breach the earth’s crust. The effort failed, but it represented one of the final superlatives of the Soviet Union: the deepest hole on earth.



Map by Francesco Muzzi

I returned to the region several times in the next two years, culminating in a three-month stay that encompassed the *mørketid*. My time in the Arctic coincided with almost constant military activity, by land, air, and sea. The Finns practiced taking off and landing fighter jets on remote roads, and planting explosives along the routes to Russia; the Norwegians trained Ukrainian special forces in unpopulated fjords. NATO held its first exercises with Sweden and Finland as member states, and the Americans docked nuclear-powered attack submarines in a Norwegian Arctic port. (Russian fishing trawlers, meanwhile, loitered in the port and reported “engine trouble,” as if looking for a pretext to get close to the submarines.)

To better understand the military preparations, I traversed roughly seventy kilometres of the border—mostly in snowshoes, occasionally in boots or on skis—and bunked with conscripts in

remote outposts whose walls were coated in ice. The border region is a place where everyday life is imbued with geopolitical significance, where the stakes are visible in what little infrastructure exists amid the vast, unyielding wilderness: radar balls, listening stations, relay towers, a microwave-communications network for the military. On a patrol last November, to monitor the border in the mountains overlooking Russia's Pechenga valley, two conscripts and I experienced total whiteout, and could hardly distinguish ground from sky. It was just freezing whiteness, minus twenty degrees Celsius—a void. Shortly after midday, everything faded to blue and gray, then to black.

The conscript in front of me, Jørgen Benningstad, led the way; the one behind me, Nikolai Thorsen, dragged supplies in a sled, and stopped every thirty minutes to call in our status and coördinates over an encrypted radio.

After nearly three hours, we arrived at an empty military cabin that had no water or electricity, only a small wood-burning stove. Benningstad and Thorsen took turns in a lookout room—perhaps four feet by six—which had a telescope pointed at Russia, about a hundred metres down the hill. There was a small table that held their radios and a night-vision monocular. But the weather made optical surveillance pointless, so Thorsen opened the window and started listening instead. “We can’t see anyone better than we would hear them,” he said. He stood, motionless, head out the window, neck craning, an ear toward the border line. The Arctic silence was so profound that we could hear the noise of a car’s tires several kilometres away, in Russia.

Thorsen and Benningstad swapped positions every fifteen minutes—ears freezing out the window or warming by the stove. After eight shifts, they put out the fire and packed up their survival packs, and we set off into the black. I never saw any Russians from the border line, except as specks in watchtowers. But each patrol

amounts to an assertion of sovereignty, a form of signalling: *Look at me looking at you.*

Many of the world's most closely guarded secrets concern the capacity of governments to destroy their enemies while denying them the ability to retaliate. Perhaps the most important of these are the precise locations of nuclear submarines. Russian submarines are designed for stealth, and carry as many as sixteen long-range ballistic missiles that can be launched underwater. The most advanced of these missiles weigh around eighty thousand pounds and carry several thermonuclear warheads, each of which can generate an explosion many times larger than that of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. A single "boomer," as these submarines are called, can turn a nation into a radioactive wasteland. They are the Russian military's ultimate investment and security blanket, and their protection is its ultimate priority.

Russia spans eleven time zones and has the longest Arctic Ocean coastline in the world. The Northern Fleet is the country's primary nuclear deterrent, but its submarines are "prisoners of geography," as the author Tim Marshall has put it. The fleet's home base, in the Kola Peninsula, is within range of Norwegian signals-intelligence stations, but it can't be moved farther east, because the Barents Sea is the only part of the Russian Arctic that has ice-free ports year-round. With each trip to the Atlantic, the submarines must traverse the shallow water of the Barents Sea, making them vulnerable to tracking by NATO forces.

Last June, I joined a U.S. Navy crew for a mission aboard a P-8 Poseidon, one of the world's most advanced submarine-hunting aircraft. We took off from Iceland and flew northeast, toward the Kola Peninsula. A little more than two hours into the flight, the lead pilot, Sandeep Arakali—a twenty-eight-year-old aerospace engineer with two degrees from Stanford—peered out his cockpit window and spotted a U.S. Air Force stratotanker to our right. It was time for an air-to-air refuelling, to maximize the time spent on

the mission. Both planes, flying at more than five hundred miles an hour, had arrived at these exact coördinates, over international waters, at the appointed minute.

Arakali approached the stratotanker from behind and from slightly below. The tanker filled the P-8's cockpit windows—four huge jet engines, spanning my peripheral vision. Arakali leaned over the controls and craned his neck upward. His hands shook wildly, compensating for forces that I could not see; in relation to the stratotanker, the P-8 seemed perfectly still. A young woman, lying prone in the stratotanker's tail, stared back at him, her face framed by a small triangular window, as she guided a fuel line into the top of the P-8. There was a rush of liquid above us—two tons per minute. Then the line detached, and Arakali descended over the Barents Sea.

To hunt submarines, P-8 crews generally fly at low altitude—sometimes below five hundred feet. The plane resembles a Boeing 737, but behind the cockpit there are only two large windows, for photographing warships, auxiliary vessels, and other objects of interest. The rest of the plane is a closed tube, filled with surveillance equipment and computer banks. Sonar buoys are dropped into the water below, creating a three-dimensional sound map of the underwater area—including any submarines passing through it—which is then shared with *NATO* ships and submarines, to continuously track the Russians after the P-8 returns to base.

That night, though, the intelligence-collection targets were not submarines but Russian ships: a Northern Fleet destroyer; a Russian-intelligence patrol vessel; a Soviet-era “hydrographic research” ship, operated by the Russian Navy. They hid under rain clouds and storm cover as best they could, making it difficult for the P-8 to get close. Arakali and his co-pilots flew a thousand feet above the ocean’s surface. The electronic- and acoustic-warfare operators kept their eyes glued to their screens. “With each pass,

we aim to maximize the surface area for the sensors and other collection equipment,” Arakali told me.

A Norwegian frigate and a British destroyer were also patrolling these waters. When the P-8’s reconnaissance mission was complete, the team did a flyby, as a show of support for its *NATO* allies. We put on life jackets, standard practice when the plane descends below a thousand feet. The youngest pilot on board, a twenty-six-year-old lieutenant named Rusty Joyce, manned the controls. Almost all of the crew had mustaches, but Joyce’s was so wispy that you could see it only up close. He buzzed the warships at three hundred feet, and banked hard for another pass. I sat by the window, watching ocean swells froth past the tip of the wing.

A Russian operator radioed the flight crew on the public emergency-radio frequency. “Zemlya, Zemlya, Zemlya—Delta Echo Ivory Eagle,” the operator said, using call signs and protocols that had been established during the Cold War. The P-8 crew radioed back, acknowledging their presence off Kola. Sometimes Russian fighter jets escort P-8s farther from their shores.

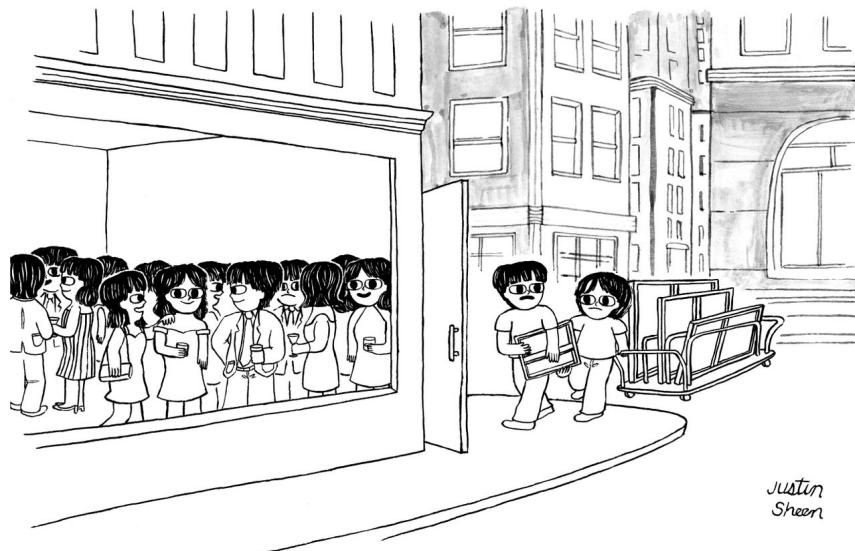
Later, an air-traffic controller at the Kirkenes airport told me that he’d heard the chatter between the Russians and the P-8, just off the coast. “For us, this is normal,” he said. He had grown up in Kirkenes in the nineteen-sixties. Back then, Russian nuclear submarines occasionally sneaked into the Varanger Fjord, just outside of town. The anomalous period was that of post-Soviet peace, he said. Then, in 2017, a Russian electronic-warfare unit set up a G.P.S. jammer in the mountains facing Kirkenes, causing at least one plane to nearly crash. The jamming was sporadic at first; now it takes place almost every day. The air-traffic controller sighed. “We’re back to the Cold War,” he said. “And I think it’s going to be like this for the rest of my life.”

Johan Roaldsnes occasionally hosts gatherings for current and former intelligence officers at an abandoned police station that

faces Russia, a short drive from Kirkenes, on the banks of the Pasvik River. They drink vodka, go in a sauna, jump in the river. Retired spies often struggle with a sense of purposelessness, Roaldsnes said—cut off from the flows of intelligence and the sources they pursued for their entire careers. But they are a fount of knowledge. Until Russia annexed Crimea, the Norwegian security services did not publicly refer to the F.S.B., Russia's largest intelligence agency, as an adversary. Then, Roaldsnes said, “you had to get in touch with your counterintelligence people from the Cold War, dust them off, gather their insights, and get back to work.”

The P.S.T. estimates that some three hundred people work at the F.S.B. directorate in Murmansk, on the other side of the border; many of them run operations in Kirkenes and the surrounding countryside, designed to probe Norwegian defenses and critical infrastructure. “They do intelligence by trawling,” Roaldsnes told me. “Quantity is their form of quality.”

Roaldsnes, the eldest of three children, was born in 1984, and grew up on a small island off the western coast of Norway. His father was a minister and his mother worked for the municipality. Roaldsnes trained as a mechanic in high school, and went on to study physics at the University of Bergen.



*“They’ll become an angry mob if we don’t get these paintings inside fast.”*

“When I arrived at university, I didn’t know a single soul,” he recalled. “I started to train in Brazilian jujitsu.” A fellow jujitsu fighter, an employee of the local psychiatric hospital, was recruiting young men who could restrain unruly patients. Roaldsnes is six feet three, with dark hair and an athletic build. He signed up to work at the hospital, and before long he “was involved in isolating a patient, together with two police officers,” he said. “I had never had a concept of policing—we didn’t have any police on the island where I grew up. And I was figuring out what to do with my life, so I asked them, ‘How is policing?’ And they said, ‘It’s O.K.’” The next morning, he applied to a police academy. “I go a lot by instinct,” he told me. “I don’t have a master plan.”

After three years at the police academy, Roaldsnes attended a career day, where he met a recruiting officer from the police in Finnmark, Norway’s second-largest and least populated province, in the Arctic northeast. Finnmark is more than twice the size of New Jersey, but it has only about seventy-five thousand residents. There are two major offshore oil fields and a handful of small towns, including Kirkenes. One of the largest employers in the province is the Norwegian military.

Roaldsnes arrived at the police station in Finnmark’s administrative center, Vadsø, in the fall of 2010. The town lies just across the Varanger Fjord from Kirkenes. It takes eight minutes to travel between them on a propeller plane, but about two and a half hours by car, tracing the perimeter of the fjord.

To Roaldsnes, the most interesting site in Vadsø was the refugee center, which had more than two hundred rooms and whose occupants accounted for roughly seventeen per cent of the town’s population. Many of them were from Afghanistan or East Africa; there were also a few Chechens. “There was a pretty high crime rate and a lot of fighting,” Roaldsnes said. “So I asked the local

police chief if I could be in charge of the refugee facility, from the police side.”

Most of the issues stemmed from clashes among various ethnic groups—“challenges in different languages, dumbed down to violence,” as Roaldsnes put it. He set out to build source networks within the communities, and defused conflicts before crimes took place by enlisting people to tip him off to what was happening. The worst offenders were relocated south, and the rate of violence dropped.

Then, in 2014, a young Chechen who had been staying at the refugee center left to fight with *ISIS* in the Syrian war. Three other Chechens from Vadsø soon followed. It was then that Roaldsnes was recruited to work for the P.S.T. “It was all centered on Syria,” he said. “Trying to figure out what groups they were in, and whether or not they were in contact with people back home.”

The next year, *ISIS* was sending operatives into Europe, scattered among hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants who were coming from Africa and the Middle East. Suddenly, refugees were arriving at Storskog, the only official Norwegian-Russian border-crossing point, six miles from Kirkenes. “It started in May, with a few drips,” Roaldsnes told me. “And then it just rocketed.”

Roaldsnes and others in the P.S.T. quickly sensed that “something was off.” The notion that the Arctic migrant route had developed organically didn’t fit with the realities of security in the Kola Peninsula. No one can reach Storskog from anywhere in Russia without a visa or written authorization from the F.S.B., which runs the border.

It is illegal to cross the border on foot, but migrants seemed to have been made aware of a loophole: they traversed the final few hundred metres in wheelchairs and on cheap children’s bicycles. The P.S.T. began to believe that the Russians were deliberately sending the migrants, to incite discord in the Norwegian population

and to test the limits of the country's humanitarianism. "It was kind of an uncomfortable feeling, at the beginning, to even *think* that the Russians were doing this on purpose—weaponizing refugees, the most vulnerable segment of society," Roaldsnes said. The demographics of the arrivals raised questions about F.S.B. involvement. At first, there were mostly Syrians. But then, he said, "we just saw higher and higher numbers of refugees from lots of strange states coming in"—forty-seven countries in all. Stranger still, many of the arrivals spoke Russian; they had been living in Russia for years, and had local residency permits. One was in his final year of medical school.

It soon became clear that a number of the arrivals had been given intelligence tasks. Some asked "unusual questions," Roaldsnes said; others were apparently instructed to take selfies with Norwegian police or security officials in the background.

One of them, a former government official from a country in Asia, had fled criminal charges at home. In Murmansk, he had been detained and interrogated by the F.S.B. They told him that "if he didn't comply, or support them with a task, they would let his home country know where he was," Roaldsnes said. The Russians told the man that, after crossing the border, he should "claim to have secrets vital to Norway, show off his government credentials from his home country, and try to get in contact with Norwegian intelligence," Roaldsnes continued. "The objective might have been to find out how somebody ends up in a P.S.T. or military-intelligence recruitment trajectory from the migrant stream. Is there a specific house? How do they do it? How do they interview you? Do they check your cell phone?" The man was instructed to send reports back to his F.S.B. handler through unsent drafts of messages in a social-media account.

The man gave himself up at the border and told the Norwegians everything. "Based on the detailed explanation, we assessed that he was likely telling the truth," Roaldsnes told me.

“So he confessed immediately?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “But that might be part of the plot.” The man was eventually deported to his home country.

By November, 2015, more than five thousand asylum seekers had crossed at Storskog; a hundred and ninety-six of them came in a single day. “It was minus fifteen degrees one day,” Roaldsnes recalled. Some asylum seekers were wearing so little clothing that if they weren’t let into Norway they would likely die. Eventually, the Norwegian government declared Russia a safe country for asylum seekers, and started turning people back; at last, the bicycles stopped coming.

Roaldsnes married another police officer, Synne, and in 2018 they moved to Kirkenes. She became the head of operations for the Finnmark police; he spent a few years running the intelligence-analysis section and then, about two years ago, became a regional head of the P.S.T. “It’s like playing chess every day at work, all while we have only some vague concept of the rules, and of what pieces are in play,” he said. “The important thing about intelligence work is to constantly try to evolve—what’s the new threat that we don’t see?”

Recently, the Russian security services have shifted their tactics from professional espionage to sabotage and destruction, often undertaken by disposable agents—random criminals who are recruited over Telegram and paid in cryptocurrency or cash. “The Russians no longer have any downsides to an operation being exposed,” Roaldsnes said. He sighed. “They ruined a great spy game with this stupid war.”

There was no dawn to mark the first day of 2023—no sunrise, not for another few weeks. In the Russian town of Nikel, thirty miles from Kirkenes, a young mercenary named Andrey Medvedev scaled two fences that had been constructed by the Russian security

services not so much to keep Norwegians out as to keep Russians in. He wore white camouflage, and crept down to the banks of the Pasvik River. It looked to be frozen solid, but the only way to test it was to go across.

The ice held, mostly, and Medvedev dragged himself up the opposite bank, his feet and ankles sodden and numb. He pulled a bottle of vodka out of his rucksack and collapsed in exhaustion on Norwegian ground.

When Roaldsnes awoke, a few hours later, he learned that there was a strange arrival in police custody. Medvedev was the first commander of the Wagner Group—a Russian paramilitary organization—to present as a defector to the West. Medvedev told the police that he had led a Wagner unit on the front lines in Ukraine, and had witnessed battlefield atrocities committed by his comrades. One of his subordinates—a convicted murderer, who had joined the Wagner Group in return for a pardon—was executed with a sledgehammer, on camera, after the group’s leadership judged him a traitor. “Live like a dog, die like a dog,” Wagner’s founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, had said of the man. Now Medvedev said that he would testify against Prigozhin.

Yet Roaldsnes wondered whether Medvedev posed a counterintelligence risk. How had he managed to slip through the Kola Peninsula, one of the most highly controlled places on earth? Was he really a defector? Or was he a double agent? A fraud?

Medvedev told the police that, as he dashed across the river, he’d heard Russian border guards firing at him and the barking of a military dog sent to chase him down. But the Norwegians found no paw prints at the border, and they had detected no shots.

Kirkenes was no place for a possible defector; the Russians had too great a presence in town. The police quietly relocated Medvedev to Oslo, some nine hundred miles southwest. In the next few months,

Medvedev acquired a reputation for erratic behavior and drunken fights. He also sought publicity, and gave inconsistent and unreliable accounts of his experiences in Ukraine. He even apparently tried to cross back over the border, into Russia. A theory developed among P.S.T. officers that the F.S.B.—believing that Medvedev would be a headache, and a drain on resources, for Norway—had not impeded his escape. (Medvedev could not be reached for comment.) Within the P.S.T., he became known as “the agent of chaos.” “At some point, you understand that you’re maybe chasing the loudest balls, and that makes you less able to see the sneaky ones,” Roaldsnes told me. “Two years ago, we got a lot of tips about people photographing a covert safe house,” he said. “We found out that a rare Pokémon was there,” in the augmented-reality game Pokémon Go.

In 2022, the P.S.T. arrested a Russian military-intelligence officer named Mikhail Mikushin, who was working in a research program dedicated to hybrid threats at the Arctic University of Norway, in Tromsø. He was operating undercover as José Giammaria, a Brazilian academic, and had spent several years in Canada, developing his credentials; he had even written about the threat that Russia poses to Arctic security in an article for the *Canadian Naval Review*. Mikushin’s arrest was unusual. Espionage is rarely prosecuted in Norway. Often, it is better to let rival services carry on using compromised sources and methods. Spies and their handlers communicate through all kinds of signals and codes—a vase in a window, a blip on the radio, a misplaced brick in a wall. Detection is difficult, but the goal in most P.S.T. operations, Roaldsnes said, is to “transform each mystery into a well-kept secret”—and then “close the doors in front of the adversary, without them being aware that we were even there.”

One of the old K.G.B. tactics that has been revived in recent years is the use of “travelling agents,” known as *marshrutniki*. These people are not really spies, just civilians who are recruited to complete a specific intelligence task, sometimes through extortion

or the promise of cash, sometimes through an appeal to their patriotism. “Satellite photos don’t give you everything,” Roaldsnes told me. “You have to have eyes on the target.” Many *marshrutniki* are dual citizens, or students or businesspeople with legitimate reasons to travel. They don’t need to understand the significance of the assignment; they just have to complete it.



*“We kept adding amenities to lure people back to the office until it was easier if we just became a bar.”*

*Cartoon by Benjamin Slyngstad*

One morning last fall, I boarded a ferry from Kirkenes to Tromsø, a journey of about thirty-six hours along the northernmost coastline in continental Europe. The Varanger Fjord was placid leading out to the Barents Sea. A couple of hours later, I went out on the top deck—just before the small town of Vardø came into view. Only one other passenger seemed to know what would soon appear on the horizon. She was in late middle age, with brown hair, and had positioned herself in such a way that no one inside the boat could see her. I noticed that she was filming the approach to Vardø, her phone propped against the railing but hidden by her torso, which leaned forward in a faux-casual pose. I drew closer. She pulled back the phone. I saw its screen for a second: the language was Russian; the time zone read Murmansk.

Vardø is a fishing village, but its skyline is dominated by successive generations of gigantic radar systems, known as Globus I, II, and III. Officially, the Globus systems monitor “space junk.” But they have another use: they can track and calculate the trajectories of ballistic nuclear missiles. The Globus complex, though it was built by American contractors, is operated by Norway’s military-intelligence service. In the late nineties, a storm blew the cover off one of the radar balls, revealing a system that was aimed straight at the Kola Peninsula.

Russia has signalled its displeasure with the Globus systems by practicing to blow them up. In recent years, bombers have flown toward the radars in attack formations, peeling off just before crossing into Norwegian airspace. Hackers have infiltrated the municipal council’s internal e-mail system, and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church have applied to build a chapel in Vardø, despite no local demand for services.

Now, as the Globus balls loomed ahead of us, passengers started streaming onto the deck. The woman abandoned her surreptitious approach and held up her cell phone, taking a video for at least ten minutes—the whole route to the Globus complex, and the path into the quiet harbor behind it.

After we left Vardø, the likely *marshrutnik* sat alone, with no luggage. Late that night, we reached a small village called Båtsfjord—the only place besides Kirkenes and Tromsø where Russian fishing boats are still allowed to dock. She tried to get off the ferry, but the staff wouldn’t let her, because there were no scheduled departures.

Another day passed. She seemed to have not prepared for this—she had no change of clothes. When we arrived in Tromsø, close to midnight, she disembarked, wrapped in a blanket stolen from the ship.

The war in Ukraine is more than a thousand miles south of Kirkenes, and yet it imbues every aspect of the town's identity, economy, and future. On the day of the invasion, the mayor cried. Russians and their families make up between five and ten per cent of the population, and until recently the town depended on cross-border trade. Roaldsnes could see the war in struggling local businesses; in the layoffs at the ship-repair factory, one of the largest employers in town, after E.U. sanctions prevented work on Russian trawlers; in the despondency and bewilderment of schoolteachers, sports coaches, and politicians, who had spent the past three decades building connections with their Russian counterparts. Many of them had believed that there was something unique and almost borderless about Arctic regional coöperation. Geopolitics was a matter for the capitals, they said; up here, the motto was "High North, low tensions." Life in the Arctic is difficult enough without worrying about the nuclear warheads just over the horizon. But sentiment had started to change. And when the narrative shifts in Kirkenes, so does the behavior of nations.

Kirkenes was originally a company town, built in the early nineteen-hundreds to exploit an iron-ore deposit. The local mining company employed fifteen hundred people at its peak, but it languished in the eighties, and, with few other economic prospects, the population atrophied. Then the Soviet Union collapsed, opening up the possibility of establishing ties and trade with the nearest city: Murmansk.

"In the months after the breakup of the Soviet Union, Murmansk was total chaos," Thomas Nilsen, the journalist, told me. Soldiers went months without wages; some desperate civilians fainted from hunger or froze. Russia's Northern Fleet was so destitute that it rented out one of its nuclear submarines to transport vegetables to a port in Siberia, potatoes loaded into the missile compartment.

"Everything collapsed—everything," Nilsen, who was freelancing in Murmansk at the time, said. "The currency, the markets, the

food-supply chain. Even I, with my foreign currency, had to spend much of my day trying to find food.”

Throughout the nineties, Nilsen researched the environmental ravages of industrial mining and poorly managed nuclear waste in the Kola Peninsula. The region accounted for almost twenty per cent of all nuclear reactors on earth; now it was scattered with decaying tankers and barges loaded with spent nuclear fuel. “There were a hundred and thirty nuclear-powered submarines that had been taken out of operation, and they posed the threat of what you could absolutely call a Chernobyl in slow motion,” he told me. One of the Northern Fleet’s submarines had sunk, in 1989, and hadn’t been salvaged; its reactor lay at the bottom of the Norwegian Sea, along with two torpedoes with nuclear warheads, corroding in salt water. Nuclear waste, marked “for scrapping,” was left outside of shipyards, exposed to weather.

But Kirkenes was suddenly alive. “I came back here for summer vacation in ’92, when the border opened,” a local air-ambulance pilot, Tor Ivar Dahl Pettersen, told me. “It was just the Wild West, and the police had no control. Some Russians set up a bordello down in the industrial area, and everybody knew about it. The ships came in from Russia, and they were selling anything to anyone who wanted it. Cigarettes and vodka, mostly, but you could buy anything but a tank.” He laughed. The Russians “would never want to go back to that again, because it must have been the most depressing moment in their lives. They went from being a superpower to being the poorest men anywhere. And all dignity was gone. They were offering up their wives just to get money for food.”

The newspaper in Kirkenes printed instructions for donating to the soup kitchen in Nikel. A Norwegian former border inspector, Frode Berg, told me that his Russian counterparts were so ill-equipped that in winter, when the temperature was minus thirty-five degrees, they wore sneakers. “We bought them food, and various things for

their wives—fabrics and sewing materials, so that they could make clothes,” Berg said. “We’d take them to civilian shops and buy them green jackets. They were very happy. We helped them a lot.”

But it is not clear that the Russians perceived such gestures as they were intended. “The worn-out phrase ‘We feel sorry for Russia’ comes automatically,” a Russian journalist wrote, after a trip to Norway. “Every Russian-speaking person is apparently to be interrogated: Is it true that there is hunger in your country?” Former K.G.B. officers and their families were suddenly reliant on the good will of a mining and reindeer-herding community in one of Norway’s poorest and least developed districts.

In the center of Kirkenes, there is a bronze bust of the late Thorvald Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian minister of defense and foreign affairs, whose son is the current head of *NATO*. After the fall of the Soviet Union, he led an initiative to unite the business, cultural, and educational interests of Arctic Europe. Norway established an entity in Kirkenes called the Barents Secretariat, to fund projects with such titles as *To Russia with Love*. “It was about sport, cultural exchange, music, bands going across from one country to another, choir, singing, environmental projects—lots of activities,” Harald Sunde, a member of the municipal council, told me.

Russia opened a consulate in Kirkenes, and local Norwegian officials rushed to revive friendship agreements that had been signed in the late Soviet years with the district of Pechenga and with Severomorsk, a closed military town that serves as headquarters of the Northern Fleet. “That was a strange one,” Sunde said. “It was a friendship agreement with a municipality that you cannot visit.”

For the next two decades, relations bloomed. Norwegians drove into Russia for cheap haircuts, alcohol, and fuel; Russians came to Kirkenes to buy diapers, appliances, and luxury goods. The Kirkenes hockey team joined a Russian league; the Norwegian and

Russian border guards held an annual soccer match. “Scandinavian historians, together with Russian colleagues, were willing to narrate the history of our northernmost regions as this kind of romantic idea of a place that transcends borders and countries and time,” Kari Aga Myklebost, the Barents Chair in Russian Studies at the Arctic University of Norway, told me. “Even though the Barents Region is a political construct from 1993.”

In 2012, Vladimir Putin signed into law new limits on the freedom of expression. “That resulted in many of the Russian N.G.O.s that were working with Norway to be branded as ‘foreign agents,’ ” the term the Kremlin uses to stigmatize and oppress civil society, Nilsen said. “Environmental groups, human-rights groups, youth groups, Indigenous peoples’ groups—pretty much every group that was being supported by the Barents Secretariat faced that risk.”

Nilsen and his colleague Atle Staalesen were employed by the Secretariat, which published their bilingual English and Russian news Web site, the Barents Observer. But, in 2014, when Nilsen wrote a column condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea, the Russian consul-general in Kirkenes at the time, Mikhail Noskov, called the Observer a destructive force in Norwegian-Russian relations. The F.S.B. had repeatedly complained about the Observer to Norwegian authorities. Now an official for the Secretariat asked Nilsen to stop writing about Crimea; he refused, and was subsequently fired. (The Secretariat contests this version of events.) Staalesen quit soon afterward. “The Barents Observer was effectively shut down by the Norwegian government, at the behest of the Russian government,” Staalesen told me. “It was very symptomatic of what was to come.”

“In order to coöperate, you have to turn a blind eye to realities,” a former high-school principal, who spent decades working on cross-border collaborations, told me. “And, from 2014 onward, we had the sense that the security services controlled our Russian partners.” Increasingly, many Norwegians’ Russian contacts

weren't ordinary businessmen—they were officers or proxies of the intelligence apparatus, and they were using the ties between the two countries to turn Norwegians into assets.

In January, a Norwegian man in the district of East Finnmark agreed to meet me at three-thirty in the morning—the night of polar night. I had heard that he was an F.S.B. informant, working under duress. At first, the man repeatedly denied the allegations. Then I told him that I wasn't guessing; my source was another person from the region who had ended up in F.S.B. custody.

"Then you already know," he said. "They use any means they can."

The man had been investigated by Norwegian authorities, who discovered evidence of crimes on his hard drive. The police informed their Russian counterparts, since the man routinely travelled to Russia, and asked for assistance in investigating his activities on the other side. "Of course, when they had this information in Russia, I was called into the immigration office," the man told me. "They showed the documents from the Norwegian police. And then they said, 'O.K., we can use this to arrest you, and put you in jail.' " The only way out was to coöperate with the F.S.B. "They forced me to sign a contract with them," he said. The contract was in Russian, which he couldn't read. But they assigned him a code name, and instructed him to go back to East Finnmark to collect the names of people who worked for the P.S.T.

Since then, the man had been called in to meet with the F.S.B. at least half a dozen times. "They were pushing me all the time," he said. "Could I get more information?" His work for the F.S.B. exposed him to the risk of prosecution for espionage in Norway. But he had family ties to Russia, and kept going back and forth. He became consumed by paranoia, turning on loud fans to prevent possible microphones from capturing conversations, even with his wife. "It was fucking stressful," he told me. "I started drinking more, and drinking more."

Some Norwegians have been compromised in banyas or brothels and then extorted. Others have faced pressure to facilitate corruption and bribes. In one case, a Norwegian businessman claimed to have received an explosive device through a window of his office, in Murmansk, apparently as an inducement to sign over a controlling share of his company. “If your business becomes big enough, the mafia takes over,” a senior military-intelligence officer in Kirkenes told me. “If it becomes even more successful, then the F.S.B. takes over. And then you’re in big, big trouble.”

Another local who ended up in the sway of the F.S.B. was Frode Berg, the border inspector. In 1992, he befriended a man named Anatoly Vozniuk, who served as a Russian border inspector and interpreter. “Everyone liked him,” Berg told me. “He was full of jokes, always smiling.” Vozniuk usually kept a bottle of vodka in his backpack, and when they were alone in the forest he would pull it out and offer some to Berg. “Other Russian officers, if they did the same things that Anatoly was doing, after a short time we’d never see them again,” Berg said. But Vozniuk “was friends with special people—with Russian generals, with colonels,” Berg recalled. “He knew many people in the government in Murmansk.”

During the next decade, the two men became “best friends.” “I called him ‘the monkey,’ ” Berg said, laughing. “I’d be walking in the forest, and I’d hear a chicken clucking at me. And it was him! We would work all day, then sit and eat together, and speak about everything.” Vozniuk would take out the vodka, “and we didn’t go home before it was empty.”

By the early two-thousands, Vozniuk was driving Berg into Russia and introducing him to regional politicians and senior military and intelligence officers in the Kola Peninsula. “He was lifting me up to another level in Russia,” Berg said. “We were meeting different people in the banyas—everyone who had an important position.” When Russian officials visited Kirkenes, Berg was often summoned for drinks. The governor of Murmansk once brought

Berg a small statue of a silver rocket, he recalled, “and, when you turned the top, there was a bottle of vodka inside.”

Before long, counterintelligence officers at the P.S.T. concluded that Vozniuk was targeting men like Berg as assets for the F.S.B. “It was always ‘Anatoly, Anatoly, Anatoly,’ ” Berg said. He rolled his eyes.

Vozniuk was taking Berg into restricted military areas, giving him tours of the border stations and of surveillance towers that looked into Norway. Vozniuk never brought him into areas of acute secrecy—submarine ports, military bases. But he made Berg feel like a V.I.P. Then Vozniuk started asking for the names of P.S.T. officers. Berg didn’t see a problem. Vozniuk had already seen the faces of certain officers at official meetings—he just didn’t necessarily know all of their names.

Around 2010, Vozniuk was promoted to serve as the official F.S.B. representative to Norway. I asked Berg whether he suspects that Vozniuk’s promotion was a reward for his success in eliciting information from him. “Yeah, from me and from other people,” he said. “They put it together—all the information that he collected.”

Berg’s story was not done. Shortly after Russia annexed Crimea, Norway’s military-intelligence service recruited Vasily Zemlyakov, an engineer at a shipyard that maintained nuclear submarines for the Northern Fleet. The deal was simple: cash for secrets. Zemlyakov instructed the service to send the money to the home of his cousin Natalya, in Moscow.

Whatever the P.S.T.’s concerns about Berg and his relationship with Vozniuk, the military-intelligence service decided that his routine jaunts across the border made him a suitable courier. In the next three years, Berg made several trips to Russia, and mailed cash and memory cards to Natalya’s address. Berg claims that he didn’t know what the operation was about—he just did as he was told. In

return, top-secret files on the Northern Fleet’s strategic nuclear submarines were conveyed to Norway. But the sender was not Zemlyakov, who was in fact working as a double agent. It was the F.S.B.

In December, 2017, Berg made another trip to Moscow. When he stepped out of his hotel, two men grabbed him and brought him to F.S.B. headquarters, a couple of blocks away.

Berg was taken to an isolation cell in Lefortovo Prison, Russia’s notorious detention center for political prisoners, critics, poets, and spies. He recalls being questioned by F.S.B. officers sixteen times. Since Berg didn’t speak more than “vodka Russian,” as he put it, the service brought in an interpreter: his old friend Anatoly Vozniuk.

Berg was charged with espionage, but Vozniuk tried to convince him that he didn’t need independent legal representation. “Take the F.S.B. lawyer,” he said. When Berg opted instead for a well-known attorney for political prisoners, Vozniuk folded his arms and said, “Our friendship is over.” (Vozniuk could not be reached for comment.)

Berg was held for a year and a half before being found guilty of espionage and sentenced to fourteen years in a penal colony. He was exchanged in a spy swap soon afterward. (The Norwegian military-intelligence agency declined to comment.) When I met him in Kirkenes, five years after his release, he handed me a stack of Russian court documents detailing the F.S.B.’s Zemlyakov operation. But it seemed as if the thing that bothered him most about his ordeal was that Vozniuk hadn’t been joking when he’d said their friendship was over. “I tried writing an e-mail to him, and calling,” Berg said. “But Anatoly has changed his number.”

After breaking with the Barents Secretariat, Thomas Nilsen and Atle Staalesen relaunched the Observer as an independent entity.

“We were the only Nordic media outlet to publish in the Russian language,” Nilsen said. “We had thousands and thousands of readers in Russia, because people could read the things here that they couldn’t find in other places.”

Their reporting has shown that, for at least the past decade, the Kremlin has been exploiting the Barents coöperation arrangements for intelligence purposes. In some cases, the F.S.B. used cultural projects as cover to send intelligence agents into Norway. But the larger effort has been to gradually establish the narrative that the people of East Finnmark owe their freedom—and perhaps also their land and their history—to Russia. The F.S.B., operating through various cover organizations, has spent decades engaging in ideological subversion in Kirkenes, rooted in the manipulation of local history, in order to make the region more friendly to Russia. “You can use this area to create chaos,” Roaldsnes told me.

It was in this context that Roaldsnes decided to come forward and describe his work—a rare instance of an active-duty counterintelligence officer going public. “One of my fears is that you have a level of intelligence failure in the F.S.B.’s foreign department that says that this region is a good subject to create a crisis for NATO,” Roaldsnes said. He recalled the Russian services’ misreading of Ukraine—their belief that it would take only three days to capture Kyiv, and that many Ukrainians would welcome the Russian Army as a liberating force. That intelligence failure stemmed from the tendency of the Russian security apparatus to report what it thinks the Kremlin leadership wants to hear. He told me, “I’m engaging in kind of an active form of counterintelligence now—to not give any leeway, and to be a bit outspoken about this threat and how it materializes.”

The Russian narrative begins around five hundred years ago, when a marauding Russian bandit named Mitrofan experienced a sudden change of heart. After a life of robbing and killing, he was ordered by God to “go to a land that is not promised and not useful,” as the

Russian Orthodox Church later put it. He gave up alcohol and violence, tied a rope around his waist, and walked north, to the valleys and fjords where the Pasvik River spills into the Barents Sea. Mitrofan converted many of the native Sámi people to Christianity, and built a few modest wooden chapels. In death, he became known as St. Tryphon.

In 1826, when Norwegian and Russian officials set out to draw the border between the two nations, they decided that the natural boundary lay in the river. But the remnants of one of St. Tryphon's chapels, the Church of Boris and Gleb, were just on the Norwegian side of the river in South Varanger, which is now part of Finnmark. The Russians insisted on carving out a small postage stamp of land and designating it as Orthodox—and therefore Russian—territory.

Then, a couple of years before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Alexei Badanin, the head of the Orthodox Church on the Kola Peninsula, called into question the legitimacy of the border line—not just the postage stamp but the entire thing. “South Varanger—this is our Orthodox land,” he said. “It was given up in 1826 by unscrupulous officials.” St. Tryphon had built another small chapel about fifteen miles west of Kirkenes. Should that be in Russia, too?

Badanin is a former Northern Fleet commander who in the early two-thousands began dedicating himself to the study and veneration of St. Tryphon. Some years into his religious journey, he took the name Mitrofan, too. Like his namesake, Badanin has spent lots of time on the Norwegian side of the border—meeting local dignitaries and spreading St. Tryphon's teachings. But some of his behavior struck people as out of sync with his role as a priest: in 2019, for example, he sought to obtain information on a facility that provides drinking water for Kirkenes.

Badanin's second career has coincided with the transformation of the Russian Orthodox Church into a kind of spiritual arm of the

Kremlin's military-intelligence structure. Priests bless nuclear missiles and tell front-line troops that they will be resurrected if they die in Ukraine. Western security and intelligence services have warned that the Kremlin is particularly reliant on the Orthodox Church abroad—both for recruiting intelligence sources and for carrying out influence operations—because it is not directly affected by international sanctions.

In Finnmark, the work of men like Mitrofan Badanin goes beyond recruitment and propaganda. According to Myklebost, the professor, it's about ideological subversion, sensitizing the local population to the idea that Russia's presence in Finnmark predates that of the Norwegian state. "They use history to legitimize the idea that this is part of the Russian cultural sphere," Myklebost said.

Badanin has taken a particular interest in the history of the Pomors, a small seafaring group that originated in Russia but whose members spent much of the past millennium hunting and fishing in what is now northern Norway. The Pomors left traces of Orthodox crosses wherever they had been. In the past decade, representatives of the Orthodox Church have systematically restored old Pomor crosses and erected new ones. The area coincides with the exact territory that would be most strategically useful to Russia's nuclear defense—Norway's entire Barents Sea coastline, all the way up to the Svalbard archipelago, where the top Russian official is believed to be a military-intelligence operative serving under diplomatic cover. (The official denies this.)

"Now that they have the crosses, and a Russian Orthodox priest has been there, sprinkling his holy water, the narrative back home is that these are Russian holy lands," Myklebost told me. "This also means that they can be defended militarily." Last year, Russian outlets started claiming that the Pentagon was constructing a secret biological-weapons laboratory on a small island between Svalbard

and mainland Norway. Similar fabrications were made about sites in Ukraine to help justify the invasion.

Badanin, as the leading Orthodox authority in the Kola Peninsula, also oversees a small church in Kirkenes, near the port. Although it's in Norwegian territory, the local priest—a dual Russian-Norwegian citizen—officially answers to him. Badanin hasn't visited Norway since the outbreak of the war. But last summer he gave a sermon at the Church of Boris and Gleb, in the Russian postage stamp on the Norwegian side of the river. "Here starts a hostile and unfriendly world," he told his followers. On another occasion, speaking to a group of soldiers, he wondered what would happen if Russia lost the war in Ukraine: "Is there any point to continue history? Or is it time to bring fire and sulfur to earth, and let everything burn?"

Such threats are not abstract in South Varanger. On October 30, 1961, the Soviet Union detonated the largest ever nuclear bomb, on a remote Barents Sea archipelago called Novaya Zemlya. The explosion was more than three thousand times as powerful as Hiroshima, and generated an "atmospheric disturbance" that "orbited the earth three times," according to two Soviet scientists who worked on the bomb. Six hundred miles from the blast site, Norwegian conscripts stood transfixed at their border posts, watching the horizon glow.

In recent years, the Russian government has also been using the history of the Second World War and its aftermath to drive a wedge between locals and the government in Oslo. One day, Harald Sunde, from Kirkenes's municipal council, who has written two local-history books, took me on a tour of the town. Like many people there, he is fascinated by the lingering presence of the war—trenches and bunkers dug in peoples' back yards, rusted cannisters and remnants of heavy weaponry scattered among the fjords. The Germans occupied Kirkenes for four years and used the area as a staging ground for tens of thousands of troops during a

failed assault on Murmansk. The Soviet Air Force, meanwhile, carried out so many bombing runs on Kirkenes that only thirteen homes were left unscathed.

During the Nazi occupation, a number of people in South Varanger were trained by Soviet intelligence to act as partisans—gathering information on German positions and transmitting it covertly to the Soviet Red Army. When the Nazis retreated from the area, in October, 1944, and Soviet troops moved in, “they supposedly treated the civilians very well,” Sunde said. “And they left afterward. They didn’t stay here, like they did in many other areas in Europe, like the Baltic states, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.”

Sunde led me to a monument, just outside the town center, depicting a triumphant Soviet soldier clutching a rifle. The original design called for the statue to be forty feet tall, and for the soldier to be crushing a German eagle under his foot, he said. But, by the time it was under construction, West Germany was being integrated into *NATO*, and so it was built at half the height, with the foot on a rock.

During the Cold War, East Finnmark was regarded by the rest of Norway as ideologically distant. Norway joined *NATO* as a founding member; the people of South Varanger elected a Communist mayor. In the fifties and sixties, officers with the domestic-security service—a predecessor to the P.S.T.—carried out illegal surveillance of former partisans and suspected Communists in South Varanger, and sought to prohibit them from being employed at the mine. The Soviets seized on these divisions, establishing a Norwegian-Soviet Friendship Society and pushing the message that Oslo didn’t care about the north—that the government was merely a tool of officials in Brussels and Washington, D.C.

In the nineties, the security service underwent a public reckoning, opening its files to all who had been wrongfully surveilled. The

King of Norway apologized to the partisans and honored their contributions to the fight against Nazism. “But this is a very vivid, very important part of public memory in East Finnmark,” Myklebost said. “At the same time, it’s very clearly used by the Russian Foreign Ministry and its diplomatic representatives in Norway.”

About a decade ago, Myklebost noticed that the Russian consul-general in Kirkenes had started systematically mapping, restoring, and holding ceremonies at monuments erected to honor Soviet soldiers and prisoners, whom the Nazis imported to Norway to build railway lines, roads, and other infrastructure. The Russians also erected new monuments, and falsely implied that the Red Army had liberated all of northern Norway, not just Kirkenes. Norwegian history enthusiasts—pensioners, mostly, who were upset by the mistreatment of the partisans—attended the ceremonies. The Russian delegations included politicians and Orthodox bishops, and were often organized by the head of the F.S.B.’s veterans group in Murmansk. These “patriotic memory tours,” as the visits were called, received funding from the Barents Secretariat. They also served as cover for at least one F.S.B. agent to travel all over East Finnmark.

In official F.S.B. publications and the Russian press, Norwegian participants were depicted as endorsing Kremlin narratives on behalf of Norwegian organizations that, in fact, did not exist. When the mayor of Vardø attended a ceremony, he was given a St. George ribbon—a symbol of support for the Russian military—and photographed wearing it. Around that time, Putin invited the then mayor of Kirkenes to the Russian Embassy in Oslo, to be awarded the Order of Friendship.

Each October, Russian officials visit the Soviet war memorial in Kirkenes, to commemorate the liberation from the Nazis. Until recently, the monument was “a site of brotherhood and friendship,” Harald Sunde told me. For its seventy-fifth anniversary, in 2019,

Putin sent his foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, along with the commander of the Northern Fleet. Norway sent its foreign minister, its Prime Minister, and its king. Before the ceremony, Sunde was invited, along with a few other partisan-history enthusiasts, to meet Lavrov. Sunde had discovered a partisan cave in the mountains and written a book about the resistance movement; now he presented a copy to Lavrov, and shook his hand.

Two years later, the new Russian consul-general, Nikolai Konygin, invited Sunde and several other Norwegians to the consulate. He poured them shots of vodka and pinned a medal from the Russian Ministry of Defense to each of their jackets. Sunde was proud of his work on partisan history. But the ceremony made him uncomfortable, and he sipped only half of the shot. Soon afterward, he asked the P.S.T. for advice on how to avoid being exploited for propaganda purposes. “I did not want to be in their pocket,” he told me, of the Russians. “I did not want to be a useful idiot.”

A few days into the invasion of Ukraine, Sunde walked into the consulate and returned his Russian medal, in protest. The next time Konygin spoke at the Soviet war memorial, he told the assembled guests that, just as the Soviets had liberated them from the Nazis, so Russia was now striving to liberate Ukraine.

In October, 2023, Sunde co-wrote an editorial in a local paper, warning that the presence of any Russian official at the annual ceremony would be “an insult to Norway, to Ukraine, and to victims of war in all countries.”

Three days before the event, Sunde walked into a flower shop to order a yellow wreath on behalf of the municipality. The plan was to place it atop a makeshift pedestal—a step stool draped in a blue tablecloth—at the foot of the monument, to represent the Ukrainian flag.

“Have the Russians ordered anything?” he asked the shop owner.

“No, Harald—nothing yet.”

But when Sunde returned to pick up the wreath, two days later, he ran into one of Konygin’s assistants at the shop. The man had come to collect a wreath of identical size, in Russian colors. “You know, you’re not welcome tomorrow, at the monument,” Sunde said to him. The man just smiled and walked away.

Early the next morning, Sunde arrived at the monument to set up the pedestal. The mayor, Magnus Mæland, appeared, and Sunde handed him the wreath. “I don’t believe in low tension anymore,” Mæland, who had been elected just a few weeks earlier, told me. “I believe that we have to be strong, because the only language that the Putin regime understands is strength. If you’re not telling your whole opinion to the Russians, they will take your silence as approval.”

The ceremony was held at 8:30 a.m., to insure that the Russians didn’t beat them to it. There were a half-dozen journalists present, but no townspeople. Mæland addressed the crowd: “In 1944, Ukrainian soldiers were among those in the Soviet Red Army who contributed to our liberation.” He went on, “Today, we support Ukraine in its pursuit of liberation.”

Mæland and Sunde left. Then, just before 11 A.M., a small group of townspeople started to assemble—Russian citizens and their supporters living in Kirkenes. A pair of cars with blue diplomatic plates pulled up to the monument. Konygin climbed out and delivered a speech, wearing a St. George ribbon. The air was frigid —his breath turned to mist as he spoke. Sunde learned of the Russians’ arrival, and hurried over. He stood alone with his arms crossed, his back turned to Konygin in protest. Some of the Russian townspeople snickered.

Konygin finished his remarks, and placed the Russian wreath below Sunde’s makeshift pedestal. Then he retrieved another

display—an enormous array with plastic flowers—and placed it over the municipality's wreath, smothering it.

Sunde turned his head, then whirled around, enraged. “Nikolai, you can’t do that!” he said. He walked over to Konygin, but Konygin acted as if Sunde didn’t exist. He and his retinue walked back to their vehicles and drove off.

To several of the Norwegian journalists at the scene, Konygin’s actions felt like an act of domination, an assertion of Russian power—and perhaps even sovereignty—over a patch of Norwegian land. Sunde called Mæland, who returned and placed Konygin’s plastic flower display to the side of the monument. Mæland began to speak to the journalists and Russians who were still present. “You must respect the South Varanger municipality,” he said.

As he spoke, a Russian woman who lives in Kirkenes slipped behind him. She picked up Konygin’s display and placed it back on top of the municipality’s wreath.

That night, Konygin’s display went missing. It was late October, and the river was still flowing. Then came the *mørketid*, and when it lifted—when the first dawn came, two months later, and the sun breached the horizon at last—those plastic flowers were entombed in the ice.

After the ceremony, Russian officials summoned Norway’s Ambassador in Moscow and lodged a complaint against Mæland, calling his response to Konygin “an act of vandalism” and a “violation of the memory of the soldiers-liberators.” Soon afterward, an anonymous Facebook account circulated a Photoshopped image of Mæland standing at the memorial as a suicide drone flew at his head. Then Sunde led a successful effort for South Varanger to cancel its friendship agreement with the district of Pechenga. (The agreement with Severomorsk, the headquarters of the Northern Fleet, had been scrapped a year into

the war.) “Think of this area as a pot of water on a low boil,” Roaldsnes told me, over a Christmas lunch of salted sheep. “Once in a while, it boils over.”

The Russian Embassy in Oslo declined to answer detailed questions, claiming that this article is “unworthy of substantive comment, since it is a malicious fiction.” But, while I was living in Kirkenes, last November, days before the sun set for the last time of the year, more Russian hybrid operations that had been tested in Kirkenes started being replicated, at scale, all over Europe. The F.S.B. rounded up migrants from Africa and the Middle East and pushed them across the border into northern Finland, in subzero temperatures. Then a Russian electronic-warfare unit started jamming G.P.S. signals in the Baltic Sea. Tens of thousands of civilian flights have been affected—alarms blaring in the cockpit, passengers blissfully unaware. The Kremlin also issued criminal charges against the Prime Minister of Estonia, Kaja Kallas, for her decision to remove Soviet war memorials. “Crimes against the memory of those who liberated the world from Nazism and Fascism must be punished,” a spokesperson for the foreign minister said. “This is just the beginning.”

When the Kremlin first announced mobilizations, to restock the front line in Ukraine, hundreds of wealthy Russians fled to Kirkenes. Suddenly, the hotels were filled with “young Russian men wearing expensive sweatpants,” as Roaldsnes put it. Most of them continued on; Kirkenes was just a choke point on the way out. Many will likely never return—a man from Murmansk parked his Lamborghini at the Kirkenes airport, removed the license plate, and vanished.

Among those who stayed was Georgii Chentemirov, the former head of the journalists’ union in Karelia, just south of the Kola Peninsula. Chentemirov left Russia six months into the war and joined the staff of the Barents Observer. A few months later, the Kremlin declared him a foreign agent, and government officials in

Karelia began reposting anonymous blog posts saying that he was a traitor.

In Kirkenes, Chentemirov's new neighbors are Russians who support the war. "They believe Russian propaganda," he told me. "I don't understand it, because Russian propaganda says that we need to destroy Europe. And they live in Europe!"

Chentemirov joined a local boxing class, in a bomb shelter that had been converted into a gym. I joined as well, for several weeks of the *mørketid*, and was often paired with a fighter from Kherson, near Crimea, who had a thick scar that ran below his left cheekbone, from his nose almost to his ear. I never learned which side of the war he was on—Kherson has been won and lost by each side. Chentemirov, who is six feet three, usually trained against the only other person in the group who was as tall as him: a man in his mid-thirties named Igor, who worked as a driver and courier for Konygin.

There were only two heavy punching bags, so some pairs had to practice on pads that had been duct-taped around concrete support pillars. The coach shouted instructions in Russian. The lights flickered. After class, my sweat always turned into ice. "Some people cannot stand the dark time," a local had told me. "But you have to be able to cope with it, or else you cannot live here." Chentemirov and Igor stood on opposite sides of a pillar, punching the concrete between them. ♦

*A previous version of this piece misspelled Kari Aga Myklebost's last name.*



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

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/russias-espionage-war-in-the-arctic>

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

[U.S. Journal](#)

## Land of the Flea

What America is buying and selling.

By [Paige Williams](#) Photography by [Leonard Suryajaya](#)

September 9, 2024



**Dogtown, Alabama:** Ashlyn, Addisyn, April, and Alyvia McMichen. The subjects in this series were provided with a cable-release bulb that controls the camera's shutter—making each photograph a kind of selfie.

“The World’s Longest Yard Sale” was founded in 1987, two years into Ronald Reagan’s second Presidential term, and currently runs for six hundred and ninety miles, from Addison, Michigan, to Gadsden, Alabama. The event is widely known as the 127 Yard

Sale, because most of it takes place on U.S. Route 127, which cuts through six states like a lightning bolt. For four days, starting on the first Thursday in August, thousands of people set out their wares, eager to be unburdened by what has been taking up space, gathering dust. Professional pickers arrive with box trucks or flatbed trailers and come from as far away as California and France. Regulars book hotel rooms well ahead of time or, ever thrifty, sleep in their vehicles. Many bring packing materials to ship their purchases home, leaving room in the car for the next round of impulse buys—an unexpected piece of cat art, a T-shirt that reads “*MITCH MCCONNELL SUCKS.*”

Regret is an inevitable part of the 127. Should’ve bought that *T. rex* cookie jar, that ironstone pitcher, that surfboard, that sleigh. These laments often surface on the 127’s Facebook page, along with images of prized finds. The other day, one of the group’s eighty thousand members posed a question to a man who’d posted video of freshly acquired Depression-era glassware in a garage that was already full of it: “What do you do with your newfound loot? Resell it?” The man replied, “I just collect. My kids are nervous about my dying.” Another shopper’s tableau included retro yard furniture, a metal ice-cream bucket, corroded playground animals, a shamrock sign, a butter roller, a Hoosier cabinet, and, literally, a kitchen sink. She captioned the photo “Spending my kids’ inheritance one junk sale at a time.”

A chamber of commerce in Tennessee organizes the 127 and puts out an annual map. Each of the forty-three towns along the route is marked with a small bull’s-eye—Celina and Glencoe and Salvisa and Cedar Knob and Mentone and Pikeville and Pall Mall. Location pins resembling orange teardrops denote the thirty-three places that promise at least twenty-five vendors—Smock Farm, Traders Park, Covered Bridge Antique Mall, Rustic Hill Brew Thru. Yet people who live on or near Route 127 know that they needn’t be mapped in order to sell. They can wake up that weekend, drag a bunch of junk out into the yard, and be rid of it by

Sunday supper, whether they're peddling outgrown baby clothes or Pyrex right out of their cupboards.

The northernmost pin belongs to Siggy Parker's General Store, which, when I arrived, in early August, turned out to be a defunct nineteen-twenties gas station with brick columns and papered-over windows. An apartment had been added on, upstairs. Out front sat an S.U.V. that was missing its grill. A sweaty fellow in shorts and work boots was sawing planks into two-by-four posts and planting them in buckets of freshly poured cement to make parking stanchions. When I asked about the 127, he pointed at the S.U.V. and said, "That's the man right there."

Out popped Daniel Potenza—early fifties, battered baseball cap, gray beard, forearm tattoos. Everyone calls him Potzy. He grew up in Northport, on Long Island, where, as a teen-ager, he drove a Volkswagen Thing and became interested in collectibles. "Mostly sex, drugs, and rock and roll," he told me. When Potzy was about sixteen, he ventured onto a hoarder's property to get a closer look at a junked car, and wound up drinking Schaefers with its septuagenarian owner, whose excess of possessions deepened Potzy's fascination with other people's stuff. Siggy Parker's General Store is named for that guy. The enterprise is more of an idea than a place. "It's always been kind of a fictitious brick-and-mortar," Potzy explained. "I've never been a fan of having hours."

As a young man, after two misfires with college, Potzy worked on charter boats and in the "black-market weed" trade. When Michigan legalized recreational cannabis, in 2019, he and some colleagues set up shop in Addison, one of the border towns that drew cannabis customers from neighboring states. Five hundred and eighty people live there. Its main intersection consists of the gas station, an old but functioning bowling alley, and a dive bar, Pirate's Cove, all of which, at one point or another, Potzy unsuccessfully tried to buy. He settled for renting the apartment above the gas station and opening a dispensary across the street.

Potzy also acquired a few vacant, grassy acres next to the shop. Addison, he decided, was missing an opportunity to capitalize on its Route 127 location. The town was on the map, but it wasn't *on the map*, as far as Potzy was concerned. He and a friend, Sarah Manders, a librarian and a fellow-collector, rounded up enough yard-sale enthusiasts to meet the threshold to be named a major vender. Addison got its orange pin. At first, sellers paid ten dollars to set up on Potzy's lot. This year, the price rose to twenty. Potzy brought in food trucks and, for the kids, a display of large fibreglass dinosaurs. A dummy wore a T-shirt inscribed with "MAKE AMERICA READ AGAIN."

The first vender arrived in a camper and parked deep in the field, near a pyramid of scrap wood waiting to become a bonfire. The occupant, Pat Allen, who is in her early sixties and goes by Miss Pat, unfurled her awning and was sitting beneath it with Rocky, one of her dachshunds, when Potzy ambled over to introduce us. Miss Pat was en route to Frostproof, Florida, her adopted town of nearly a decade, having spent a few months in her native Lansing, where she had been visiting her ailing mother. Miss Pat preferred Florida to Michigan because of the weather and her fondness for the Florida Flywheelers, a large community of antique-engine fanatics. She also owns a food truck there, Miss Pat's Mini Donuts.

"Powdered sugar, cinnamon, or plain—that's all I do," she said.  
"No fruit, no nothin'. No frills."

At the 127, Miss Pat would be selling garden pavers that she paints in cheerful colors and patterns: "I do scarecrows, I do snowmen, owls." Opening a storage hatch in her camper, she showed me stacks of bubble-wrapped caterpillars and ladybugs. A red-white-and-blue set spelled out "U.S.A."

Given Michigan's importance as a swing state in Presidential elections, I had been surprised to see few campaign signs. Miss Pat hadn't seemed to notice. "I'm not into politics or religion, either one," she told me. "I've been in a conversation where it started to

get heated, and I piped right up and said, ‘What about this warm weather?’ ” She voted the year that she turned eighteen and later tried to vote after she got married, only to be turned away at the polls, she told me, because of a paperwork kink involving her new last name. “I thought, Well, screw you,” she said. “The world don’t need me.” Miss Pat never voted again, and considered herself “uneducated” about the 2024 candidates: “I don’t pay attention to Democrat, Republican, red, blue. I know the words, but I don’t understand them. What makes you Democrat? What makes you Republican?”

Van Wert, Ohio, population eleven thousand, was named for one of the American militiamen who captured Major John André, the head of British intelligence, during the Revolutionary War. The town transformed itself from swampland into a significant grower of peonies. In 1932, the long-standing tradition of Peony Sunday, held on the first weekend in June, was expanded into a festival. Toward summer’s end, that delight is now followed with the 127—Van Wert is a major stop. Folding tables and tents materialize on lawns, porches, parking lots, and the county fairgrounds.

The 127 is a rolling peek into Americans’ obsessions—Elvis here, cast-iron skillets there, Christmas everywhere. (So many nutcrackers.) In the driveway of one large old home in Van Wert, a vender named René Balyeat showed me her “creepy babies,” small plastic dolls that she paints and makes gruesome with fangs, horns, and stringy hair. A red one was tagged “Baby Michael, mutilated by his mother.” Balyeat, who is a youthful sixty—overalls, a tank top, a bandanna, round sunglasses, pink manicured nails—is a former dental assistant with children in their thirties. Not long ago, she was diagnosed with Parkinson’s and went through a divorce. “I’m the whole country song,” she told me. Overdoing it at Halloween is her “relief.”

Behind us, Terry Webster was sitting in the rattling blow of an industrial floor fan. Webster recently retired after forty-five years

as a tool-and-die-maker, and now spends much of his time searching for arrowheads, some of mankind's earliest tools. He rarely sells the artifacts in his vast collection. At the 127, he peddles whatever he and his wife buy from estates and auctions: "She has her art glass and pottery. I like my fishing lures, my coins, and my rocks."

A few lawn signs in the neighborhood read "*TRUMP WON*" and "*TRUMP THE TRUE PRESIDENT*," but Webster, who is thin and bespectacled, with white hair and blue eyes, told me, "A lot of people don't care for what's coming out of Trump's and Vance's mouths." J. D. Vance, Donald Trump's running mate, is a fellow-Ohioan. "That remark that Vance made about people with no kids, and that people with kids should have more power when it comes to voting—that's ridiculous," Webster said, referring to the moment, during a 2021 interview, when Vance, then a candidate for the U.S. Senate, complained that the country was being run, in part, by "childless cat ladies" with no "direct stake" in its future.

Webster considers himself a conservative, but he voted for Hillary Clinton, in 2016, and for Joe Biden, in 2020, because he could not stomach supporting "a thug." He hadn't made up his mind about November, though; he did not yet know enough about Kamala Harris. "I told my wife I'm *almost* thinking about voting for Kennedy," he said. (Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., dropped out soon afterward.)

Balyeat, who had been listening in, said, "I like Trump," and volunteered an opinion on Harris: "I don't think she's qualified." Webster, a quiet talker, told her, "She had a good record, as far as being a prosecutor." It was hard to tell whether Balyeat knew that Harris had also been the attorney general of California, and a United States senator, in addition to Vice-President. (In early September, I contacted Webster to ask whether he was still undecided. He said, "I'm leaning toward Kamala.")

Another dealer, Gary Pontsler, was fiddling with something beneath a shade tree. He had on a “*TRUMP 2020*” T-shirt. The back of it read “*IMPEACH THIS!*” Pontsler shared that he is a “direct-line descendant” of a Revolutionary soldier who “used to cut George Washington’s hair” at Valley Forge. This prefaced an inheritance saga involving an engraved shaving razor made in London, a walnut case, a piece of parchment, and a Pennsylvania congressman who allegedly borrowed the razor and misplaced it at a World’s Fair, losing Pontsler’s family’s treasure for all time. He ended the story by saying, “Thanks, Mr. Congressman!”

Pontsler, who is seventy, dealt in vintage firearms and frequented a shooting range where, one time, two old men and a woman he’d never seen before showed up and asked if they could cut some of the sycamore roots on the property, to make a tea for their diabetes. He never saw them again and decided that they were angels. He believed in angels because, in 1973, he wrecked a Kawasaki 750, came out of his body, looked down at the bloody scene of his own impending death, felt an overwhelming sense of unconditional love, beheld a ray of light that poured like honey and crackled like a bad telephone wire, then chose to return to his physical form—to his life. No longer does he fear death or doubt stories about dying patients’ visions.

Pontsler spoke of this as fervently as he did of the reason for his Trump T-shirt. “Trump is the only guy that’s against the One World Order!” he said. “Even the Republican establishment—they’ve all taken money from everybody. They’ve drank the Kool-Aid! One World Order people are now controlling the United States through Barack Obama, through the Bidens. I mean, it’s so corrupt!”

What Pontsler really wanted to talk about was his two accomplished sons—an F.A.A. test pilot and an employee of Google—so we did that for a while. When I left, he was tending to a giant stuffed Pink Panther, his 127 mascot. It was sitting in a lawn

chair with its legs crossed, drinking a Busch Light, and it was not for sale.

The 127 crowds looked huge to a first-timer like me, but up and down the route everybody was attributing what they described as an unusually light turnout to the economy. This was a whipsaw summer, for political *and* financial news. Inflation was slowly coming down, but there were concerns about a recession. The stock market nosedived on the Friday of the yard sale, then corrected on Monday, and by mid-August reached a yearly high. Yard salers were feeling the volatility. A vender in Hamilton, Ohio, hours south of Van Wert, told me, “People are tired of living paycheck to paycheck.”

We were at Pleasant Treasures, another pinned stop, where the asphalt parking lot was baking us in our shoes. The vender and her husband, who had on a Trump cap and an AR-15 T-shirt, were sitting with portable fans pointed directly at their faces. They were selling a new class of souvenirs that had quickly emerged after July 13th, when a would-be assassin at an outdoor campaign rally nearly shot Trump in the head. A prominently displayed T-shirt read “*YOU MISSED.*”

Precious Brown and Seairra Collier, cousins in their late thirties, with matching “11:11” tattoos on their left biceps, were selling gemstone jewelry and crystals. They were among the few people of color I saw all weekend, selling or buying. Like Nascar, the 127 is overwhelmingly white. The cousins’ business card advertised “All Things Spiritual.” For ten dollars, Brown and Collier also read tarot. I handed them two fives.

Collier shuffled her deck and laid the Ace of Cups, the Four of Swords, and the King of Wands atop a plastic storage bin, her makeshift table, tapping each with long fingernails iridescent as moonstone. Brown was pulling oracle cards. The interpretations that followed included “It’s telling you to rest,” “You’re getting up

every day and fighting to be happy,” and “You are a beloved child of God.” Brown lit and waved a fat stick of sage, releasing fragrant swirls of smoke.

The parking lot of Pleasant Treasures seemed as good a place as any to ask what the cards said about November 5th, but Collier told me, “We’re not, like, *psychics*.” Uranus was up to something, though, and Mercury was currently in retrograde. (“Chaos.”) The cousins admitted that they had not been thinking much about Presidential politics, yet, now on the topic, Brown said that she hoped Harris would win so that she and Collier could witness “another first” in their lifetime. They had been in their early twenties when the U.S. elected its first Black President. Harris would be, among other things, the country’s first female President. Brown murmured, “That would be pretty dope for my daughters to see.”

A couple of tents down were Julie Middendorf, a ferociously tanned widow in a pink “*Women for Trump*” tank top, and her daughter, Sarah Smith, a registered nurse. At the 127, they sell whatever they don’t want anymore. (Cookie jar, suitcase, cross-stitched wall doodad that read “*KEEP THE KITCHEN CLEAN, EAT OUT.*”) Middendorf had brought a batch of patriotic décor that once belonged to her mother-in-law, including a cast-iron replica of the Liberty Bell.

Middendorf no longer felt comfortable putting a Trump sign in her yard, for fear of haters, but she still wore the shirt because Trump is “honest, hardworking, and cares about America!” She said, “People are struggling. Our property taxes have skyrocketed. Our electric bills have gone up.” The thought of November “scared” her, she told me, explaining, “I think they’re going to cheat and steal from us. That’s what they are—liars and cheaters.”

“You talking about Democrats?” a man passing by asked.



*Addison, Michigan: Faye Eaton and Debra Foreman.*

“Amen, brother!” It bothered Middendorf that “Democrats” had been “pulling Trump into court,” and she complained that it had become impossible to “sit and have a discussion with someone from the other side.”

“Some people feel that way about *us*,” Smith gently reminded her mom. “But that’s the problem. If we had conversations, we’d see that we all want the same things out of life. We want to be able to take care of our family and ourselves, be happy, and live a good life. It’s getting harder and harder to do that.”

“Well, with the wars, with the immigration!” Middendorf said. “My God, you’re in mid-America here, and we’ve got people who are undocumented walking down our streets. They know nothing about

our rules of law. I see them go up and talk to fourteen-year-old girls! They're just different from us." She added, "We're afraid that America's gonna be gone if Trump don't get in."

George Washington, in the form of what appeared to be a miniature ceramic bust, caught my attention in a box beneath Middendorf's table. I lifted him out. He was a cologne bottle. You opened it by unscrewing the head.

Route 127 rolls through forests, cornfields, soybean crops, valleys —kaleidoscopes of green. Enter Tennessee and poof: kudzu.

Certain legs of the journey get monotonous enough to warrant the logging of roadkill (skunk, cat, deer, armadillo, undetermined) until another stretch of homespun signs blossoms in the ditches, alongside the black-eyed Susans:

*FRESH CORN  
GUNS & AMMO  
BICYCLES  
CLOTHES  
LEMONADE  
EGGS  
WINE SLUSHIES  
QUILTS  
RESTROOMS*

Kentucky has the second most mapped destinations of any state, and, unless you barrel through without pausing to chat, there's no time to see them all. "This was never meant to be a Cannonball Run type of thing," as Potzy put it. I went straight to Liberty, the seat of Casey County, which is in western Appalachia. On the side of a hill just north of town stood a glowering Trump, rendered in hay bales painted red-white-and-blue. Passersby were stopping to take pictures, some of which showed up on the 127's Facebook page, whose administrators, for those posts, disabled the comments. A number of vendors on the route avoid overt political

messaging. At the Central Kentucky Ag/Expo Center, Liberty's signature stop, one told me, "We try to stay nonpolitical in here."

The Ag/Expo has a dirt floor and a soaring ceiling studded with enormous blades manufactured by a Kentucky company called Big Ass Fans. Tables were laden with rusted horseshoes, deer antlers, wooden rulers, vintage tins, stacks of license plates, souvenir mugs from Colonial Williamsburg. A seller of old-fashioned signs had on a uniform like the ones that gas-station attendants wore in the fifties. I heard him tell a customer, "*I love history.*"

A man in a straw hat was selling handsome hand-turned bowls of cherry and ambrosia maple. You never know what you might find at a place like the 127, he told me. He'd heard about someone who bought a wardrobe that had belonged to the seller's grandmother. As the buyer loaded it up—*clunk*. Searching for the source of the sound, he discovered a secret drawer. The drawer held a derringer. The buyer showed it to the seller, who thought about the gun for a second and said, "Well, Granny *was* a whore."

Next, the bowl-maker spun one about a couple who bought a box containing what they thought was an old rug; it turned out to be a Native American blanket, which they sold on eBay for six thousand dollars. The bowl-maker mentioned that he himself once shot a coyote for menacing his property, hung its head from a tree until scavengers picked it clean, then affixed the skull to a humanoid sculpture and sold it at the 127 as Coyote Man, claiming that it warded off evil spirits.

These are the kinds of stories you will hear if you sit down with people long enough at the 127. It does carry some emotional risk. You can be an hour deep into a winsome conversation with a stranger and ask something as innocuous and locationally relevant as "Do you drink whiskey?," only to take a dagger to the spirit with the reply: "It's like the Jew says, 'Whiskey's for sellin', not drinkin'.' "

What you hope for, then, is a cleansing presence like Donna Gaddis, whose specialties include vintage globes. “I’m down nine,” Gaddis told me when I spotted her booth. She had just sold a small brass-accented globe that showed Charles Lindbergh’s route across the Atlantic in 1927. On another, a dotted line showed East and West Germany, before they were reunified. At home, Gaddis, a retired transportation director for a public-school system, and her husband keep a celestial globe in their library. “The framing is copper, nineteen-forties,” she said. One of her deeply held beliefs is that travel yields perspective. When she sees a tableful of rusted tools, she wonders whose hands they have touched, and what they have built. “You think about how many times an object has produced an economy around itself,” Gaddis told me. “I like being in the food chain. I nibble on something, something nibbles on me.”

Viewed in this light, the 127 is a compendium of the American experience, not merely a repository of pet cages and cowboy boots and boxes of really bad books. In 2021, Jennifer Hendricks noted, in *CUNY’s Hunter Urban Review*, that American yard-sale culture began in the nineteen-sixties, “in response to people overfilling their homes with consumer goods during a decade of affluence.” Yard sales evolved into “radical forces for communal cohesion,” Hendricks wrote. “A symbol of American excess and hyper-consumerism has ironically come to symbolize one of the few remnants of a communal exchange during a moment when it feels like such acts are rapidly dissolving.”

Venders may endlessly truck a piece back and forth to the 127 rather than throw it away. Three years ago, a shopper liked a certain painting but balked at the price, two hundred and fifty dollars. The following year, the painting was still there, for a hundred dollars. This year, it was twenty dollars. The buyer offered ten. Sold. I spent a dollar on a thin manual titled “A Progress Report 1793-1974, Bicentennial Celebration, Liberty, Kentucky.” It highlighted Casey County’s agricultural significance—tobacco, apples,

peppers, corn, all of which, and more, are still farmed there today. For twenty bucks, I bought a golden lizard made of scrap-machine parts, horseshoe nails, and a fork; do not ask me why. The tail used to be a bicycle chain. It moves.

Crossville, Tennessee. Venders galore, from the parking lot of a cancer-treatment center to the knoll between a Chevrolet dealership and a Chick-fil-A. There were more Confederate flags here than in the previous states combined. A sticker on a battered van with a North Carolina license plate read “*Never apologize for being white.*” Trump flags everywhere. The farther south you went, the more defiant the signage: “*I’m voting for the felon.*”

Multiple booths trafficked in Nazi memorabilia, and in “mammy” pottery and replicas of Jim Crow-era signs. One of these sellers was Black. Her name was Alexis Woodbury; she’d come from Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and was recovering from a near-fatal car accident. On Woodbury’s table were Hitler-themed postage stamps and faux slave I.D. tags, which she said she had bought from a white vender who had just tried to insist, to me, that his merchandise was historical, not hateful. When I asked Woodbury whether she was offended by the slave tag, she replied, “I didn’t make it! It was meant to mock my people, but I look at it as a kind of art, and a relic of the past.”

I was reminded of Miss Pat. When she is not making doughnuts or decorating pavers, she paints American flags onto wooden pallets, twenty-five dollars each, to sell at events like the 127. Two customers in Michigan had recently commissioned her to do Confederate flags, but Miss Pat, who is white, hadn’t started yet. When I asked why she would agree to perpetuate such a divisive symbol, the question seemed to perplex her. “A pallet is just the right size,” she replied, adding, “It’s money in my pocket.” (She later told me that she’d cancelled the order.)

A seller of military surplus was telling a couple of knife enthusiasts that life in the United States was about to get “real screwy” because of an ammunition shortage. A dicey relationship with China, a top exporter of raw material for gunpowder, would generate scarcity-driven conflict Stateside, he predicted. An eavesdropper who’d been nodding knowingly at everything the vender had said declared that he, for one, could make his own dang gunpowder just by shopping at Lowe’s.

The price of ammo was “only gonna go up,” the vender went on, “because of Ukraine. It’s not *their* money. They don’t give a shit what the prices are. They’re buying everything they can get their hands on.” He seemed attuned to various conspiracy theories, the balance of which had led him to conclude that the only way to unfuck the United States was “a reboot—eliminating the government and starting over. Civil war.”

The eavesdropper at one point said, “Nobody has no clue what’s coming to this country.” Anybody who really wanted to dig into it should read “One Second After,” the vender said, referring to a post-apocalyptic novel by William R. Forstchen. In the book, he explained, attackers set off an electromagnetic pulse that “instantaneously sends this country back into the Dark Ages. Nothing you have works. Your vehicle doesn’t work—your pacemaker, your fucking pump at your house, your refrigerator, nothing.” Then: “Cannibalism!”

I thanked the vender for scaring the crap out of everyone within earshot. As I left his tent, I heard a customer who was buying ammunition introduce himself by saying, “I’m legally blind.”

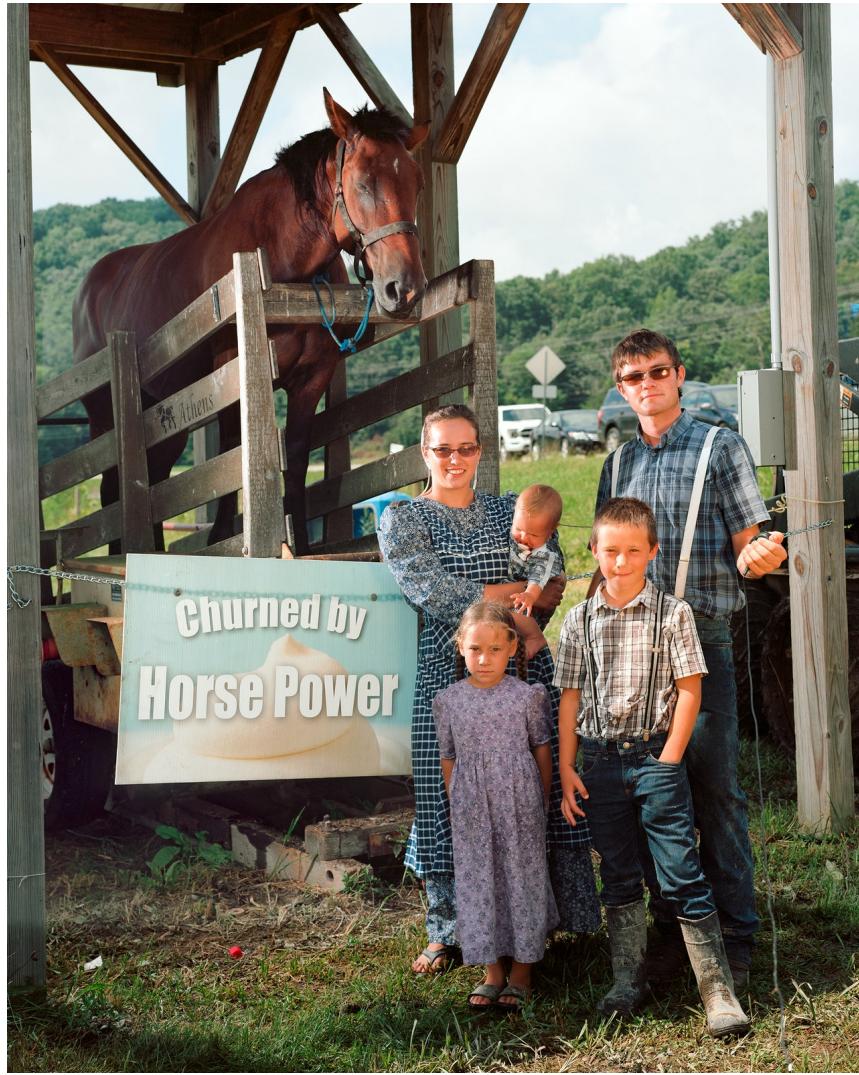
Around Chattanooga, the route gets hinky. Cell signals may vanish in northwest Georgia and not reappear with any consistency until the road doglegs into Alabama. On Sunday, the last day of the sale, the temperature in Gadsden hit the nineties, with not a breath of a

whisper of a breeze. Noccalula Falls Park, a popular 127 destination, was down to one sad-looking table.

A couple of miles away, at another pinned location, venders were packing up, pulling out. People who lived in homes nearby were taking down the chains that they had strung across their driveways to thwart rogue parkers. A food truck was still selling deep-fried peaches. A woman named Malena was leaving with her friend Peggy. They had on matching 127 T-shirts. Malena told me that they had started at “the very tippy top of Kentucky” and worked their way south, buying furniture and rose-of-Sharon plants but mostly stocking up on Trump shirts.

Malena, a native of Nogales, Arizona, associated Trump with support for the military (her son is active-duty Army) and a secure border with Mexico (her brother works for Customs and Border Protection, and her husband works for Immigration and Customs Enforcement). The connection to federal law enforcement made her leery of giving her last name. She told me, “I’m Hispanic—I’m born and raised in Arizona—but I can’t correlate how illegals and all these other people are getting everything.” Fentanyl was being smuggled in shipments of strawberries, Malena said. “Illegals used to hide from border patrol. Now they don’t. Now they go to the end of the street and wait to get picked up.”

A vintage picnic suitcase—yellow Bakelite utensils, matching plates—sat open in the tent of Gary Wine, a longtime vender from the Atlanta area. The suitcase, priced at six hundred dollars, dates to the Packard era, before interstates and Burger Kings. “Back then, everybody was talking about Route 66,” Wine, who is in his early seventies, said. He was sharing a vender space with André Kross, who is in his early fifties and lives in Peachtree City, Georgia. Kross showed me a worn clothbound volume of *Harper’s* articles from the Civil War, which he was selling for fifty bucks.



*Liberty, Kentucky: Grace and Elijah Martin with their children, Hannah, Arianna, and Caleb.*

It seemed doubtful that these items would move, even late in the 127, when buyers get reckless and some dealers would rather off-load merchandise than pack it back up. “There used to be things that were guaranteed sales—dough bowls, tobacco baskets, pulleys,” Kross said. “Now everything’s kind of a crapshoot.”

Wealthy young consumers would prefer to spend five hundred dollars on one meal than on a collectible, Wine said. “Five years ago, antique boxes that had writing on them—dynamite boxes, old general stores’ from the early nineteen-hundreds—we would sell twenty to thirty of them, every sale. Now you can’t give ‘em away.” Wine and Kross agreed that anything fit for a “man cave” was recession-proof, and that, in the South, men were their most

reliable customers. “They’re tool buyers, they’re knife buyers, hatchet buyers,” Wine observed.

When I asked how they were feeling about the Presidential election, Kross said, “I hope to hell Kamala doesn’t get in. Look what Biden’s done. I can’t even go buy hamburger meat anymore —it’s seven dollars a pound.”

“I’m a Republican, but I don’t *like* Trump,” Wine said.

“Yeah, don’t get me wrong,” Kross cut in. “I don’t think Trump’s a god—at all. Far from it.”

“I’m for strong borders, but I’m also very strongly for taking care of the Affordable Care Act, and education,” Wine said. Before retirement, he had sold educational materials for nursing schools and worked for U.S. Steel. He and his second wife have six children between them, all in their thirties and forties. Most are progressives, one is gay; there are grandchildren with special needs. Wine recently tried to give his daughter an expensive set of Henredon dining-room furniture—“high-high-end, French country, carved legs,” he told me. “She went to IKEA and bought pressed wood.” Not cheap, but new. ♦



*Paige Williams* began writing for *The New Yorker* in 2013 and became a staff writer in 2015. She is the author of “*The Dinosaur Artist*” and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/land-of-the-flea>

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

[Profiles](#)

## Richard Powers on What We Do to the Earth and What It Does to Us

*“Playground,” Powers’s new novel, aims to do for the oceans what “The Overstory” did for trees, shaking us out of our human exceptionalism.*

By [Hua Hsu](#)

September 9, 2024



*Powers moved to the Great Smoky Mountains while writing “The Overstory,” which became a phenomenon by delving into the life of the forest. It also made him “the tree guy.” Will “Playground” make him “the ocean guy”?*

*Photographs by Bryan Schutmaat for The New Yorker*

“Can you smell the negative ions?”

The novelist Richard Powers and I were sitting on the banks of a river in the Great Smoky Mountains, and I could scarcely hear him above the water crashing against the rocks. The sound was both violent and serene, like being trapped inside a white-noise machine. These collisions, he said, release negative air ions, electrically charged particles with beneficial health effects. Sometimes he liked

to wade into the river and sit among the rocks, letting the cold water pound his body. I took a deep breath, and the air did, indeed, smell fresher. Was I experiencing a surge in my serotonin levels, or am I just impressionable? Before I could decide, Powers was on to the next wonder. “Do you know your trees?” he asked.

Since the nineteen-eighties, Powers has built a reputation as a novelist of unusual intellectual curiosity and range—as interested in probing the frontiers of technological innovation as in expanding the possibilities of fiction. He’s written prize-winning, best-selling novels about computing, virtual reality, neuroscience, and nonhuman forms of consciousness, often focussing on the process of discovery and invention. But it was his twelfth novel, “*The Overstory*,” which won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2019 and sold more than two million copies, that turned him into an unlikely sensation. The book is a five-hundred-page multigenerational epic that follows nine characters whose only overlap is some form of relationship to trees—a chestnut tree that symbolizes a family’s resilience, a banyan that saves a parachuting pilot from danger, a California redwood that a band of activists risk their lives protecting. (Passages of the novel are even narrated from the perspective of a tree—an attempt, as Powers put it, to shake us out of our “human exceptionalism.”) “*The Overstory*” is about the damage that humans do to the natural world, but it is also about the natural world’s innate resilience to the worst we can inflict. To many readers, Powers became “the tree guy.”

Powers lives in eastern Tennessee, in a small town very close to one of the main gateways to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which he visits multiple times a week. He walks the trails as though he’s checking in on old friends, remarking on flowers that are “brand new,” pointing to barren-looking patches that will be “all bloomed out” within a couple of weeks. Judging by how frequently he hosts friends or journalists in the Smokies, he seems to relish being “the tree guy.” As we hiked, he would occasionally pluck a leaf off a tree and encourage me to chew it, or point to a

plant and tell me to take a whiff. He joked about “doing the ‘Smells of the Smokies’ tour.”

I admitted to Powers that I knew little about trees, though I had the impulse, shared by many who read “The Overstory,” to touch them and protect them. “This little spot is infused with semantic and syntactical meaning that you have to learn how to read,” he said, gesturing toward trees and bushes flanking the river. I asked him to tell me the story of where we were sitting. “There are endless psycho-social-historical-botanical narratives that I can start to learn how to read in a spot like this, that just keep opening outward the more you’re able to see,” he said. “For instance, what happened to this tree?” I had no idea, besides the fact that it looked a little skinny. He explained that it was a hemlock that had withered, marking the presence of the hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive, aphid-like insect that had made its way to the United States from Asia in the first half of the twentieth century. Even a dead tree, though, like one he spotted lying in the river, could create its own ecosystem—a new set of “pleasures and perils,” he said. Then he pointed out a stand of healthy hemlocks along a ravine, high across the river, that the adelgid had not yet reached.

He was telling me a story driven not by characters or by plot but by the different time lines that converged on this river. “I don’t care if humans think that humans are the center of the universe,” he said. “I just want the rest of the universe to be there as well.” Powers has a precise, gentle energy that’s sometimes broken by a goofy laugh. He speaks in full paragraphs, toggling between technical language and earnest astonishment. But attempting to take hold of all the stories within our sight line caused him to stumble in excitement. It reminded me of a moment in “The Overstory” when the limited horizons of the human brain are mocked by the “chorus of living wood” all around: “If your mind were only a slightly greener thing, we’d drown you in meaning.”



*"I now pronounce you . . . seated."*  
Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

Because of all the rhododendron bushes nearby, Powers continued, "I know that something has recently disturbed this forest. And I know what it is: the logging in the nineteen-twenties and thirties  
—"

I interrupted to make sure I had heard him right: "You just said 'recently.' "

"Hundred years," he said, laughing. "That was 'recently,' man!"

This month, Powers will publish his fourteenth novel, "Playground," a book that initially seems like a way for him to add "ocean guy" to his C.V. It essentially comprises three story lines. The first is about Todd Keane, an all-conquering tech giant. The onset of dementia has compelled him to revisit his happiest memories, which involve Rafi Young, a close friend of his teens and twenties from whom he is now estranged. A second story line concerns a close-knit, dwindling community on Makatea, an island in French Polynesia, that must decide how to respond to an offer from wealthy American investors who want to launch a libertarian

seasteading enclave nearby. The third follows Evelyne Beaulieu, a famous oceanographer, as she reflects on her life's work and all the destruction she has witnessed: the collapse of fisheries and the disappearance of various species; the acidification of the seas; the dredging, in a single afternoon, of entire "coral cities that had taken ten thousand years to grow." There's also a Silicon Valley-inspired twist, involving Todd's investments in social networking and artificial intelligence, that brings these narrative threads together.

Powers was a participant in the personal-computing revolution of the seventies and the rise of the Internet in the nineties, and he is deeply attuned to the potential cataclysms that technological innovation could invite. "I had this sense that we were living through this ethical moment again," he said, of the inspiration for the new book.

In May, Powers was in New York to meet with editors at his publisher, W. W. Norton. We had an early dinner at a vegetarian restaurant in Koreatown, and we discussed his upbringing. Powers was born in 1957, in Evanston, Illinois, the fourth of five children, and he has described his childhood as "almost idyllic." The kids would gather around the organ for sing-alongs with their parents. His father was a school principal; his mother cared for the family. When Powers was about eleven, the family moved to Thailand, where his father had taken a job at the International School Bangkok. His parents wanted the children to have a meaningful adventure abroad, so they were given a great amount of freedom. Powers recalled exploring the city, sleeping on beaches, and drinking a surprising amount of coffee, to which he attributed his current aversion to caffeine. His classmates were the sons of American military leaders and political élites. He sang and played guitar, bass, clarinet, and saxophone in bands and orchestras that toured throughout Southeast Asia.

The family returned to the United States in 1973. "I had more culture shock coming back" to the U.S. than after moving to

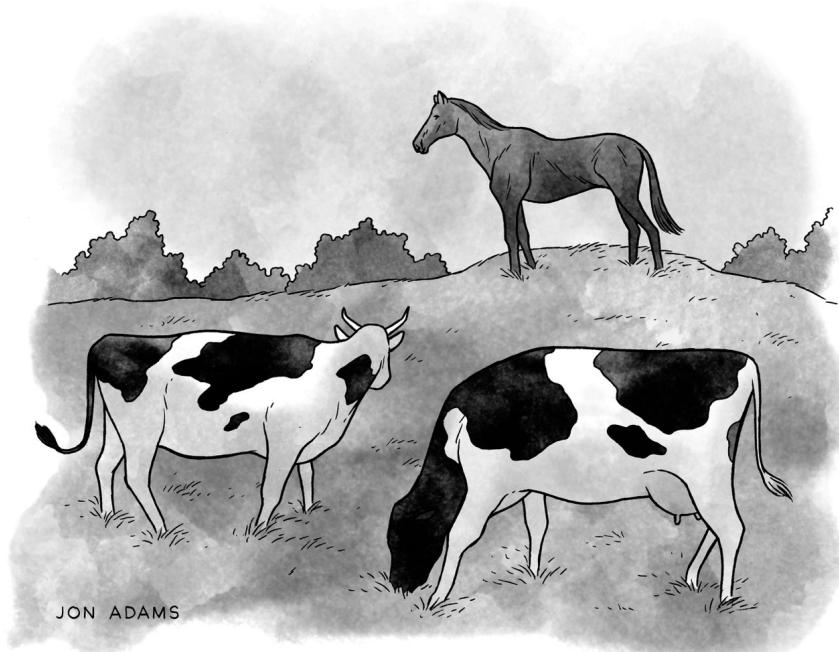
Thailand, he told me. “We left with the Beatles, and we came back with James Taylor. There was a discontinuity there that we had to get caught up on.” He finished high school in DeKalb, Illinois, where he was a novelty to his classmates. Some complimented him on his English, not knowing that he was from the United States. It was during this period that he began to see the world as a writer, understanding what it meant to be simultaneously inside and outside situations. He could mimic the speech and codes of those around him—“That’s the writer thing,” he said. “You’re ventriloquizing everything.” He read “Gravity’s Rainbow” and was awestruck by Thomas Pynchon’s electric prose and roving intellect, as well as by his sheer force of will. “I had nothing to compare it to,” he said, “no explanation of how it worked or where it was going or what its endless, surreal vignettes meant or how the whole astonishing structure fit together.”

Powers was good at math and science, and in 1975 he enrolled at the University of Illinois, intending to pursue physics. But he was miserable during his first year and recalled going to the health clinic complaining of stomach pains and stress. Specialization was antithetical to how he understood the world. Eventually, he decided to major in rhetoric, adding a concentration in math and physics. He was fascinated by the university’s internal computer network. On weekends and late at night, he hung out in the computer lab, teaching himself how to program.

“When I first understood what coding was, I thought, This is the answer,” he said. “We now have the ability to incarnate thought, to make thought have its own agency in the world, to create things that are like organisms but sprung totally out of brains. It was absolutely intoxicating.” In “Playground,” Todd, whom Powers sees as his alter ego, gives voice to this feeling: “I now had the tools to create a way of playing in this life that human beings had always wanted.”

Powers stayed at Illinois to pursue a master's degree in English, with vague literary ambitions. But, in 1978, his father died of cancer. Powers recalled sitting in a graduate seminar, analyzing a poem on euthanasia, and realizing that the conversation was about the work's mechanics rather than about what the poet was trying to communicate about death or suffering. "Somewhere between the life and the study of art, there had been a massive disconnection," he said.

Powers decided to give up literature, and he moved to Boston, where he began working as a computer programmer. He lived close enough to Fenway Park that he could open his windows and hear whether the Red Sox were winning. Programming work was abundant, lucrative, and relatively easy. He occasionally took on freelance jobs; for one, he wrote a program, for an exiled Spanish prince, that foresaw the future of options hedging. In his spare time, he read a lot. On weekends, he visited museums. One Saturday, he went to the Museum of Fine Arts, which was staging the first American retrospective of the German photographer August Sander. He came across one of Sander's most notable works, "Young Farmers," taken in 1914. The image of three young men dressed in their finest clothes, on their way to a dance in a nearby village, immediately captivated Powers. The men look back at Sander, unaware of the First World War ahead of them.



*"There's no way he got that body just from eating grass."*

*Cartoon by Jon Adams*

Powers wanted to devote himself to thinking about this photograph. He returned to work on Monday and gave notice. He began writing what became his first novel, "Three Farmers on Their Way to a Dance." He'd discovered a solution to satisfy his restless mind. "If I'm a physicist, I can't do all these other things," he said. As a writer, he didn't have to make a choice. "I can be a dilettante forever," he said.

"Three Farmers"—which was at once a history of photography, an exegesis of Sander's work, and a series of short, speculative stories about the young men—was published, to acclaim, in 1985, with critics likening Powers to Pynchon and Don DeLillo. While writing "Prisoner's Dilemma," he moved to the Netherlands. The novel, which was published in 1988, interwove the story of a postwar Illinois family not unlike his own with the histories of Walt Disney, the incarceration of Japanese Americans during the Second World War, and the proliferation of nuclear-weapons testing. The range of these two works, and the clever, stylish way he evoked resonances between the past and the present, earned Powers a MacArthur Fellowship—often called the "genius" grant—in 1989. Two years later, he published "The Gold Bug Variations," a novel that

positioned a pair of love stories, decades apart, within a broader historical landscape of scientific discovery and musical composition. Powers drew inspiration for the story's shifting time lines from the double-helix structure of DNA.

Popular novelists of the nineties often used technological change as a metaphor for uncertainty—the surveillance-state dystopia of Neal Stephenson's "Snow Crash," the dull, spirit-crushing corporatism of Douglas Coupland's "Microserfs"—but Powers's interests were more granular. In "Galatea 2.2," a novel about a writer embedded with a lab of researchers experimenting with A.I. and machine learning, and in "Plowing the Dark," which follows an artist and her wonkish colleagues as they design a virtual-reality simulation, Powers focusses on the lives of scientists, programmers, and engineers, as well as on the obsessive-compulsive labor their insights require.

The writer Ann Patchett first met Powers when they appeared at an event together in the early two-thousands. "It was the best reading I've ever heard," she told me. Although he's an introvert, Powers projects a wise confidence onstage, as though he's figured something out that the rest of us still need to learn. She was so absorbed by his reading that she volunteered to give up her time so he could keep talking. "He really is one of those people that you think, Yeah, everyone in this room would follow this guy off a bridge," she told me. The second time they met, she heard him tell a crowd at Vanderbilt University that he wished more people would write novels that dealt with science. "I thought, O.K., I'll do that," she told me. "And then I wrote 'Run,' totally because of him, and then 'State of Wonder' "—novels that featured characters shaped by science or its pursuit. "I was just, like, If you think that's a good idea, then I think that's a good idea, too."

Powers wrote about technology with the earnest zeal of an early adopter. "At every stage," he said, of his journey into computing, "I wanted the latest and greatest. There was a revolution every twelve

months.” But he was also interested in the social ramifications of this progress. The protagonist of “Galatea 2.2” recalls browsing the World Wide Web for the first time, in the mid-nineties. He feels a constant “low-grade thrill at being alive in the moment when this unprecedented thing congealed.” This gradually gives way to a realization that “people who used the Web turned strange,” likening it to a “vast, silent stock exchange trading in ever more anonymous and hostile pen pals. The Web was a neighborhood more efficiently lonely than the one it replaced. Its solitude was bigger and faster.” Yet the character confesses that he cannot log off.

A common criticism at the time was that Powers was writing “think pieces,” not novels—“More head than heart,” as the writer Jim Holt put it in a review, in 2014, referring to it as the “Powers Problem.” But Powers viewed himself as someone inspired by the great twentieth-century European novelists, such as Proust, Mann, and Musil, or American novelists like Pynchon or Gaddis, whose work reflects the large-scale changes in the world. He tried to balance his astonishment at technological revolutions with a novelist’s vision of what might come to pass in their wake. He believed that many writers in the nineteen-nineties presumed that we had “beat nature,” he said. Struggles were focussed inward: “Can we get along with each other? Can we get along with ourselves?” The tendency of novels to root conflict largely in psychology, and to offer deep introspection as a way out, struck him as troubling, cutting us off from the nonhuman.

“He was misunderstood for a decade or two,” Kim Stanley Robinson, one of contemporary science fiction’s greatest writers, told me. Robinson has devoted his career to exploring the interplay between the natural world—and its possible impending collapse—and culture. He draws a distinction between his novels, which are speculative and future-oriented, and Powers’s, which come from a more grounded, realist tradition. “Modern critics didn’t know what to do with him—‘Oh, he’s so cerebral.’ They weren’t able to define him, because he actually wrote about scientists, ideas, and work. It

doesn't always have to be about people's soap operas and domestic, bourgeois, modern American life. He's just interested in larger, more systemic things, and his novels are about those things."

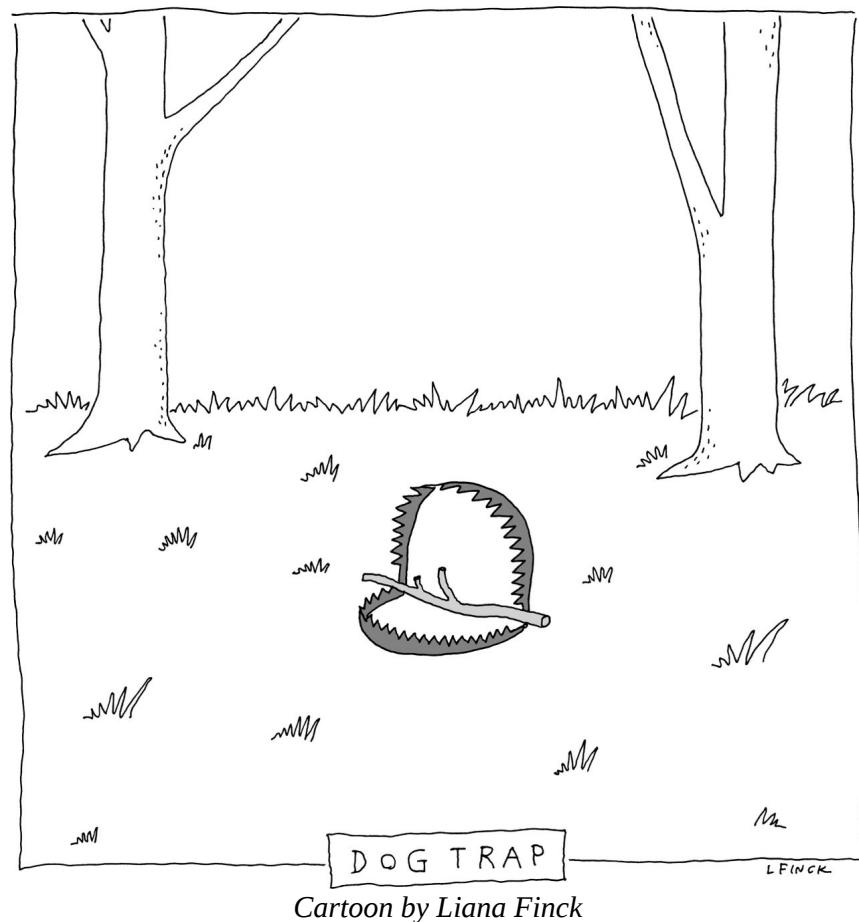
Powers's reputation for braininess belied the fact that his books often featured small glimpses of his personal history. On the final pages of "Prisoner's Dilemma," Powers seems to step into this swirling, playful novel about the Hobson family and the tales that their father, who recently succumbed to cancer, once told them. "I have had an idea for how I might begin to make some sense of the loss. The plans for a place to hide out in long enough to learn how to come back," the narrator observes. "Call it Powers World." "Operation Wandering Soul" borrows from his childhood in Thailand, and "Galatea 2.2" from the circumstances of his return to Illinois after nearly six years in Europe.

These connections were likely lost on reviewers and readers, since Powers was largely an enigma. His books didn't feature an author photo until "Galatea 2.2," in 1995, and he didn't go on tour until 1998, with the release of "Gain." "I just thought, I don't really know how to drive this thing yet," he said. "I think it would probably be better if I allowed myself to mature in isolation. Figure out what you're doing before a lot of other people tell you what you're doing, or what you should be doing."

A couple of years ago, Powers's older sister, Peggy, passed away unexpectedly. While recalling their childhood, he recovered a memory: for his tenth birthday, she had given him a book about coral reefs. From his bedroom in Chicago, "it felt as if earth was two impossibly different planets"—the concrete-and-steel one just outside his window and the oceanic abyss far beyond. He never learned why she gave him the book. But the following year they were living in Bangkok, and he was snorkelling alongside all the creatures he'd previously only read about. The recollection inspired him to try writing a novel that would examine how much the oceans had been transformed in the fifty years since his sister had

given him that present. “The largest part of the planet exhausted,” he writes, “before it was ever explored.”

After dinner, we walked through midtown. It was warm out, the time of year when New Yorkers begin looking toward summer, and Manhattan had a jagged, anarchic feeling to it. Powers told me that he was far more comfortable in the solitude of the mountains. As we walked through Madison Square Park, he found it hard to ignore the city’s distractions and distresses. “I’m hearing a lot of particular sounds I wouldn’t have been attentive to otherwise,” he said. A man on a bench began screaming about Anthony Fauci. “That’s hard for me,” Powers said quietly. (“How funny,” Patchett said, laughing, when I mentioned our dinner. “Rick in New York.”)



It was still early enough in the cycle of publication that few people had read “Playground,” and he kept asking me about my response to it—what parts I’d found compelling, whether the novel had made me cry. Many of his books had helped people come to terms

with panicky uncertainty regarding the future. As we passed some people playing chess in Union Square, he reflected on a book that had recently helped him deal with that terror himself: “*Homo Ludens*,” published in 1938, by the Dutch theorist and historian Johan Huizinga.

“*Homo Ludens*” is essentially a celebration of play. When we are young, play teaches us about freedom and pleasure, boundaries and order, the difference between real life and fantasy, what works and what doesn’t. “Play is older than culture,” Huizinga writes, and it is fundamental to culture’s twists and turns. Powers began to see the engine of evolution—“life’s way of testing, training, and extending itself”—as play.

In “*Playground*,” the characters Todd and Rafi cement their friendship with the Chinese strategy game Go, whose history stretches back some four thousand years. Although they’re competitive with each other, it’s the game’s complexity, the numerous possibilities in every decision, that appeals to them most. They can play a single game all night. A theme of “*Playground*” emerges: What if the point of life isn’t to win but to keep surviving, together? “We play to keep on playing,” Powers said triumphantly, raising a finger to the sky before disappearing into the evening crowd.

Powers spent much of the nineties and early two-thousands in Urbana, at his alma mater, where he had returned in 1993 to teach creative writing and continue writing fiction. Researching novels allowed him to explore all kinds of curiosities—music, psychological disorders, corporate history, cancer cells, the history of racial segregation.

In 2010, he was hired as a writer-in-residence in the creative-writing program at Stanford University, and in 2013 he was given an endowed professorship. Powers probably had a more open-minded and sophisticated view of Silicon Valley than many

novelists his age. But he recalled attending dinners in California alongside tech entrepreneurs who seemed to have it all but were still fixated on correcting what they saw as the “design flaw” of life: death.

Meanwhile, life on earth was growing ever more precarious. “I would go up into the Santa Cruz Mountains whenever I could, to escape this vision of the future being created down in the Valley,” he said. He didn’t know much about the woods. Everything was “a green blur” to him. One of the first trees he learned about was the bristlecone pine, within driving distance, which had “germinated before human beings invented writing,” he said. He admired the natural world’s seeming indifference to our inventions and innovations.

He collected hundreds of books on trees and began working on what would become “The Overstory.” In 2014, he left Stanford and returned to Illinois. In 2015, he decided to visit the Smokies, after reading about the untouched, old-growth forests there. It was a revelatory experience: the light, the smells, and the sounds were unlike anywhere he’d been. For months, he thought about the region. The next year, he moved to Tennessee.

Powers lives in a modest house in the mountains; he settled on it the first day he went looking. (His wife, the translator Jane Kuntz, splits her time between the Smokies and Urbana, where the couple met. They have no children, owing in part to his anxieties about bringing life into an imperilled world.) It feels a bit like an adult tree house: there’s a screened-in porch that runs along one edge of the house, with a telescope, some DVDs, and a bed where he sleeps when the weather permits. Inside, there are books in every room, though the bulk of his library remains in Urbana. In a corner of the living room is a small hydroponic table for growing salad greens and herbs, which he set up during the pandemic. Throughout the house are old awards and also gifts from his book tours, including a set of bricks that an admirer decorated with paintings of Powers’s

covers. When I visited him, he looked at a topographical map of the Smokies and traced the mountain ridges with his finger, marvelling at how much was left to explore.

“Being able to think on the time frames of trees reduces my anxiety,” he said. (He joked that his anxieties could be inflamed by more short-term sources, such as being profiled for magazines.) When I asked him where he wrote “Playground,” he looked around the house. “Everywhere,” he replied. His process involves a combination of dictating, typing, and writing by hand—depending on the nature of the scene—and he estimated that he wrote about eighty per cent of the novel while lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, trying to get as close as possible to sensory deprivation.

“I think of him as a little bit reclusive, a very private person,” Robinson told me. “Even though I’ve known him a long time and we talk a lot, I don’t know much about him. That just strikes me as another aspect of him being him.”

Powers told me that he’s never felt healthier or more content than while living in Tennessee. He thinks of the past few years, following the thrilling yet taxing success of “The Overstory,” as akin to a postmortem experience. He never imagined that he would have professional success on this scale, let alone in his sixties. “I’m in the bonus round,” he said.



*Powers swimming in Tennessee.*

The way a novel about the ocean reveals itself to also be a novel about artificial intelligence will likely determine how readers feel about it. “Playground” is by no means a dystopian story, despite moments of concern over “the Age of Deep Machines.” One of the main characters, a believer in the “technological sublime,” places all his faith in the machines that have built his vast fortune. Todd—whom Powers initially thought he would base on Elon Musk—“is who I would’ve been if I stuck with the death world,” Powers said.

Despite his passion for computers, Powers resisted owning a cell phone until he began working at Stanford. He said that he recognized the perils of a hyperconnected future. From a young age, he told me, “I knew that to some extent my views on what it meant to be a human being were not normal. While my brain was

capable of a lot of things—manipulating, exploring, and taking things apart of great complexity—I wasn’t especially good at understanding what people meant when they said what they said. The codes of social interaction. What signals are people giving off to each other, how do I read them?”

He foresaw that the new social networks of the Web would redefine what identity, community, and solitude meant. “I could see how profoundly all these new technologies change what we meant by social intelligence and what we meant by social advantage. I had a pretty sophisticated sense of the sociopolitical ways in which privilege was going to be amplified by these devices.”

In “Playground,” Todd builds his empire on these connections, even as he is profoundly lonely, and that leads him deeper into technology. “The Age of Humans was coming to an end,” Powers writes. “A new kind of life had come along to take our jobs, manage our industries, make our new discoveries, be our friends, and fix our societies as it saw fit. And that age launched itself in a heartbeat, after the briefest childhood.”

It’s not a spoiler to reveal that an A.I. entity appears—and that it does not end up destroying life as we know it. In fact, the representation of A.I. is almost sympathetic, suggesting the possibility that machines could learn grace and benevolence. I asked Robinson what he made of it. “I think that we keep on understanding A.I. through science-fiction stories from the nineteen-fifties,” he said, “or ‘2001.’ We anthropomorphize these extremely rapid calculators and immediately give them characters and personality and agency, so then they become villains or heroes or whatnot. There’s a constant category error being made that assigns agency and personality to algorithms that are much simpler than that. These are not mechanical people. Their brains are not like our brains, if you wanna call ’em brains at all. Their thinking isn’t like our thinking.”

After a day of hiking, Powers prepared us a chickpea stew alongside couscous and caramelized onions. As I looked out at the forest from his deck, he told me the rough ages of the surrounding trees. He asked me to snip some salad from his living-room garden. While we ate, he pulled out his phone to show me an experiment he'd undertaken. He had fed his book to ChatGPT-4, the most advanced chatbot available to the public at that moment, and he asked it to identify ironic moments in the novel.

There had been very little written about "Playground," not even an Amazon plot synopsis, so there was nothing for the A.I. to parrot. But, in two seconds, it came up with a polished, pages-long interpretation, which Powers read aloud with a sense of total bemusement. It identified the irony, for example, of a character creating a giant sculpture from plastic waste salvaged from the ocean. "The sculpture, which takes on mythic and cultural significance, is made from the very materials that symbolize environmental degradation."

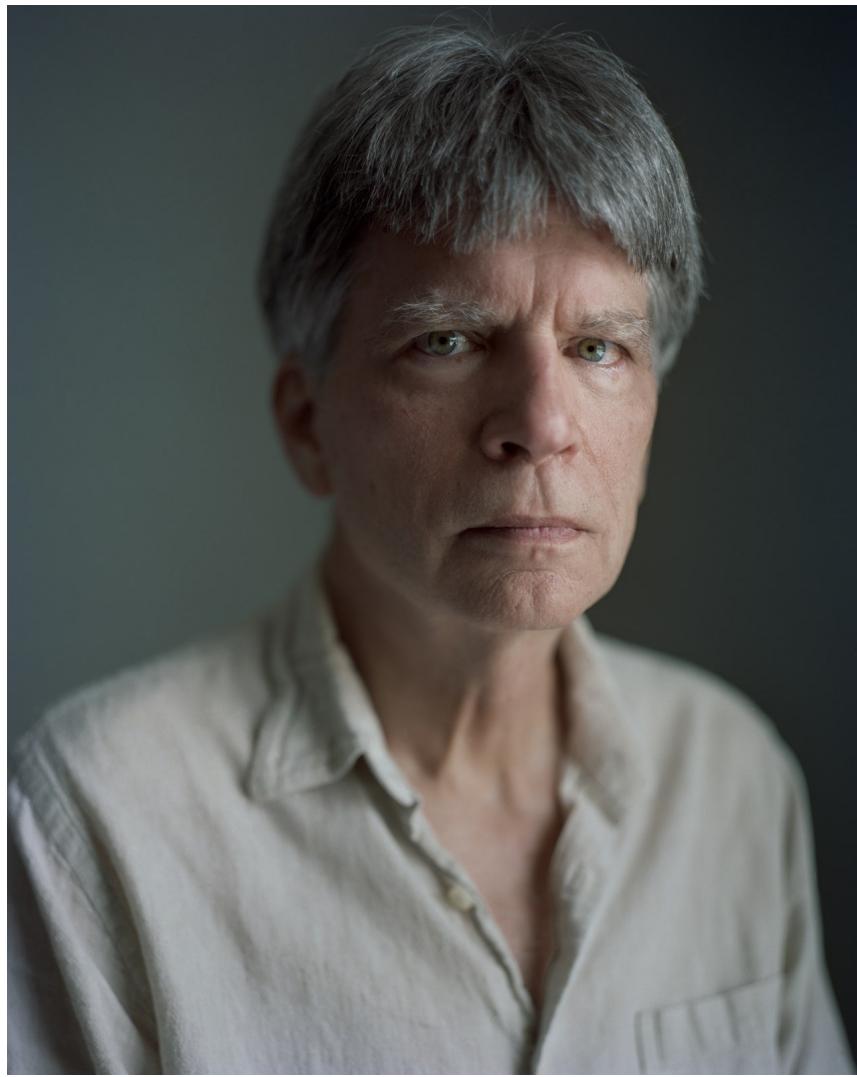
When GPT-4 began analyzing the ironic presence of A.I. in the book, we both started laughing. "'Richard Powers, stop talking to me!'" he said. "'Go and talk to some other humans about your book.'"

Earlier that day, I had asked whether he remembered his first experience with these sophisticated chatbots. "Oh, my God," he recalled thinking. "It's weird. It's gonna happen in my lifetime." I told him I couldn't quite discern his tone. Was that "Oh, my God" one of terror, awe, or delight?

"Do I have to choose one of them? I mean, all of them. Don't you feel all of them?"

I couldn't shake my own nineteen-fifties-science-fiction-derived anxieties. In late May of 2023, a group of three hundred and fifty industry leaders, researchers, and engineers made news by signing

a one-sentence statement: “Mitigating the risk of extinction from A.I. should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks, such as pandemics and nuclear war.” And then there was the comparatively minor professional anxiety: I am a writer and an academic, and the past couple of years have been filled with stories of novels or homework being offloaded to A.I., resulting in all kinds of existential worries about the future of our work. After all, Powers had just read me an analysis of his book that, with some editorial massaging, might not sound out of place in this magazine.



*“Terror results from not being able to escape the time frame where you can only see the earth as a story of loss,” Powers says.*

“I feel more terror than delight,” I told Powers.

“‘This changes everything.’ The phrase itself is emotionally agnostic,” he said. “But we are at this point with the human

manipulation of time and space and deformation of the earth where to say, ‘This changes everything’ . . . it almost morally asks a person to say, ‘Do not lose your head.’ What is actually happening? What might actually happen? What values do we want to survive these changes? What do we want to do? In the moment of absolute disruption, if we say, ‘Make it go away because it’s all bad,’ then it *will* be all bad.” He went on, “It may require massive amounts of regulation. But the question is not ‘Is A.I. good or bad?’ It’s ‘How do we want to use A.I.? ’ ”

It felt a little incongruous to admire the handiwork of GPT-4 at Powers’s kitchen table, in the mountains, with the insects outside the only sound other than our conversation. We agreed that it had produced an admirably strong effort. Still, I said, I was glad it got some plot points wrong. “Gives us another eighteen months,” Powers said, laughing. He added that just a few years ago he hadn’t thought machine learning would happen on this scale for at least another forty years. He was staring at his phone, smiling.

After dinner, he took a blender that he’d received last Christmas down from a shelf. He was still experimenting with new recipes, and he loaded it with frozen bananas and made a kind of dairy-free ice cream. We drizzled our bowls with ginger syrup and crushed nuts, delighted by what this contraption had created.

“Struggling with this question of the ultimate eradication of everything that you would think of ordinarily as personal meaning is not unrelated to struggling with this notion that ninety-nine point nine per cent of all species that ever evolved go extinct,” he said. “The beauty of consciousness is that it can do that. The curse of consciousness is that it understands that.”

When Powers was teaching at the University of Illinois, he had a student named Neelay Shah, who is now a principal software architect at Nvidia, the technology company that has become the dominant supplier of A.I. hardware and software. Shah was

familiar with Powers before they met: a high-school teacher had given him a copy of “Galatea 2.2,” which explored the possibility of a computer equipped with a kind of A.I. software that could pass the Turing test—an edgy plotline for the mid-nineties. In the novel, a writer feeds the computer book after book, to see whether it can successfully mimic the insights of a graduate student in literature.

Shah told me that, when he read “Galatea 2.2,” he was skeptical of its implications. Even once he became an engineer, working on early versions of A.I., he assumed that training a machine would require other sensory inputs, like visual cues, not just text. But he was revisiting “Galatea 2.2” recently and realized that Powers had been right all along. “It’s almost exactly what they’re doing today,” he said.

Powers had given him an early copy of “Playground.” Shah was impressed by Powers’s desire to understand the engineer’s perspective. “It’s a really human portrait of why we might be doing these things, and what we could potentially get out of them,” Shah said.

On my last day in the Smokies, we made our way up into the mountains so that Powers could show me a spot he’d pointed out on the map in his living room. On our hikes, he often seemed like a volunteer member of the National Park Service, asking strangers whether they needed help with directions, sharing tips about less travelled trails, offering to take photos of couples celebrating their anniversary. We looked out at the hundreds of thousands of acres of trees between where we were standing and North Carolina, and he repeated a joke that his wife makes whenever they come across a particularly spectacular sight in the park: “Now *that*’s ‘National’!”

There were a lot of salamanders along the trail. We walked for a bit and then sat on a mossy fallen tree. Powers had brought a bag of snacks—crunchy, dried shiitake mushrooms, ginger cubes, pretzels, and cookies. We weren’t far from a road, and my concerns were

generically urban, mostly involving the parking protocol. It was hard not to feel like an intruder in a world that did not need us.

“Terror results from not being able to escape the time frame where you can only see the earth as a story of loss,” he said. “Right now, everyone is seeing A.I. only as a story of loss, because they know that every aspect of their life is gonna be changed by this. And they don’t want that instability. But, in a story, in an artistic work about the moment that we live in, it can’t be emphasized enough that nothing we have done, no action that we’ve taken, no resource that we’ve extracted, no technology that we’ve created, nothing has altered in the least the life force’s ability to continue to respond to change at the same rate it has always been capable of responding.”

Each time someone passed, we returned to the world of social pleasantries. An excited middle-aged couple—who looked as though they’d come to the forest straight from their desk jobs—regaled us with an account of all the different-colored salamanders they’d seen thus far. My ankles itched.

“What can I make happen?” Powers asked. “How do I have to save the world? The world is still, even now, constantly saving itself, and it’s hard for you to see because you’re out in the blink of an eye. But, if you can see and understand it, your own existence as an organism is going to be much healthier, much saner. If you get to the end of ‘Playground’ and say, ‘The world is still here. The world will still exceed my comprehension and astonishment by orders of magnitude. The world will open up to me if I attend to it,’ then let’s see what happens.”

The bugs were getting more aggressive. We kept walking. He pointed at a downed fir right next to me; I hadn’t even noticed it. It was just another brown blur. The fir was hundreds of years old, and now it was resting on its side, its roots in the air, dried out and barren. And then he pointed up, where a birch tree was growing perpendicularly out from the fir’s fallen trunk. “Trees come and

go,” he said, and we continued on our way. “We have to build a new world with the ingredients we’ve got.” ♦



*Hua Hsu* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning memoir “*Stay True*.” He teaches at Bard College.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/richard-powers-profile>

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

# Shouts & Murmurs

## • [How We Got the Story](#)

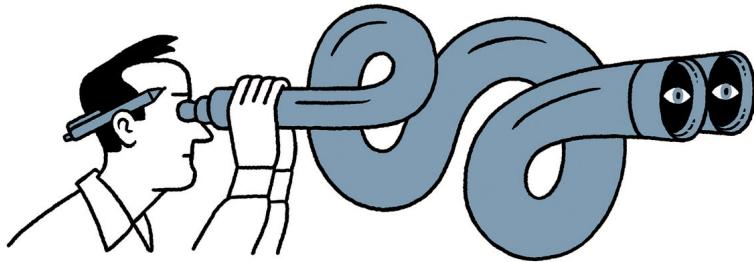
By Bruce Headlam and Stephen Sherrill | This five-part series, which includes this three-part series on how we got the story, is the result of a two-year investigation, involving scores of interview requests, several interviews, and five 311 calls.

**Shouts & Murmurs**

# How We Got the Story

By [Bruce Headlam](#) and [Stephen Sherrill](#)

September 9, 2024



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

This five-part series, which includes this three-part series on how we got the story, is the result of a two-year investigation, involving dozens of legal filings, scores of interview requests, several interviews, innumerable Zoom meetings, and five 311 calls. We examined hundreds of confidential documents, crisscrossed the country three times, and uncovered shocking revelations, including the fact that we were still short of Delta Medallion status.

Our investigation was driven by three questions, or what journalists call “concerns.” First, what was the relationship between company executives and government regulators? Second, was there evidence of a “quid pro quo” (literally, a reciprocal relationship that raises “concerns”)? Third, was there sufficient evidence of a “quid pro quo” to keep us from being reassigned to the sports desk?

Using cell-phone data and flight manifests, we followed Michael Tisdale, the chief executive, for months, shadowing him during a weekend at Davos, observing him as he toured factories in China, and spending ten days partially submerged in the koi pond outside his office. We also tracked his activities online, contacting him on LinkedIn more than seven (8) times. It was later revealed that we had the wrong Michael Tisdale, but the one we found sounds like he's doing quite well as a "brand development manager" for the past "one year and 3 months," which we are still trying to confirm.

We made three trips to company events, first posing as shareholders at the general meeting, then as coatroom attendants at a company "Kahlúa for the Cure" charity evening, and, finally, as members of the visiting Vienna Boys' Choir. We were able to confirm a lot of this reporting during a sales team-building offsite in Scottsdale, Arizona, where we placed second in the scavenger hunt (partnered with Jamie, Southeast territory).

All interviews were conducted under strict guidelines. On-the-record interviews were quoted with full attribution. Off-the-record interviews were quoted without attribution. Off-the-record interviews with attribution were quoted anonymously. Anonymous interviews were quoted on the record without attribution but using just the adverbs, which strongly implied that the chairman's ex-wife is drinking again.

We made more than a dozen requests for federal documents under the Freedom of Information Act (*FOIA*). Concerned that the company might be alerted to our reporting, we also used *FOIA* to obtain all other *FOIA* requests for similar information. Worried that our own colleagues knew what we were doing, we then *FOIA'd* all their *FOIAs*.

Inevitably, we encountered roadblocks. We sent samples of company waste to an independent lab, but the results came back negative, although the technicians were able to identify the rash we

got while sleeping in our rental car. We spent a month in a “coding boot camp,” after our employer, a stalwart of long-form investigative journalism, announced that it was pivoting to become an app that delivers non-alcoholic cocktails.

By then, it was obvious that the target of our story was using “black ops” to interfere with our investigation. First, we received a mysterious phone call asking us to “participate in a customer survey” for Brawny Paper Towels. Was this a message that we were getting “too close”? Then we discovered that the company had initiated a whisper campaign, when we received word that our Classmates.com profile had been visited 1 times [sic].

To protect our reporting, we moved all our research to a locked office, and communicated using only emojis. During one particularly intense night, Bruce let Stephen know that he was laughing so hard he was crying, and applauded three times, to which Stephen replied that he prayed this was true, while also wearing sunglasses. At this point, our editor-in-chief began calling us “Nimrod and DimStein,” which we took as a compliment.

We got the first draft down to just under a hundred thousand words and broke it into chapters that we uploaded to five-inch floppy disks, encrypted, and moved to another locked room, where they were de-encrypted, loaded onto CD-ROMs, and then hidden under our editor’s pillow. We then hammered out the final version, working in our editor’s garage in Maplewood, New Jersey. Then, in a room rented under an assumed name at the Holiday Inn Express Newark (King Deluxe, partial city view), we fine-tuned the edit during her weekly ketamine infusions.

We reached out to the company for comment a full two hours before publication. When we called the C.O.O. at home, he said that he was “surprised to hear from us” given that the company “had gone bankrupt a year ago.” For space reasons, we declined to print his statement in full.

We are spending the next six months filing expenses, but we are still on the story. If you have information you'd like to share, please reach out to [companytips@](mailto:companytips@). Be one of the first ten and receive a twenty-per-cent discount off your first Kombuchatini six-pack. ♦

*Bruce Headlam* is the editorial director of Aventine, a nonprofit research institute, and a host of the podcast “Broken Record.”

*Stephen Sherrill* has contributed to the magazine since 1997.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/how-we-got-the-story>

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

# Fiction

## • “Last Coffeehouse on Travis”

By Bryan Washington | I was too broke to pay her rent, so every morning saw me behind the counter of her coffee shop.

**Fiction**

# Last Coffeehouse on Travis

By [Bryan Washington](#)

September 8, 2024



*Photograph by Delaney Allen for The New Yorker*

For a few months, I stayed with my aunt's friend in Midtown, back when she could still afford to live there. Now it's filled with condos, and they're all a trillion dollars a month. But, in those days, she owned the house, and also a coffeehouse a few blocks away.

I was too broke to pay rent, so every morning saw me behind the counter. This was the arrangement. I'd just broken up with my ex—a doctor with legible handwriting, an ungenerous top—because he was moving to Austin and I wasn't down to do that.

Margo lived with her young son, Walter. Sometimes he went by Walt, the name his father called him, but his father was gone. My aunt had introduced the two of them to me as her Good Friends, which meant they'd either met at church or been involved in some kind of beauty-shop gossip entanglement—but, when I was standing in their doorway, effectively unhoused, none of that had mattered to me.

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

*[Listen to Bryan Washington read “Last Coffeehouse on Travis.”](#)*

Walter looked up at me with absolute disdain. Margo only shrugged.

I really appreciate your hospitality, I said, nearly bowing.

Don't call it that, Margo said. It's a favor. Your aunt will pay it back.

This made my aunt's eye twitch. But it wasn't a lie. I'd been living with her for a while, and, ever since she'd walked in on me sucking off a hookup in her living room, every word she lobbed my way felt loaded. So she smiled, pushing me forward a bit.

You'll hardly even notice him, she said, rubbing my back. He's no trouble.

Better not be, Margo said.

Walter kept staring at my face. I scrunched it a bit to see if he'd laugh or something, but he did not.

•

I'd been a barista before, but Margo still wanted me to make her a coffee. She sat with her legs crossed at the bar, tapping at her phone. It wasn't a big space: there were three sofas, a few tables, and some drapes lining the windows. The walls were painted the lightest shade of gray. Walter sketched Bluey at a table by the entrance.

Is this a test? I asked.

Only if achievement-based endeavors give you validation, Margo said.

And if I fail?

Then I'll be the first person to ever change her mind.

Margo's face didn't tell me whether or not this was bullshit. After I served her a cup of pour-over, she swirled it in the mug and kind of wiggled her nose.

Took one sip, and then a second.

Three.

All of a sudden, I actually cared what she thought.

It's fine, she said. Emergency averted.

Told you, I said.

But I didn't say this was *good*, she added, standing to take hold of the kettle.

Margo wasn't a short lady. Braided hair ran down her back. I watched as she did exactly the same things I had: weighing the

beans, grinding them, reboiling the water, saturating the grounds over a scale. But, when I took a sip from the mug she passed me, a chill started in my spine, reaching the ends of my ears.

*Fuck*, I said.

Don't fucking swear around Walter, Margo said.

He probably hears worse on TikTok every day, I said.

He's in *third grade*, Margo said.

O.K. But *fuck*.

Yes.

What the fuck did you do?

I paid attention, Margo said. You can make sandwiches, right? That's where you'll start. No coffee for now.

Then she turned away, maneuvering around the tiny kitchen space, assembling a small mug of hot chocolate. She walked it out to Walter, who hardly looked up from his sketchbook, nodding exactly once.

•

I wasn't completely useless. And it wasn't like Margo had time to train me: her business hours went from early morning to late at night. She opened the coffeehouse, and I stuck around to close it.

First, she caught the office workers headed downtown (white), and also the day workers, stumbling through the door looking half asleep (Latinx). Once that rush slowed, Margo served tourists (white), folks working from home (white), random influencers juggling filming setups (mostly white), care-worker types on break

from the medical plazas (Asian, white, Latinx), and the packs of (white) undergrads passing through. For these clients, she wore a practiced face. Spoke a few decibels louder than usual, gliding by me as I washed dishes, assembled salads, wiped butter on toast. Sometimes Margo passed me an order for a latte or a tea, glancing my way as I assembled the drink but not really caring too much.

I learned, quickly enough, that these were the people who kept her in business. The morning rush. All of them received paper cups. A wide smile. Warm sendoffs.

And then Margo had her regulars. The ones who lingered. Local musicians toting trumpet and guitar cases. Churchwomen pushing sixty and seventy, who always arrived in trios, wearing bright sweaters and flowing dresses and towering hats. Teens ambling along in jerseys and tank tops, looking distracted until Margo asked about their sisters and their grades. Nurses from Montrose's sex clinic looking overworked, whose faces softened when they stepped inside, just perceptibly. Unhoused folks, who counted change on Margo's counter while she shook her head at them, pushing back the coins and swearing that they really didn't have to.

These customers were invariably Black. For them, Margo didn't even let me look at the coffee beans—in fact, she didn't use the same beans at all. She'd assign each drink a mug, in muted pastels. And she'd walk the coffee out to each of them, lingering for a moment, until their bodies relaxed in her shadow, then she'd set a hand on their shoulders and finally turn back to the register.

•

A few weeks in, names still weren't sticking with me. Most customers couldn't care less. But Margo's regulars couldn't stand it.

Marge, Danny (cellist, fifty-four years old) said, who the fuck is this kid?

New guy, Margo said. He won't last long.

Margo, Lenorah (preacher, sixty-two) said, where'd you find this young man?

Craigslist, Margo said. Don't worry too much about him.

Yo, AJ (student, nineteen) said, I thought you said you weren't hiring?

I'm not, Margo said. He's volunteering.

She's lying, I said.

Whatever, nigga, AJ said. I don't need a receipt, volunteer.

I wasn't exactly volunteering. Most of my work was in exchange for rent. In the evenings, I stayed behind while Margo walked Walter home. I wiped and brushed and swept until the shop looked reasonably clean. Trekking back to her place, I'd lope over the sidewalk while pickups raced by and men slumped under street lights, scanning me briefly before nodding off into their phones. By the time I made it to Margo's house—a tiny blue one-story at the end of a cul-de-sac, tucked between a nail salon and a Vietnamese restaurant—she'd put the kid to bed and got ready for the night. I slept in the spare room, under a poster of Harry Belafonte. Obviously, this wasn't ideal.

A few weeks in, I asked Margo why she didn't let me help out around the house more.

She gave me a long stare. "Crash Landing on You" droned from the television. She lounged in a sweater and shorts, with one foot half in a slipper, and twirled chopsticks over a bowl of bún riêu.

Don't worry about that, she said. You're barely keeping afloat at the shop.

You said I was doing pretty good the other day, I said.

I lied. Focus on the coffee.

Except you won't let me make it.

Ah, she said, shushing me. Watch this part.

Onscreen, Hyun Bin swerved on his motorbike, flinging it at an oncoming truck. We watched as it exploded behind him, with smoke billowing toward the sky.

•

One day, a customer asked me if the coffee was different.

He was a short guy, chubby with glasses. (I'm no twink, either.) I'd seen him at the shop. Sometimes he'd pass by twice a day: once in the morning, and then again just before closing. I'd seen him coloring with Walter a few times, waving as Margo shuffled the kid away for the evening. She'd give me a meaningful look before the door shut behind her.

Ah, I said. I made that one.

And you don't usually? this guy asked.

No, I said. Owner's preference.

He's still training, Margo said, from across the shop.

I'm still training, I said.

Word, the customer said. Understandable. But it still tastes great.

Do you hear that? I said, glancing at Margo, who ignored me and turned back to her table of churchwomen.

I asked the guy if he was Ken or Kentaro today, and he grinned.

You remember my name, he said.

Maybe you're a memorable guy.

I aim to please.

You can still aim higher.

Ken gave me a look. I'd revealed myself too soon. This had also been an issue with the ex: after we'd fucked for the final time, and he'd finished all over my neck, he told me I was too goddam funny, and also he'd be terminating our lease.

But Ken's face softened.

It's always nice to have goals, he said.

I reached for his cup, refilling it. He kicked his feet against the counter. We shared eye contact for another moment before I looked away and saw Margo staring.

•

Sometimes, when things were slow, Margo would ask me to make her a cup of coffee. It was June, and through the windows the heat traced waves. I'd sigh, making a production of stretching my arms, squatting on the wood floor, before I addressed the beans. She'd watch my hands as I ground them, and then while I warmed the water, and then as I filled the filter and balanced my wrist as I poured, making loops around the coffee.

She'd take exactly one sip. Make a face.

This was enough for me to know that I'd failed.

Bitter, she'd say.

Or: Harsh.

Or: You're not blooming the grounds long enough.

Or: You're disturbing the grounds too much.

One day, after I brewed her three carafes in a row, Margo simply sighed and turned her back to the door. A couple of neighborhood guitarists had crowded around Walter. He knocked on the table while they strummed chords beside him.

Fuck, I said.

Hey, Margo said, fucking *stop* that.

Sorry. But, you know, can't you just show me how to do it?

Wouldn't matter if I did, Margo said. It's in your hands. You aren't paying attention.

Then she took my place behind the counter. She ground more beans, reboiled the water, filled the carafe, made two tiny mugs, and watched my face as I sipped.

The difference was undeniable.

But I did the same fucking thing as you, I said.

Clearly not, Margo said. You're rushing.

If I moved any slower, I'd die.

Then allow yourself to be reborn.

The door opened behind us—a pair of white vloggers—and Margo gave me a long look before she greeted them from the register.

•

One morning, Margo asked me if I could walk Walter over to the shop and open up. She hadn't got dressed. Usually, it was her clattering around the house that woke me up—her energy got me out of bed. I'd follow her out the door about an hour later. When I lived with the ex, I'd find myself waking up at one or two in the afternoon; Margo's predawn activity made a marked difference.

Now the kid sat across from his mother while she stared at her phone. Another K-drama droned from the television.

Sure, I said. Any special instructions?

Don't get hit by a scooter on the way there, Margo said.

Right, I said.

And then, tentatively, I added, Is everything all right?

Margo looked at me, briefly.

There was something in her face that I hadn't seen before.

But, just as quickly, it was gone.

Don't worry about me, she said. Practice making a new brew before customers start rolling in.

•

So Walter and I walked. He lagged behind me, dragging his backpack on the sidewalk. I didn't feel like I was the person to tell him to pick it up.



Cartoon by Emily Flake

So, I said, anything fun planned today?

Walter looked up at me as if I were the dumbest motherfucker in the world. Then he turned back to the concrete, dragging his shoes along the ridges.

Good point, I said.

We were a block from the shop when I spotted Ken. He leaned against his car, talking on the phone. Usually, at the shop, he couldn't have appeared warmer. Now he looked entirely distressed.

We'd nearly passed him when he waved, flagged us down, and scooped up Walter's backpack. The kid only glanced at him.

Isn't this a bit early for you? Ken asked.

It's fine, I said.

You look a bit tired.

Everything's *fine*. But are you O.K.?

Sure, Ken said. It's nothing.

Jesus. You and Margo both?

Ken gave me an exaggerated smile as I unlocked the door.

He took a seat at the counter while Walter set up by a window. Normally, it would be another hour before Margo saw her first customers. Ken wiped sleep from his eyes and yawned into his palm.

Early start for you, too, then, I said.

Yeah, he said. I was at the hospital.

Fuck, I said. Is everything all right?

It's not me, Ken said. My dad. He's going through cancer treatment right now.

And how's that going?

He'll live.

It's sweet of you to be there. Not everyone has that.

We're not close, Ken said. Because, you know.

He made a limp wrist, along with a face I hadn't seen from him. Something dry.

Ah, I said.

But I'm all he has in this country, Ken said. So I'm the one that's there.

I nodded, turning back to the coffee, pouring water over the grounds. I passed him a mug, then he took a sip, and it was enough

for him to look up.

Whoa, he said.

Is that a *bad* whoa? I asked.

I don't know, Ken said, squinting.

I'll pour another one, then.

That's not what I mean, Ken said, waving his hands. It feels—and tell me if this is stupid—like you meant it?

He took another sip, sitting with the taste. Then he grinned. The two of us turned to the window where Walter sat with his sketchbook, pushing watercolors across the pages.

•

Margo made it in a few hours later, but this became our new normal: every morning, I left their place with Walter in tow. Sometimes we caught Ken hanging around by his car. And the three of us trekked the block to the coffeehouse. I don't know what the fuck we looked like to bystanders.

Mostly, we were buoyed by Ken's talking, and talking, and talking: about his job (he edited audio for documentaries), his childhood (in Nagano, and then Toronto), the heat (Japan's summers were worse, but how could we possibly deal with this year-round), astrology (telling Walter that he'd have good fortune soon, if he knew to look out for it, but that I was doomed), geography (did we know that the land we walked on had been home to several Native tribes at once), and anything else that came to mind. Walter and I mostly walked in silence beside him. Sometimes we exchanged glances. But, once, as Ken was giving his prognosis for an upcoming local election (perilous, basically), Walter stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, squeezing both sides of his bag.

Hey, he said. Ken. Do you have a girlfriend?

Ken and I exchanged looks.

No, Ken said.

Then you have a wife?

I had a partner, Ken said, gently. But now I don't.

O.K., Walter said. So you're gay.

Queer, Ken said. But sure.

Then you can still answer my question. What happened when you two fought?

Ken started to speak, before stopping, then starting again.

Did you have a fight with someone? I asked Walter.

No, he said. I'm asking for someone else.

The kid looked me square in the eyes. It was one of the first times that he'd spoken to me.

Is it someone we know? I asked.

Don't be nosy, Walter said. And Ken still hasn't answered my question.

Oh, I said. Well.

Now both Ken and Walter were staring. Some guys across the road cackled at a joke between them, leaning on a massage parlor's windows. When an attendant shooed them away, they kept laughing as they wandered up the road.

Well, I said, sometimes it's really easy to make up after a fight. And sometimes it's hard. Sometimes it doesn't work out the way you want it to.

But that's O.K., Ken said.

Right, I said. There are times when things just don't work out. And it's not a bad thing.

Ken and I turned to each other. There was a question on his face, but I wasn't sure how to approach it.

O.K., Walter said. Well. Thanks for nothing.

Then he walked ahead of us, leading us to the shop.

•

When Margo showed up that afternoon, she looked fine. Gave me a muted smile, nodding exactly once before taking up her station behind the counter. I watched her—measuring beans, toasting bread, assembling salads—but I couldn't get shit from her expression. Once, I saw Walter staring at her, too, but then he turned back to his sketchbook.

Life went on, though: Margo's musicians passed through, griping about Houston's rising rent. Margo's churchwomen giggled beside the register, teasing one another about their hats. Margo's regular crew of unhoused dudes came by, eating the sandwiches I assembled for them. One of them—Edward—asked me, point-blank, what was going on with her.

You did something, Tony said, chewing an egg sandwich.

I did not, I said.

Sometimes we do things, Roger offered, and we don't even know it.

Then the three of them nodded, sagely.

I didn't know what the fuck to say to that, so I poured them more coffee.

•

That evening, an hour before close, Margo told me that she'd shut things up on her own.

What? I said.

It's only fair, Margo said. You opened, I'll close. Walter will stay with me.

I turned to Walter. Once again, I couldn't read his face.

I'll stay here and practice, I said.

You will *not*, Margo said. This isn't a suggestion. Take off.

Then what'll I *do*? I said.

Why are you asking *me* that? Margo said.

She turned to Ken, who sat at a table with his headphones in—he'd dropped by again for an evening coffee. He took one from his ear, cocking his head.

Be creative, Margo said, giving me another look, and turned back to the jars of beans.

•

Walking back to his car, Ken asked, entirely awkwardly, if I wanted to grab a drink with him.

Ah, I said.

Wait, he said, you don't drink!

No, I said. It's not that. I just haven't, you know, been on a date in years.

Oh. Was this a date?

Shit. It wasn't?

Ken and I stood against his car, hedging. Then he laughed, all at once, open-mouthed, and I did, too.

He drove through the side streets of Montrose, under the palm fronds that protruded above fading auto-body shops and brand-new fusion restaurants. He parked in front of the neighborhood's leather bar, which was nearly empty since it was a weekday. It'd been years since I'd stepped foot inside, but Ken sidled up to the chaps-wearing bartender comfortably, chuckling as the dude handed him two beers. We walked out to the patio under posters of men in chains, lying prone with strap-ons, advocating for safer sex.

A fan blew steam over our heads. At a table beside us, two guys in pup masks made eyes at each other.

Here's a question for you, Ken said. How'd you end up at Margo's?

She's a family friend, I said. I'm just here for the summer.

And before that?

I lived with a man, I said, smiling in a way that I hoped would end the inquiry.

Ken took the hint. He grinned, sipping his beer.

What about you? I said. No girlfriend? A wife?

Stop that, Ken said. I, too, lived with a man.

White guy?

What? What makes you say that?

I'm always curious. Gays love white guys.

No, Ken said. Iranian dude.

Mm, I said. And how did it end?

What makes you think it's over?

The past tense generally signifies a conclusion.

Well, Ken said, he's in Toronto and I'm not. Came here for my dad. And this guy didn't like that.

How's he doing?

Swimmingly. He's already got a new toy. Three years together, and he replaced me in a few months. It's fine.

Ken took another sip of his beer. I wondered if the alcohol would be a problem. But he came up for air, smiling.

Sounds like we're both in transitional periods, he said.

Who knew you were a poet, I said.

Yeah, Ken said. Bad tanka.

Well, I said. Fuck that guy.

Right. Fuck yours, too.

And poorly. Without skill.

Or tact.

I hope he doesn't come.

Or that he comes too fast.

I extended my beer. Ken met it. And the two men sitting next to us offered their plastic cups, which we clinked, crossing elbows and brushing forearms as we stretched across the benches.

•

The next few weeks passed by predictably: I opened the shop with Walter in tow, Margo stayed behind to close. Our operation got smoother; orders made their way to tables a little quicker. The coffeehouse never got too busy, but Margo's regulars noticed the difference.

Once, a table of church ladies watched while I set sandwiches and iced coffee on their table.

You've *improved*, Delilah said.

She stated this matter-of-factly, wiping her lips with a handkerchief. The other women nodded.

Through no fault of my own, I said.

Of course not, Angelica said. You've got the master chef back there with you.

Didn't she work in Shanghai? Lenorah said.

Seoul, Margo said from behind the counter.

*Seoul*, Lenorah said, nodding.

And then Melbourne, Angelica said, right? We *know* the lore.

What? I said.

For a little while, Margo said, I had a business partner. We travelled for a few years, working at other coffee shops, before we opened this one.

Wait, I said, you have a business partner?

Had, Margo said.

I didn't know that, I said.

Plenty you don't know in this world, Delilah said.

Margo glanced up at this, snorting. But she didn't say a word.

Each morning, she had me make her a pour-over. But now she lingered over every sip. I'd even started assembling a few drinks for her regulars. But this, by and large, remained her domain. I'd given up asking, opting to watch how she handled them instead. I'd started noticing shit that I hadn't before: the way she held her wrist. How she leaned over the scale and counted down the seconds between the second and third pours.

Most days, by the time I looked up, the sun had set. Ken returned to the shop just before Margo sent me off, lingering while she briefed me on the next day's menu. Then, talking incessantly (did I know there were active volcanoes fifteen kilometres north of Taipei, or that the United States was responsible for sixty million tons of air pollution annually), he'd drive us to the leather bar, or to this late-night Malaysian coffee spot uptown, or, once, to an oyster bar for happy hour. I'd never spent so much time with a guy without fucking him.

In the evenings, he'd drop me back at Margo's. Midtown was largely silent. I'd linger in the car, for a moment, until it became clear that nothing was happening, but it didn't feel like a loss. Because I knew I'd see him again the next day.

It was a tiny coffee shop, really. Nothing important. If you blew too hard, you could wipe it clean off the map. But it was something to the people who spent time there: a place to go. Now I know how important this is.

Even then, in the back of my head, I knew that things couldn't continue like this. So easily. But I still tried allowing myself to wonder if it could be possible.

•

The morning it happened was absurdly hot. The day workers bemoaned the forecast, fanning themselves with their caps.

We'd just stay here if we could, Raul said.

I could roll over and *die*, Luis said.

Well, Margo laughed, don't. Space is tight enough as it is.

Bet lover boy would like that, Raul said, winking at me.

You're not my type, I said.

What's wrong? Raul said. You don't fuck guys who work with their hands? You're classist?

That's not very progressive, bro, Luis said.

No, I said. I just don't date bottoms.

Raul scowled. Luis boxed his shoulders. Margo waved them away, passing them their mugs.

Walter sketched by a window. The churchwomen and the high schoolers sat in their usual corners. Everyone kept to their own quiet universes, together but apart.

But, a few hours earlier, before I stepped inside, Ken had held a palm against my back. Walter glanced at the two of us as he went in. He and I made eye contact before he shut the door behind him.

Hey, Ken said, I was thinking. Would you be up for coming to my place?

Oh, I said.

Not right now, Ken said. Obviously. But maybe, you know, later?

His face had turned absurdly red. Behind us, a car rolled by, honking once and long.

I don't know, I said.

Ken took his hand back.

Sorry, he said, it was just a thought.

Don't be sor—

It's just, you know, with my dad, I haven't been thinking, and—

It's really fine, Ken.

Then we stood in the doorway.

Guess I'll see you, then, he said, turning around.

Now I stood behind the register with my cheek in my palm. Then I noticed Margo staring at me.

Sorry, I said.

You're fine, she said. I was just saying, you know, the coffee tastes different today.

You mean good? I asked.

No, Margo said. Different.

She looked like it had really stumped her. I shrugged, giving a half smile.

And this was when the door opened.

Margo's face froze. All its warmth vanished, like a fucking vacuum sealer sucked out the air.

Dad, Walter yelled.

It was the loudest I'd ever heard the kid speak. He stood and barrelled toward a grizzled guy who was entirely too gorgeous. And this man wrapped one hand around Walter's back, half carrying him. The churchwomen, who had something to say about every living thing that stepped through the door, were silent. The high schoolers peered over.

Garette, Margo said.

I came because you wouldn't answer the phone, Garette said.

Margo frowned. Then she turned to me.

Can you handle the register for a few hours? she asked.

A question.

Usually, she spoke to me only in directives.

I nodded like a fucking idiot.

Margo unwrapped her apron and left the counter, stepping toward Walter and Garette, separating the two with one arm while opening the door with the other.

Then Garette grabbed her shoulder. Two of the high schoolers stood up, jostling their table. The churchwomen cleared their throats.

Margo made a face that could've dropped an elephant. And Garette smiled, nervously, letting go of her arm, patting her shoulder.

Margo turned to Walter, pointing toward his seat.

We'll be back, she said.

Why can't I go? Walter asked.

*We'll be back*, Margo said.

Then she smiled.

Walter gave her a long look. Then he sat down and returned to his sketchbook.

The air around us settled. Slowly, the churchwomen started chatting again. The teens loomed over their phones. But I kept my eyes on Walter. He wasn't drawing or anything like that, just staring at the sketchbook.

•

When Margo returned, it was already dark. She looked exhausted.

Walter glanced her way, but he didn't say anything. I'd already started wiping down the tables and washing the dishes. Margo stepped behind the counter and reached for a carafe and a jar of beans I'd never seen before.

Watch this, she said.

She met my eyes to insure that I was paying attention, then gradually ground the beans, measuring them out to set in the filter. I watched as she poured, and the coffee bubbled, spilling slowly into the carafe. For the first time, I noticed that Margo held her breath as she poured. Her breathing slowly returned to normal as the carafe filled.

She made us two mugs. Looked at Walter, who had now fallen asleep on the sofa.

Did you get that? she asked.

I nodded. Even if I didn't, really, that seemed like the correct answer.

All right, she said. I want you to do me a favor and take the weekend off.

Really? I asked.

Yeah. It's no good to work all the time. I'll manage until Monday.

I frowned. Margo sipped her coffee.

Hey, I said, is everything O.K.?

Margo glanced at me. Then she grinned.

Do I not look O.K. to you?

No, I said. It's just, I thought—

Don't think too much, Margo said, crossing her arms. You're young. It's the weekend. Surely you can find someone else to spend it with?

•

Ken's place was hardly clean, but then he explained that it wasn't really his.

I'm just renting it while my dad's in the hospital, he said.

So you're rich, I said.

No, Ken said. I tried staying at his place, but that didn't work out. His operation's next week, and me being here is just easier.

When I had texted, it had taken him a little while to respond. But he sent me an address, and I caught a ride to a section of Midtown hidden behind trees. On the way over, the driver played tinny mariachi music, twirling his finger above the steering wheel. Watching the buildings, I realized it'd been ages since I'd passed through the area—it'd been with the ex.

Ken stood in running shorts and a hoodie. He hadn't shaved, and scruff lined his face. A "Drag Race" rerun droned from his laptop, RuPaul admonishing a set of queens onstage.

I get it, I said. Too much history?

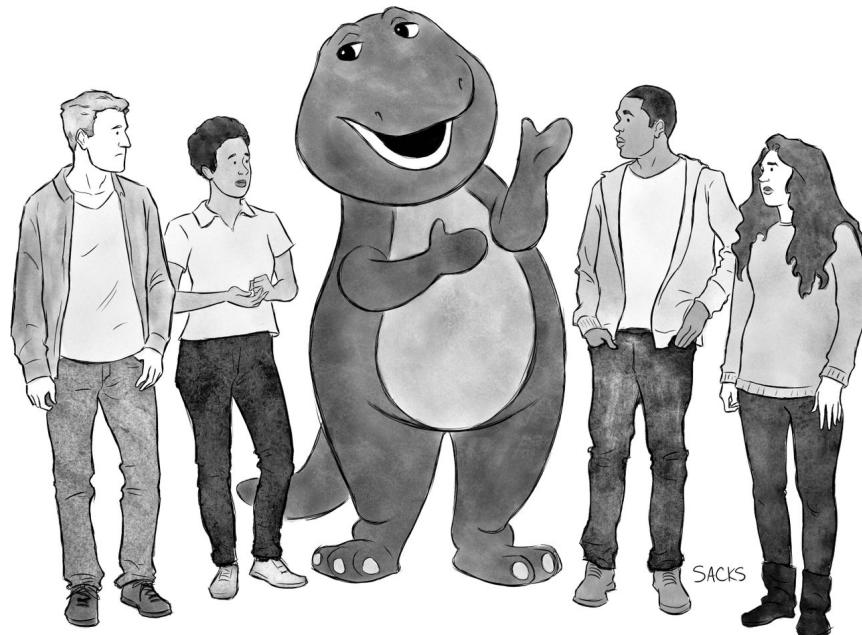
Not too many happy memories, Ken said.

But you still showed up for him.

Yeah, but I don't know why. It's not like he would for me.

People are complicated, I said.

I watched as Ken hovered, pacing from the laptop to the stove to the sofa. Eventually, slowly, he took a seat beside me.



*“Now that you’re older, I should mention that sharing is also a good way to get rid of possessions you don’t value in exchange for a social bond you can later exploit for your benefit.”*

Cartoon by Adam Sacks

So, he said, I didn't think you'd text me.

Don't know why you thought that, I said.

Well, Ken said, when I—

Which is when I leaned forward and kissed him.

His body relaxed into it almost immediately. We stayed that way, leaning across each other on the sofa, until Ken put his hands on my waist, and I started pushing mine through his hoodie. He maneuvered out of his shorts, wrapping his hands around my ass when I straddled him—then, just as quickly, he broke off the kiss for air.

Fuck, he said. Is this O.K.?

It was enough to make me laugh.

More than O.K., I said.

It's been a little while for me, Ken said.

Me, too, I said. Sort of.

Sort of?

Not really. It's fine.

Well, what do you want to do? I don't really bottom, so—

I do.

Yeah? So you're, like, prepa—

Yes.

O.K. Should we move, or—

We'll take it slow, I said, dipping to kiss him again, until he wrapped his arms around me and we sank into the sofa. I laughed, and he laughed, too. We were both shaking, jerking each other off, while the drag queens on the screen danced, spinning multicolored signs with slogans, slowly descending the stage.

•

When I made it to the shop on Monday, Walter wasn't around. Margo didn't ask me any questions. Ken had insisted on driving me, even after I'd told him I didn't mind the walk. But he had to go to the hospital anyway, he said—so the two of us rode to the coffee shop, with me wearing his joggers and an old Björk sweater.

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

We'd fucked through the weekend. Maybe unsurprisingly, Ken was very good at sex. And, the last time, he decided that he wanted me to top; halfway through, once I'd made it inside of him—balancing his hips on one pillow, and then another, before switching positions entirely, until he leaned over me—Ken burst into laughter, and, when I asked what was wrong, if he was O.K., he said only that he'd forgotten how it felt.

Plus, you look funny down there, he said.

That doesn't really make me feel great, I said.

Sorry. What about, You look funny down there, Daddy?

Great edit, I said. We're back.

Parked in front of the shop, he turned serious.

Will I see you later, he said, now that you've had your way with me?

Probably, I said.

Then I squeezed his thigh, and nearly sprinted from the car.

Margo hardly looked up when I stepped inside. When I asked her about Walter, she said he was with his father.

It's his day, she said.

Oh, I said. I didn't know that was a thing.

Tectonic plates are constantly shifting, Margo said, brushing past me.

She was, just incrementally, slower. If I hadn't spent the past few months watching her, I wouldn't have noticed. We tried moving

along with the shop's rhythms as usual, but I couldn't unsee it. And when I tasted her coffee—of course it was phenomenal. But it wasn't the same.

•

That night at Margo's there was a knock at the door. I didn't come out from the spare room, at first, because all I heard was a muffled conversation. Then the volume gradually increased. When I heard something fall over, I finally opened my door.

Garette stood in the living room. Walter sat on the floor. And Margo stood with her arms crossed beside them.

Wait, Garette said, pointing at me. He *lives* here?

It's nothing, Margo said.

You didn't want a man here, but you've got this fag with you?

All at once, for the first time in the home, I felt uncomfortable.

Margo, I said, do you want him here?

She looked up at me. It was a new face that I couldn't read. It felt like the train was too far down the tracks to stop it.

What the *fuck*? Garette said.

I'm just saying, if you don't want him here, then he should probably leave.

Walter looked up at me, too. There was something in his eyes that I couldn't place. Something that wasn't good.

Garette, Margo said, I think you should go.

You can't be fucking serious, Garette said.

Just do me this favor, Margo said.

It is still *our* home, Garette said. I haven't signed anything yet. You know that, right?

But he turned to me, again. There was something on the tip of his tongue. But I met his face until, finally, he turned away.

He extended a hand to Walter, though.

And the kid took it.

Garette, Margo said.

Relax, Garette said. If he doesn't want to come with me, he can stay. And, if you don't want him with me, he won't come with me.

Walter looked between the two of them. Then Margo sighed, just barely. Nodded.

The kid took his father's hand. And Garette gave me another look before he left, shutting the door lightly behind him.

Which left Margo and me standing in the living room.

I didn't know what even made sense to say.

It's nothing to worry about, Margo said. We're just going through something.

Is he moving back in? I asked.

No. Garette and I have been finished for a while now. But it's taken longer for him to accept that than it did for me.

Really? And that's just fine with you?

Of course not.

So what are you going to do?

You're full of questions tonight, Margo said. A few months ago, you didn't care what I thought.

Margo grinned, leaning against a chair. All of a sudden, the room felt cold.

Listen, she said. I don't know. We're figuring it out. Because, as strongly as I may feel, it's not just about me.

O.K., I said. But it's not *not* about you, either.

Margo looked up at me, a little surprised. She started to say something. But she chuckled instead, picking up a blanket from the sofa, setting a hand on my elbow before she stepped down the hallway toward her bedroom.

•

Later that night, when Ken opened his door, bare-chested in boxers, he still had sleep in his eyes. I'd caught a ride to his place, giving him a heads-up on the way over. He took one look at me and started reaching for sweatpants and a tank top, inching his feet into Crocs.

Let's go for a walk, he said.

Weren't you just dreaming? I said.

Everyone loves a midnight jog.

Please be serious.

But Ken was already locking the door behind him, shooing me off the patio.

Midtown's lights had started to dim. Aside from the odd scooter or Camry, the streets were empty as we walked, pausing after every other intersection.

Trouble at home? Ken asked.

Yeah, I said. Might be time for me to move on soon.

Sorry.

It's fine. About time I go back to my aunt's anyway.

Straights, Ken said.

Straights, I said.

We passed a closed flower shop. An empty auto depot. A chicken-and-waffles joint. A trio of sports bars. A Filipino grocery store, a gas station, and two Thai diners.

So, I said, how'd it go with your dad?

Oh, Ken said. He's fine. The surgery was a success.

That's great news.

Yeah. The nurses called him a noncompliant patient.

Aren't we all? I said.

Maybe, Ken said. But I don't think he really needs me around anymore.

We stopped at an intersection. A gym's sign glowed above us. On the other side of the street, we watched revellers dancing on the tables of a cantina, screaming into microphones.

So, I said, does that mean you'll be taking off, too?

Ah, Ken said. Haven't really decided. Don't know if I have a reason to stay.

Well, I said, stepping forward, but Ken caught my hand, bringing me back to him.

The kiss he gave me was light, but it had feeling. Then we stared at each other, blinking.

I was shocked. But Ken only smiled.

Then, as if out of nowhere, he pointed at the sky.

Look, he said, the Big Dipper!

I squinted upward. Of course I couldn't see shit. But then, gradually, my eyes started to connect the dots. What hadn't been visible to me became entirely clear.

•

When I made it to Margo's shop in the morning, the churchwomen were sipping their coffees. One of the teens nodded to me. A few of the musicians tinkered in the corner. It could've been just about any other day, but Walter wasn't around.

Margo looked relaxed. I didn't know whether to bring it up, so I went about my day.

And the day moved along. We saw our regulars. When the heat rose, we lowered the blinds. When the sun began to set, we raised them again. Eventually, we'd entered the last hour of our evening. I was wiping dishes beside Margo when I said her name.

When she looked up, there wasn't anything new on her face.

I think, I said, it's time for me to move out.

Margo's expression didn't shift. But then she nodded, once.

Makes sense to me, she said.

O.K., I said. Will you be O.K.?

Margo looked at me, smirking. It was the first time she'd done that.

Listen, she said, do me a favor and make me a coffee? ♦

*Bryan Washington has contributed fiction, in addition to essays on food, queer life, and Texas, to The New Yorker since 2018. His books include the novel “[Family Meal](#),” which received a 2024 Lambda Literary Award.*

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/last-coffeehouse-on-travis-fiction-bryan-washington>

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

# The Critics

- **[What if Ronald Reagan’s Presidency Never Really Ended?](#)**

By Daniel Immerwahr | Anti-Trump Republicans revere Ronald Reagan as Trump’s opposite —yet in critical ways Reagan may have been his forerunner.

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

“The Missing Thread,” “Life as No One Knows It,” “Bright Objects,” and “Napalm in the Heart.”

- **[An Anatomist of Pleasure Gives Voice to the Body in Pain](#)**

By Parul Sehgal | Garth Greenwell has been lauded for his depiction of sex. His latest novel, “Small Rain,” unfurls within the consciousness of a patient hospitalized with a rare vascular condition.

- **[Where Dragons Are Real and the Unicorns Are in Serious Trouble](#)**

By Kathryn Schulz | In “Impossible Creatures,” Katherine Rundell extends the rough-and-tumble world of her children’s books to a hidden archipelago and the realm of fantasy.

- **[The Ghoulishly Retro Pleasures of “Beetlejuice Beetlejuice”](#)**

By Justin Chang | The director Tim Burton and the actor Michael Keaton resurrect a classic collaboration with supernatural-screwball verve.

[Books](#)

# What if Ronald Reagan's Presidency Never Really Ended?

Anti-Trump Republicans revere Ronald Reagan as Trump's opposite—yet in critical ways Reagan may have been his forerunner.

By [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

September 9, 2024



*Two opposing characteristics defined Reagan's Presidency. He harbored reactionary beliefs, but could, in practice, be ideologically flexible. These traits mirror the Republican Party's warring factions today.*

*Photograph from Sunset Boulevard / Corbis / Getty*

For many people, the 2016 election was a catastrophe. For Max Boot, it was a betrayal. He'd been a movement conservative: a loud voice for the Iraq War, an editor of *The Weekly Standard*, and an adviser to the campaigns of John McCain, [Mitt Romney](#), and Marco Rubio. Boot took heart when Republicans initially closed ranks against Donald Trump's candidacy. Trump is "a madman who must be stopped," Bobby Jindal said. "The man is utterly amoral," Ted Cruz agreed. Rubio called him "the most vulgar person to ever aspire to the Presidency." For Rick Perry, he was "a cancer on conservatism." Then, one by one, they all endorsed him, and he won.

Trump's election shook Boot's world view. Was this what Republicanism was about? Had Boot been deluded the whole time? He wrote a book, "[The Corrosion of Conservatism](#)" (2018), about his breakup with the G.O.P. The #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements, he could now admit, made good points. His advocacy of the war in Iraq had been a "big mistake," and he felt guilt over "all the lives lost." Boot was like a confused driver who had arrived at an unintended destination and wondered where he'd missed the off-ramp. When was the right moment to have left the Republican Party?

For many anti-Trump conservatives, the lodestar remains Ronald Reagan. In his sunny spirit and soothing affect, he was Trump's opposite. Their slogans differed dramatically: Reagan's "Tear down this wall" versus Trump's "Build the wall"; Reagan's "It's morning again in America" versus Trump's "American carnage." Both men survived an assassination attempt, and their instinctive responses were telling. Reagan, though gravely wounded, reassured those around him with genial humor. (To his wife: "Honey, I forgot to duck." To his surgical team: "I hope you're all Republicans.") Trump, in contrast, wriggled free of his bodyguards, raised his fist, and commanded the crowd to "[Fight! Fight! Fight!](#)" Three days later, he released a sneaker line featuring an image of him doing so,

the *FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT* high-tops, priced at two hundred and ninety-nine dollars.

## What We're Reading

*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*



Boot grew up idolizing Reagan. “How I loved that man,” he recalled. In 2013, he started writing a book about the fortieth President. His [“Reagan: His Life and Legend”](#) (Norton) aims to be the definitive biography, and it succeeds. It’s a thoughtful, absorbing account. It’s also a surprising one. One might expect, given Boot’s trajectory, that this would be a full-throated defense of Reagan, the Last Good Republican. But it is not.

Although Boot once felt “incredulous that anyone could possibly compare Reagan to Trump,” he now sees “startling similarities.” Reagan’s easygoing manner, Boot acknowledges, concealed hard-to-stomach beliefs. Reagan viewed the New Deal, which he’d once supported, as “fascism.” He raised preposterous fears about the Soviet capture of Hollywood, and fed his fellow-actors’ names to the F.B.I. When Republican legislators largely voted for the landmark civil-rights laws of the nineteen-sixties, Reagan stood against them. (He’s on tape calling Black people “monkeys.”) He also campaigned against Medicare, insisting that it would lead the government to “invade every area of freedom as we have known in this country.” For unconscionably long into his Presidency, he refused to address a pandemic, AIDS, that was killing tens of thousands of his constituents, and he privately speculated that it might be God’s punishment for homosexuality. Then there is his

campaign motto, ominous in hindsight: “Let’s make America great again.”

Recent events have forced Boot to ask if Reagan was part of the rot that has eaten away at Republicanism. Boot now sees him as complicit in the “hard-right turn” the Party took after Dwight D. Eisenhower which “helped set the G.O.P.—and the country—on the path” to Trump.

And yet Boot sees a redeeming quality as well: Reagan could relax his ideology. He was an anti-tax crusader who oversaw large tax hikes, an opponent of the Equal Rights Amendment who appointed the first female Supreme Court Justice, and a diehard anti-Communist who made peace with Moscow. “I’ve always felt the nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government, and I’m here to help,” Reagan famously quipped. But he delivered that line while announcing “record amounts” of federal aid. He viewed the world in black-and-white, yet he governed in gray.

Reagan tolerated a gap between rhetoric and reality because, for him, rhetoric was what mattered. “The greatest leaders in history are remembered more for what they said than for what they did,” he insisted. (The example he offered was Abraham Lincoln, apparently rating the Gettysburg Address a more memorable achievement than the defeat of the Confederacy.) When it came to policy, Reagan was happy to hand things off to “the fellas”—his generic term for his aides, whose names he could not reliably recall.

This, too, sounds familiar. Like Trump, Reagan held facts lightly but grasped larger emotional truths. When he uttered falsehoods, as he frequently did, it was hard to say that he was lying. “He makes things up and believes them,” one of his children explained. Reagan’s lies, like Trump’s, were largely treated as routine, as if he were a child who couldn’t be expected to know better. Fittingly,

both came from the spin-heavy world of sales and entertainment. Boot points out that Reagan and Trump are the only Presidents who had television shows.

“Did Reaganism contain the seeds of Trumpism?” Boot asks. Usually, that’s a question about each man’s beliefs. Looking at Reagan’s life through Boot’s eyes, though, one wonders about their styles, too. Was there something about Reagan’s way of operating that got us here?

“Dutch” Reagan, as he was universally called in his youth, was a theatre kid. His parents founded an amateur theatre company in Tampico, Illinois. Dutch remembered being “drawn to the stage” as if it were “a magnet.” He found, in drama, a “wonderful world, possibly more fascinating than any other.”

Even in his twenties, Dutch had “an inability to distinguish between fact and fancy,” his then fiancée remembered. Yet this was his superpower. He got his break in radio, covering sports. The technology of the day sometimes required sportscasters to announce games from the studio rather than the stadium, describing events they could not see. It was theatre of the mind, and Dutch excelled at it. He would take telegraphed reports of runs and strikes and conjure a world.

If there was anything unimaginative about Dutch, it was his politics, which were what you’d expect of an artsy son of two artsy parents coming of age during the Depression. Looking back, he saw his younger self as a “near-hopeless hemophilic liberal” who “bled for ‘causes.’ ” He worshipped F.D.R., supported world government, and scorned Republicans who cut taxes for the rich and “snatched away” benefits from workers. A self-described “rabid union man,” he served seven terms as president of his union.

But that union was the Screen Actors Guild, headquartered in Los Angeles, the world capital of self-reinvention. In his case, the

makeover was ordered by Warner Bros. “Take him over to wardrobe,” the casting director Max Arnow barked. “He looks like a Filipino.” Reagan accepted this unflinchingly. He started wearing wide-collar shirts to make his neck look longer and combing his hair up in a plasticated style (the “Republican Gumby”) that became his signature. He dropped the nickname Dutch at the studio’s behest and went instead by Ronald, a name he had not hitherto used. He didn’t look back; even his wives called him Ronnie.

Such was the price of fame. Or, for Reagan, semi-fame. He was “the Errol Flynn of the B’s,” he wrote, and appeared in dozens of low-budget films. He was pencilled in for the Victor Laszlo role in “Casablanca” but didn’t get it. The closest he came to stardom was third billing in an Oscar-nominated film, “Kings Row” (1942), playing someone whose legs are amputated. “Where’s the rest of me?” Reagan’s character screams upon waking from surgery. To prepare, Reagan consulted physicians, psychologists, and disabled people. “Perhaps I never quite did as well again in a single shot,” he wrote. Yet it was a minor scene, and Reagan was never a major star. A poll in 1942, his cinematic peak, ranked him tied for Hollywood’s seventy-fourth most popular actor.

What saved Reagan from fading into obscurity was what saved Trump: television. In 1954, fifty years before Trump started hosting “The Apprentice,” Reagan started hosting “General Electric Theater,” a dramatic anthology show featuring famous guest stars (Fred Astaire, Jimmy Stewart, James Dean). To showcase General Electric’s products, the program shot documentary segments in the Reagans’ “total electric” house. This was “TV’s first reality series,” the theatre professor Tim Raphael says. It aired on Sunday nights, between “The Ed Sullivan Show” and “Alfred Hitchcock Presents,” and it regularly drew more viewers than either.

Somewhere along this path, Reagan’s politics transformed. He’d arrived in Hollywood a liberal Democrat, but by 1960 he was

“about as far right as a public figure could be,” the historian of conservatism Rick Perlstein writes. Reagan saw Communist conspiracies everywhere. Boot traces many of his “shrill and alarmist” talking points to the ultra-right John Birch Society—the QAnon of its day.

What changed him? The usual story, pushed by his second wife, Nancy, is that Reagan rebelled against the high taxes that Hollywood’s top earners paid. But this is implausible, Perlstein argues; Reagan wasn’t a top earner. A better explanation is that he learned to be a conservative the same way he learned everything else: by playing the part. In an anti-union campaign, General Electric sent Reagan, the firm’s likable face, on a stream of plant visits from 1954 to 1962. Reagan estimated that he spent two of those eight years travelling, and a quarter of a million minutes talking into microphones. He told Hollywood stories to G.E.’s employees and gave political speeches to business groups. The visits were “almost a postgraduate course in political science,” Reagan felt.

The best orators, the late anthropologist James C. Scott wrote, develop “a kind of perfect pitch” for their audiences’ moods. They try a theme, listen, adjust, and try again. That is how Reagan worked. Rather than delivering typed speeches, he improvised from index cards, which he would edit and reshuffle based on what material landed. Few political figures before the age of social media had anywhere near the unfiltered and prolonged contact with national audiences that Reagan had. And not many were so willing to remake themselves. Speaking largely to conservative groups, Reagan became a conduit for the era’s gathering right-wing energies.

Reagan performed his road-tested show following the 1964 Republican National Convention. The nominee, Barry Goldwater, was a hard-edged Republican with little patience for Eisenhower’s moderation. Goldwater’s supporters voted down a platform

denouncing the Ku Klux Klan and the John Birchers. Reagan's pro-Goldwater speech, "A Time for Choosing," told a powerful story, spelled out in shining, mile-high letters, about freedom versus slavery, prosperity versus bureaucracy, and God-fearing Americans versus the "intellectual élite." The crowd was ecstatic.

With that speech, Reagan entered politics; he soon won California's governorship. To help voters see him as a politician, he published a memoir. The obvious title would have been "A Time for Choosing." But Reagan went with "[Where's the Rest of Me?](#)," the closest thing he had to a Hollywood catchphrase. There was something cringe-inducing about this ("Hey, remember? I'm the 'Where's the rest of me?' guy!"), yet it captured perfectly the vacuity of Reagan's politics. Here was a world view built less on an ideologue's bedrock principles than an actor's need for applause.

Reagan latched on to something deep in the national psyche—a need for absolution, perhaps, strongly felt in the dour nineteen-seventies. "They tell us we must learn to live with less," is how he announced his Presidential candidacy in 1979. "I don't believe that. And I don't believe you do, either."

Reagan's 1980 campaign was a theatrical triumph of mood-setting. He was elected overwhelmingly. Behind the curtain, though, things were different. The British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, after visiting Reagan in the White House, pointed to her head and said, "There's nothing there." The President was "unbelievably passive when not on stage," his biographer Lou Cannon wrote. His aides described telling him where to stand, what to say, and how to say it.

The Presidency involves symbolic and executive functions. Like no President before him, Reagan specialized exclusively in the symbolic ones, to the point of getting lost in fantasy. He would recount, with tears, a conversation between two doomed airmen in a falling plane. Those men didn't exist, but there was a similar scene in the 1944 film "Wing and a Prayer." Reagan was obsessed

with the idea that a space shield could stop nuclear missiles—much like the “inertia projector” from his 1940 B movie “Murder in the Air.” He occasionally referred to himself as the Gipper, the nickname of one of his characters, and when a reporter asked him the name of his dog, Millie, Reagan replied, “Lassie.”

Reagan hovered above the material plane, and others indulged him. “You wanted to help Reagan to float through life,” his longtime adviser Michael Deaver explained. “You’d be willing to do whatever it took to take the load off of him of all the shitty little things that normal people have to do.”

Those “shitty little things” included running the country. Deaver was sometimes called the “deputy President,” but others bore that title, too—the whole Administration ran on delegation. The President offered little guidance even when it came to taxes, his signature issue. “In the four years that I served as Secretary of the Treasury, I never saw President Reagan alone and never discussed economic philosophy or fiscal and monetary policy with him one-on-one,” Don Regan recalled. “The President never told me what he believed or what he wanted to accomplish.” Without direction, Reagan’s aides—the fellas—held extraordinary power. He accepted their views (though he sometimes fell asleep while they presented them), and he rarely sought outside counsel.

Auteur theory interprets films as fundamentally the creations of directors. A similar notion prevails in politics: the idea that Presidents are fully in charge. But when has that ever been true? Reagan knew, from his years on film and television sets, that the face of a production is just a part of it. There was something refreshingly honest in his ceding policymaking to those who knew more than he did. There was also something ironic: Reagan, the foe of bureaucracy, surrendering to the state.

Reagan’s hands-off, eyes-closed approach had upsides, Boot argues. Mainly, it freed his Administration to act pragmatically. Its

greatest triumph here was the turn to peace with Moscow. Boot dismisses the myths that Reagan brought down the Berlin Wall or single-handedly ended the Cold War. But he rightly credits the White House for entering into unexpected, productive negotiations with the Kremlin.

Much of the glory belongs to the fellas. For decades, Reagan had demonized Communists. Yet in early 1983, just as Reagan was publicly attacking the Soviet Union as “the focus of evil in the modern world,” the Secretary of State, George Shultz, guided him to speak privately with Soviet officials. Then, to remedy what the national-security adviser, Bud McFarlane, called the President’s uneven command of historical facts, McFarlane brought in the writer Suzanne Massie. She helped Reagan understand Russians as religious, entrepreneurial people suffering under the yoke of an overweening government. It was a resonant story. In fact, it was the one Reagan had long told about his own country.

With a new script in hand, Reagan was ready. An alarmed aide recalled how Shultz prepared Reagan for a meeting with the Soviet Premier, Mikhail Gorbachev, by giving him stage directions for what to do “in this scene.” Still, Reagan hit his marks. He greeted Gorbachev with openness, and, astonishingly, the two set out to eliminate their countries’ nuclear arsenals.

They might have succeeded, too, had Reagan’s fantasies not intruded. His political career was defined by three great delusions: that Communists were close to seizing the United States, that cutting taxes would increase government revenues, and that satellite weapons (particle beams, lasers) could stop all nuclear missiles. At a summit in Iceland in 1986, Reagan and Gorbachev nearly agreed to a ten-year plan for total nuclear disarmament, but Reagan wouldn’t abide limits on U.S. outer-space defenses.

“Almost no government officials” believed such defenses would be feasible “in any realistic time-frame,” Boot writes. Yet Reagan had

faith in them, insisted on them, and scotched the deal with Gorbachev over them. (A year later, he agreed to arms reductions.) Today, the United States and Russia collectively possess more than ten thousand nuclear warheads. And, despite Trump's promises to build "a great Iron Dome over our country," satellite defenses against nuclear attacks remain unviable.

Although he didn't stick the landing, Reagan's coöperation with Communists was nonetheless extraordinary. He had relinquished "the dogmas of a lifetime," Boot writes. "Few other leaders have shown as much boldness or flexibility in changing with the times." It's hard not to notice that the virtues Boot lauds in Reagan are the ones he's cultivated in himself. This biography carries a pointed message for conservatives: Reagan achieved greatness by abandoning his ideology. He could listen, Boot argues, and he could change.

Adaptability can be an admirable quality. Did Reagan possess it, though? "He was, yes, pragmatic like any successful politician," Rick Perlstein writes in "[The Invisible Bridge](#)" (2014). But when Reagan bowed to reality—repeatedly raising taxes to make up for budgetary shortfalls—he rarely learned from it. His "habit of parsing the world into black-and-white" didn't lessen with experience, Perlstein observes. "In some ways, it even deepened." In 1987, far into his diplomacy with the Soviets, Reagan reassured an ultraconservative supporter: "I'm still the R.R. I was, and the evil empire is still just that."

One wonders how much Reagan was adapting, and how much he was deferring. The White House included people who sought peace with Moscow. It included those who favored balanced budgets, too. Reagan agreed with them, as he agreed with most people near him. But there were few voices in his orbit when it came to, say, defending social services. There was the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development—Samuel Pierce, Reagan's sole Black Cabinet member—but he seemed uninspired, and, on one occasion, Reagan

mistook him for a city mayor. Most of the Administration's top hundred officials had been selected by Reagan's wealthy backers, and more than a quarter had net worths in the millions. No one was bringing writers to the Oval Office to paint the President word pictures about economic insecurity.

The Administration was at its most blinkered in Central America and the Caribbean. The President had strong instincts here; he saw the region's Marxist movements as menacing the United States. Speaking of El Salvador to Canada's Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, Reagan predicted that, "if we're not firm here, these fellows are going to wind up challenging us in Brownsville, Texas." Mulroney was flabbergasted. "Ron, there's not a chance these guys can challenge you anywhere," he told the President. But Reagan was "mesmerized" by the Communist threat to the south, Boot writes.

Unfortunately, many under him were also mesmerized. When Reagan fulminated against the Soviet Union, his aides, fearing nuclear war, challenged him. When he fulminated against Central American and Caribbean states, he was pushing on an open door. "Just give me the word and I'll turn that fucking island into a parking lot," Secretary of State Al Haig offered, regarding Cuba. Latin America's strategic insignificance made it a playground where hard-line anti-Communists in the Administration could do what they liked, the historian Greg Grandin argues in "[Empire's Workshop](#)" (2006).

Reagan saw the bloodiest Latin American battlefields as crucibles of freedom. The White House provided military aid to Guatemala as it carried out, against left-wing and Indigenous Guatemalans, "the worst slaughter in Latin America's history," Grandin writes. Reagan protested that Guatemala's dictator, Efraín Ríos Montt, had a "bum rap"; he was "totally committed to democracy." The Administration also shunted millions to the Contras, guerrillas who killed tens of thousands in their terror campaign against

Nicaragua's Socialist government. They were, Reagan felt, the "moral equal of our Founding Fathers." Perhaps from Moscow Reagan looked like a pragmatist, but from Managua he looked unhinged.

In 1983, Grenada's Marxist government sought to build an airfield with a nine-thousand-foot runway. It requested U.S. aid and, when none came, turned to Cuba. Reagan was alarmed: "Grenada doesn't even have an air force. Who is it intended for?" In fact, it was intended for tourists; Grenada required a runway that long to land U.S.-built Boeing 747s. But Reagan saw a conspiracy afoot to make the Caribbean a "Red Lake." After an internal coup, Reagan—guided by his advisers—ordered an invasion. Its ostensible aim was to rescue some U.S. medical students, though the students didn't see any need. Dozens died (Navy pilots bombed a psychiatric hospital), and the United States occupied the country. The U.N. General Assembly voted to "deeply" deplore this "flagrant violation of international law" by 108–9. "The Americans are worse than the Soviets," Margaret Thatcher seethed.

The White House finally faced consequences for its Latin American adventures in 1986, when it was caught using funds from an illegal weapons trade with Iran to provide illegal aid to the Contras. Investigations were launched, officials indicted, and "the entire government seemed to grind to a halt," Nancy Reagan remembered. Still, the President's air of obliviousness shielded him. Although he had indeed sought to fund the Contras, the scandal bewildered him. "I don't think the President, to his dying day, understood," Secretary of Defense Frank Carlucci said. Holding Reagan accountable felt like a category error, like trying to convict a squirrel of trespassing.

Iran-Contra did nothing to dim his certitudes. After his Presidency, Reagan reflected on the Grenada invasion. He believed that he had acted as an instrument of God. He quoted a U.S. pilot who noted that Grenada produced nutmeg, an ingredient in eggnog. The

“Russians were trying to steal Christmas,” the pilot insisted. “We stopped them.”

At the start of this century, it seemed that Reagan’s legacy to conservatism would be his wide-eyed faith in freedom, the “magic of the marketplace,” and American innocence. Today’s G.O.P., however, is more cynical, more interested in fighting trade wars than spreading capitalism. The Reaganite values that most endure are the reactionary ones: his hostility toward civil rights, feminism, and the welfare state.

Boot has given up on defending Reagan’s values. Hence his last-ditch defense of Reagan as a pragmatist. Reagan’s two tendencies—he had wild ideas but went with the flow—match the warring Republican factions today: the *MAGA* firebrands and the establishment conservatives. Boot sides with the establishment and so likes the pliable Reagan best. “I’d rather get eighty per cent of what I want than go over the cliff with my flags flying,” Reagan said. One suspects that Boot would have preferred Reagan at sixty per cent.

In the eyes of the *MAGA* set, Boot has been co-opted by the Beltway élite. His critics cackled recently when his wife, Sue Mi Terry, was indicted for serving a foreign country as an unregistered agent. Terry allegedly took pay from South Korea, including in the form of expensive handbags, to push its positions, including in an article written with Boot. She also stands accused of passing along “nonpublic” governmental information and introducing South Korean spies to U.S. officials over drinks. (Terry’s attorney has said that she “strongly denies” the allegations.) Even if the charges are true, they’re closer to well-lubricated networking than cloak-and-dagger spycraft. But this is precisely the sort of slippery insider business that makes everyone hate Washington.

Boot is more alert to the pathologies of ideology than to those of the establishment. He lauds Reagan for taking cues from clear-eyed

officials. He has less to say about the contexts, like Latin America, in which officials acquiesced to, or even amplified, the President's excesses.

This is the prospect we face today. Trump's first term was, in Boot's sense, Reaganesque, in that Trump's aides sometimes managed to thwart or redirect his ambitions. Trump promised to build the wall and lock her up, yet he did neither. A second Trump term might not be so halting. Republicans have constructed a world around Trump's delusions, in which Mexicans are bloodthirsty invaders, Democrats are Communists, and the 2020 election was stolen. With enough willing officials in place, these will become not the idiosyncratic beliefs of the President but the agreed-on facts of the government.

Asked about one of Reagan's persistent lies, his press secretary Larry Speakes shrugged: "If you tell the same story five times, it's true." This might be Reagan's most lasting contribution to politics. Presidents had lied before, some egregiously. Reagan, however, fabricated an alternate reality. The country no longer expected truth from the world's most powerful individual. It no longer expected comprehension, even. Reagan's job was making myths. The problems came when people believed them. ♦

*An earlier version of this story misstated when Ronald Reagan delivered his "A Time for Choosing" speech.*



*Daniel Immerwahr*, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of “[How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States.](#)”

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/reagan-his-life-and-legend-max-boot-book-review>

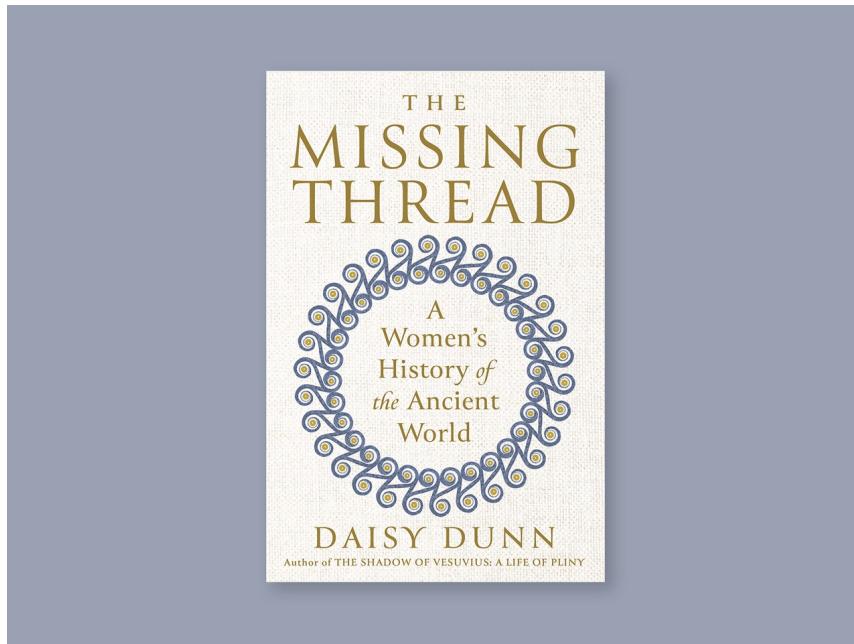
| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Books](#)

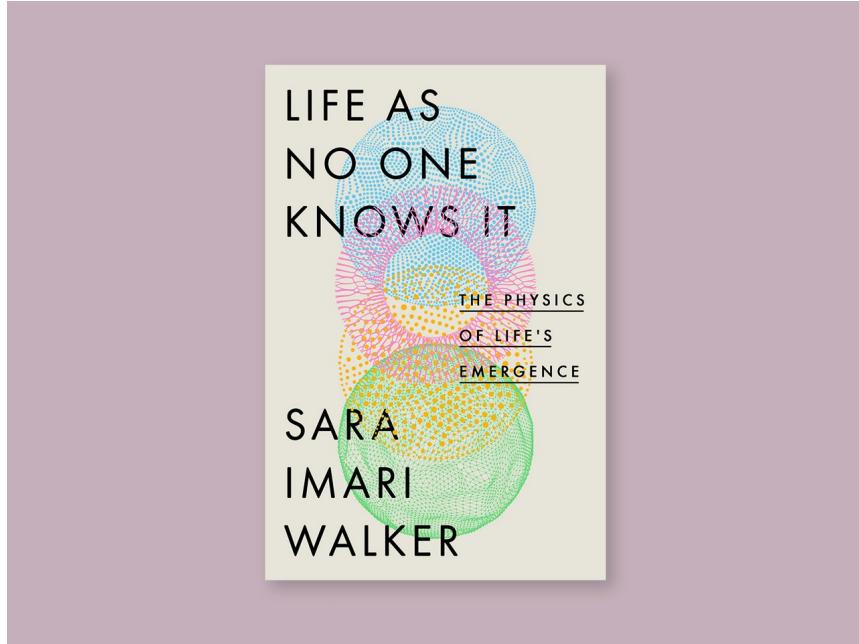
## Briefly Noted

“*The Missing Thread*,” “*Life as No One Knows It*,” “*Bright Objects*,” and “*Napalm in the Heart*.”

September 9, 2024



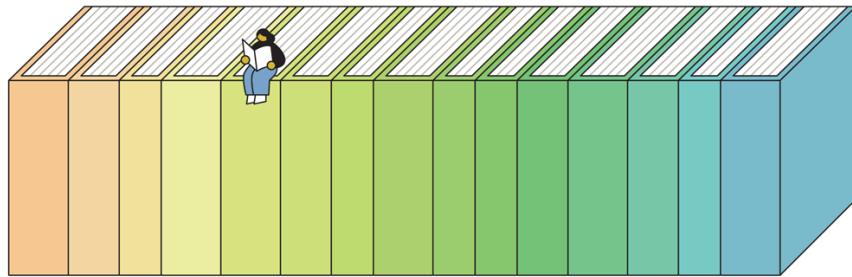
**The Missing Thread**, by *Daisy Dunn* (*Viking*). This engaging book, by a classical historian, surveys three thousand years and argues that women were more integral to the development of the ancient world than prevailing narratives suggest. Dunn’s subjects include Pandora, whom Greek mythology identifies as the “first woman”; Locusta, the toxicologist who helped Agrippina to poison Claudius; Fulvia, a late Roman politician who raised an army after her daughter was scorned by a lover; and the scores of anonymous Etruscan women who maintained a thriving quasi-matriarchy until the Roman ascendancy. “Women are everywhere that antiquity raises its head,” Dunn writes. “They are the authors of our history.”



**Life as No One Knows It**, by *Sara Imari Walker* (Riverhead). In this treatise, an astrobiologist and theoretical physicist posits a new account of life: Assembly Theory, which identifies the threshold between nonliving and living complex objects—anything from a rock to a coffee cup to a human being—by counting the “steps” it takes for the universe to assemble them from their smaller parts. (In the lab, Walker and her team found that, on Earth, objects with an assembly index below fifteen steps are nonliving.) Assembly Theory has already attracted much attention, but more compelling is its underpinning idea of a “new physics” that places information front and center. “The fundamental unit of life,” Walker argues, “is not the cell, nor the individual, but the lineage of information propagating across space and time.”

---

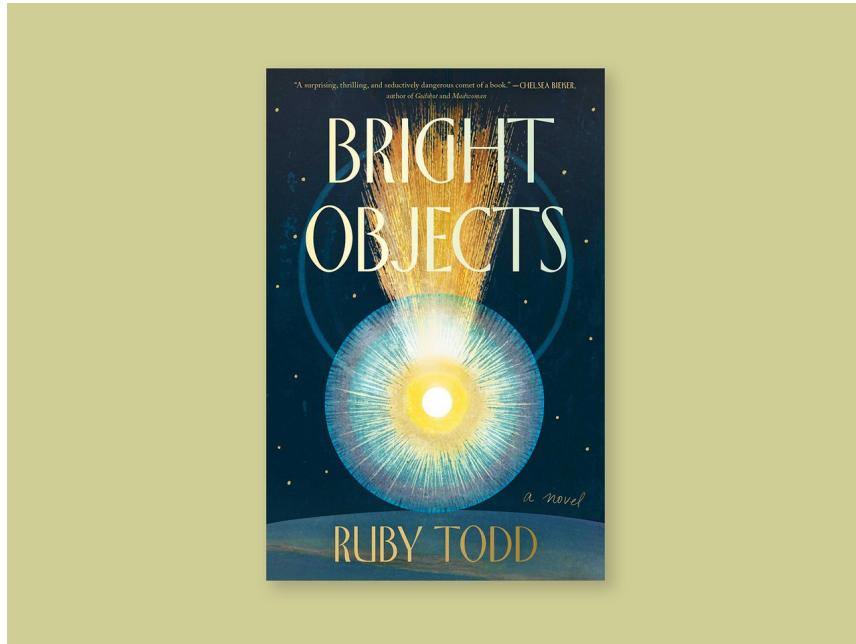
## What We're Reading



*Illustration by Rose Wong*

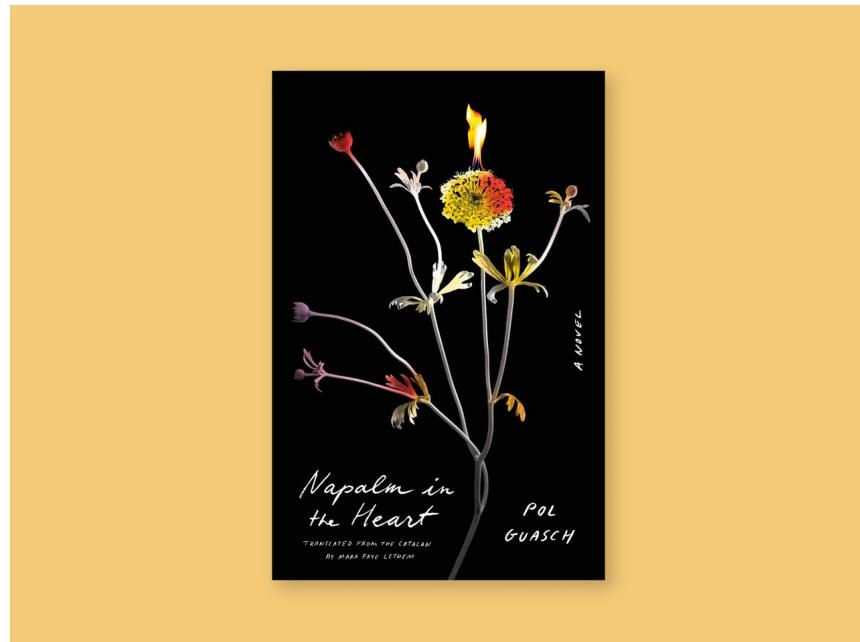
*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*

---



**Bright Objects**, by Ruby Todd (*Simon & Schuster*). The protagonist of this layered début novel, set in 1997, is a young funeral attendant named Sylvia, who lives in a small town in Australia and is planning her suicide. Sylvia sets the date for it on the second anniversary of her husband’s death in a hit-and-run, but, before the time comes, she falls in love with an American astronomer working at a nearby observatory, where he discovered a comet that some townspeople have since endowed with conspiratorial significance. As Sylvia attempts to track down the driver who killed her husband, the book develops the momentum of a thriller; meanwhile, the astronomer’s skepticism about drawing

meaning from the stars enriches the text with the provocations of a philosophical novel.



**Napalm in the Heart**, by *Pol Guasch*, translated from the Catalan by *Mara Faye Lethem* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). Written in lyrical, if brutal, fragments, this dystopian novel takes place in an unnamed country riven by military strife and environmental disaster. Its narrator, a young man who lives in the forest with his mother, sustains himself by writing letters to his city-dwelling boyfriend. But, following a violent confrontation with a soldier, the young man embarks on a harrowing drive across a post-apocalyptic landscape, encountering mercenaries and desperate refugees along the way. If Guasch's formally inventive approach can sometimes risk murkiness, the beauty of his prose shores up his story, in which language, love, family, and home are in constant peril.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/the-missing-thread-life-as-no-one-knows-it-bright-objects-and-napalm-in-the-heart>

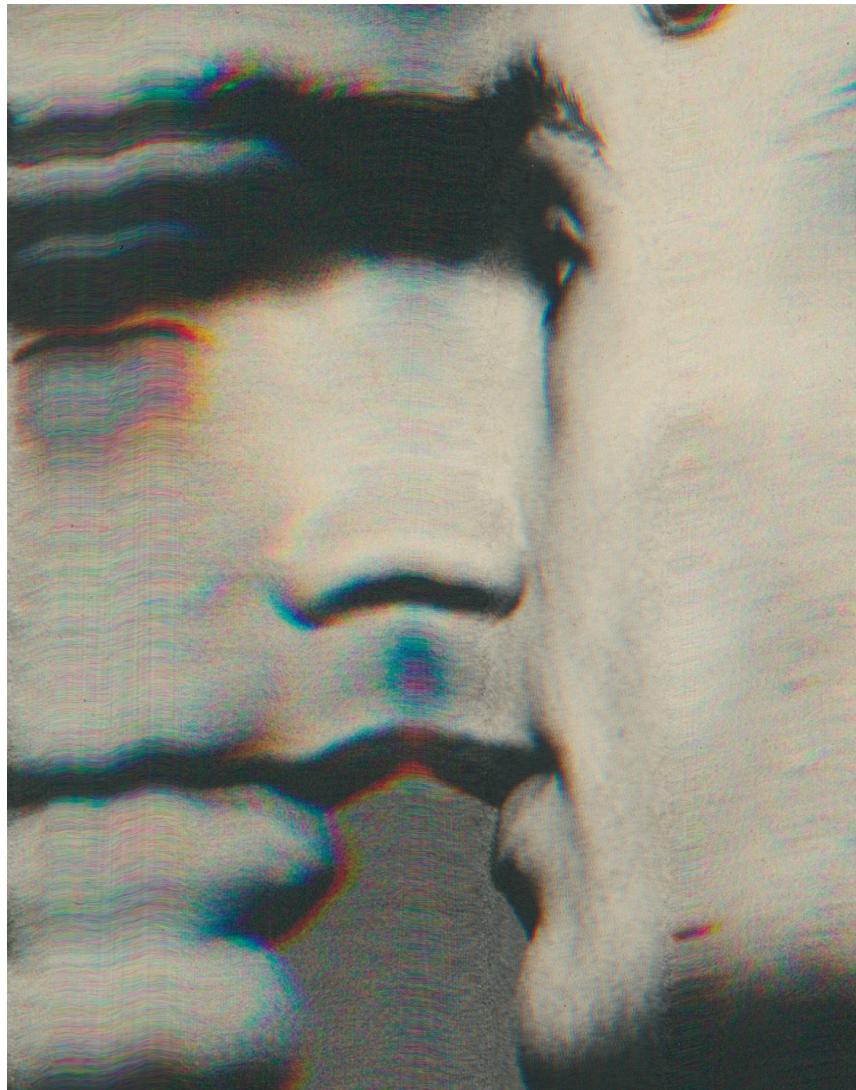
[Books](#)

## An Anatomist of Pleasure Gives Voice to the Body in Pain

Garth Greenwell has been lauded for his depiction of sex. His latest novel, “Small Rain,” unfurls within the consciousness of a patient hospitalized with a rare vascular condition.

By [Parul Sehgal](#)

September 9, 2024



*The attempt to capture pain in language transforms Greenwell's sentences.*  
Illustration by Vartika Sharma; Source photograph by Jack Mitchell / Getty

Pain, it has been said, is the great censor, the eater of words. Pain shatters language; it remains untranslatable—not just anti-narrative but pre-narrative, calling us back to our first sounds. In the canon of illness writing, there are those accounts—Alphonse Daudet’s “In the Land of Pain” and Christina Crosby’s “A Body, Undone,” to name two—which closely observe how pain shapes a life, how it exists both within and alongside the self as antagonist and intimate companion (Nietzsche called his chronic pain his dog). Typically, however, writers do not sit long with their pain; they busy themselves with the history, the social meanings of sickness. Pain, on its own, seems to have no plot; as Emily Dickinson wrote, it “has an Element of Blank.”

Perhaps it is a great anatomist of pleasure who can fill in some of the blanks in the story of pain. Garth Greenwell, the author of two previous works of fiction, “What Belongs to You” (2016) and “Cleanness” (2020), has been lauded for his depiction of sex—our “densest form of communication,” he calls it. His sinuous, stately sentences have brought a formal feeling to scenes of cruising; public bathrooms have become versions of the nineteenth-century ballroom, full of their own occult codes, hierarchies, the season’s new beauties. The books have followed the same narrator—a writer and a Southerner by birth, who has spent time teaching poetry in Bulgaria. We meet him again in Greenwell’s latest novel, “Small Rain,” in the late summer of 2020. He is now living in Iowa, teaching at a college. He is working in his study when it happens: he feels a twisting pain in his stomach, as if “someone had plunged a hand into my gut and grabbed hold and yanked, trying to turn me inside out and failing and trying again,” he says. “Like that, while somebody else kneed me in the groin.” For eight hours, he crouches on all fours, waiting for the pain to subside. His partner—a man identified only as L—begs him to seek treatment, but the pandemic is blazing; hospitals seem unthinkable dangerous.

“When I try to remember my thoughts they come broken and scrambled,” the narrator later recalls. He has become “a creature

evacuated of soul.” Finally, the pain prevails; he goes to the hospital, where he is labelled as the dreaded “interesting” case. Specialists flock to his bed. Days tick by. He struggles to understand the diagnosis of an infrarenal aortic dissection, a rip in the aorta. In nearly half of all cases, it is instantly fatal. “The words didn’t mean anything, I only understood one of them, aortic; there sprang into my mind a scrap of a poem, the blowing aorta pelting out blood, which I couldn’t place and was of no help at all.”

## What We’re Reading

*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*



Each blood draw, each medical detail, is presented with documentary precision, lifted, one assumes, from life. Greenwell’s fiction often seems to skim from experience, and he has spoken about his own frightening hospitalization in 2020. His previous books were closely observed minuets of pleasure, power, humiliation between lovers. “Small Rain” again reports from the site of the narrator’s body, the body in the hands of strangers. The narrator becomes conversant in a new language—the language of the medical system—and a new vocabulary of touch. He learns whose hands are efficient, and whose are clumsy, whose touch renders him a body, a problem, or a person.

There is something almost showy about the formal challenge of this novel. It unfolds, for the most part, in a hospital bed, with only a strip of visible sky. There are few meaningful characters, just the rotating sequence of doctors, nurses, and cleaning personnel, masked and identifiable mostly by their hair styles—this one’s tight braids, another’s curls. “Place is at the heart of writing for me,”

Greenwell has said. “More or less everything I’ve written has been spurred by a response to a particular place.” “Small Rain” is not a book about the hospital or the medical system, however; it unfurls internally, in the consciousness of a character, a consciousness aware of itself evolving, shaped by a terrible new pain and knowledge. Tangled in tubes, with machines that beep and bring constant news of his body, the narrator participates in a similar activity, of self-monitoring, retrieval, and discovery; he watches himself, he learns about himself, but he relies on an older technology—he uses the sentence.

What sort of technology is a sentence? It can reflect, like a mirror; it can reveal, like an X-ray. It can arrange and bring order to chaos, like a pair of hands. It can dilate, split, and suture, bridge the private and public selves. Form follows function, and Greenwell’s sentences are marked by their distinctive shape. Here are three examples from the first two books:

Are you mad at me, he asked, and I wasn’t quite, anger wasn’t really what I felt, or not yet. (“What Belongs to You”)

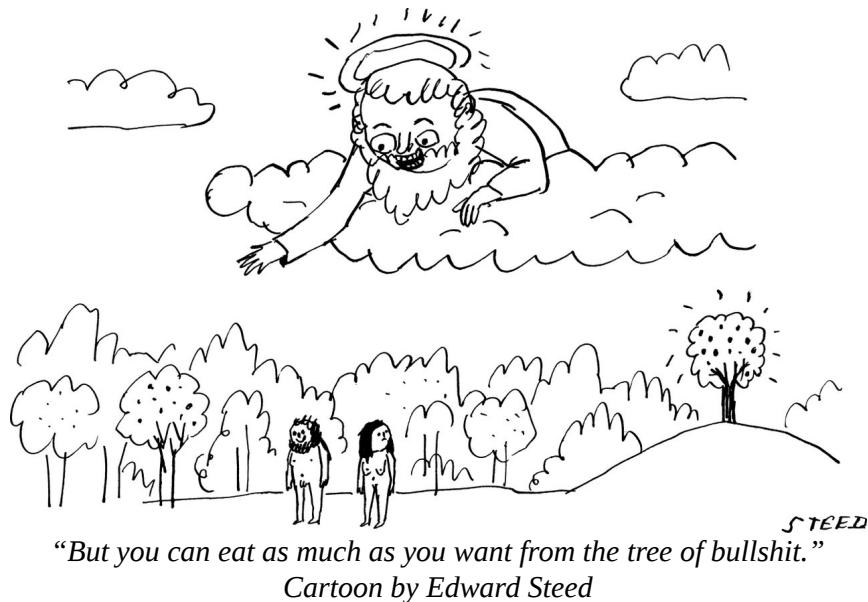
I wasn’t sure what I wanted, or what I wanted had changed. I had thought I wanted to make him laugh, that after that I wanted sex, but I didn’t want sex, I realized, or not only sex. (“Cleanness”)

Feeling a heat in my gut that I recognized as shame, but it wasn’t sharp yet, it was distant or dulled, and though I knew in the next days I would be miserable with it I turned away from it now. (“Cleanness”)

These sentences curve in on themselves and force themselves to fray—not only to reveal the hidden strands in even our simplest thoughts or wants (the seed of reluctance in desire, the spark of want in fear) but, it seems, to incapacitate our predilection for quick judgment. We trip on those crisscrossing clauses. Syntax

becomes an instrument of slowness, an enforcer of patience and careful distinction. When the narrator pauses, in sex or conversation, to frisk his own feelings, to ask himself if he is experiencing pain or merely intensity, fear, or excitement, the writer does not intrude or resort to voice-over. The moment hangs open, framed by curiosity, and kept safe from the imperative to name and tame. This is the real setting of Greenwell's fiction—not the hospital, the classroom, the night clubs in Sofia, but this space that exists within them, within ordinary life, a realm unlatched by those forked sentences, in which time is slowed, and a deep, receptive kind of contact with the other, with the self, is permitted to bloom.

In "Small Rain," the attempt to capture pain in language transforms those sentences. Pain, the narrator observes, "had become a kind of environment, a medium of existence; I wasn't impatient or bored, there was something fascinating and dreadful about the experience of my body. I began negotiating with it, with the pain or with my body." Pain supplants his will, as desire once did. It arranges his days—sometimes it breaks old habits and reflexes, such as the mindless scrolling on his phone. It reorders his rhythm, his relationship with time. He stares out of the window, at the sparrows, with wonder—"unoccupied but not anxious or bored," he realizes. "I had lost my sense of time as a thing that could be wasted." Pain even unpicks the elaborate tone. Gone is Greenwell's glittering ceremony, the long sentences tinkling with semicolons. Commas are inserted casually, idiosyncratically. The language is softer, mussed, exploratory. Pain makes a mockery of control; the armor of high style is loosened.



*“But you can eat as much as you want from the tree of bullshit.”*

Cartoon by Edward Steed

Greenwell's writing has always revelled in how we are made singular by our desire, its strength and specificity. His narrator has shown us how his tastes have been shaped by his past, his wants occasionally emerging from the darkest and most fearful moments of his life, as if he has found a way to salvage them—in a sense, to give them use. Physical pain and vulnerability, he finds, do something different. Pain is deeply democratic. Pain makes him like everyone, anyone else—there is a common humanity that he finds and, with it, a kind of humor, as illicit and necessary as humor in a hospital always feels. Riding “the oxy hum,” our poet unleashes rapt and deeply stoned odes to the “ensouled” trees. He wonders at his capacity for wonder. He holds up a potato chip and loses his mind in admiration and horror. “It was thin and almost weightless, an amazing object, really, if you think about it, a miracle of engineering, a kind of transubstantiation of a root vegetable,” he marvels. “I knew it was pernicious, one of the manipulations of capitalism . . . really it symbolized in miniature the utter decadence of all genuine value, the fall of a culture, absolute bliss.” He goes on like this, for another few pages, ending with a thunderous coda on potato chip as document of civilization and barbarism.

And, somewhere beneath this narrative of suffering and its lessons, a B plot is gathering. Just as a Greenwell sentence twists to question itself, to unravel its initial claim, to surprise you, “Small Rain” turns. From a tale of great pain—a rare kind of story—it becomes one so difficult to render that it is thought to be impossible: a story of ordinary love, ordinary happiness.

I recently learned of an Icelandic word, *nær-gætni*, which means, I’m told, “near-carefulness”—the care one should take when coming near to another person. Greenwell’s novels have always been grand adventures in *nær-gætni*, in the taxonomy of touches, the images of locks and latches, the obsessive attention to how power shapes spaces between teachers and students, adults and children, people and animals. In “What Belongs to You,” the narrator becomes besotted with a beautiful hustler and gives him not a nickname but a “nighest name”—taken from a notion of Whitman’s, about the specific intimacies one can have with a stranger.

But in “Small Rain” the “near-carefulness” has less to do with the art of approach than with how to see what is already near to you—what has, perhaps, been too near to be properly perceived. Sparrows, for example, or lines from a poem memorized long ago. Your own body. The narrator watches himself being washed, his body soft around the waist, streaked by stretch marks, a good body, which has held so much pleasure and shame:

How strange to have hated it so much, when it had always been so serviceable, when it had done more or less everything I had needed until now, when for more than forty years it had worked so well. Poor body, I thought again, looking down on it. I had hated it so much and been so ashamed and I might have loved it instead, I thought suddenly, it had been all that time available for love and it had never occurred to me to love it, it would have seemed impossible, as it seemed impossible now.

And then he revises; the section twists, as you knew it would: “Or maybe that’s not true, maybe I just needed more time. Maybe I could still get over myself, I thought, maybe L would teach me yet.” What sustains the novel is what sustains the narrator: L, the partner, the man at home worrying. It is this love story that comes to the fore, as the narrator lies in recovery. L’s familiar face now so suddenly missed, their private language of endearments and jokes; the white floors he insisted on in their home (he didn’t mind the look of dirt); his funny, formal way with animals. It is this happiness, this mutual claim that has been so steady and so difficult for the narrator to notice. Pain and terror rouse him from his habituation, the domestic life that dulls. Their bequest is a restoration of sight; the book feels written as if to preserve this knowledge, to engrave it somewhere permanent:

Try to remember this, I admonished myself, since I knew it would fade. All happiness fades, or does for me, misery digs deep gouges in memory, sets the course of the self, I sometimes think, it lays down the tracks one is condemned to move along, whereas happiness leaves no trace. Remember this, I said to myself. Why should only suffering be a vale of soul-making, why shouldn’t the soul be made of this moment, too, this unremarkable moment, remember this.

Much is made of the overlap between fiction and life, especially when it comes to autofiction. What can be missed is the porousness between a writer’s books themselves—the way they can be read as one long project. As the third in such a series of books, “Small Rain” feels like a culmination, which comes with its own feeling of melancholy for the reader. There is no word in Icelandic—or in any language, as far as I know—that explains what it means to be near a fictional character, to enjoy the particular intimacy that fiction alone allows so unself-consciously; there is no real word for what it means to have followed a character for almost a decade, enjoying the happiness his happiness can give you (it feels peculiar to admit it, even here), and have to let him go. But we leave him as we must

—the man we first met in “What Belongs to You,” tramping alone, always alone, in his blissful alienation, in a city where no one could pronounce his name. He is now L’s “bello.” He is remade and renamed in love—he is still tired, but he puts his head on L’s shoulder. It is almost evening and he is almost home. ♦



*Parul Sehgal* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/small-rain-garth-greenwell-book-review>

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

[Books](#)

# Where Dragons Are Real and the Unicorns Are in Serious Trouble

In “Impossible Creatures,” Katherine Rundell extends the rough-and-tumble world of her children’s books to a hidden archipelago and the realm of fantasy.

By [Kathryn Schulz](#)

September 9, 2024



*In Rundell’s books, it is the children, as much as the manticores, who are impossible, in both senses: they’re disruptive and unreasonable but also borderline magical.*

*Illustration by Lou Benesch*

Of all the many cultural products that the United Kingdom has exported to the United States—Aston Martins, Doc Martens,

Burberry coats, Cadbury chocolates, a lingering and historically incongruous fascination with the Royal Family—my favorite by far are first-rate fantasy novels for children. To be clear, it's not that no such work is produced here at home. My own childhood—which is to say, my own intellectual, aesthetic, and moral formation—would have been gravely impoverished without the likes of L. Frank Baum and Lloyd Alexander, Madeleine L'Engle and Ursula K. Le Guin.

But the U.K., oh my. Who knows what historical factors or contemporaneous living conditions have conspired to set so many brilliant minds of that relatively small country to the task of conjuring magical realms? Maybe it all began with Geoffrey of Monmouth; maybe it's just too much rain. Whatever the reason, we have the Brits to thank for some of the world's most compelling and enduring imaginary places—for Narnia and Neverland, Wonderland and Middle-earth. They gave us “[The Borrowers](#)” and “[The BFG](#)”; they gave us Harry Potter and Lyra Belacqua and the Wart; they gave us “[The Dark Is Rising](#)” and “[Five Children and It](#)” and “[The Lives of Christopher Chant](#).[“](#)

The latest addition to this trove of fantastical stories is Katherine Rundell’s “[Impossible Creatures](#)” (Knopf). Rundell belongs to a specific and storied subspecies of the British fantasy writer; like C. S. Lewis, Lewis Carroll, and J. R. R. Tolkien, she is part children’s-book author, part Oxbridge academician. In 2008, at the age of twenty-one, she sat the exam for All Souls at Oxford and was awarded one of its coveted fellowships; that same year, she wrote her first book, which was picked up by Faber & Faber and published in 2011. Over the next twelve years, while studying and teaching Renaissance poetry, she wrote nine more children’s books, one play, and three works of adult nonfiction, which have collectively sold more than three million copies and won a laundry list of honors bestowed by the British publishing industry, from the Waterstones Children’s Book Prize to the Baillie Gifford Prize for Non-Fiction. This year, at the British Book Awards, Rundell took

home not only Book of the Year in the category of children's fiction, for "Impossible Creatures," but also Author of the Year, a prize seldom awarded to writers whose work is aimed primarily at children. (The only other such recipients in the history of the prize are J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman.)

## What We're Reading

*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*



Really, though, Rundell's work is aimed everywhere. Her play, "Life According to Saki," is set in the trenches of the First World War and imagines the final days of the real-life Hector Hugh Munro, a brilliant, acerbic, closeted British author who often wrote under the pen name Saki. "[Super-Infinite](#)" is an exuberant and erudite biography of John Donne. Her books for children are set in, variously, London, Paris, New York, Russia, Zimbabwe, and the Amazon jungle, and involve pretty much everything that kids thrill to or adore: zoos, circuses, runaways, hidden treasure, abandoned castles, horses, wolves, piranhas, and malign and idiotic adults.

These previous children's books contain improbable events galore, but "Impossible Creatures" is Rundell's first foray into outright fantasy. Its conceit is straightforward and immediately appealing: somewhere in the North Atlantic Ocean lies a cluster of thirty-four islands, magically hidden from most outsiders for the past three thousand years, where countless allegedly mythical creatures, long since hunted to local extinction in the rest of the world, still flourish—centaurs and sphinxes, dragons and krakens, mermaids and manticores, griffins and unicorns. Now, though, those creatures are struggling. They depend for their existence on the magic that

suffuses the Archipelago, but that magic, known as the glimourie, is on the wane—stifled or siphoned off by someone or something that wants it for less benign and biodiverse purposes.

As this setup suggests, “Impossible Creatures” has something to do with environmental decline here on our own Red List planet. Yet it is not quite right to call it a parable, of species extinction or climate change or anything else. Its real subject is twofold: the exceptional strangeness and dazzling beauty of the natural world, to which the very young, who are not yet accustomed to it, so often have special access; and the potential bravery of children, to which, in our hyper-protective, helicopter-parent society, they so often do not. In this sense, “Impossible Creatures” is not a departure from Rundell’s earlier works but a continuation of them. Her grand theme—in worlds both real and imaginary, in the great outdoors and in the human soul—is the vital necessity of wildness.

Katherine Rundell was born in England but spent her formative years in Harare, Zimbabwe. Her mother was a French lecturer there and her father a diplomat; in addition to Rundell, they had a son and two foster daughters. For Rundell, it was a glorious place to be a kid. Her classes ended at one in the afternoon, and she was free to do what she liked for the rest of the day, which generally meant running around barefoot with friends, climbing trees and poling homemade rafts across a lake and scaring one another by pretending to spot crocodiles in it.

All childhood idylls end eventually; Rundell’s did so early and tragically. When she was nine, the family temporarily returned to England to seek urgent medical care for one of her sisters, Alison, who suffered from a congenital illness. Rundell, who had grown up surrounded by siblings and cousins, suddenly found herself lonely, frightened, and five thousand miles from home. Already an avid reader, she turned to books both to make sense of her new reality and to escape it; but, in the end, escape was not an option. Alison died the following year, when she was sixteen and Rundell was ten

—the age, not coincidentally, for which she has been writing ever since.

After the death, the family returned to Harare, where, for Rundell, the consolations of nature joined the consolations of literature. Her parents, perhaps distracted by grief, permitted her even greater liberties than before; by the time she turned twelve, she was allowed to drive herself to a local game park, where she could get lost among the giraffes and zebras. But then came a second upheaval, less tragic but still terrible: her father was transferred to Belgium, and Rundell, very much against her will, was whisked away from Zimbabwe and into the British School of Brussels.

In one way or another, all of Rundell’s children’s books distill into fiction these two formative shocks—the devastation of being powerless in the face of death and the outrage of being powerless in the face of adult decisions. In “[Cartwheeling in Thunderstorms](#),” the first and most autobiographical of the books, the heroine, Wilhelmina Silver, grows up gleefully free on a farm outside Harare, until her father dies of malaria and she is summarily dispatched to a British boarding school. In “[Rooftoppers](#),” a baby found floating in a cello case in the English Channel is rescued by a kindly and eccentric bachelor who raises her until age twelve, at which point Britain’s national child-care agency deems her upbringing inappropriate and orders her to be sent to an orphanage. In “[The Wolf Wilder](#),” a girl who is more or less literally raised by wolves—although also by a loving mother who rewilds wolves purchased and then abandoned by Russian aristocrats—gets into a confrontation with a maniacal general in the tsar’s army. He burns down her house, imprisons her mother, and tells the girl she should be sent away to school in Vladivostok. That last example turns out to be just a threat—worse things are in store for our heroine than boarding school—but you get the point. In books that teem with danger—snakes, scorpions, shipwrecks, plane crashes, house fires—the chief hazard to children is adults who want to control them.

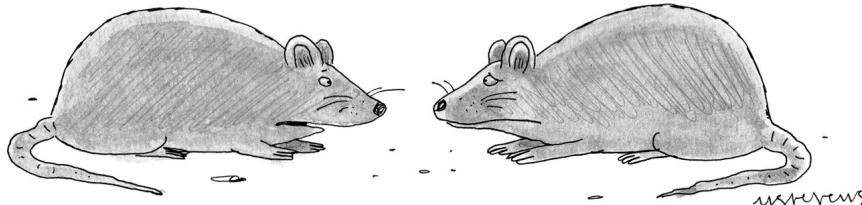
Consider Christopher Forrester, one of the two protagonists of “Impossible Creatures.” His mother died when he was very young, and, perhaps as a result, his father is tremendously overprotective: “He warned against potato peelers and tin openers; he viewed birthday candles as deadly weapons.” Especially troubling to the father are the wild animals that seem to be drawn to his son. In North London, where they live, foxes trot out onto the football pitch when Christopher is playing, and swans paddle after him when he goes for a swim in the Hampstead ponds. His father claims that the boy must have a distinctive scent, but Christopher doesn’t think he smells particularly strange. (“He washed, though not unduly.”) The animals make him happy but upset his father so much that Christopher doesn’t dare to openly delight in their company.

But, although Christopher longs for more freedom, he is not enthusiastic when his father sends him off to the Scottish Highlands to stay with his grandfather. Unlike most of Rundell’s other books, this one is set in the present day, and Christopher is annoyed to be stranded somewhere with no cell service. Worse still, his father has imposed a firm stricture on his visit. Christopher may explore his grandfather’s huge old house and the forest around it, but under no circumstances is he to climb the hill that rises behind it.

Meanwhile, our other hero, Mal Arvorian, is growing up under a similar constraint. Mal has an ability that, even in the Archipelago, is rare in humans: she can fly, although only when wearing a coat given to her by a stranger at birth and only when the wind is blowing. In a different sense, however, her wings are clipped. Both of her parents are dead, and she lives with a great-aunt in a far-flung outpost of the Archipelago, in a small house surrounded by large gardens and bounded on one side by a wall. Beyond the wall is a river filled with lavellans—small, vole-like creatures with sharp teeth and deadly venom. Accordingly, “Mal had been told, at an average rate of once a day for a decade, not to climb the wall.”

Here is an ironclad law in Rundell's books, as in so many other good stories for kids: any absolute prohibition established by an adult will absolutely be violated by children. And so it is inevitable that Mal will climb the wall and Christopher will climb the hill. In Mal's defense, she does so only because she is fleeing a murderer, who has just killed her great-aunt while attempting to kill Mal. As for Christopher's defense, there is none, beyond that old, familiar one: it was there.

"It was a very fine day, until something tried to eat him": thus, unimprovably, does "Impossible Creatures" begin. We learn, in the pages that follow, that Christopher has ventured up the hill and discovered a lake at the top, out of which various unfamiliar and astonishing animals are stampeding. But his attention is caught by something that is still in the water, on the verge of drowning: an injured baby griffin, which Mal had been holding when she jumped off the wall and into the river. Christopher rescues the creature, immediately realizes what it is—very few things on this planet are part lion, part eagle—and, in shock and low on options, takes it to his grandfather for help.



*"Don't take it so hard. It was a really tough maze."*

*Cartoon by Mick Stevens*

Grandpa, notably unfazed, tends to the griffin's wound, then unlocks a safe, withdraws a map and a bestiary, and proceeds to tell him about the Archipelago. The lake, he explains, is a portal to it; he himself is the guardian of that portal, as Christopher's mother would have become in due time, and as Christopher will someday be. This family tradition comes with certain aptitudes—hence Christopher's gift with animals—as well as certain responsibilities. Accordingly, the grandfather goes outside to round up all the

creatures that have emerged from the lake and send them back home. This leaves Christopher alone with the griffin, which insists, via a considerable amount of squawking and biting, on returning to the hill. It is then that Christopher encounters the creature that tries to eat him—an oversized dog with flames for ears—and it is then that he meets Mal, who saves his life.

Thus begins the quest. Together, the two children head to the Archipelago to figure out what is wrong with the glimourie and why someone wants to kill Mal. They have on their side two handy enchanted objects—a compass that always points toward Mal’s home and a knife that can cut anything in the Archipelago—and two adults of notably opposite natures. One is Fidens Nighthand, an enormous, irritable, unemployed bodyguard who is incapable of feeling fear: not of pain, not of death, not of serially offending everyone around him. The other is Irian Guinne, an introverted marine scientist whose research proposal on the growing ecological crisis, lately presented to the Archipelago’s Senate, is effectively stalled in committee.

Irian, we eventually learn, is part nereid, descended from the sea nymphs of Greek legend. That makes her one of the Archipelago’s impossible creatures, though she’s a lot less impossible than most of them. Rundell, who ransacked the world’s mythologies to populate her islands (and then took considerable liberties with the results), does not limit herself to the likes of centaurs and mermaids. In the Archipelago, you will encounter ratatoskas (greenish, squirrel-like animals with a fondness for gossip and a lenient attitude toward the truth), al-mirajes (horned hares that follow Christopher around like the foxes back home, with more alarming consequences), longmas (winged horses with scales like a dragon’s, apparently a popular mode of transport among the wealthy and powerful), and, unfortunately, karkadanns (demonic anti-unicorns, covered in sagging purple flesh and inclined to kill for sport).

Rundell has a great deal of infectious fun with these creatures, and with the line separating fact from fable. One of her nonfiction books, “[The Golden Mole](#)”—which will be published this fall in the U.S. as “[Vanishing Treasures](#)” (Doubleday), though it could just as easily be called “Possible Creatures”—extolls the marvellous strangeness of, among other species, hedgehogs, giraffes, and swifts, all of which, together with the panther, Mal thinks are mythical. Christopher, meanwhile, learns not only that dragons are real but that, contrary to lore, they dislike the cold and damp of caves. Like other lizards, they prefer to be someplace they can bask.

Taken together, these creatures provide much of the book’s emotional range—its awe, its gravitas, its comic relief. There are dragons in its pages as large as cathedrals and others as small as hummingbirds; one of these latter kind has a disproportionately enormous ego and a plan to make Christopher his official biographer. Unicorns roam the islands in vast herds, and an early sign of trouble Mal spots in the Archipelago is perfectly calculated to be among the saddest things imaginable for a ten-year-old girl: “a unicorn foal, pure gold, stillborn.” When Mal needs answers to why it and so many other creatures are dying, she and Christopher seek out the sphinxes, which live on one of the more forbidding islands and occasionally eat their visitors. As Nighthand says, “If every one in a hundred times you consulted a book, the book ate you, you would read fewer books.”

It is very difficult, in the vast shadow of the Potterverse, to write about animals like these—to say nothing of boys like Christopher, with his uncanny knack for understanding them—without seeming like a knockoff Newt Scamander. “Impossible creatures,” after all, sounds almost identical to “fantastic beasts.” But Rundell chooses her words carefully, and the phrase gestures not away from J. K. Rowling but toward something else. Way back in “Cartwheeling in Thunderstorms,” an adult character, scandalized by the tomboyish, willful, semi-feral protagonist, calls her an “impossible creature.”

So were all the protagonists that followed over the next dozen years. In Rundell's books, it is the children, every bit as much as the manticores, who are impossible, in both senses of the word. They're disruptive and unreasonable but also borderline magical—capable of doing things that defy the imaginations, and the strictures, of the grownup world.

In that sense, Rundell's child heroes are also their own kind of endangered species: young people who slip the bonds of adult supervision, heading out all alone to do things that would make even the most committed of today's free-range parents call 911. The main character of "Rooftoppers," threatened with an orphanage but convinced that she is not actually an orphan, flees from England to France, where, to find her mother, she secures the help of a group of kids who live by themselves on the roofs of Paris. In "[The Good Thieves](#)," a girl decides to avenge her beloved grandfather, the newly widowed, newly penniless victim of a con; to do so, she persuades a pickpocket, a trapeze artist, and an animal tamer to follow her on a journey to his ancestral home. (In effect, the circus runs away with *her*.) In my favorite of the books, "[The Explorer](#)," four children survive a plane crash in the Amazon Basin and, in sweaty, hungry, itchy, harrowing fashion, struggle their way toward the city of Manaus on foot and raft. In "The Wolf Wilder," a group of kids, armed with little more than sticks and snowballs, foment a revolution.

All these characters find themselves in—or, just as often, place themselves in—mortal danger, generally to save something important: their freedom, their lives, someone they love. But one of the virtues of fantasy novels is that they radically enlarge the scope in which children can plausibly exert influence. And so, in "[Impossible Creatures](#)," Christopher and Mal must do what adults everywhere, for all their hoopla and hand-wringing and good intentions, have so far failed to accomplish: they must save the world.

The power of a child to do so is not a new story; there's a reason Christians sing "For Unto Us a Child Is Born." But Rundell is pleasingly at ease with tried-and-true tropes—witness all the orphans in her books, to say nothing of that baby found drifting in a body of water. She knows that kids don't care; after all, they may be encountering such devices for the first time. And her books, although wildly imaginative, deliberately refuse to be new in another way as well. The catchphrase of contemporary children's literature is "windows and mirrors," the idea being that books for young people should either give them insight into other people's lives or reflect their own experiences. Rundell honors the admirable intentions behind this theory; her heroes include a disabled girl, a ballet-loving boy, and an aspiring Black acrobat, and she creates worlds in which, wonderfully, young men look up to young women. ("It would have been quite something, to have had a sister," Christopher thinks, while marvelling at Mal.) But she also understands the limitations of the windows-and-mirrors credo. Representation is not the same as identification, and children are perfectly capable of seeing their real troubles in improbable tales, and of seeing themselves in a dragon.

Knowing this, Rundell steers clear of the Fraught Social Issues school of children's literature; her interest in windows is chiefly predicated on whether kids can climb out of them. She wants young people to experience at least a taste of the unsupervised wildness that she so cherished in her own childhood, because she believes that in such freedom lie the beginnings of both courage and happiness. There is a wonderful scene late in "The Explorer" in which the four children, alone in the vast cathedral of the Amazon, are caught in a rainy-season downpour that puts a temporary stop to all their plans. Stuck in the mud, they play a game of stuck-in-the-mud—a moment, in the midst of hardship and exhaustion and fear, of pure and drenching elation. Nothing about the plot demands that scene, just as nothing about existence, strictly speaking, demands joy. Yet I have thought about it many times since finishing the

book, with admiration for its author and something like envy for its characters. They have what Rundell wants for all children: memories so golden and wild that they shine clear through to adulthood, a talisman in times of disenchantment, a torch in times of despair.

Some years ago, Rundell published a slim little essay-as-book aimed at adults, “[Why You Should Read Children’s Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise](#).” Musing and anecdotal in tone, it is basically an elaboration on a remark by W. H. Auden: “There are good books which are only for adults, because their comprehension presupposes adult experience, but there are no good books which are only for children.”

That’s true as far as it goes, but it obscures an important point: good books for children, even outstanding books for children, are immeasurably better when you are an actual child. When I was a kid, books like “[A Wrinkle in Time](#)” and “[Tuck Everlasting](#)” upended my world, sliding me straight out of my bedroom and into eternity. When I reread them in adulthood, the flames had burned to embers; I could remember the fire but not feel it. That’s often the case when you revisit books you loved in your youth or catch up on the ones you missed or were born too early to encounter at the intended age. As a grownup, you may enjoy such works, but you can no longer wholly enter them. You are, in an inversion of that childhood injustice, too tall to ride the ride.

I was aware of this limitation while reading “[Impossible Creatures](#)”—much more aware of it, in fact, than while reading Rundell’s more realist works for kids. That might be because children are so much better than adults at crossing the boundary between the ordinary and the magical, or it might be because the new book occasionally falters in ways the earlier ones do not. Rundell is usually a master of the elegant plot twist, but this book was both less surprising than the others and more convoluted, with an Archipelagic cosmology that involves a magical tree, a maze, an

immortal guardian, a heat source called a somnulum, and some crucial moments of overlap with our own earthly history that were a little too “Da Vinci Code” for my taste.

Still, I doubt that any of this would matter to a child. It may be true that adults should read children’s books, but it is definitely true that children’s books should not be written for adults, and Rundell knows her audience; she neither talks down to kids nor shies away from the things that interest them while leaving grownups cold. There is plenty of snot in this book and plenty of things that smell bad, and the griffin, on first encounter, vomits all over Christopher. But there is also irreversible harm and undying friendship and a refusal to make things easier than they are, and I suspect that most children, when they come to the story’s end, will feel that they have become a part of something larger. That’s not only because “Impossible Creatures” is the first of a trilogy but also because it tells children a real-life truth that is both thrilling and scary: soon enough, this whole precious, precarious world will be yours to try to save. ♦



*Kathryn Schulz*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. She is the author of the memoir “*Lost & Found*.”

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

[The Current Cinema](#)

# The Ghoulily Retro Pleasures of “Beetlejuice Beetlejuice”

*The director Tim Burton and the actor Michael Keaton resurrect a classic collaboration with supernatural-screwball verve.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

September 6, 2024



*Michael Keaton, Catherine O’Hara, Winona Ryder, and Jenna Ortega star in Tim Burton’s sequel to his 1988 comedy, “Beetlejuice.”*

*Illustration by Ricardo Diseño*

Tim Burton’s “Beetlejuice” (1988) derived its title, by way of a phonetically useful misspelling, from the name of Betelgeuse, a centuries-old demon who delighted in pranking the living and the dead alike. Played by a marvellously repugnant Michael Keaton, with a barf-smeared face, a sex pest’s leer, a charlatan’s patter, and a voice of boozy gravel, Betelgeuse was a figure of malevolent play—a puckish parasite of the afterlife. Dare to summon him, by saying his name three times in quick succession, and you were in for a hell of a headache. But you were also in for some fabulously macabre spectacle, realized with special effects that, seen today, are all the more captivating for their old-fashioned, handcrafted inventiveness. At Burton and Betelgeuse’s command, inanimate

objects sprang to vicious life, staircase bannisters coiling into lethal serpents, and a jauntily stylized blue-green underworld—full of shrunken heads, plucked eyeballs, and other grisly evidence of violent death—beckoned to us from beyond.

If Betelgeuse was the movie’s not-so-secret weapon, he was also something of a red herring. A little of the guy went a long way, and Burton knew that maximizing Keaton’s impact required limiting his exposure. “Beetlejuice” may have been a netherworld burlesque, but it was also a stirring tragicomedy about the conjoined fates of the living and the departed, firm in its belief that death, a realm of tediously long lines and uncertain ends, ultimately offered its sufferers no more relief or resolution than life. At its heart, and in its playfully jaundiced soul, “Beetlejuice” was also a movie about the burdens and blessings of family—and, specifically, about the comedy, horror, and surprising resilience of marriage.

You had to laugh at the goofily mismatched Charles and Delia Deetz (Jeffrey Jones and Catherine O’Hara)—a boring suburban aspirant and a neurotic, self-aggrandizing sculptress—as they abandoned their idle-rich New York existence for an old farmhouse in Connecticut. Rather more functional as a couple were the home’s previous occupants, the recently deceased Adam and Barbara Maitland (Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis), who ill-advisedly hired Betelgeuse to scare the new occupants out of their digs. By the end, even Betelgeuse couldn’t escape the tug of matrimony; in exchange for supernatural services rendered, he tried—and failed—to tie the knot with Lydia Deetz, Charles’s teen-age daughter. She was played, in a star-making early role, by Winona Ryder, with a tremulous goth-girl resplendence that has never fully abandoned her.

Now, more than three decades later, Burton has brought Lydia, Delia, and Betelgeuse together again for a pleasurable flyweight sequel, “*Beetlejuice Beetlejuice*.” Lydia has become a self-styled

paranormal investigator with her own occult-themed talk show; she and her stepmother, Delia, always at each other's throat in the first film, have long since buried the hatchet. But Lydia has found fresh estrangement: from her own teen-age daughter, Astrid (Jenna Ortega), a science-minded skeptic who can't abide her mom's "supernatural bullshit." As for the benevolent ghosts of Adam and Barbara, they have permanently moved on, and their disappearance is, by some distance, the most haunting thing in the movie. Lydia explains the Maitlands' departure by way of "a loophole"—a technicality in the dreary bureaucracy of the afterlife.

Few sequels, especially those as belated as this one, come into being without arranging a few narrative loopholes of their own: expedient twists and contrivances that can explain a shift in dramatic focus or the conspicuous absence of key past collaborators. "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" makes use of one particularly gutsy one: mere minutes in, Charles Deetz meets with an untimely offscreen demise, and under circumstances grisly enough to rule out either an open casket or a return appearance by the actor who played him. (Jones has had few screen roles since 2003, when he pleaded no contest to charges of hiring a minor to pose for sexually explicit photographs.)

And so the story kicks off with a funeral, and surely the only funeral ever to feature a choral rendition of "Day-O (The Banana Boat Song)," in a warm callback to the first film's cracked calypso showstopper. (Not least among the spirits hovering over the sequel is Harry Belafonte.) But Charles is scarcely in the ground before we hear a peal of wedding bells: Lydia's boyfriend and manager, Rory (Justin Theroux), an insufferable font of New Age therapy-speak, actually pops the question at the wake, and, if you think that's in bad taste, "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" is just getting warmed up. Before long, Betelgeuse (now spelled Beetlejuice in the credits, but whatever) has reared his green-haired head, and characters are hurtling through otherworldly portals, propelled, at every turn, by the hectoring spirits of love and commitment. Lydia must contend

with duelling proposals from Rory and Betelgeuse; Delia weeps and wails for her lost hubby; even Astrid is bewitched, for a spell, by a youthful crush. No wonder it all builds to a hellish wedding, complete with goo-slathered cake, and with multiple brides and grooms in play.

Skulking alongside the main action, meanwhile, is Delores, Betelgeuse's long-lost, long-dead spouse; in a better Hades, she would have been known as the Afterwife. Hellbent on reclaiming Betelgeuse as her husband, Delores gets one of the movie's deftest bits of slapstick grotesquerie, a body-horror tour de force that could double as a staple-gun ad. She's the latest of Burton's corpse brides, and one so murderous that even infernal denizens steer clear of her. Naturally—or, rather, supernaturally—she is played by none other than Monica Bellucci, Burton's offscreen partner.

Nearly every movie sequel is an act of creative reanimation, an attempt to bring a shock of artistic life back to that which has already come to a logical end. Even so, given Burton's career-long interest in disturbing the dead, he has directed remarkably few sequels before this one; his "Batman Returns" (1992) was a welcome exception. Like most successful American filmmakers, Burton has sometimes caved to the imperatives of an industry that increasingly insists on unnecessary remakes and questionable franchises. Crucially, though, he has always sought to tuck art into the margins, to inscribe even a moribund effort such as "Dark Shadows" (2012) with something resembling a personal signature. It's worth noting that his last picture before "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" was one of his most subversive: a wildly eccentric live-action remake of Disney's "Dumbo" that all but repudiated the Hollywood machinery that spawned it.

"Beetlejuice Beetlejuice," for its part, evinces a certain skepticism about artists, entertainers, and the moneyed industries that keep them afloat. Delia, who opts to mine the family's bereavement for her next big multimedia project, is held up for some lighthearted

art-world satire. So is Lydia's talk show, which, though rooted in real-life paranormal activity, is not immune to charges of ghoulish exploitation. One of the movie's funnier new characters is a ghost detective, played by Willem Dafoe, who used to be an actor and now can't stop playing to nonexistent cameras. He's trapped not just in the afterlife but in the non-stop theatre of his own mind.

If "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" looks mildly askance at Hollywood, it nonetheless qualifies as something of a corrective among recent studio sequels. The movie is hardly its predecessor's equal in conceptual richness or comic inspiration, which is fine, because it knows that duplicating the experience was never the task to begin with. The script, by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, has its share of bum lines and misfired jokes, but placed alongside, say, the dutiful fan service of "Alien: Romulus," or the smarmy meta-shenanigans of "Deadpool & Wolverine," the writing is practically a model of originality, and of relentless forward momentum. Where its predecessor kept a foot planted in reality, "Beetlejuice Beetlejuice" barrels through the underworld with an ever-looser, crazier Looney Tunes energy. The sequel's visual design, too, is deeper and subtler than the original's, and Burton's panoply of visual tricks has grown in tandem with his sense of mischief. In the first film, Betelgeuse spun his head like Regan MacNeil; now he can cheerfully disembowel himself and, with exuberant nastiness, send his lower digestive tract spilling out onto the floor.

Keaton is as splendidly, mangily disreputable as ever, even though, as before, Betelgeuse remains faintly peripheral, more impish sideshow attraction than main event. That's as it should be. There is something slyly poignant about the fact that, while Betelgeuse hasn't changed much—how much *can* one change after centuries in the afterlife?—the two older Deetz women very much have. Delia has grown warmer, wackier, and less supercilious; O'Hara, a genius of comedy, gives her a faint dash of Moira Rose dottiness. Lydia, in Ryder's touching, jittery performance, has sacrificed her youthful self-possession for full-blown grownup anxieties, with perhaps a

side order of her stepmother's neuroses. It falls to Ortega's Astrid, the designated breath of fresh air in this determinedly musty crypt of a movie, to diagnose their condition. When someone notes that death is hard, she offers the only sensible reply: "Yeah, sometimes I think life is harder." ♦



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

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/beetlejuice-beetlejuice-movie-review>

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

# Poems

- **“Outage”**

By Raven Leilani | “He was already gone, already weather, already / language my mother needed / for the coroner.”

- **“I Have No Word in English For”**

By Sandra Cisneros | “Apachurrado. Hat run over by a truck. Heart run over by unrequited love.”

[Poems](#)

# Outage

By [Raven Leilani](#)

September 9, 2024

Even though the atmosphere is made  
to fail your feelings, I expected weather  
on the day we buried my brother, the pine box  
light, too large for what was left of him.  
Before the burial, I joined my mother  
and the body in the room  
that used to be mine,  
all the clocks wrong  
from an outage in the night.  
Wires bedevilled by rain, too late  
to get to my brother through the machines  
he used to breathe.  
He was already gone, already weather, already  
language my mother needed  
for the coroner. Sister, brother, mother,  
no father, 1970, surprise  
in her voice as she recalled his birth.  
We all felt fatherless, or rather the fatherlessness  
of our heavenly father and the debts  
that makes due, what follows  
when the son must die and become  
atmosphere, though on the day we buried him  
it was all wrong. Sunny, cloudless,  
everyone sweating and shedding their coats,  
in awe of how such a day could be beautiful.

*Raven Leilani* is the author of the novel “*Luster*,” and a lecturer in English at Harvard University.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/outage-raven-leilani-poem>

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

[Poems](#)

# I Have No Word in English For

By [Sandra Cisneros](#)

September 9, 2024

*Apachurrado.* Hat run over by a truck. Heart run over by unrequited love.

*Estrenar.* To show off what's new gloriously.

*Engentada.* People-overdose malaise.

*A estas alturas.* Superb vista with age.

*Encabronada/o.* A volatile, combustible rage.

*Susto.* Fear that spooks the soul away.

*Ni modo.* Wise acceptance of what fate doles.

*Aguante.* Miraculous Mexican power to endure conquest, tragedy, politicos.

*Ánimo.* A joyous zap of fire.

*Divina Providencia.* Destiny with choices and spiritual interventions.

*Nagual.* Animal twin assigned at birth.

*Amfibio.* Person with the gift of global perspective due to living between borders.

*Alebrije. Amfibio* with wings from geographical travel.

*Ombligo.* Buried umbilical. Center of the universe.

*Toloache.* Love concoction made with moonflower and menstrual blood.

*Tocaya/o.* Name double. Automatic friend.

*Amiga hermana.* Heart sister closer than kin.

*Un pobre infeliz.* The walking wounded maimed by land mines of life.

*Un inocente.* Mind askew since birth; blameless.

*Chupacabrón/a.* Energy vampire disguised in human form.

*Cenzontle.* Tranquillity transmitter in bird or human form.

*Friolenta/o.* Tropical blood. Vulnerable to chills.

*Chípil.* Melancholia due to an unborn sibling en route.

*Desamor.* Heart bleeding like xoconostle fruit.

*Xoconostle.* Must I explain everything for you?

*Sandra Cisneros* received a 2022 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. Her books include “*Woman Without Shame*,” which was released in 2023.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/i-have-no-word-in-english-for-sandra-cisneros-poem>

# Cartoons

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

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

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

Drawings from the September 16, 2024, magazine.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/contest>

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/gallery/cartoons-from-the-september-16-2024-issue>

# Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, September 4, 2024**

By Patrick Berry | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

[Crossword](#)

## The Crossword: Wednesday, September 4, 2024

A *beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [Patrick Berry](#)

September 4, 2024



[Patrick Berry](#) has been publishing puzzles since 1993 and lives in Athens, Georgia.

---

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from  
<https://www.newyorker.com/puzzles-and-games-dept/crossword/2024/09/04>