

PRICE \$8.99

THE

NOV. 11, 2024

THE NEW YORKER



R. Blitt

The New Yorker Magazine

[November 11, 2024]

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

Goings On

• [Winter Culture Preview](#)

What's happening this season in art, music, theatre, dance, movies, and television.

[Goings On](#)

Winter Culture Preview

What's happening this season in art, music, theatre, dance, movies, and television.

November 1, 2024



Shauna Lyon

Goings On editor

As the air gets crisp and we head indoors, the cultural horizon brings warmth and sustenance. With the holidays around the corner, we'll soon have a bounty of "Nutcracker"s, "Messiah"s, and "Christmas Carol"s to behold. We'll be delivering a full list of the city's topnotch holiday events in a few weeks. But there's much else to enjoy this season—from Adrienne Lenker at Kings Theatre and Ghostface Killah at Terminal 5 to Angel Blue at the Metropolitan Opera; from Denzel Washington on Broadway to Gabriel García Márquez on Netflix; from "Nickel Boys" in the cinemas to Camille A. Brown at the Joyce and Caspar David Friedrich at the Met. Your subscription makes it possible for our critics to canvass the cultural landscape and bring you the best shows, films, concerts, exhibitions, and pop-ups in New York City and beyond—thank you for letting Goings On be your guide to the season. Let it snow!

Jump to: [Contemporary Music](#) | [Theatre](#) | [Art](#) | [Dance](#) | [Classical Music](#) | [Television](#) | [Movies](#)

Contemporary Music



Illustrations by Julien Posture

Wu-Tang, Esperanza Spalding, Indie Crooners

The winter concert slate opens with the reunion of one of the great indie-rock acts of the twenty-first century: **TV on the Radio**, at Webster Hall (Nov. 25-30), which leads a spate of sensational bands. On Nov. 14-15, at the same venue, the easygoing outfit **Slow Pulp** unwinds its moody sound. The following week, the shoegaze pioneers **Slowdive** take over Brooklyn Paramount (Nov. 18-19). At Pioneer Works, the post-rock radicals of **Godspeed You! Black Emperor** début urgent music of protest (Nov. 20-21). For those seeking rock with a more outré appeal, consider **Fousheeé** (Music Hall of Williamsburg; Nov. 26), **Toro y Moi** (Terminal 5; Feb. 14), or **Bartees Strange** (Bowery Ballroom; Feb. 19), whose new album, “Horror,” is out on Valentine’s Day.

Rappers from across the city score homecoming shows. On Dec. 6, three of the Wu-Tang Clan’s most revered members, **Ghostface Killah**, **Raekwon**, and **GZA** bum-rush Terminal 5. Another seminal hip-hop group, **De La Soul**, comes to Lincoln Center on Jan. 17, as part of its pay-what-you-wish program. A night later, the

Queens m.c. **Elucid** stages the punk provocations of his new album, “Revelator,” at Baby’s All Right.

There’s a singer-songwriter for anyone in need of a less boisterous experience. The Big Thief leader **Adrienne Lenker** stokes the embers of the rustic songs from her recent solo record, “Bright Future,” at Kings Theatre (Nov. 18-19). In a special series of shows, **Regina Spektor** runs through her 2002 album, “Songs,” at Warsaw (Dec. 8-10). On Jan. 30, the loop artist **L’Rain** joins **Soccer Mommy** at Brooklyn Steel while the emergent folk star **Joy Oladokun** shares her observant music of personal awakening at Irving Plaza. At Radio City Music Hall, the understated R. & B. humorist **Faye Webster** hits the road for the second time in support of her recent album, “Underdressed at the Symphony” (Feb. 26). As a spiritual palate cleanser, there are plenty of opportunities to catch the jazz visionary **Esperanza Spalding** during her Blue Note residency, Feb. 18-March 2.

If you prefer dancing to swaying side to side, lighter in hand, the d.j.s are in full swing. On Nov. 15, the “Brat” architect **A. G. Cook** continues a breakout run—which welcomed his album “Britpop”—at Knockdown Center; **Floating Points** (Feb. 21), the techno experimentalist who once collaborated with the sax colossus Pharoah Sanders, later appears. At Avant Gardner, on Nov. 21, Dan Snaith unveils the new **Caribou** album, “Honey,” a product of A.I. vocal effects, and, at Park Avenue Armory, Jan. 9-12, the xx bellwether and producer **Jamie xx** celebrates “In Waves,” his first LP in nine years.

For shows even more driven by charismatic star power, look to the realm of colorful international pop. The Norwegian folk-pop musician **AURORA** continues the second part of her “What Happened to the Heart?” tour at Beacon Theatre (Dec. 5-6). And, as the season melts to a close, Brooklyn Paramount hosts two budding sensations: the Argentine fusionist **Nathy Peluso** (March 8) and the British soul hypnotist **Jorja Smith** (March 10).—*Sheldon Pearce*

The Theatre



A Starry “Othello” and “Gypsy,” Language Lessons

The big news of the winter season is that the six-time Tony Award-winning Audra McDonald is playing Madame Rose in George C. Wolfe’s production of **“Gypsy”** (Majestic; starting previews Nov. 21). Rose is the musical equivalent of King Lear, a role that great actors rise toward as a capstone achievement.

As for the *rest* of 2024, Broadway sleds down it on comedy: Matthew Sklar, Chad Beguelin, Thomas Meehan, and Bob Martin’s musical adaptation of the Will Ferrell movie **“Elf”** is back, with Grey Henson in Ferrell’s curly shoes (Marquis; Nov. 9); Leslye Headland’s Christmas-set farce, **“Cult of Love”** (Helen Hayes; Nov. 20), features stars such as Zachary Quinto and Shailene Woodley as members of a Christian family in schism; Jonathan Spector’s **“Eureka Day”** (Friedman; Nov. 25), a precise satire of devolving communication on a progressive school board, casts the wry wits Amber Gray and Bill Irwin; and **“All In: Comedy About Love”** (Hudson; Dec. 11), Alex Timbers’s staging of the gifted writer Simon Rich’s comedic vignettes, will be performed by a kind of rotating comic supergroup, featuring John Mulaney, Tim Meadows, Renée Elise Goldsberry, and Richard Kind.

The new year belongs to serious playwriting: first up is **“English”** (Todd Haimes; Jan. 3), Sanaz Toossi’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play

about learning the language in Iran; later, Branden Jacobs-Jenkins gives us the drama “**Purpose**” (Helen Hayes; Feb. 25), in which a family fractures around a legacy of Black radicalism. Off Broadway contains a rogues’ gallery: Jordan Harrison’s “**The Antiquities**” (Playwrights Horizons; Jan. 20) imagines a museum dedicated to a vanished humanity; Bess Wohl opens “**Liberation**” (Laura Pels; Jan. 31), a time-jumping tale about a group of women and the daughter who tries to understand their fate; and Samuel D. Hunter’s “**Grangeville**” (Pershing Square Signature Center; Feb. 4) includes the Oscar-winning star of Hunter’s “The Whale,” Brendan Fraser, in another of Hunter’s perfectly machined stories of effortful connection.

When it comes to musicals, I’m excited to see if SpitLip’s Second World War-set “**Operation Mincemeat**” (Golden; Feb. 15) seems as hilarious to a Broadway audience as it did when I saw the zany, fringey show on London’s West End. Other options are graver: Idina Menzel stars in (and co-conceived) Tina Landau’s “**Redwood**” (Nederlander; Jan. 24), with music by Kate Diaz, about a woman fleeing her grief in the forest; the musical adaptation “**Buena Vista Social Club**” (Schoenfeld; Feb. 21) imagines sorrows of romance and racism behind the group’s stunning self-titled album; and, Off Broadway, the experimental director David Herskovits reimagines and reexamines the racial currents in Hammerstein and Kern’s masterpiece “**Show/Boat: A River**” (Skirball; Jan. 9), now that the musical has sailed into the public domain.

Finally, as the snows melt, stars’ minds must turn to the classics. Denzel Washington plays the baffled general “**Othello**” (Barrymore; Feb. 24), opposite Jake Gyllenhaal as the toxic Iago, in a new revival by Kenny Leon; Sarah Snook takes on the corrupt but unchanging title character, as well as two dozen others, in her solo performance of Oscar Wilde’s “**The Picture of Dorian Gray**” (Music Box; March 10); Isabelle Huppert plays Mary Stuart in Darryl Pinckney’s “**Mary Said What She Said**” (Skirball; Feb.

27), directed by the great visual-theatre maestro Robert Wilson; and Andrew Scott plays all the parts in “**Vanya**” (Lucille Lortel; March 11), an adaptation shaped to his particular, puckish spirit.—*Helen Shaw*

Art



Casper David Friedrich, Kafka, MOMA's Ode to Design

There is no New York without graffiti, and periodic attempts to pretend otherwise have made it only plainer. Three decades ago, the year Giuliani became mayor, the painter Martin Wong made the Museum of the City of New York a donation of more than three hundred works by the sorts of street artists who were then being harassed almost out of existence. Some landed on their feet (*Futura 2000*, for one, is currently enjoying a retrospective at the Bronx Museum), but others deserved better—making **“Above Ground: Art from the Martin Wong Graffiti Collection”** (opening Nov. 22) a belated opportunity to give it to them.

Nothing says the holidays quite like Franz Kafka, who died of tuberculosis in 1924, right when the Morgan Library was admitting its first visitors. The pairing, a century later, of author and museum should delight anybody who cares about literature, and even some people who don’t, provided that they’re fans of Andy Warhol—he included Kafka in the silkscreen “Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century.” Among the juiciest morsels in **“Franz Kafka”**

(Nov. 22), besides that Warhol, are the original manuscript of “The Metamorphosis” and mounds of letters, photographs, drawings, and diaries.

While the centennial shows continue at the Morgan, the Dia Foundation celebrates a still respectable fifty years. Its Chelsea location ends 2024 with **“Echoes from the Borderlands”** (Dec. 11), a four-part, twenty-four-hour sound piece, created by Valeria Luiselli, Ricardo Giraldo, and Leo Heiblum, that mixes unadorned field recordings and the artists’ imaginative replies.

MOMA kicks off 2025 with a charismatic selection of furniture, clothes, games, and gadgets, all from the misty land known as “design.” If there is a governing theme, it’s the power of this kind of art to alter the world in subtle ways—to make a computer easy enough for a child to use, say, or to render the “Wheelchair Accessible” sign more proudly kinetic. Good design is unobtrusive, but **“Pirouette: Turning Points in Design”** (Jan. 26) takes some of the most sneakily influential art of the past century and gives it a welcome chance to obtrude.

If you’ve ever stared out at the ocean and felt huge and microscopic at the same time, stop by the Met for a dip in **“Caspar David Friedrich: The Soul of Nature”** (Feb. 8), occasioned by the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the great German Romantic painter’s birth. You probably know him, even if you don’t recognize his name, for 1818’s “Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog,” but his bench is deep—depths, geographic and otherwise, being to Friedrich roughly what apples were to Cézanne.

After a year of bangers, the American Folk Art Museum hosts the third and final part of its exhibition **“Somewhere to Roost”** (Feb. 12), a characteristically compact, thoughtful exploration of the themes of home and belonging. The name comes from the title of a mixed-media piece, by Thornton Dial, Sr., that joins some sixty art works assembled for the occasion.

The Purim story was among the few that both Jews and Christians of seventeenth-century Holland celebrated, and Rembrandt's lustrous "A Jewish Heroine from the Hebrew Bible"—quite possibly his imagining of the story's protagonist, Queen Esther—is the sturdy trunk of a show at the Jewish Museum. The painting shares wall space with drawings, prints, and ceremonial art for "**The Book of Esther in the Age of Rembrandt**" (March 7), a splendid way of celebrating democratic pluralism at its best, or just bidding goodbye to winter already.—*Jackson Arn*

Dance

Camille A. Brown, Kyle Abraham, Maria Tallchief



The soaring Drill Hall at the Park Avenue Armory tends to infuse anything that happens there with an aura of grandiosity. And yet **Kyle Abraham** has chosen the most intimate of themes—the sadness that comes with the passing of time, the feeling of being alive in this world—for his new work, “Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful,” to be performed there Dec. 3-14. Along with Abraham’s silken physical language, the new piece is built on the contrast between the layered movement of groups and the isolation of the individual—as in a solo for Abraham—all bathed in immersive visuals by the artist Cao Yuxi.

A solo, danced on some nights by the choreographer herself, is also at the heart of “I Am,” **Camille A. Brown**’s newest work, which comes to the Joyce Feb. 5-9. Brown’s influence can now be seen everywhere from Broadway (where she created the dances for “Hell’s Kitchen,” among other shows) to the opera, but the root of her approach to theatre—which is explosive, polyrhythmic, honest—can be felt most clearly in the dances she makes for herself and her own handpicked dancer-collaborators. Here, she explores an idea drawn from the HBO series “Lovecraft Country”: a character who can be whatever she imagines herself to be.

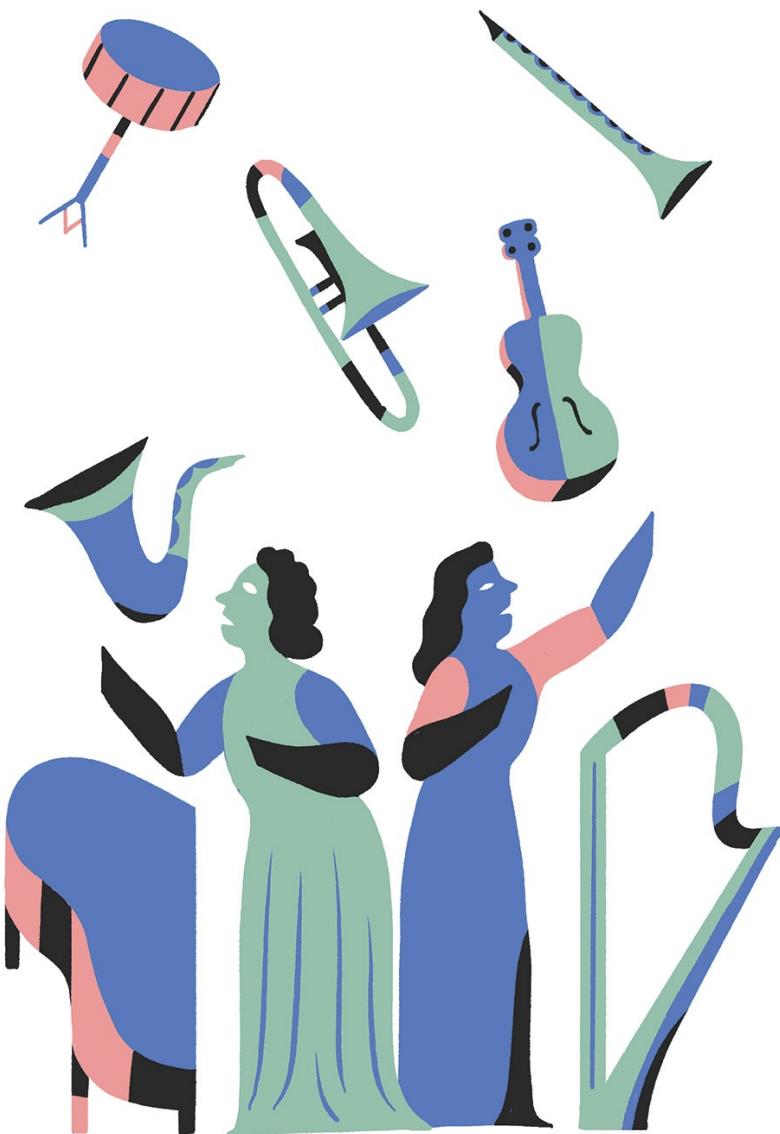
While the cultural reverberations of Alvin Ailey receive their due at the Whitney Museum’s “Edges of Ailey” exhibit (through Feb. 9), the company he founded, in 1958, leans into the idea of forward motion. **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre**’s season at City Center (Dec. 4-Jan. 5) introduces a raft of new works, three of them by former Ailey dancers. Matthew Rushing’s “Sacred Songs” is set to nine spirituals that Ailey cut from his great “Revelations” after its première. Hope Boykin uses her open-hearted movement style, in her jazz-inflected “Finding Free,” to explore the theme of individual freedom. And, in Jamar Roberts’s “Al-Andalus Blues,” dancers take a musical excursion to Moorish Spain, on the wings of Miles Davis’s adaptation of the “Concierto de Aranjuez” and Roberta Flack’s rendition of the poem “Angelitos Negros.”

New York City Ballet’s winter season (at the David H. Koch Theatre, Jan. 21-March 2) brings new works from two artists-in-residence, Justin Peck and Alexei Ratmansky, each reflecting the character of its maker. Peck, who has shown a knack for channelling a kind of raw millennial energy, will harness the electronics-heavy sound of Dan Deacon; Ratmansky draws from the nineteenth-century ballet “Paquita,” out of which he will carve a suite of dances designed to challenge the performers’ classical technique. And Balanchine’s brilliant “Sylvia Pas de Deux” (set to Delibes) returns, for the first time since 1994, as part of a program

of works originally choreographed for the Osage-born ballerina Maria Tallchief, one of the company's first stars.—*Marina Harss*

Classical Music

Angel Blue, Barbara Hannigan, Tallis Scholars



If there's one thing you can rely on hearing around the holidays—even though it was written for Easter—it's Handel's "**Messiah**," which falls in flurries throughout December. Performers include the

choirs of St. Thomas Fifth Avenue (with New York Baroque Incorporated, Dec. 10 and 12) and Trinity Church (conducted by Jane Glover, Dec. 11-13); Musica Sacra with the New York Philharmonic (David Geffen Hall; Dec. 11-14); Masterwork Chorus and Orchestra (Carnegie Hall; Dec. 19); the Oratorio Society (Carnegie Hall; Dec. 23); and Grace Chorale and the Brooklyn Chamber Orchestra (St. Ann's Church, Brooklyn; Dec. 22).

Holiday traditions also continue at the **Chamber Music Society** (Bach's six Brandenburg Concertos, Dec. 13, 15, and 17) and at the Metropolitan Opera (Julie Taymor's abridged, Englished version of "**The Magic Flute**," Dec. 12-Jan. 4). The **Tallis Scholars'** plainchant-oriented concert at St. Mary the Virgin strips down the jubilation (Dec. 5), whereas David Lang's "**Little Match Girl Passion**" (Crypt Sessions; Dec. 4-6) and the American Modern Opera Company's "**El Niño**" (Cathedral of St. John the Divine; Dec. 19) offer more questioning takes on the Christmas story.

At the Park Avenue Armory, the soprano-impresario **Barbara Hannigan** breaks the holiday embargo with a recital centering John Zorn's "Jumalatteret," a cycle of songs named for Sami goddesses which has all the cackling beauty of a leaf blown on the wind (Dec. 12). Heartbeat Opera, always adventurous, brings Dan Schlosberg's refashioning of Strauss's "**Salome**" to the Irondale Center (Feb. 4-16), and National Sawdust premières the "**North American Indigenous Songbook**," a project, and a corrective, constructed by Native composers including Raven Chacon and Martha Redbone (Nov. 16).

Amid the European ensembles parading through Carnegie Hall—including the **Berlin Philharmonic** (Nov. 17-19), **Czech Philharmonic** (Dec. 3-5), and **London Symphony Orchestra** (March 5-6)—the **Philadelphia Orchestra**'s program of Mahler's Ninth Symphony and Jake Heggie's "Songs for Murdered Sisters" (Jan. 15) stands out; so does **Angel Blue**'s recital of songs by

Strauss, Rachmaninoff, and Hoiby, accompanied by **Lang Lang** (March 8). Blue also appears at the Metropolitan Opera, where she makes her title-role début in Verdi's "**Aida**" (select dates Dec. 31-May 9). On the same stage, Ryan Speedo Green appears as Queequeg in Heggie's "**Moby-Dick**" (March 3-29), and Lise Davidsen, as Leonore, anchors Beethoven's "**Fidelio**" (March 4-15). "Oh to Believe in Another World," a film by William Kentridge, plays as the **New York Philharmonic** performs Shostakovich's Symphony No. 10 (Dec. 5-7); Nathalie Stutzmann leads the orchestra in "The Ring Without Words," which boils Wagner's sprawling epic down to seventy-five minutes (Jan. 16, 18-19).

The Miller Theatre's composer portrait of **Miya Masaoka** includes her "Mapping a Joyful Noise," for violin and tapes (March 6). Want a *really* joyful noise? Get to Washington Square Park at 6 p.m. on Dec. 15, for Phil Kline's annual phone-and-speaker carolling pageant, "**Unsilent Night.**"—*Fergus McIntosh*

Television



Thrillers in Belfast, the Poconos, and London

Until fairly recently, television seemed content to be ensconced in stock locales: the living room, the office, the neighborhood bar.

Then, in the past two decades, as prestige TV embraced riskier narratives (and benefitted from higher budgets), its settings became more adventurous, too. That ambition (and money) is draining from the medium, but far-flung and fanciful backdrops may be here to stay, at least judging from winter's premières.

One of late fall's most anticipated programs, Hulu's "**Say Nothing**" (Nov. 14), transports viewers to Belfast, Northern Ireland, where, during the Troubles, two young, photogenic sisters join the guerrilla campaign for Irish Republicanism. (The series is based on the book by [Patrick Radden Keefe](#), a staff writer at this magazine.) A different pair of powerful sisters, played by Emily Watson and Olivia Williams, wage their own war for survival on a hostile desert planet in Max's "**Dune: Prophecy**" (Nov. 17), a prequel to the recent big-screen adaptations of Frank Herbert's sci-fi novel.

"Dune" has long been considered "unadaptable," but it's not the season's only difficult page-to-screen translation. During Gabriel García Márquez's lifetime, the Nobel laureate refused to sell the movie rights to his most famous work, "**One Hundred Years of Solitude**" (Dec. 11), declaring that the story necessitated a hundred hours of screen time to be told properly. Nonetheless, Netflix is now taking a stab at bringing the saga of seven generations of the Buendía family to TV, with a Spanish-language production filmed in García Márquez's native Colombia.

Escapes, of a sort, can also be found via the two-part Ken Burns documentary "**Leonardo da Vinci**" (Nov. 18), on PBS, and the Barack Obama-narrated nature docuseries "**Our Oceans**" (Nov. 20), on Netflix. Also on the streaming service, "**Black Doves**" (Dec. 5), a spy mystery set in London at Christmastime that stars Keira Knightley and Ben Whishaw, seems designed to sweep you up, as does Max's "**Get Millie Black**" (Nov. 25), a crime drama set in Kingston, Jamaica, written by the Booker Prize-winning author Marlon James.

Of course, TV offers the pleasures of familiarity, too. Netflix's **"Squid Game"** (Dec. 26) returns after three years, as does Apple TV+'s **"Severance"** (Jan. 17). The romantic comedy gets a dark new spin with **"Laid"** (Dec. 19), on Peacock, which finds Stephanie Hsu ("Everything Everywhere All at Once") playing a woman who discovers that all her past lovers have been dying "in unusual ways." The genre playfulness continues on Hulu in **"Interior Chinatown"** (Nov. 19), a crime mystery with a sly, self-aware take on the police procedural and on kung-fu tales.

The stakes are higher in **"The Madness"** (Nov. 28), a conspiracy thriller on Netflix, in which a media commentator, played by Colman Domingo, becomes linked to a murder in the Pocono woods. Perhaps no frustration strikes deeper in the heart than the challenges of buying a home, a predicament dramatized in the black comedy **"No Good Deed"** (Dec. 12), co-starring Lisa Kudrow and Ray Romano, as a couple who have a hard time leaving the site of so many memories.—*Inkoo Kang*

Movies



"Nickel Boys," Bob Dylan, Intern Affairs

This winter's movie season resembles the 2024 baseball season, in which many teams saw a chance to compete for a wild-card slot.

Similarly, with few obvious Oscar front-runners emerging early in the year, the calendar has filled up with movies of ostensible prestige, in a wide array of genres.

As usual, literary adaptations are generously represented, albeit sometimes in surprising ways. RaMell Ross's **"Nickel Boys"** (opening Dec. 13), based on a novel by Colson Whitehead, is set in the mid-nineteen-sixties and focusses on two Black teen-agers' struggles to survive in a segregated Florida juvenile-detention center that's run by a sadistic warden. The narrative offers unusual shifts in the main characters' points of view, which Ross evokes with a visual style that's as distinctive as his sense of form. The director Luca Guadagnino's **"Queer"** (Nov. 27), an adaptation of William Burroughs's unfinished 1985 novel, set in the mid-fifties, features Daniel Craig and Drew Starkey as American men of different generations who meet in Mexico City and begin a fraught sexual relationship. **"The Return"** (Dec. 6), directed by Uberto Pasolini, is an adaptation of Homer's "Odyssey," starring Ralph Fiennes as the wandering Odysseus and Juliette Binoche as Penelope, the steadfast wife who waits for him for twenty years.

Music-centered movies are also inevitably prominent, especially in the form of bio-pics—foremost, James Mangold's **"A Complete Unknown"** (Dec. 25), about Bob Dylan's rise to folk-music fame, in the early nineteen-sixties, and the backlash that resulted from his turn to amplified instruments. Timothée Chalamet stars as the young bard, Monica Barbaro co-stars as Joan Baez, and Edward Norton plays Dylan's supporter turned antagonist Pete Seeger. Angelina Jolie plays the title role in Pablo Larraín's **"Maria"** (Nov. 27), which imagines the opera singer Maria Callas's turbulent life and career from her own jumbled perspective in the week before her death, in 1977. **"The End"** (Dec. 6), directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, is a more traditional musical in format if not in subject: it's a postapocalyptic operetta, starring Michael Shannon and Tilda Swinton as the heads of a super-rich family taking refuge from climate disaster in their luxurious subterranean bunker.

Melodramas provide florid showcases for certified stars, such as Nicole Kidman, who heads Halina Reijn's "**Babygirl**" (Dec. 25), as a hard-driving C.E.O. who risks her career and her marriage to have an affair with an intern (Harris Dickinson). In Brady Corbet's "**The Brutalist**" (Dec. 20), Adrien Brody plays a Hungarian architect who survives the Holocaust, moves to Philadelphia, and tries to reunite with his wife (Felicity Jones), while working for a rich industrialist (Guy Pearce) on a grandiose project. Pedro Almodóvar's "**The Room Next Door**" (Dec. 20), adapted from a novel by Sigrid Nunez, stars Julianne Moore and Tilda Swinton as writers and former friends who reconnect when one becomes terminally ill.

Fantasy is a genre for all seasons, as with Marielle Heller's "**Nightbitch**" (Dec. 6), starring Amy Adams as a former artist, now an overwhelmed stay-at-home mom, whose rage is embodied in her occasional transformation into a dog. Robert Eggers's "**Nosferatu**" (Dec. 25), a remake of F. W. Murnau's silent vampire drama, from 1922, stars Bill Skarsgård, Lily-Rose Depp, Emma Corrin, and Willem Dafoe.

Highlights of the new year include two films by Steven Soderbergh —the horror film "**Presence**" (Jan. 24), depicting a haunted house from a ghost's point of view, and the spy thriller "**Black Bag**" (March 14), with Cate Blanchett, Michael Fassbender, and Regé-Jean Page—and one by Bong Joon-ho, the science-fiction comedy "**Mickey 17**" (Jan. 31), starring Robert Pattinson as a clone in outer space who meets his mental double.—*Richard Brody*

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [On befriending kids](#)
 - [Saoirse Ronan schools Paul Mescal](#)
 - [Remember Microsoft Paint?](#)
-

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/winter-culture-preview-2024-5>

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

The Talk of the Town

- **[Standing Up to Trump](#)**

By David Remnick | Jeff Bezos endorsed a Trump-era slogan—"Democracy Dies in Darkness"—for his newspaper, the Washington Post. Why wouldn't he let it endorse a candidate?

- **[Will Kamala Harris Win the Kamala Harris Vote?](#)**

By Dan Greene | The handful of Kamala Harrises who aren't the Vice-President review the perks (wayward donors) and the perils (threatening phone calls) of their name.

- **[A Farewell Tour for the Outdoor Dining Shed](#)**

By Naomi Zeveloff | As the free-for-all architectural symbols of pandemic-era New York are torn down by city decree, a photographic chronicler of the sidewalk structures says goodbye.

- **[Willie Nelson's Latest Is a Cannabis Cookbook](#)**

By Adam Iscoe | The ninety-one-year-old singer might outsmoke Snoop Dogg, but for lunch he'll stick to bacon-and-tomato sandwiches.

- **[When Andrew Carnegie Was a Cotton Spinner: Inside the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen](#)**

By David Owen | You won't find any taxidermied animal heads, like those at the Harvard Club, across the street, but there are hundreds of very cool locks and safes.

[Comment](#)

Standing Up to Trump

Jeff Bezos endorsed a Trump-era slogan—“Democracy Dies in Darkness”—for his newspaper, the *Washington Post*. Why wouldn’t he let it endorse a candidate?

By [David Remnick](#)

October 30, 2024



Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux

In May, at a prison colony in the Siberian city of Omsk, a lawyer paid his weekly visit to his client, the Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza. They sat together in a small room, separated by a pane of glass. Kara-Murza, who had been poisoned in 2015 and 2017, presumably by Vladimir Putin’s secret police, was serving the second year of a twenty-five-year sentence for his public opposition to the invasion of Ukraine.

The lawyer had news to deliver: Kara-Murza had been awarded a Pulitzer Prize for columns he had written for the *Washington Post*. The news, Kara-Murza recalled, “sounded like something from a different planet, from some kind of a parallel reality.” He was pleased, of course, though he assumed that he would never collect

the prize in person. Like [Alexei Navalny](#), like so many political prisoners before him, he believed that he would die in his cell.

Yet the unimaginable happened. On August 1st, Kara-Murza was part of a prisoner exchange, and in late October he stepped onto a stage at Columbia University’s Low Library, to receive his Pulitzer. He gave a brief speech to an audience that included the other winners—among them the *Post*’s David Hoffman, who had won for his reported editorials on the technologies that authoritarian regimes deploy to suppress dissent. The occasion, Kara-Murza admitted, was “surreal.”

For the staff and the readers of the *Post*, the next day was equally surreal: the paper’s publisher and C.E.O., William Lewis, announced that its planned endorsement of Kamala Harris would not run. All manner of explanation was offered—respect for the reader, a return to the editorial page’s more neutral roots—but [these contortions](#) convinced no one. Most concluded that what had happened was that the paper’s owner, Jeff Bezos, who has plenty of business with the federal government, and with the election approaching, dared not offend Donald Trump. This was the same Bezos who had endorsed a Trump-era slogan for the paper—“Democracy Dies in Darkness”—and supported a great deal of extraordinary reporting. Now, it seemed, Bezos was suffering from degeneration of the spine. Columnists expressed their embarrassment and anger. Three editorial-board members, including Hoffman, resigned. Within a few days, according to NPR, two hundred thousand readers had cancelled their subscriptions.

What was the meaning of this sorry episode? Or, for that matter, of the similarly last-minute decision of Patrick Soon-Shiong, the owner of the Los Angeles *Times*, to kill a Harris endorsement that his editorial-page editors had drafted? (Cue the resignations. Cue the cancelled subscriptions.)

Every editor who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that endorsements are of modest influence at best. The editors of this magazine, when it [recently published a lengthy essay](#) describing (for the thousandth time) the authoritarian prospects of a second Trump Presidency, and endorsing Kamala Harris, had no illusions. Editors may be as prone to sanctimony as they are to the common cold, but there was never any thought that such an endorsement would suddenly tip the balance in the battleground states, much less win majorities in the Deep South or the Great Plains. The point was that we, like other publications, attempted to make a cogent case, and had the editorial freedom to do so.

Perhaps experience ought to tell us that it is ridiculous to clutch our pearls every time a person of immense political power or financial means acts in his own selfish interest. Bezos is hardly alone.

Senator Mitch McConnell, who denounced Trump in the immediate aftermath of January 6th and, in private, has called him “stupid” and a “despicable human being,” is endorsing him. The billionaire Nelson Peltz has referred to Trump as a “terrible human being,” and yet is helping to bankroll him. Is there anything still to know about Donald Trump? Deeply conservative and reticent figures who have long working experience with Trump—such as his former chief of staff John Kelly and the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley—have gone on the record to declare him a fascist, a peril to national security, and yet they cannot seem to dissuade Elon Musk, Stephen Schwarzman, Paul Singer, Timothy Mellon, and a line of other plutocrats from backing him. Éric Vuillard’s “[The Order of the Day](#)” opens with a lightly fictionalized scene of two dozen German industrialists and financiers summoned, in 1933, to meet Hermann Göring, who demands their fealty. If the Nazi Party wins the election, Göring tells them, “These would be the last elections for ten years—even, he added with a laugh, for a hundred years.” Where have we heard similar “jokes”?

No small part of Trump's authoritarian campaign is his insistence on dominance. And, though his aides and supporters are dismissive of comparisons to previous embodiments of fascism, the elements are all there: the identification of "vermin" and "the enemy within"; the threat to deploy the military against dissenters; the erasure of truth, the "big lie." [The *maga* rally](#) at Madison Square Garden last Sunday did not feature starched gray uniforms, swastikas, or disciplined salutes. Lee Greenwood is no Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. But the rhetoric was rife with scapegoating, racism, and lies.

In Russia, Putin has not replicated the Stalinism of the nineteen-thirties so much as he has modernized it. He has not gone to the trouble or the expense of re-creating the totalism of the old Gulag system. Instead, he carefully selects his victims—an opposition journalist here, a liberal politician there—and makes sure that their destruction is clearly understood by the Russian people. Similarly, the authoritarianism that Trump intends to establish will be of its moment. There will be no Lefortovo, no Treblinka. But mass deportations? That is a campaign promise, Trump told the crowd at the Garden, to be carried out "on Day One."

The literature of anti-authoritarianism—Czeslaw Milosz's "[The Captive Mind](#)"; Václav Havel's essays and letters to his wife, Olga; Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs; Frederick Douglass's autobiographies—are written by souls larger and vastly more heroic than common mortals. Yet they describe the ways that human-scale people, all of us, can refuse complicity, and act in the face of repression and outrage, if that is what public life comes to. The reporters and the editors at the *Post* who have resigned or spoken out against something as seemingly trivial as a spiked editorial may not be risking their lives or their immediate material comfort, but they are writing an endorsement that is worth signing on to: In order to stand up, one must have a backbone. ♦



David Remnick has been the editor of *The New Yorker* since 1998 and a staff writer since 1992. He is the author of seven books; the most recent is “*Holding the Note*,” a collection of his profiles of musicians.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/standing-up-to-trump>

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

[Name Game](#)

Will Kamala Harris Win the Kamala Harris Vote?

The handful of Kamala Harrises who aren't the Vice-President review the perks (wayward donors) and the perils (threatening phone calls) of their name.

By [Dan Greene](#)

November 4, 2024

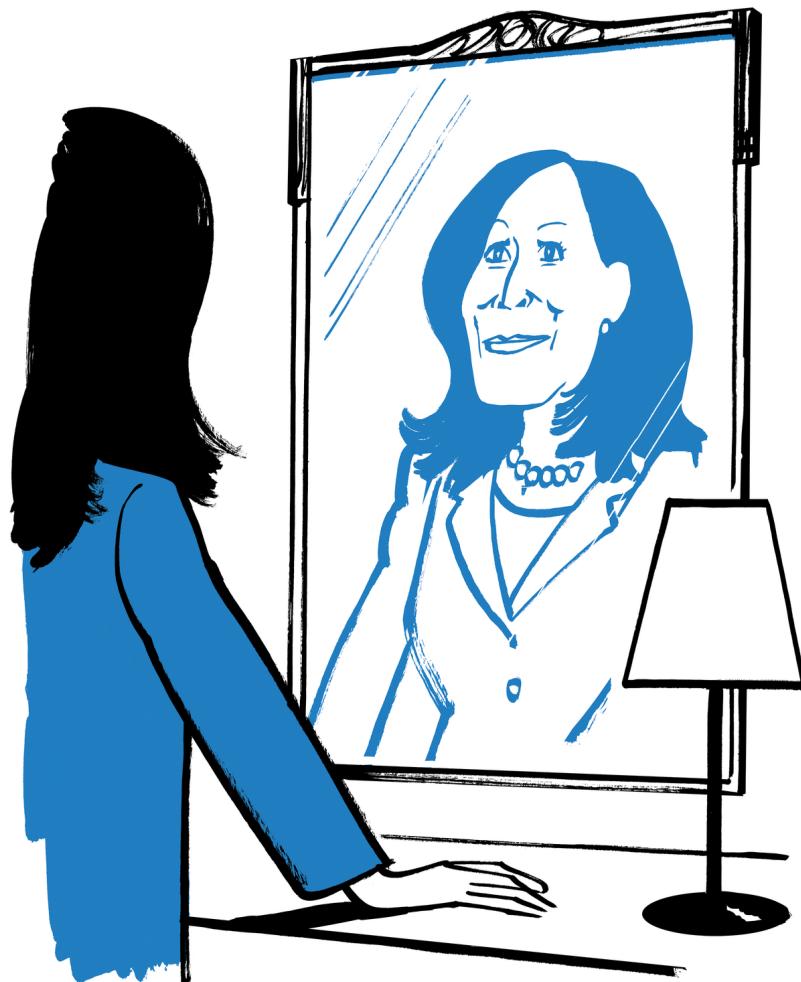


Illustration by João Fazenda

Residents of New Hampshire, where Presidential hopefuls often court diners at greasy spoons, have come to expect high-level politico drop-ins. Not long ago, a doctor's office in Portsmouth prepared itself for a visit from the Vice-President. A half-dozen staffers stood at attention in the waiting room, ready for duties both Hippocratic and patriotic. A white woman with blond hair who was several months pregnant entered and checked in with the receptionist: she, Kamala Harris, was there for her scheduled appointment. The letdown was palpable. The patient rolled her eyes. "I was, like, 'Why would the Vice-President go to a doctor in *Portsmouth*?' " Harris, a thirty-two-year-old resident of nearby Seabrook, said recently. Generally, she goes by Kamii.

Some Presidents have plenty of name duplicates. There are more than a hundred George Bushes in New York alone; IMDb has listings for almost a hundred James, Jimmy, or Jim Carters. A few even achieve a prominence of their own. In the early sixties, the Washington Senators had a third baseman named John Kennedy, who also shared a birthday with the then President. The Virginia oncologist Donald L. Trump has inspired a rare bit of humility from the forty-fifth President, who once said that the doctor is "probably more important than Donald J. Trump, which is me."

If measuring Presidential-name popularity on a scale of Barack Obama to Andrew Johnson, Kamala Harris would fall somewhere around Martin Van Buren: others exist, but they're rare. Public-records searches suggest that you could count them on your fingers. Some, like their political namesake, seem to be reticent with the press. Others might reply to an inquiring text with "I am not the vice president." Their name is one part common (Harris is the twenty-fifth most popular surname in the U.S.), one part less so (Kamala is five thousand one hundred and thirtieth among given names, according to MyNameStats.com). The forty-nine-year-old Kamala Harris of San Bernardino, California, made it four decades without encountering anyone with even her first name, let alone her first and last. Recently, she, too, visited a new doctor and was met

with disbelief. “I showed my driver’s license,” she said. She was named Kamala, in the seventies, after a similar-sounding form of funk dancing that her father liked. This past summer, people would jokingly ask who she was going to pick as her running mate.

“It gets annoying quick,” Kamii said. She has become accustomed to the routine when she presents I.D. at her local dispensary: “It’s, like, a whole five-minute thing of ‘That’s so crazy, what are the odds?’ You have to just be polite and entertain it, you know?”

Growing up was worse. Kids twisted her first name into vulgarities.

The Vice-President, as her grandnieces memorably demonstrated at the D.N.C., pronounces her first name like “comma-la,” with emphasis on the first syllable: KAH-muh-luh. Trump and his partisans have continually deployed it as “Kuh-MAH-la.” Perhaps they just can’t shake the preferred pronunciations of Kamala Khan, a Marvel superheroine who débuted in 2013, and Kamala the Ugandan Giant, a late pro wrestler who occasionally took on Trump’s pal Hulk Hogan. (That Kamala’s real name: James Harris.) More likely, it’s a disrespectful dig, with a subtext of othering. “I don’t think that’s right,” the San Bernardino Kamala Harris said, of such willful mispronunciations. But, if you called *her* KAH-muh-luh, that wouldn’t be quite right, either: she pronounces it like Pamela. So does Kamii in New Hampshire.

Kamala Plaisted, of Weston, Connecticut, does, too. She’s part of another select club: the former Kamala Harrises. Like Kamala DeLuz, of Sacramento (who goes by Denise, her middle name), Plaisted dropped Harris, her maiden name, when she got married, twenty years ago. Plaisted, who is of mixed European stock, was named in honor of the Indian-born actress Kamala Devi, whose husband, Chuck Connors, Plaisted’s mother adored. (Devi is also the Vice-President’s middle name.) She is pretty sure that she was once confused with the Veep, in the mid-nineties, when she gave her name to a clerk at Saks Fifth Avenue, who then called up an account with a San Francisco address. “The lovely girl was, like,

‘Oh, my gosh, there’s two of you!’ ” Plaisted recalled. Her name change has failed to insulate her from being bothered by impassioned non-constituents on the phone. “Some have been threatening,” she said. “And a couple have been, like, ‘Oh, please, you’re the only one that can help us! I know who you are!’ And I’m, like, ‘I’m not.’ ”

Mixups can have their benefits. Every once in a while, the New Hampshire Kamala Harris reported, she receives an unsolicited PayPal deposit from a mistaken would-be donor. It’s typically five or ten bucks, which has been a help to her as a single mother of three. “That side of it has been pretty cool,” she said. She doesn’t correct them. ♦

Dan Greene is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/will-kamala-harris-win-the-kamala-harris-vote>

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

[Streetscape](#)

A Farewell Tour for the Outdoor Dining Shed

As the free-for-all architectural symbols of pandemic-era New York are torn down by city decree, a photographic chronicler of the sidewalk structures says goodbye.

By [Naomi Zeveloff](#)

November 4, 2024

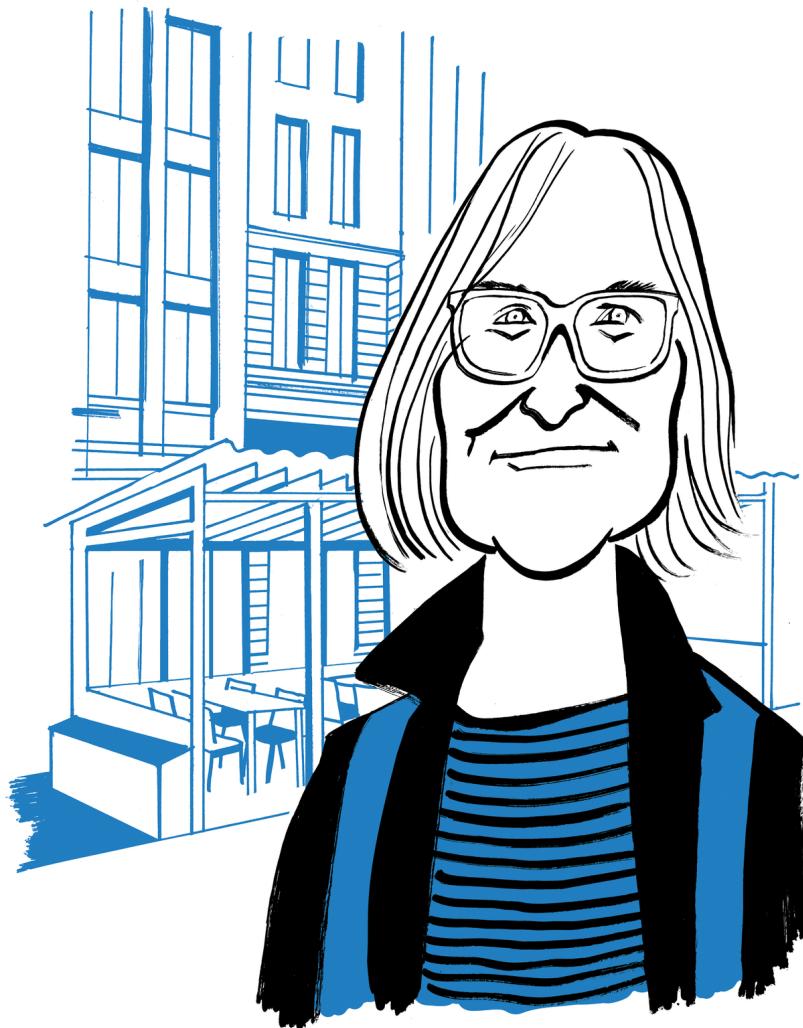


Illustration by João Fazenda

Last year, when New York City was devising new rules for outdoor dining structures, a designer in the city-planning department e-mailed an art director named John Tymkiw. Since 2020, Tymkiw has been photographing what he describes as the city’s “D.I.Y., free-for-all folk architecture,” which sprang up during *COVID* lockdowns, as part of a series on sidewalk sheds called “How We Ate.” The city designer was a fan; Tymkiw offered suggestions. “My one pet peeve was the floors—if you look at them, all of them are terrible, all of them are, like, rotting,” he recalled. “I said just allow people to have no floors.”

The other day, Tymkiw was in the East Village for a farewell tour of sorts. Restaurants are dismantling their sheds in what he calls a “big purge.” By the end of this month, the city will require that its streets be empty of these defining symbols of the pandemic. When restaurants are allowed to resurrect them, in April, they’ll be more uniform in style, with standardized barriers and ceiling covers. The city has offered four prototypes; floors, ultimately, are not mandatory.

Tymkiw, who lives in Stuyvesant Town and has graying chin-length hair and glasses with clear frames, is pro-purge. “They needed some excuse to clear all of these away and start over again,” he said. For four years, he has crisscrossed town on a Citi Bike to photograph more than a thousand roadway cafés. Many are featured on his Instagram page and in self-published books. The sixth and final volume has just been released.

Tymkiw didn’t set out to document every last shed. He focussed on designs that piqued his interest, like the faux Winnebago outside Joey Roses sandwich shop, on the Lower East Side, or the lighthouse-esque roof at Sami’s Kabab House, in Long Island City. He combed social-media posts, searched Google Street View, and pounded the streets to find his subjects. People sent him tips. His research led him to every borough except Staten Island.

The East Village never failed to deliver. It was where he took several snowy photos during what he calls his “winter period.” “I was sticking the camera in my armpit to warm it up so the battery would come back, and I’m, like, ‘Is this even worth it?’ ” he said. Up the street was another one of his subjects, Miss Lily’s, a Caribbean restaurant. He had photographed it in 2020, when there were just a few simple barriers outside, and again a year later, after it débuted a jaunty red-white-and-blue shed.

He made for the shed, and paused to admire its transparent corrugated roof. “When you look toward the sun, sometimes the light is really nice. You get this special glow,” he said. Near the base of one door was a small metal screen. “So the rats don’t get in,” he said. “But rats, they always get in.”

Tymkiw liked to shoot in the morning, before customers arrived. He started with an iPhone 7, but the camera had a short focal length, and he had to dodge traffic to fit longer sheds in the frame. “I was so happy to find the iPhone 13 had a wide-angle lens,” he said. “I didn’t have to dare death to get a picture.”



“Golly! If my folks back in Nebraska could see me now!”

Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

A couple of stops later, at Nowon, a Korean American gastropub on East Sixth, Tymkiw peered through the window of a locked wooden shed. Inside were heat lamps, a signboard, and fake plants. “This looks like it was cobbled together with stuff from Home Depot,” he said.

Over on Avenue B, Horus Cafe had one of the most mystifying outdoor dining structures Tymkiw had encountered: an elevated wood platform with stairs and a railing, but no roof. “It’s like a parade float—it’s a stage,” he said. “If there is a block party and you have a local band playing, or an m.c., they would be up here. But why would they do that?”

Tymkiw had photographed many other unusual designs: a set of stairs meant to evoke a brownstone stoop, at Foreigner NYC; an elaborate green Victorian-style wrought-iron shelter, at Oscar Wilde; a gossamer overhead covering made of knitted white shapes, at NeueHouse. “The things I’ve documented were human creativity and spirit manifested in physical constructions,” he said. Not manifested: durability.

On East Seventh Street, at the shed in front of C&B (notable for once having a wood stove), a woman wearing a “Harris for President” hat chatted with Tymkiw. Her name was Denise Kuriger, and she wanted to know how he felt about the structures.

“They are an experiment that the city didn’t realize was really an experiment,” he said. “My hope is that we have a new version of dining in New York City that becomes very New Yorky—that’s not like Paris, that’s not like Barcelona.” ♦

Later, over a drip coffee at Cafe Mogador, Tymkiw added, “The only thing I’d be disappointed in is if they all go away in every form and we go back to just parking everywhere.” ♦

[Naomi Zeveloff](#) has reported from the Middle East for outlets including NPR and The Atlantic. She is based in Brooklyn.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/a-farewell-tour-for-the-outdoor-dining-shed>

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

[Austin Postcard](#)

Willie Nelson's Latest Is a Cannabis Cookbook

The ninety-one-year-old singer might outsmoke Snoop Dogg, but for lunch he'll stick to bacon-and-tomato sandwiches.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

November 4, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Willie Nelson, the ninety-one-year-old singer-songwriter, who has brought comfort and heartbreak and joy to his fans with a hundred

and fifty-three albums, thirteen books, and more than a couple of arrests for marijuana possession, will soon publish his first-ever cookbook. The concoctions in “Willie and Annie Nelson’s Cannabis Cookbook: Mouthwatering Recipes and the High-Flying Stories Behind Them” include Shirred Eggs with Asparagus & Fennel (17.6 milligrams of THC per serving), Vegan Cannabis Butter (212 milligrams of THC per tablespoon), and Buttermilk Fried Chicken (no THC). The stories veer from recollections of a Christmas he spent in the Alps with Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson to an account of a harsh winter, in Tennessee, when he bought seventeen weaner pigs at a quarter a pound, then sold them at a loss.

“I learned one thing—I’m not a hog raiser,” Nelson recalled the other day at Luck, his dusty ranch in the Texas Hill Country. He was at his “world headquarters,” a building used mostly for playing poker, watching MSNBC, drinking, and getting high. The inside was decorated with cardboard cutouts of Gene Autry and John Wayne (“My heroes!”), a “Willie for President” license plate, and some signed Snoop Dogg memorabilia. Nelson glanced over at a Doggy Dogg poster and said, “I smoked him under the table one night!” (Snoop confirmed: “Willie Nelson is the only person who has ever outsmoked Snoop Dogg!”)

On the front porch, Nelson sat with his wife, Annie D’Angelo. She and the chef Andrea Drummer had written the cookbook’s recipes, which, these days, the singer doesn’t much fancy. “He only eats certain foods,” D’Angelo said.

Nelson, who wore old cowboy boots, black jeans, and a black puffer coat in the eighty-degree heat, said, “I used to eat chicken-fried steaks and enchiladas and all that good stuff. Now I have to watch it.” His current diet features toast, protein shakes, gluten-free waffles with syrup, chicken soup, and bacon-and-tomato sandwiches.

But he does still get high. “I had to lay off smoking for a while. I’m giving my lungs a rest,” he said. “I started out smoking cedar bark, and then cornstalks, and then switched up to cigarettes—Chesterfields and Camels.” He went on, “One day, I emptied out my Chesterfields box and rolled up twenty fat joints and stuck ’em in the box, and anytime I wanted a cigarette I’d smoke a joint. And I quit smoking that way.” He laughed. “Now I do edibles.”

“I’m the one who makes them,” D’Angelo said. Nelson’s daily dose of THC is about sixty milligrams—enough to turn a regular person into stardust.

“I think it saved my life,” Nelson said, of cannabis. “And probably other people’s lives.” He paused. “I drank a lot—”

“He’s not a good drinker,” D’Angelo, who wore a “*humans against ted cruz*” T-shirt, chimed in. “He breaks the family rule when he drinks. The family rule is: Don’t be an asshole, don’t be an asshole, don’t be a *goddam* asshole.”

“I quit doing a lot of the shit that was killing me—smoking and drinking,” Nelson said. “And now I’m feeling good and looking forward to the show, and not dreading it.”

“Once he’s up there, it’s wild to see,” D’Angelo said.

“That’s what keeps me going, doing an hour show,” he said. “Not only is it good exercise but it’s good mentally, physically, everything.”

The previous night, he had performed the title track of his latest album for an audience at a taping for the fiftieth season of the public-television show “Austin City Limits.” He’d crooned, “I’m the last leaf on the tree / The autumn took the rest / But it won’t take me.” Several large men in the crowd wept. “I’ll be here

through eternity / If you wanna know how long / If they cut down
this tree / I'll show up in a song.”

On the porch, Nelson said, “I believe in reincarnation. It’s the only thing that makes sense to me. But I don’t worry about it. We’re all gonna die, and there’s no use rushing it.” He went on, “I’ve lost a lot of friends. Kris, a few days ago—Kris Kristofferson. And Waylon Jennings and Merle Haggard and Johnny Cash.” He looked out at a grove of cedars and live oaks. “*I am* one of the last ones. I don’t know why I’m still here, but here we are. Last man standing.”

After a brief rainstorm, D’Angelo began to make some chicken soup for lunch. “Or I can make a bacon-and-tomato sandwich, too, if you’d rather,” she said to her husband.

“Soup’s good,” he said. ♦

Adam Iscoe is a writer based in New York City.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/willie-nelsons-latest-is-a-cannabis-cookbook>

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

[Lockbox Dept.](#)

When Andrew Carnegie Was a Cotton Spinner: Inside the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen

You won't find any taxidermied animal heads, like those at the Harvard Club, across the street, but there are hundreds of very cool locks and safes.

By [David Owen](#)

November 4, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

The Manhattan organization with the coolest name, the General Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen of the City of New York, also has the coolest motto, which it shares with the Worshipful Company of Blacksmiths: “By hammer and hand all arts do stand.” The society was founded, in 1785, by twenty-two local craftsmen, whose trades included tanning, silversmithing, ship-joining, stonecutting, coach-making, and chandlery. Since 1899, its headquarters have been at 20 West Forty-fourth Street, in a building that had previously been a school for boys. Not long ago, Victoria Dengel, the executive director, pointed to a large leaded-glass arched window above the entrance and said, “We restored the building’s façade a few years ago, and the Rambusch Decorating Company, which was founded in 1898, took that window completely apart and re-leaded it.” The society’s library is the city’s second oldest. Its stacks rise four stories alongside a cavernous central atrium, and it’s an ideal resource for anyone who has questions about concrete-making, corrosion prevention, tunnel digging, or hundreds of other subjects, as well as for anyone who needs a break from the stuffed animal heads on the walls of the Harvard Club, across the street.

Dengel started at the society as a volunteer, and, ten years ago, became the boss. “I’ve been coming here since I was eleven years old,” she said. “My dad was a Local 14 operating engineer. He was the president in 1982, and he definitely impressed upon us how important the society’s work was.” It conducts a landmark- and labor-related lecture series, which began as a nineteenth-century equivalent to *TED* talks, and it holds free classes for people who work in building trades. It also rents office space to a number of compatible organizations, among them the Horological Society of New York, the Institute of Classical Architecture & Art, and the Society of Mayflower Descendants.

“These are our presidents since the time of photography,” Dengel said, referring to a series of portraits. “On this wall, they’re all deceased.” Her office looks roughly as it must have in the eighteen-

nineties. Its furnishings include sternum-height wooden wainscoting and a Seth Thomas pendulum calendar clock, patented in 1876, which was designed to keep track of the month, date, and day of the week, in addition to the time. “This is a bust of Brother Andrew Carnegie, who joined in 1903,” she said. When Carnegie signed the membership register, he listed his trade not as “millionaire philanthropist” but as “cotton spinner,” his first job after immigrating to the United States, in 1848, when he was twelve. An open hallway outside Dengel’s office overlooks the library’s main floor and is flanked by an ornate brass railing. “I love this view, and I just appreciate it every day,” she said. If her office were your office, you would never work from home.

Among the society’s many treasures is the John M. Mossman Lock Collection, which includes more than three hundred and fifty locks, keys, and safes, most of them from between 1850 and 1912, a robust period for bank robbing. Mossman was born in 1846. His parents were Scottish immigrants, as Carnegie’s were, and, like Carnegie, he went to work at twelve, in his father’s safe-and-lock business on West Broadway. His specialties eventually included time locks, whose intricate mechanical workings prevented tellers from opening safes outside of banking hours, even if they knew the combination and had a gun at their head. Mossman became one of his trade’s most avid historians, and, in 1903, he donated his collection to the society. “People come from all over the world to see it,” Dengel said.

Ryan Krakowsky recently became the curator in charge of the lock collection. He studied sculpture at the Rhode Island School of Design in the nineties, and, after graduation, talked his way into a job as a locksmith’s apprentice in Providence. For the past five years, he has been one of eleven full-time locksmiths at Harvard University, which owns five hundred or so lockable structures in and around Cambridge. He visits the General Society when he can, and recently straightened out some mislabelled locks in several of its display cases.

“I’m also a collector,” he said. “I have a basement full of stuff, and I have four or five safes right now in my dining room.” He’s especially interested in the work of George Damon, who was based in Boston in the late eighteen-hundreds and specialized in bank vaults and safes. Damon’s customers included the Boston Safe Deposit Company, the Bay State Trust Company, the Old Colony Trust Company, and the United States Treasury. “His attention to detail and his craftsmanship were amazing, even in parts you couldn’t see,” Krakowsky said. “His vault doors are basically works of art.” Modern locks are works of art, too, at least technologically—right?

“No, they’re really not,” Krakowsky said. “Unfortunately, they’re not.” ♦



David Owen has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1991. He is the author of “[Volume Control: Hearing in a Deafening World](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/when-andrew-carnegie-was-a-cotton-spinner-inside-the-general-society-of-mechanics-and-tradesmen>

Reporting & Essays

- **[The Tucker Carlson Road Show](#)**

By Andrew Marantz | After his Fox show was cancelled, Carlson spent a year in the wilderness, honing his vision of what the future of Trumpism might look like. This fall, he took his act on tour.

- **[How Syria Became the Middle East's Drug Dealer](#)**

By Ed Caesar | Bashar al-Assad has propped up his regime by exploiting the Middle East's love of an amphetamine called captagon.

- **[The Americans Prepping for a Second Civil War](#)**

By Charles Bethea | Many now believe that the U.S. could descend into political violence. Some are joining survivalist communities, canning food—and buying guns.

- **[The Shipwreck Detective](#)**

By Sam Knight | Nigel Pickford has spent a lifetime searching for sunken treasure—without leaving dry land.

[The Political Scene](#)

The Tucker Carlson Road Show

After his Fox show was cancelled, Carlson spent a year in the wilderness, honing his vision of what the future of Trumpism might look like. This fall, he took his act on tour.

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

November 1, 2024



“Put your earphones on to white noise, and just look around,” Tucker Carlson has said. “Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys?”

Photographs by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker

Sometimes, when Tucker Carlson is in the shower, he takes a quiet moment to reflect on whether his haters may be right about him. I know this not firsthand but because he recently mentioned it to a few thousand fans in Rosenberg, Texas. He said, “I have been through this process for so many years, where they call you something”—in his case, a very incomplete list would include “venomous demagogue,” “crypto-Nazi blowhard,” “anti-science ignoramus,” and “a dick”—“and I actually do try to take stock. Like, am I that person?”

These reveries always lead him to the same conclusion: he’s clean. It is the haters who are wrong. That night, in Rosenberg, the epithet

he lingered on was “extremist.” He drew out the syllables in a derisive growl, followed by his foppish hyena bark of a laugh—a familiar sequence to anyone who has watched Tucker Carlson heap scorn on his enemies, which is to say, anyone who has [watched Tucker Carlson](#). “Whatever else I am, I’m the opposite of an extremist,” he continued. “My parents got divorced. I’m totally opposed to change.” He claims that his vision for the country’s future is actually a vision of the country’s past, one that strikes him as modest, even obvious: “I liked America in 1985.”

This was the ninth stop on the Tucker Carlson Live Tour—sixteen arenas, this fall, from Anaheim, California, to Sunrise, Florida, but mostly in the heartland. At each stop, before bringing out his special guest (Kid Rock in Grand Rapids; Donald Trump, Jr., in Jacksonville), Carlson delivered a semi-improvised monologue, usually starting with some geo-targeted pandering. In Michigan, he praised the local muskie fishing before slamming the state’s “brain-dead robot” of a governor. In Pennsylvania, he extolled the beauty of the Conestoga River before describing that state’s governor as “evil, actually.” In Texas, he said, “There’s something about being in a room full of people you agree with that is so great. It’s like a spa treatment.”

He claims to hold his haters beneath contempt, but he does bring them up a lot. A forthcoming biography of Carlson will be named for one of the highest compliments he pays: [“Hated by All the Right People.”](#) Carlson began one of his own books with a personal note to the C.E.O. of Simon & Schuster, “whose descent from open-minded book editor to cartoonish corporate censor mirrors the decline of America itself.” (To be clear, Carlson’s book was not censored; it was published by Simon & Schuster.) When he still had a show on Fox News—for a time, the most popular program in the history of cable news, and the one that set the agenda on the American right throughout the Trump Administration—the *Times* ran a [front-page story](#) about how he had “adopted the rhetorical tropes and exotic fixations of white nationalists.” Holding up the

paper and laughing, he posed for a photo, which he posted on Twitter. He doesn't ignore his enemies; he seems to define himself by them. The globalists in Davos, the defense contractors in Bethesda, the private-equity wives in Santa Monica: whatever else he is, at least he's not one of *them*.

On the tour, each night's monologue included at least one off-putting non sequitur ("I can identify every member of my family by smell, and I'm proud of it"), and at least one contrarian riff on a topic that would have appeared on no one's current-events bingo card (Antifa pretends to be radical but is actually "the Praetorian Guard for the ruling class"; sending mosquito nets to Africa is overrated, actually). He often punctuated his claims with "actually," or "obviously" (as in "They're lying to you—obviously"). Then he would segue back to his general thesis: You're not crazy; *they're* crazy. "Who is actually *for* inflation, or no borders, or castrating your kids and having no grandchildren?" he said in Texas, comparing the gaslighting of right-wingers to a Soviet PsyOp. "Like, nine rich ladies in L.A. are for that. Everybody else hates it."

In the spring of 2023, Carlson was abruptly fired from Fox News, for reasons that remain somewhat opaque. He took refuge on Twitter, whose new owner, Elon Musk, he had praised for "risking it all to save free speech." (Carlson, a [coastal-élite prep schooler](#) turned rugged prepper, claims to revile the billionaire class, but in practice he's more discriminating.) His next show, if you could call it a show, was named "Tucker on Twitter," then "Tucker on X." He posted intermittently. In straight-to-camera monologues, he used the editorial "we" to decry vaccine mandates or the war in Ukraine —like the A-block of his Fox show, but without the graphics (or the ratings). He broadcast from his barn in rural Maine, sitting at a desk with a hatchet and an alpenstock behind him, or at a dining-room table beneath a chandelier made of antlers. He did interviews, too; these were released as a podcast, in which he delivered even his ad reads in a paranoid aggro style ("Verizon, A.T. & T., and T-

Mobile want you to believe that you have to have something called ‘unlimited data’ . . . *whatever that is*”). Without Donald Trump watching every night, he had less immediate political influence but more freedom to think out loud.

In private, many Republicans will admit that, although Trump may be useful as a political battering ram, he’s too indolent and self-serving to get much done. Because he has instincts, not ideas—and because his Kitchen Cabinet has included both nationalists like Carlson and free-market neoconservatives like Rupert Murdoch—Trump can be spun around by whichever adviser gets to him last. For years, Carlson and others [pined for a nationalist movement](#) unconstrained by one man’s personal limitations, and with a more unified ethos. A wonky way to put this: What might a post-neoliberal Republican coalition look like? A plainer way: What is Trumpism after Trump?

On social media, Carlson screen-tested some options. Maybe the coalition could infuse some of Trump’s old instincts (the nativism, the unending crusade against a pervasive enemy) with a new sense of purpose (more working-class cred, a turn toward economic populism). And, to prepare for Trump’s retirement, the movement would need a standard-bearer-in-waiting. For a moment, it seemed like this might be the entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, or Governor Ron DeSantis—or Carlson himself. But the heir apparent has turned out to be Senator J. D. Vance, a friend and protégé of Carlson’s since before he ran for public office.

The Tucker Carlson Live Tour made a stop in Hershey, Pennsylvania, and Vance was the special guest. By then, of course, he was the Republican candidate for Vice-President—a dark-horse pick championed by a small circle, Carlson prominent among them. “I know J. D. Vance very well, and I know that he’s, like, the most authentic person in politics,” Carlson said. To prove it, he brandished an incandescent-green object—a plastic bottle of Diet Mountain Dew. “They don’t have this at the Aspen Institute, trust

me,” he said. There is not much that Carlson won’t do for an audience’s approval, but he put the bottle down unopened. “I’m not gonna try that, sorry,” he said. “I’m not a man of the people.” Instead, he picked up a smaller, darker glass bottle of Perrier.

“The realignment is now very obvious,” Carlson said, when he and Vance were seated onstage. As he did most nights, he brought up the fact that Dick Cheney—or “Darth Vader”—had recently endorsed Kamala Harris, and Vance replied, “The leadership of this country has gotten so deranged that they’ve convinced themselves that there’s a great American majority for fighting a ton of wars, importing a ton of illegal aliens, and shipping all the jobs overseas.” If you like those ideas, he continued, “you’re welcome in the party of Kamala Harris and Dick Cheney.” Carlson nodded along and, at one point, added, “Amen.” For now, and for the foreseeable future, this is what Trumpism after Trump looks like. It looks like Vanceism, which owes a heavy debt to Tuckerism.

Like Trump, Carlson appeals to his base by positioning himself as a class traitor—not a man of the people, exactly, but an apostate from the cosmopolitan élite. His stepmother was a Swanson, an heir to the frozen-dinner fortune; his father was an ambassador under Ronald Reagan (and reputedly had ties to the C.I.A.). Carlson has gone bow-tie-less for nearly two decades, but he never stopped looking like “The Official Preppy Handbook” come to life; it can seem a bit rich to hear a populist battle cry from a guy wearing a blazer and a Rolex, but his indignation appears sincere. He spent thirty-five years in Washington, D.C., before decamping to central Maine. Though he was a Beltway fixture, making the rounds at book parties and lunching at the Palm, he always treated his fellow swamp dwellers with palpable disdain. In January, 2016, long before most of his Republican neighbors, Carlson came out as gleefully anti-anti-Trump, in a Politico article titled “Donald Trump Is Shocking, Vulgar and Right.” “Like most effective populists, he’s a whistleblower,” Carlson wrote. “Anyone can peer through

the window in envy. It takes a real man to throw furniture through it from the inside.”

Both men take obvious pleasure in desecrating Republican pieties. This is less remarkable in the case of Trump, who enjoys desecrating everything, than in the case of Carlson, who was once such a dyed-in-the-wool movement conservative that he has both a brother and a son named Buckley. Both Carlson and Trump were for the Iraq War before they were against it; only Carlson freely admits this, and often raises it as an example of his fallibility.



“I just need you to find this e-mail from two or five years ago, but I can’t remember the subject line or address or if I actually received it.”

Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

When he was at Fox News, his prime-time colleagues Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham were reliable partisan warriors. In some respects, the Republican Party was a close enough proxy for Carlson’s personal world view: abortion is murder; Oberlin sophomores are annoying; we should be more libertarian on guns, but not on sex or drugs or policing. In other ways, it was a more combustible fit, because Carlson seemed to have an ideological project of his own. He argued that both parties had strayed radically off course—that, for decades, professional Washington had been bewitched by economic neoliberalism (ruinous trade deals, laissez-faire corporate regulations) and neoconservatism (“invade the

world, invite the world”), both of which struck him as not only misguided but practically treasonous.

One night in 2019, he started his Fox show by quoting extensively from a document called “A Plan for Economic Patriotism,” which called for re-shoring American jobs, propping up domestic manufacturing, and other protectionist measures that flew in the face of free-market orthodoxy. Gradually, he built to his big reveal: “The words you just heard are from—and brace yourself here—Senator Elizabeth Warren.” Carlson wasn’t endorsing Warren for President—she was still a “race-hustling, gun-grabbing abortion extremist,” after all. But at least she was willing to “protect American industries”—as opposed to most Republican lawmakers, who were too afraid to “violate some principle of Austrian economics” or “make the Koch brothers mad.” Despite the cliché that the average voter is socially liberal but fiscally conservative, Carlson insisted that an untapped majority was the opposite —“nationalist on economics, fairly traditional on the social issues.”

One of the first major attempts to map out a Trumpism after Trump was the 2019 National Conservatism Conference, in Washington. Carlson was a keynote speaker. “I was trained from the youngest age, from a pup, to believe that the threats to liberty came from government,” he said. But now—“I’m bewildered that I’m saying it”—the bigger threat came from multinational corporations. Some of his examples were frivolous. (Apparently, Nabisco had printed various gender pronouns on some special-edition Oreos, which Carlson called “a profound statement against nature.”) But he was on his way to a more significant argument—about why Google may need to be broken up—when he interrupted himself, delighted to see a friend in the audience. “J. D. Vance, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, with a wide smile.

On air, night after night, he repeated a similar admonition: If Republicans won’t become the party of the working class, the other side will. He insinuated that “Trump, at his best,” had the right

instincts, but that he was being thwarted by Mitch McConnell and the rest of the swamp. Soon enough, a handful of Republican figures started to echo him. In 2019, on Carlson’s show, Vance said that “working- and middle-class, blue-collar folks” were “increasingly the base of the Republican Party, but the Republican donor élites are actually not aligned with those folks. . . . Have Republicans done anything for those people, really, in the last fifteen or twenty years?” Carlson ended the segment by telling Vance, “If the Republican Party has a future, it will be organized around the ideas you just laid out—maybe led by you, or someone who thinks like you.”

In 2021, when Carlson started a streaming show on Fox Nation, Vance was one of his first guests. They spoke for an hour, discussing their many ideological affinities, with a rapport that suggested a history of developing those affinities off-air. Carlson teed Vance up with a question about visiting the Aspen Institute, and Vance said that it was there, among the ruling class, that he’d had an epiphany: “The reason they’re not governing effectively is ’cause they actually hate the country they’re meant to govern. . . . A little more malice and evil, as opposed to just incompetence.” Carlson agreed, looking slightly enamored. Trump may be a rich guy who likes McDonald’s, but in Vance—a Yale Law graduate with Appalachian roots—he seemed to see a newly sophisticated kind of whistle-blower.

When it’s framed as a choice between social services at home and unwinnable wars abroad, the logic of America First seems straightforward. And yet it has a way of masking the poisonous America First of Charles Lindbergh and Father Coughlin, or cashing out in empty promises. “Party of the working class” is just a slogan; the details matter, and Carlson and Vance seem more invested in shielding American workers from the ravages of immigration than in, say, protecting their right to join a union. Still, it’s difficult to deny that large swaths of the country have been hollowed out, in part owing to free-market orthodoxy, in the past

few decades, and that resentment over this has become a tectonic political force.

In his final months on Fox News, Carlson interviewed Vance several times. One Friday night, Carlson ended his show by eating a sausage-and-pineapple pizza, then signed off: “We’ll be back on Monday.” That Monday morning, he was fired, apparently with no explanation. (“I’m kind of psyched to be humiliated in public,” he recalled thinking. “I know that I will learn something about myself.”) Dominion Voting Systems had sued Fox News, alleging that its anchors, including Carlson, had falsely accused it of election meddling. Many of Carlson’s text messages had become public in the process, including one in which he called Trump “a demonic force, a destroyer.” In the end, the last straw that led to Carlson’s firing could have been any number of things—a text in which he fantasized about a mob of Trump supporters beating an Antifa protester to death, or one in which he reportedly referred to a female Fox executive as a “cunt”—but Carlson and his allies suggested that the real problem may have been his freethinking brand of nationalism. “Rupert Murdoch is a globalist,” Trump said, a few months after Carlson’s firing, “and I am America First.”

Despite his wariness of T-Mobile’s unlimited-data plans, Carlson agreed to perform at the T-Mobile Center, in Kansas City, a couple of weeks before Nicki Minaj and after Barry Manilow. The stadium has about nineteen thousand seats, and maybe half of them had been filled. The stage set could have been on loan from Oprah: two white armchairs, elaborate bouquets of flowers. The sound system played classic rock at dentist-waiting-room volume: “Ramblin’ Man,” by the Allman Brothers Band; “I’m on Fire,” which Bruce Springsteen released as a single in 1985.

A few fans wore Carlson merch, such as a T-shirt that read “No One Can Cancel Tucker.” (Fact check: probably true, if only because, as Carlson sometimes says, “I don’t even know what I do for a living at this point.”) But most wore Trump shirts:

“Felon/Hillbilly 2024”; “Fight,” with a photo of Trump after getting shot. After I found my seat, there was a word from the tour’s main sponsor, a sleep aid made with “honey and organic herbs,” whose active ingredient turned out to be a generic antihistamine. And then Carlson bounded onto the stage, to the strains of “American Bad Ass,” by Kid Rock, holding a Perrier. He wore a blazer, a gingham shirt, and loafers with no socks; as always, his hair was elegantly rumpled, as if he’d just been awakened from a nap on a friend’s yacht. “This is the best country,” he said. “For anybody who doubts it, from too much time on Instagram—get on the road.”

Whatever else he is, Carlson is a singularly compelling performer. Apart from looks, brains, and moneyed benefactors, there is really only one relevant skill in political mass media: you have to be able to hold an audience’s attention. By this metric, Carlson is better than just about anyone on the planet. Trump, the reigning virtuoso of attention-hacking, seems destined to keep repeating the same leaden anecdotes about shark attacks and long-dead celebrities, but Carlson has an appetite for new information and a flair for verbal dexterity. (He was once, as much as it pains me to admit it, a very good magazine writer.) Like a d.j. who can fill a dance floor without playing any Top Ten hits, he can go for long stretches without mentioning Biden’s senility or Trump’s virility, keeping a crowd in thrall with one obscure digression after another: Regency architecture, transhumanism, Grateful Dead trivia, the Hart-Celler Act. Sean Hannity could never.

In Kansas City, his main riff started with a simple statistic: “People who voted for Joe Biden hold seventy per cent of the wealth in the United States, and the people who voted for Donald Trump hold thirty per cent.” Instead of delivering this as an applause line, he plumbed it for dark ironies, almost in the style of one of his old nemeses, Jon Stewart. “How long do you think we could live in this country without private equity?” Carlson said. “Three days, four days, before people starved to death?” He stayed deadpan, but

the audience warmed to the bit. “And, by the way, I’m from that world, so I know a lot about this,” he said. “Everyone I know” is a “consultant for Bain”—the sort of job that is high status but “totally useless.” Trump voters, by contrast, are “the people who don’t really matter—you know, like farmers, and electricians, and the people who built the house that you live in.”

“Preach it, Tucker!” someone shouted. Carlson smiles when he’s having fun, but when he’s really cooking he looks deadly serious, like Kobe Bryant in unblinking Mamba mode. “The credentialling system that produces the worst people in the world is not an accident,” he continued. “It’s a way that people who have no useful skills at all—who couldn’t change your tire, or find shelter in a rainstorm, or fix your freakin’ toaster—can still have houses on St. Barts, and then at the same time lecture *you* about how you’re nonessential and should go die of a fentanyl O.D.” Near where I was sitting, some people cheered and others sat in rapt silence. One woman had her hands raised and her eyes closed, as if in prayer. The seventy-thirty statistic wasn’t exactly right, but the larger point, about inequality and class immobility, certainly was. Carlson wasn’t offering any specific solutions, but at least he sounded angry at the right people. Of course rural workers, whose real wages and life expectancies keep falling, are not mourning the death of the free-market consensus. It’s not surprising that, if you’re desperate enough, you’ll thrill to someone willing to throw furniture on your behalf.

Carlson’s guest that night was Megyn Kelly, one of his erstwhile Fox News colleagues. She didn’t have much to say about neoliberalism. She mostly played the hits: the Trump indictments are bogus; “gender is bullshit.” She ended by protesting too much about the cultural relevance she and Carlson still enjoyed, even though they’re no longer on TV. “Cable news is dead,” she said. “It was a suicide that was assisted by Donald Trump.”

After Carlson was fired, he spent a year in the wilderness. On X, he posted long, loosely structured interviews with a man who claimed to have had sex with Barack Obama and an expert on fossil fuels in space. None of this was setting any national agenda, but it likely turned a profit. Some weeks, his podcast was among the most popular in the country. For a while, this seemed to be his lot: hawking life insurance and bamboo bedsheets on X and iTunes. For a guy who had already lived nine lives in the fickle media business—self-satisfied pugilist on CNN and MSNBC; stiff-backed “Dancing with the Stars” contestant—this iteration didn’t seem half bad. And all along, amid his shock-jock antics, he maintained a steady ideological drumbeat: You are being replaced.

Carl Sagan said that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. According to Carlson’s Razor, there are no unintended outcomes; that which seems extraordinary is in fact simple, and intentional. Follow your gut. Why is your community falling apart? Because your leaders pledge allegiance to foreign shareholders and cheap labor, not to the American people. Crime, disorder, spiritual decay, [deaths of despair](#): whatever the problem, it’s something that they are doing to you, on purpose, because they hate you. Obviously.



Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

The writer Matt Yglesias argues that, in the past decade, a “[crank realignment](#)” has pushed left-leaning “cranks and know-nothings,” such as [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), out of the Democratic fringes and into the Republican base. On the Tucker Carlson Live Tour, the only two repeat guests were Kennedy and Russell Brand, disaffected progressives who recently became zealous Trump supporters. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene was on the schedule for Greenville, South Carolina, but the event had to be cancelled because of Hurricane Helene. (“Yes they can control the weather,” Greene tweeted.) Another guest was Alex Jones, the [keening fabulist](#) whom Carlson once considered beyond the pale and now treats as a prophet. In Maine, Jones sat in Carlson’s barn for a ninety-minute interview, ranting about 5G and bug protein. Whenever Carlson couldn’t think of anything nice to say, he could always make the negative case. “We have a ruling class in the United States defined by its hatreds,” he said, in his introduction. “But no one is hated more by them than a man called Alex Jones.”

Donald Trump is famously vain, but he doesn’t always hold grudges for long. A few months after Carlson’s insulting texts about him became public, Trump attended a U.F.C. fight at Madison Square Garden, with Carlson in his entourage. When Fox News hosted a Republican primary debate, in 2023, Trump skipped it and gave an interview to “Tucker on X.” By the time he won the nomination and needed a new running mate, having sicked a murderous mob on the previous one, he asked an array of people for advice: Wall Street donors, the staff at Mar-a-Lago, and his ever-evolving brain trust. Some of Trump’s more traditional advisers, including Kellyanne Conway and Sean Hannity, were reportedly for Marco Rubio, the polished senator from Florida. But apparently the nationalists in Trump’s circle, led by Carlson, Elon Musk, and Donald Trump, Jr., convinced him that Rubio was a swamp creature with divided loyalties. In June, according to the *Times*, Carlson told Trump that “if he chose a ‘neocon’ . . . the U.S.

intelligence agencies would have every incentive” to assassinate him.

On the first night of the Republican National Convention, Carlson talked about having spent “the whole day . . . starting at 5 A.M.” engaged in a behind-the-scenes fight against a number of “feline and ruthless” adversaries to get Vance selected, a fight that he’d just learned he’d won. “Sometimes I’m not on God’s side, but I definitely know who’s representing the other side,” he said. “And every single one of those people” was lined up “to knife J. D. Vance.” Later that evening, he named one such person: Lindsey Graham, the Republican senator, who had just hailed Vance’s addition to the ticket. “No one lobbied harder against JD Vance than he did,” Carlson tweeted. (Graham did not respond to requests for comment.) “People like Lindsey Graham are happy to lie right to your face, smiling as they plot your destruction.”

It would be simple enough to dismiss Carlson’s whole act as pure cynicism, and clearly there is some cynicism involved. In his private texts, he referred to conspiracy theories about the 2020 election as “absurd” and “insane”; these days, he makes his own groundless claims about election fraud, and downplays January 6th as a vibrant demonstration attended by “diabetic grandmothers.” Still, cynicism can’t explain everything. On his Fox show, Carlson did fawning interviews with four sitting heads of state, all aspiring proto-authoritarian strongmen: [Nayib Bukele](#), of El Salvador; [Jair Bolsonaro](#), of Brazil; [Viktor Orbán](#), of Hungary; and [Donald Trump](#). This past February, Carlson went to the Kremlin to film a long [interview](#) with Vladimir Putin; last summer, Carlson was back in Hungary. “Your country is freer than the one I live in,” he told a local reporter. “It reminds me of America in 1985.”

Given his various rhetorical modes, it can be hard to know when to take him at his word. Does he really believe that Lindsey Graham is not just his political enemy but an agent of the Enemy, a.k.a. Satan? Communism “isn’t an ideology. It’s an antihuman impulse

that comes from some outside source. Obviously.” The point of *COVID* was to destroy the nuclear family. Seed oils may sterilize you, but nicotine is a superfood. In Fort Worth, to make a point about humility, Carlson returned to the topic of his bathing habits. “You really do have this image of yourself as a godlike figure,” he mused—“until you step out of the shower and into the harsh glare of the mirror.” His guest that night was Roseanne Barr, who lit up a Parliament onstage. “Fauci gave everybody *AIDS!*” she shouted. “Google it!”

I have no access to the inside of Carlson’s mind, heart, or shower, and he did not respond to texts and e-mails asking for an interview. But I think I have listened to him long enough to have a sense of what’s truly important to him. He might deny it, but luckily, according to him, that doesn’t matter. “The only way to understand motive is by effect,” he said in Kansas City. “If I keep doing something that has the same result, then that is the intended result.” He added, “Someone can tell you, ‘I’m the best person there is’ . . . but I’ve gotten to the point where that’s totally irrelevant to me.”

Although he’d always considered himself a freethinker, he said at the National Conservatism Conference, “the Trump election was so shocking” that it forced him to reassess his other beliefs: “In other words, if the Loch Ness monster is real, what about the yeti?” As it turned out, the Loch Ness monster wasn’t real, but U.F.O.s were, and they were being revealed as part of a celestial plan. Maybe there really was a conspiracy to kill J.F.K., and Jeffrey Epstein, too. Carlson had been raised Episcopalian but basically secular, encouraged to talk about the weather rather than his immortal soul. Now he started reading more Scripture, and talking more about signs and portents. There was good and evil in the world—not in the colloquial sense but in the literal, supernatural sense.

The main thing he started doing was trusting his gut. Diversity is not our strength; what makes a nation strong is unity. Obviously. Western civilization was under attack, though most people were

scared to say this out loud. “Everyone’s lying, it’s all propaganda,” he said. “So just disregard all of it, put your earphones on to white noise, and just look around: Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys?”

When you looked at it that way, it was clear that Lindsey Graham was a bad guy and Vladimir Putin was a good guy. Fake conservatives might tut-tut about the cultural ground they were losing (methadone on demand, drag-queen story hour); ultimately, however, they went along with the program. But Putin wasn’t going along with the program: a man is a man, criminals go to jail, illegal immigrants get deported. Graham is a neocon who loves war because he’s possessed by a demonic force; Putin is a nationalist who is looking out for Russia’s interests. Recently, on his podcast, Carlson said that Putin, Orbán, and Trump “are pretty sincere nationalists—not crazed ideological nationalists, just want to do the best for their country. . . . In the 1984, ’85, ’86 context, they would be sort of moderate.” His guest on that episode was the history podcaster Darryl Cooper, who espoused a similar theory about the Second World War: Actually, the leader who escalated the war was Churchill, who was likely “a psychopath”; Hitler made some mistakes, including letting some prisoners of war die of starvation. Who knew! When you’re truly open-minded, you learn something new every day.

Tuckerism is an ornate pyramid, with a lot of weird stuff about testosterone and declining sperm counts near the top, but the base of it, the part that has never evidently changed, is immigration. On his Fox show, Carlson suggested that the Democratic Party was importing “more obedient voters from the Third World,” and that immigrants make the country “poorer, and dirtier, and more divided.” He addressed his audience as “legacy Americans,” and he didn’t seem to mean Native Americans. If the way to understand motive is by effect, then it was plain to see the effect he was having on the fascist fringe. “If you didn’t catch the German-shepherd whistles,” a white supremacist named [Mike Enoch](#) said, praising

one of Carlson’s monologues, “I don’t know what universe you’re existing in.” For a long time, Carlson mostly avoided explicit racial language, and so, whenever the pearl-clutching media called him racist, he laughed it off. More recently, on a live stream with Donald Trump, Jr., Carlson alleged that George Soros was replacing the “indigenous population” of Ireland with “people from the Third World,” and accused him of having “genocidal intent.” “I don’t, at this point, care if you’re not allowed to notice it,” he said. “I’m going to live like it’s 1985 in my country.”

In October, during a talk at a conservative think tank in the Upper Midwest, Carlson waxed nostalgic about the Twin Cities. Because a place is a reflection of its people, he said, “Minneapolis always struck me as famously clean, but also kind of sterile and atomized —like the Scandinavians.” St. Paul was boisterous but charming, like the Irish. For about a century, the population of the Twin Cities was almost entirely white; now nearly half the residents are people of color, many of them refugees from Somalia or Southeast Asia, a fact that Carlson seems to find intolerable. “I no longer go there,” he said, because the cities are “disgusting.”

If you had to pick a turning point, a year before places like the Twin Cities were, in Carlson’s view, irrevocably destroyed by demographic change, you might choose 1985. The following year, Ronald Reagan signed the Immigration Reform and Control Act, granting amnesty to millions of immigrants. Carlson grew up in San Diego County, “the most beautiful place God ever made,” but it, too, underwent rapid change during the mid-eighties, while he was in boarding school; now he talks about himself as a refugee, forced to live thousands of miles away. “The main thing worth preserving in our country,” he said, is the ability “to live in the place where your grandparents were buried. . . . And that is under threat in a way that I don’t think we even perceive.” Carlson’s brand of nationalism plays on a range of desires, from the lowest to the loftiest: the yearning for communal cohesion, for satisfying work, for a life rich with meaning. But, because Carlson’s Razor

requires a unified narrative with a clear villain, complexity must be written out of the story. Kick out the immigrants, punish the globalists, and then we can have a functioning welfare state, just for us.

Carlson's side is "honorable" and "direct," he continued. "If you make someone on the right angry, they're, like, 'I've got an AR-15.' " But the left is passive-aggressive, which keeps most Americans from recognizing whom "we have to kill to be free." The audience chuckled nervously, but Carlson, unsmiling, named the enemy: "An invading army that calls itself refugees." Encouraging your audience to take up arms against the needy would seem to contradict many of Jesus' teachings. At other times, Carlson has advocated for nonviolence, but that day he was apparently channelling the crusading Jesus of Matthew 10:34 ("I have come not to bring peace, but a sword").

Carlson and his various nationalist allies sometimes contradict one another, and themselves, but they agree on one point: A nation *is* its people, and if you put a people under too much strain—through drugs, depravity, inequality, or mass migration—then you won't have a country for long. Orbán understands that Hungary is for the Hungarian people. Bukele understands that El Salvador is for the Salvadorans. If those leaders have to get creative to stay in power —jailing enemies of the state, packing the courts, bending the rules around election time—then that's a fair price. After Orbán lost an election in 2002, he gave a speech explaining that, in a higher sense, he hadn't really lost, because "the nation can't be in opposition." When Trump lost in 2020, he made similar noises, and Carlson amplified them. In July, on the main stage at the Republican National Convention, Carlson said that, from the moment Trump survived an assassination attempt, "he was no longer just a political party's nominee"; he was "the leader of a nation." Titles don't confer legitimacy. Legal niceties can be renegotiated. "A leader is the bravest man," Carlson continued. "This is a law of nature." You could interpret that statement as

merely a rousing line in a campaign speech, or you could see it as a prejustification for whatever Trump's supporters are prepared to do in the unlikely event—the impossible event, really—that he loses. He is the bravest man—the only man—in the race. He is the rightful leader, whatever the official tally says.

The night after the Kansas City show, the Tucker Carlson Live Tour stopped in Wichita. It had taken Carlson decades to graduate from free-market conservative to Trump-curious contrarian to authoritarian populist, but his guest for the night, the thirty-one-year-old activist Charlie Kirk, had done the speed-run version. “The reason they hate Trump is not because he talks funny,” Kirk said. “It’s because he does not believe in the core religious orthodoxy of the neoliberal governing élite.” Carlson nodded, referring ominously to “a large black building not far from here”—the global headquarters of Koch Industries.

About an hour in, the mood started to turn. “Can I just talk about Springfield, Ohio, for a little bit?” Kirk said. Trump had recently claimed, without evidence, that Haitian immigrants in Springfield were “eating the pets of the people that live there.” Kirk added, “Their local school is being overrun by Haitians. But they’re racist for noticing that their home is turning into Port-au-Prince?”

Across the aisle from me I’d noticed a wholesome-looking young family—a mother, a father, and four children, all wearing church T-shirts. During the bits about neoliberalism, they’d seemed buoyant and surprisingly engaged. Now they were hollering, their voices taking on a hoarser, darker edge. “They’re coming from a country where witchcraft is the dominant religion,” Carlson said. “I don’t think you should import people who practice witchcraft. I think that should be illegal. I’m sorry, it’s my country.”

A religious test for immigration would violate the First Amendment, but everyone in the stadium understood what Carlson meant: You are being replaced. Taking swipes at the Kochs and the

Bain consultants was one thing, but this was scapegoating of the most classic kind: a vicious lie, weaponized by Vance and mainstreamed by Trump. Six elementary schools in Springfield have now been evacuated or closed because of bomb threats. And yet I can't find clear evidence that Trump or Vance has paid a political price for this. As far as I can tell, it may have helped them.

The other night, Carlson joined Kirk at a Trump rally in Georgia. America was out of control—like a two-year-old smearing feces on a wall, or a “hormone-addled fifteen-year-old daughter”—but Trump, the nation’s daddy, was about to restore order. “When Dad gets home, you know what he says?” Carlson asked, rousing the crowd to a libidinal frenzy. “ ‘You’re getting a vigorous spanking, because you’ve been a *bad girl*.’ ” That weekend, Carlson got a prime slot at Trump’s [Madison Square Garden rally](#), where he declared that, at long last, “a realignment” has arrived in American politics. On Thursday night, in Arizona, a one-night-only encore performance was added to the Tucker Carlson Live Tour. Special guest: Donald Trump.

Carlson is probably right that whichever party is most associated with the interests of the working class, in 2026 or 2028 or beyond, will be the party best positioned to win national majorities for a generation. And he seems to have placed his bet about how to accomplish this: a meta-narrative that weaves together all the aspirations and grievances that have always undergirded the nationalist impulse, along with some new ones. It’s a compelling story, even if many parts of it are not true. And the resentments of the neglected working class, both white and nonwhite, are not going away. The left-populist meta-narrative that would address those resentments hasn’t quite caught on. In fairness, though, the left may have an inherently tougher job. It’s easier to stitch together a post-neoliberal coalition if you’re willing to pass off calumnious rumors as obvious facts, to appeal to an ethnic majority’s basest instincts, to throw the least of these under the bus. To address inequality at its roots, without sacrificing the rule of law or the

ideal of a truly multiracial democracy—that is more difficult. In fact, it's never really been achieved.

After the show in Wichita, I stayed in the lobby and talked to some of Carlson's fans. Most of them were in good spirits. "Tucker is hilarious!" one woman said. Another noted, "Eye-opening, truly." The only two attendees who seemed relatively subdued were a local college student and her mother, a biologist from Montana. The mother was a fan of Carlson's, and she said that the show was "entertaining, but I don't know why he has to stoop to the divisive stuff." She certainly wasn't a globalist, she continued, but "I'm not a nationalist. I'm a hardworking, thinking Christian. I think we can do better." ♦



Andrew Marantz is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of "*Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation*."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/the-tucker-carlson-road-show>

[Annals of Crime](#)

How Syria Became the Middle East's Drug Dealer

Bashar al-Assad has propped up his regime by exploiting the Middle East's love of an amphetamine called captagon.

By [Ed Caesar](#)

November 4, 2024



A storage room in Jordan's anti-narcotics directorate contains thousands of captagon pills and other drugs seized along the Syrian border.

Photographs by Moises Saman / Magnum for The New Yorker

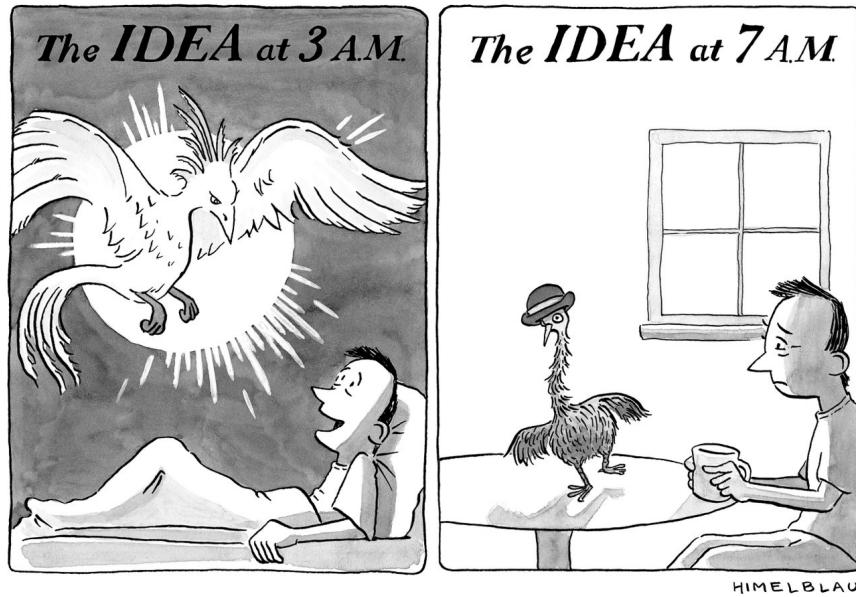
Before Marai al-Ramthan started the job that made him rich and got him killed, he was a sheepherder. A handsome and resourceful man in his thirties, he lived in southern Syria, in the scrubby area near Jordan, and had family on both sides of the border. There is a long tradition of petty smuggling in the region. His surname is derived from Ar-Ramtha, a city on the northern edge of Jordan which grew prosperous through the illicit transit of goods in and out of the country.

Until the civil war in Syria began, in 2011, a group of Jordanians known as *bahhara* (or “sailors”) were licensed to drive taxis across the border. There were about eight hundred such drivers, and everybody understood the real purpose of their journeys: to return

to Jordan, where the cost of living is sixty per cent higher than in Syria, with cheap goods. The *bahhara* brought back fresh produce, cigarettes, and other everyday items, and sold them at a considerable profit. Jordanian customs officials and the *bahhara* had an informal deal: for a bribe, a driver could bring trunk loads of Syrian products into the country tax free.

When the civil war broke out, rebels opposing the regime of President Bashar al-Assad seized control of the city of Daraa, across the border from Ar-Ramtha. As the two sides fought in the streets, the *bahhara* trade came to a standstill. According to [a report by the Carnegie Middle East Center](#), eighty per cent of Ar-Ramtha's stores had closed by 2017. The following year, Assad's forces recaptured Daraa, and the border crossing reopened. Many of the *bahhara* resumed their old profession. A few locals pursued a more lucrative opportunity: drugs. Marai al-Ramthan was one such entrepreneur. He began moving large volumes of captagon, an amphetamine, into Jordan. To avoid checkpoints, he hired Bedouins to transport the drug through the desert. Before long, he had an army of hundreds of smugglers.

Syria has now endured thirteen years of civil war. More than half a million Syrians have died in the fighting; five million have fled abroad. The country's infrastructure and legitimate economy have been shattered, and the regime is heavily sanctioned internationally. But, with the support of Iran and Russia, Assad has survived, and his government now controls about three-quarters of the country. In the past few years, he has found a desperately needed source of income in captagon.



Cartoon by Ed Himelblau

In Syria, a single pill of the stimulant costs a few cents to produce. But that pill can be sold elsewhere in the Middle East—the only part of the world where captagon is a popular drug—for as much as twenty-five dollars, especially in wealthy cities such as Riyadh. The margins of the business are high enough that exporters can be unsuccessful as often as not and still reap giant profits. The Assad regime now controls much of the captagon trade, making billions of dollars a year. The most significant figure in the government's production and distribution of captagon is reportedly the President's younger brother Maher al-Assad, who is the head of the 4th Division of the Syrian Army, a unit founded in 1984 to protect the government from all threats to its authority. Caroline Rose, who studies the captagon trade at the New Lines Institute, a think tank in Washington, D.C., told me that Syria's amphetamine business is worth some ten billion dollars. The country's official gross domestic product is only nine billion.

Michael Kenney, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh who researches the transnational drug trade, told me that although the term “narco-state” is often misused, it describes Syria perfectly. Assad's regime has become dependent on captagon, much the way Bolivia's government relied on the cocaine trade in the early eighties, and the Taliban stayed afloat on opium revenue during the

years that it was fighting U.S. forces for control of Afghanistan. Kenney said of the Assad regime, “State institutions have been thoroughly penetrated and corrupted by drug activities. Significant elements of the Army, of the security apparatus, are directly involved in various aspects of the trade. And the government itself —to the extent that there is one—has become heavily reliant on the revenues from captagon exports in order to maintain its governance.”

Jordan, which abuts much of Syria’s southern border, is now an important overland route to Saudi Arabia, where the vast majority of captagon pills are consumed. And Jordan itself has become an increasingly fertile market for the amphetamine. Signs of drug wealth are now obvious in Ar-Ramtha, where run-down houses stand next to gaudy new mansions with gold-painted walls. (A British diplomat in Jordan described such buildings to me as examples of the local “narchitecture.”) The Jordanian government is determined to impede the movement of drugs through its territory. Much of its military is stationed on the border with Syria, despite the wider conflict that has shaken the region since last October. Clashes with armed traffickers are frequent.

The Jordanian military sometimes goes after captagon kingpins inside Syria. For some time, Marai al-Ramthan was at the top of the hit list. Aware that he was a target, he owned at least one bulletproof car and, according to a Syrian military defector, shuttled among three houses. One was a seven-acre complex near Damascus, protected by multiple security guards, which contained a basement warehouse. His family residence, near the Jordanian border, was decorated with a large photograph of Bashar al-Assad. The logo of Syria’s military-intelligence agency hung by the front door.

On May 8, 2023, shortly before dawn, Jordanian fighter jets bombed Ramthan’s family house. The attack flattened the building and killed Ramthan, his wife, and five of their six children. The

Jordanian Air Force did not express any regret about the collateral damage. Shortly after the air strike, several figures connected to the captagon trade in southern Syria received texts from an unknown number: “We know who you are, your movements are monitored, your meetings are hacked. You contribute to destroying the minds of our people, and for their sake we will not have mercy on any of you. The Jordanians will soar like eagles to hunt you down, one criminal after another. Marai al-Ramthan was the first but not the last.”

In 1961, Karl Heinz-Klinger, a researcher at the West German pharmaceutical company Degussa, completed the synthesis of a new drug called fenethylline—a combination of amphetamine and an asthma medication called theophylline. One of fenethylline’s advertised benefits was that it produced the same kick as a standard amphetamine but didn’t cause a dangerous surge in blood pressure. Degussa launched the drug onto the worldwide market with the trademarked name Captagon. Each pill contained fifty milligrams of fenethylline, and had a pair of interlocking half-moons imprinted on one side. Doctors prescribed Captagon to treat narcolepsy and listlessness, and to help people recover from serious illnesses and injuries. From the beginning, however, the drug reached a nonmedical market. One famous user was Uschi Obermaier, a model who lived on various communes in West Germany and became an emblem of left-wing radicalism in the late sixties. In an autobiography, Obermaier revealed that as a young woman she became so addicted to Captagon that she took marijuana and LSD simply to counteract its effects.

Sales of Captagon were strong, but after eighteen years the patent expired, and other pharmaceutical companies began marketing fenethylline products. In the late seventies, Reda Yastas, an Egyptian who owned a pharmaceutical company in Germany called Samychemie, travelled to various Arab countries, including Lebanon, where he noticed that a surprising number of people were taking Captagon. Yastas later told a German court that there was

“great demand for fenethylline there, perhaps because constant heat makes you so tired, or because the Quran forbids alcohol.”

Yastas produced pills that were chemically and visually identical to Captagon, and shipped half a million of them to Lebanon. In 1978, Degussa sued, but was forced to concede in court that it hadn’t protected the half-moon logo. It settled with Yastas, for about ten thousand dollars, but Yastas continued producing fenethylline pills, now using a similar snake-like “S” as the logo. In another injunction hearing, in 1982, Degussa claimed that Yastas was sowing “confusion” among customers. A judge disagreed. In any case, it seems likely that the real issue was profit: the Arab market for fenethylline had grown so huge that Degussa was selling only four per cent of its Captagon stock in Germany.

Degussa is now known as Evonik. A spokesperson for the company told me that, in the early eighties, Degussa suggested to the World Health Organization that fenethylline should be tightly controlled, “since growing numbers of counterfeit Captagon or the active ingredient fenethylline were being produced by unauthorized manufacturers.” The Evonik spokesperson said that this was the first time a pharmaceutical business had asked for its own drug to be regulated by the W.H.O. In 1986, the W.H.O. and the U.N. Commission on Narcotic Drugs designated fenethylline as a stimulant so prone to being abused that it could be prescribed only in a small number of cases. Exports of the drug were also severely limited.

Other suppliers, however, were ready to meet the demand in the Middle East. Traffickers began secretly exporting Captagon pills from West Germany to Communist Bulgaria, and then on to the Middle East and West Africa, under the protection of Bulgaria’s state security apparatus, known as the D.S. Then a Lebanese trafficker named Abdul Hamid Shamaa gave the D.S. pill-pressing equipment, and three sites in Bulgaria began making counterfeit

tablets, also called captagon. (Shamaa was granted Bulgarian citizenship for his services.)

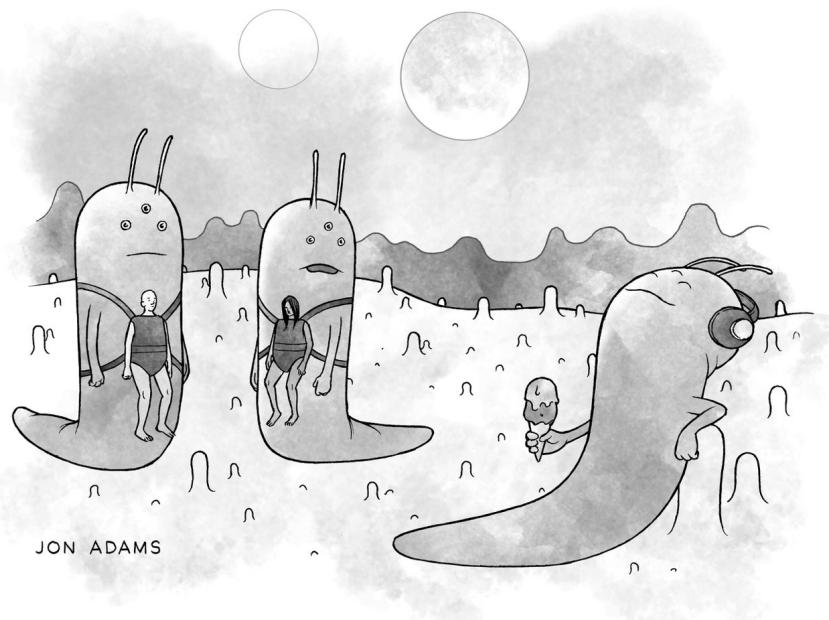
In 1986, Degussa's lawyers concluded—correctly—that the W.H.O.'s classification of fenethylline meant “the virtual elimination of legal sales,” and halted production. Fenethylline was banned in most countries. Nevertheless, Bulgarians continued producing and exporting pills. According to Hristo Hristov, a Bulgarian investigative journalist who has researched recently opened state files on drug trafficking, the revenues provided the government, which was starved of funds, with an important source of foreign currency. Although the Middle East remained the primary captagon market, the drug also found its way to Bulgaria's neighbors in the Eastern Bloc. Misha Glenny, the author of the 2008 best-seller “[McMafia: A Journey Through the Global Criminal Underworld](#),” told me that he encountered captagon in Prague before the fall of the Berlin Wall—a time when other illicit drugs were hard to find.

Captagon never became a coveted drug in Western Europe, except in one context: sports. The illegal stimulant was used to make players more aggressive and relentless. In 2015, the French investigative journalist Pierre Ballester, in a book about rugby, quoted a French doctor as saying that members of the French rugby team took captagon pills before a notorious 1986 match against the All Blacks, New Zealand's national team. The game is considered to be one of the most violent in rugby history. France won, 16–3, and the All Blacks team captain suffered a concussion, the loss of several teeth, and a torn scrotum.

In the decade and a half after the fall of Communism, Bulgarian authorities essentially ignored the continued illicit production of captagon—as long as it was for export only. The country finally cracked down on the drug's manufacture in the mid-two-thousands, when it successfully made a bid to become a member of the European Union.

Captagon production soon shifted to the Middle East. Caroline Rose, at the New Lines Institute, has noted that, for years, the Syrian government was invited to send “chemists to study in Bulgaria.” This connection, she says, “paved the way for an exchange of technical and scientific expertise and the establishment of clandestine labs in Syria and along the Lebanese-Syrian border.” The militant group Hezbollah, which had plenty of experience trafficking hashish, ran many of the Lebanese labs. Meanwhile, vast quantities of a precursor chemical for amphetamines, benzyl methyl ketone, or BMK, were exported from various Western countries to the Middle East. BMK is sometimes used in household cleaning products, and, whenever shipments of BMK were intercepted, traffickers would claim to be transporting the chemical for legitimate purposes. But in 2009 ninety-five per cent of all BMK being produced was going to the Middle East. Either the region had become addicted to sparkingly clean kitchens or a more nefarious pattern had been established.

The labs of the Middle East have never been as fastidious as the Bulgarian ones were about copying captagon. Indeed, almost no pills sold as captagon today contain fenethylline. Instead, Rose told me, they comprise “a mishmash of precursor chemicals and additives.” She added, “The producers are kind of making it up as they go.” In the Arab world, “captagon” has come to mean any pill that has amphetamine inside, or that provides an amphetamine-type boost. Often, the only link to Degussa’s original product is the interlocking-half-moon design.



“Ever wonder what our lives would be like if we’d never abducted earthlings?”
Cartoon by Jon Adams

Part of captagon’s allure is that it can be used invisibly in societies that mete out harsh punishments for intoxication. There are no documented instances of fatal overdoses. Many Saudis use the drug regularly, and some fall prey to addiction, but the streets of Riyadh are not strewn with captagon junkies. It’s as if an entire region had developed a secret penchant for Adderall. Malik al-Abdeh, a British Syrian who has written extensively about captagon, told me, “In Middle Eastern societies, captagon is not viewed by a lot of people as a drug. They see it as almost a step up from headache pills. It’s more like a coffee than like a drug that you’re sniffing or injecting into your veins.” Of course, if many pills are ingested, the kick is stronger. Captagon is sometimes called “poor man’s cocaine.”

In 2011, after the [Arab Spring uprisings](#), Lebanese authorities, eager to weaken Hezbollah, began shutting down the organization’s captagon factories. The group simply moved its production facilities across the Syrian border. This was when the Assad regime became involved in the captagon trade in earnest.

Captagon manufactured in Syria can follow various routes to reach the wealthy markets of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Pills can be

shipped overland through Jordan; sent north to Turkey, then taken by boat to their destination; or delivered to one of Syria's ports, such as Latakia, and shipped to ports in the Red Sea. The relative popularity of each route has depended on the fluctuations of geopolitics. A paper in the *Columbia Journal of International Affairs* notes that when *ISIS* took control of northern Syria, in the mid-twenty-tens, captagon smuggling into Turkey slowed dramatically. In 2015 and 2016, battles between rebels and Assad's forces in the Syrian city of Homs led to the destruction of captagon facilities there; some production briefly returned to Lebanon.

As the trade keeps adapting, traffickers have sometimes turned to unorthodox methods. In 2015, the Saudi prince Abdel Mohsen bin Walid bin Abdulaziz was arrested, along with four other Saudis, at Beirut's airport after attempting to load forty suitcases filled with captagon, and a little cocaine, onto a private plane bound for Riyadh. It was the largest seizure of drugs ever made at the airport. Abdulaziz was sentenced to five years in prison—a severe punishment for a prince.

Captagon has developed a reputation as a soldier's drug. This has some basis in fact. Since the production of synthetic amphetamine and methamphetamine became widespread, in the first half of the twentieth century, such drugs have been attractive to sleep-deprived fighters. In the Second World War, the first conflict in which uppers became widespread, the German military used Pervitin, a methamphetamine, to energize its troops. Royal Air Force airmen on nighttime missions sometimes turned to Benzedrine—an amphetamine that was originally formulated as an asthma medication—which they called Wakey Wakey pills.

Captagon has been used in battle in the Arab world. Saddam Hussein's Army was a top client of the Bulgarian mobsters who produced the drug. Fighters on all sides of the conflict in Syria have taken captagon. On June 12, 2018, coalition forces battling *ISIS* found and destroyed three hundred thousand captagon pills

belonging to the Islamist group. Last year, the Israel Defense Forces reported finding captagon pills on the bodies of Hamas fighters killed during the October 7th attacks.

These discoveries notwithstanding, European tabloids have exaggerated the threat of what they call “jihadi speed.” After the *ISIS* attacks in Paris in 2015, such outlets reported that using captagon had made the perpetrators fearless and aggressive enough to commit suicidal violence. There was never any evidence to support this claim; autopsies of the bodies of the terrorists showed that they had not ingested alcohol or narcotics. Nor can jihadism account for the *volume* of captagon being produced, or for the enormous profits it generates. There are only so many jihadis. The major user base for captagon is broadly the same as the one Reda Yastas found in the late seventies: workers and students looking for a strong pick-me-up that won’t derail their day.

Half a century ago, amphetamines became popular among truckers in the United States. On a recent trip to Jordan, I was told that truck drivers who stop at roadside coffee venders often order a *qahwa mazbouta*: a “blended coffee,” which costs about ten dollars. A captagon pill gets crushed and mixed into the drink. On the streets of Syria, meanwhile, one can ask for a *ya mas-hrny*—a “keep me awake” pill.

Saudi Arabia, in particular, appears to be flooded with captagon, given the scale of the seizures that authorities there are making. The U.N. Office on Drugs and Crime has stated that between 2012 and 2021 sixty-seven per cent of the captagon officially seized by authorities was either inside or bound for the kingdom. A working assumption by anti-narcotics experts is that police forces generally catch about twenty per cent of trafficked drugs. Saudi Arabia claims that between May, 2023, and July, 2024, it seized seventy-six million captagon pills. The country has a population of only thirty-two million.



Lieutenant Colonel Hassan al-Qudah, the head of the anti-narcotics directorate, says that captagon traffickers prefer to cross the desert in winter, when they can use the cover of sandstorms, snow, or fog.

This past spring, I visited Riyadh. The Saudi government was uneasy about allowing officials to talk to a reporter about drugs, but a man who dealt directly with the captagon problem was authorized to speak with me, on the condition that I did not name him or the ministry where he worked. The official said that sixty-five per cent of people in jail in Saudi Arabia were there for drug-related offenses. The domestic market for captagon, he confirmed, was mostly students, and also included workers in the “shadow” economy—presumably, the temporary migrants being enlisted to

construct the country's many new buildings, often at alarmingly high speeds. (The new Kingdom Arena, the highest-capacity soccer arena in the world, was reportedly built in two months.) Academic researchers interviewing Saudi captagon users have found that some women use the drug to aid weight loss.

The official told me that the glut of captagon in Saudi Arabia could not be explained solely as a matter of supply and demand. Rather, there had to be a political motivation behind such high volumes of trafficking to the kingdom. They were being *targeted*, he said. (This view seemed at odds with that of most Western observers, who see captagon primarily as a source of income for the Assad regime; Michael Kenney, the narcotics expert at the University of Pittsburgh, said that it's "more about business.") The political purpose of captagon, the Saudi official said, a bit melodramatically, was to tear at the social fabric of his country, and thereby slow down its progress. To counter this destructive effect, he said, authorities in the kingdom treat addicts with kindness: anyone who admits to a drug dependency can be treated for free at a government clinic, without fear of punishment. Traffickers, however, are put to death.

In October, the Ministry of the Interior announced that twenty-one Saudis had been arrested on suspicion of belonging to a gang that trafficked captagon into the Riyadh region. Sixteen of the suspects were employed at government ministries. Their crimes included transporting drugs "from outside the kingdom" and secretly selling off drugs seized by Saudi authorities. Saudi Arabia is no exception to the rule that drug trafficking cannot thrive without corruption.

The Arab world's relationship with captagon shows up in unlikely places. Harley Street, in London, is where the most expensive private doctors in the United Kingdom have their offices. In an elegant town house on the street, Bashar al-Assad's father-in-law, Fawaz Akhras, has a cardiology practice. A few doors down, Sophia Khalique, a general practitioner, runs a clinic with Rameez

Ali, a therapist and addiction specialist. Among its clients are Saudi captagon addicts.

Khalique and Ali make an odd pair. On the day I visited, Khalique padded around her giant office in a minidress, fish-net tights, and fluffy slippers. Ali was friendly but intense; his forehead bore the mark of frequent prayer. Khalique and Ali have treated hundreds of rich students from the Middle East who have developed captagon habits. Their patients are mostly men aged nineteen to twenty-four. Many of them come to the clinic complaining of severe insomnia. It always takes a few questions to identify the root of this problem: a dependence on stimulants.

“When I speak to the students, they say it’s becoming more and more embedded in their life style in the Middle East,” Ali said, of the drug. Khalique said that some patients, already dependent on amphetamines, come to her hoping for a legal prescription—for, say, attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder medication. “They’re saying they want a study aid,” she told me, raising an eyebrow. Some of these patients, she noted, might indeed have learning difficulties. But the attraction of captagon is often social. In her view, it is often used as a “party drug.”

Ali told me that young Middle Eastern men had frequently spoken to him of taking captagon at private house parties. At high doses, users experience euphoria, but the drug seems low risk and not as overtly haram as alcohol. Habitual users of captagon often develop symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety, depression, and mood swings. Ali was also beginning to hear stories about Syrian captagon being used in tandem with anabolic steroids, to cater to a crossover market of men who want not only to keep awake but also to suppress their appetites and bulk up their bodies. Ali said, “Steroid abuse in the Middle East is *huge*.”

A disused captagon-pill press stands in the parking lot outside Jordan’s anti-narcotics directorate, in Amman. The device, made of

metal, is about the size of a refrigerator, with large buttons in primary colors, like a child's toy. Jordanian authorities seized the press during a recent raid on a production facility, and placed it outside the directorate as a symbol of the agency's purpose.

On a cool February morning, the head of the directorate, Lieutenant Colonel Hassan al-Qudah, sat behind a wooden desk, drinking coffee and sucking on a vape, while others in the office smoked cigarettes. (Nicotine is Jordan's most popular drug.) He said that I'd caught him during the busiest season for trafficking from Syria, and explained that smugglers prefer to cross the desert in winter, when they can use the cover of sandstorms, snow, or fog.

During a snowstorm on January 26, 2022, Syrian traffickers attempted to ferry a huge consignment of captagon pills into Jordan on foot. Jordanian troops opened fire, killing twenty-seven smugglers and wounding several others. That was an unusually bloody clash, but serious engagements occur nearly every month. Syrian smugglers now use a variety of cunning techniques to move their drugs to Jordan, including drones and carrier pigeons, which have been taught to fly with tiny bags of contraband affixed to their legs. More than once in recent months, smugglers have fired consignments of captagon across the border inside surface-to-air missiles fitted with tracking devices that allow criminal colleagues in Jordan to find them after they land.

An international monitor had told me that a smaller amount of drugs had been captured at the border in 2023 than in 2022, suggesting a decrease in trafficking activity. But Qudah said that the volume of seized drugs was an imperfect metric. His ministry preferred to measure trafficking *attempts*, which, incidentally, were on the rise. "Three attempts weekly, minimum," he said. "This hasn't been the case before. It's much more aggressive now."



"I can't tell if it's still in there or not."

Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

Moreover, the number of people engaged in such sorties had risen. Before Jordan instituted a shoot-on-sight order against traffickers, in 2022, most attempts to move drugs across the border involved only a handful of people. Now, Qudah said, groups of thirty or forty men were common. A few weeks before our meeting, two hundred and fifty men had crossed the border simultaneously, at different locations; another time, four hundred men had used this strategy. The modus operandi was for cars to transport the drugs to within a mile of the border, where individuals would carry them into Jordan in backpacks. Jordanian forces have infrared cameras that register body heat, but these sometimes fail to spot traffickers —say, during a sandstorm. (A source who knew some of the smugglers said that traffickers had invested in thermal-camouflage suits, to evade infrared detection.) The Jordanians also knew that behind the smugglers carrying backpacks would be a “defensive line” of militiamen with semi-automatic weapons, ready to kill members of border patrols. Often, Qudah said, engagements became “a shoot-out.”

Qudah estimated that four-fifths of the captagon entering Jordan was destined for Saudi Arabia. The rest would remain in Jordan. I

asked to see some pills that he had seized. He buzzed his secretary. A minute later, an officer brought in a baggie containing two hundred tan-colored pills printed with interlocking half-moons. That logo, Qudah said, was becoming passé. One popular Syrian variety, he said, now featured a horse's-head insignia; another, the Lexus logo.

Captagon pills were no longer his sole concern. The same people moving captagon from Syria were now also trafficking crystal meth, which could easily be made in the same factories as captagon, and was far more dangerous. A few years ago, crystal meth in Jordan cost a hundred and forty dollars a gram; now it was fifty-five. A friend in Amman told me that she'd seen crystal meth used at middle-class dinner parties.

I visited a state-sponsored rehabilitation clinic in Amman, where some fifty men were recovering from various addictions. One patient in his thirties, who wore a Hollister hoodie, chain-smoked cigarettes, and shook violently, told me he'd first become a captagon user in Jordan. He then moved to Turkey, where he ran a successful construction business. The captagon boost became insufficient, and he turned to crystal meth. The patient said that he had "lost everything" because of his addiction. In Istanbul, he'd become hooked on crystal meth—in addition to taking three or four captagon pills a day. He'd been arrested and deported to Jordan. The man said that most of the captagon dealers in Istanbul had been Syrian or Jordanian. But Iranian gangs, he said, controlled the crystal-meth trade, to the point that the drug was known locally as "Iranian heroin."

Around 2015, police forces in Europe and the Middle East began seizing huge consignments of captagon. In November, 2015, Turkish authorities confiscated nearly eleven million tablets hidden inside a shipment of oil filters headed for the Gulf. A month later, Lebanese police found thirty million tablets bound for Egypt, stashed in a shipment of school desks.

Chris Urben worked for the D.E.A. for twenty-five years. Before retiring from the agency, in 2021, he was in the special-operations division, focussing on international threats. Captagon became an area of concern. Starting in 2018, Urben told me, “the U.S. government essentially had an intelligence-gathering effort to determine why we were seeing this massive increase in terms of large seizures of captagon at ports, and who was benefitting.”

By 2021, the picture had become clear. Many of the intercepted shipments were arriving from Syria—especially from the port of Latakia, which is a stronghold of the Assad family. In the most notable case, in July, 2020, eighty-four million captagon pills from Latakia were uncovered inside a shipment of industrial-sized gears and rolls of paper at the Italian port of Salerno. The seized drugs were worth a billion dollars. But, in the estimation of Europol, there is no domestic market for captagon in Europe. Some Middle Eastern traffickers whose shipments might seem suspicious to Saudi or Gulf authorities launder the provenance of the freight by moving it through Europe first. The extra cost is worthwhile if the shipment is successful.

“The Assad regime was organizing this on a massive scale,” Urben said. “There was a certain professionalism, in terms of organized crime.” Intelligence from within Syria confirmed that the Assad family, and in particular the President’s brother Maher, controlled the supply, in partnership with producers in Lebanon. The Hezbollah connection was significant, Urben explained, “because they’re experts in terms of transportation, facilitation, and corruption in those regions and outside those regions—corruption at ports, money laundering.”

Urben told me that the D.E.A. shared its intelligence on captagon with legislators, and that a few politicians had jumped on the issue. The concern wasn’t that captagon would soon flood America—the country was already in the grip of more powerful and addictive synthetic drugs, such as fentanyl. The politicians wanted to stop the

billions of dollars flowing to Assad's sanctioned regime, and also to his allies and enablers in Iran and Lebanon. At the vanguard of this effort was French Hill, a Republican congressman from Arkansas, who co-sponsored the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, which placed heavy sanctions on Assad and his closest allies. Hill subsequently introduced the Captagon Act of 2022, which was designed to “disrupt and dismantle the Assad regime’s production and trafficking of the lethal narcotic,” and, more recently, the Illicit Captagon Trafficking Suppression Act—which President Joe Biden signed into law as part of April’s foreign-aid package—to widen the ambit of sanctions against those involved with the trade. Hill, whose efforts have attracted bipartisan support, told me that his bill had two objectives: “Can you disrupt transnational drug networks, with partners? That’s a good goal. But my principal goal is cutting off the funding to Assad.”

The Treasury Department recently sanctioned fourteen more Syrian and Lebanese nationals involved in the captagon trade. One of these individuals is Taher al-Kayali, a Syrian who owns Neptunus L.L.C., a shipping company based in Latakia. The cargo ship Noka, which was intercepted by Greek authorities in 2018 and found to be carrying more than a hundred million dollars’ worth of captagon and hashish, was a Neptunus ship.

Whether sanctions will help to curtail the captagon trade is an open question. A recent U.N. report noted that sanctions against Iraq prior to the 2003 U.S.-led war had “contracted the Iraqi economy” but “fuelled underground economies.” Similarly, sanctions against Iran and Syria could amplify “opportunities for trafficking and illegal economies in overcoming sanction restrictions.” When the world won’t otherwise do business with you, selling drugs can make up the shortfall.

Since the Caesar Act was passed, captagon trafficking has, in fact, increased dramatically. Matthew Zweig helped to implement that legislation as a senior sanctions adviser in the Trump

Administration. He is now at the lobbying arm of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, a think tank. “For many of the Syrian actors, and for actors in the Iran threat network, captagon is a *major* sanctions-evasion tool,” he said. But, in his reckoning, this was a reason to work even harder to stifle the trade, rather than a reason to weaken sanctions.

On my trip to Jordan, I was told that the U.S. had provided authorities there with scanners and other equipment for interdicting trafficked substances. A D.E.A. officer based in Cyprus recently spent six months in Jordan offering assistance to the government there. But the D.E.A., which has many higher priorities than captagon, officially has no permanent staff in the country. The Jordanians are clearly overwhelmed. A Syrian opposition figure who monitors the captagon trade told me that Jordan’s soldiers are “doing what they can . . . but they are not equipped enough.”

There is also a question of whether the U.S.’s policy aligns with those of countries in the Middle East. In May, 2023, Syria was welcomed back to the Arab League for the first time since 2011, at a summit in Jeddah. Saudi Arabia’s leader, Mohammed bin Salman, was photographed chatting warmly with Assad. For the moment, Russia and Iran remain Assad’s most crucial allies, but other countries have recently chosen to take a less punitive approach to his government, despite the sanctions risks.

In Jordan, too, politicians are changing their confrontational stance. I met with the interior minister, Mazin al-Farrayeh, who told me that he’d seen his Syrian counterpart the previous week, at a gathering that also included the Iraqi and Lebanese ministers. “The outcome of that meeting was that Syria was the center of the drug problem,” Farrayeh said. But Jordan’s response was not to threaten the Syrians. Instead, Farrayeh told me, Syria needed financial help to pay for scanning equipment and additional customs officers, so that it could curtail smuggling on its side of the border.

The situation seemed absurd: the Jordanian government knew that the Assad regime was directing much of the captagon trade, and yet it was pretending that Syria was committed to stopping that trade. (Farrayeh told me that, if Jordan were to give the Syrian government scanning equipment, at least it would remove one of Assad's possible excuses for failing to stop the smuggling.) The minister's approach was mirrored across other agencies. Every Jordanian official I met seemed loath to criticize the Assad regime's involvement in captagon production and smuggling. Indeed, Qudah, the head of the anti-narcotics directorate, refused to speak to me on the record about it. (Even the Saudi official who talked to me about captagon being used as a weapon declined to name Assad or Syria explicitly.)

Representatives from several Jordanian agencies explained their positions by pointing to the chaotic situation in southern Syria, where, despite over-all control by the Assad regime, an array of groups hold influence. Katrina Sammour, a Jordanian security analyst, told me that the cautious rapprochement between Jordan and Assad's government reflected her country's weariness, given Assad's seeming impregnability. Sammour said, "Jordan was the first to call for Syria to be removed from the community of states as punishment for Assad's crimes"—such as chemical attacks on his own people. "But, ultimately, the world community failed." When it came to captagon, "instead of allowing chaos at our border, the decision was made to make a partnership—albeit an imperfect one."

A Syrian-opposition monitoring group called *ETANA* has done bold investigations into the captagon trade, gathering information from hundreds of sources within Syrian gangs, businesses, and government ministries. *ETANA* staffers scoff at any suggestion that the Assad regime is not in control of Syria's drug empire. Before the Jordanian air strike killed Marai al-Ramthan and his family, for instance, *ETANA* sources observed him meeting with several members of Syrian military intelligence. In two interviews, *ETANA*

representatives explained to me what they believed to be the structure of the captagon business in Syria. Profits, they said, flowed upward to senior figures in the 4th Division. About half the money made from the Syrian captagon trade was pocketed by the Assad regime.

Last year, a joint investigation by the BBC and a journalistic collective called the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project [uncovered important new details](#) from the 2021 trial, in Beirut, of Hassan Daqqou, a Lebanese Syrian man who has been called “the King of Captagon” in the Lebanese press. Daqqou had been accused of masterminding a shipment of nearly a hundred million captagon pills, which was seized in Malaysia. During the trial, a series of WhatsApp messages between Daqqou and a man he named only as the Boss was presented as evidence. In the messages, the two men discuss the movement of “goods” and security clearances. The Boss is suspected to be Ghassan Bilal—Maher al-Assad’s deputy in the 4th Division.

In London, I talked with a Syrian defector who had met Bilal when they were both in the Syrian Army. He told me that Bilal, a former engineer who had served for a long time under Maher al-Assad, “was giving orders” about captagon trafficking himself. The defector said that both Bilal and Maher had the power to increase or decrease the flow of captagon out of Syria. If they wanted to stop the captagon trade tomorrow, the defector said, it would just take “a phone call.”

Samir Rifai, who served as the Prime Minister of Jordan between 2009 and 2011, told me that this view was simplistic. We met at his house, in the hills outside Amman. From his garden, you could gaze across the border to Israel and the West Bank. Jericho was just visible. Syria, to the north, was out of sight. Rifai, who speaks in English that he polished while studying at Harvard and Cambridge, sees his region in pragmatic terms. As Prime Minister, he sat across the table from Assad when the Arab Spring was exploding. Ever

since, he has followed the catastrophe in Syria with increasing dismay. I asked him whether he thought Assad could stop the drug trade if he wanted to.

“Yes,” Rifai said. “But with a caveat. He *and* the Iranians have to be convinced. The problem that he has is he does not trust the West. So for him to leave the graces of Russia and Iran? What guarantees are going to be given to him that will make him take that leap of faith?”

ETANA believes that, for a few weeks before the May, 2023, meeting of the Arab League, the Assads ordered traffickers to slow captagon production. (Jordan clearly thought the Syrians had not been trying hard enough: Marai al-Ramthan and his family were killed shortly before the summit.) But the *ETANA* representatives showed me evidence that the situation had since changed. This past February, a source described to *ETANA* a conversation in which a senior figure in Assad’s government ordered a captagon kingpin to resume “full production.”

Matthew Zweig, the sanctions expert at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, was less certain about such a clean narrative. Over time, he pointed out, drug empires develop rival centers of power, and the criminals involved in the captagon trade were no doubt determined to keep their businesses going. Zweig didn’t doubt that Syria’s 4th Division was heavily involved in the captagon business. But the amphetamine and methamphetamine markets in the Middle East had possibly grown beyond Assad’s control. Zweig noted that the Arab League’s decision to resume relations with Assad was made partly in the hope that he could stop captagon from saturating the region. But the captagon trade was still strong, and possibly growing. Zweig asked, “Is that because Assad won’t stop it—or because he *can’t?*” ♦



Ed Caesar is a contributing staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His book “*The Moth and the Mountain: A True Story of Love, War, and Everest*” received a *Telegraph Sports Book of the Year Award*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/how-syria-became-the-middle-east-s-drug-dealer>

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

[American Chronicles](#)

The Americans Prepping for a Second Civil War

Many now believe that the U.S. could descend into political violence. Some are joining survivalist communities, canning food—and buying guns.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

November 4, 2024



When Drew Miller established Fortitude Ranch, a network of survivalist compounds, foreign terrorist attacks were at the top of people's minds. "Now, for many, it's civil war," he said.

Photographs by Brian Finke for The New Yorker

“Did he say *fight?*” Drew Miller asked me. It was July 13th, and we were in rural Colorado, near an outpost of Fortitude Ranch, a network of survivalist retreats that Miller has constructed in anticipation of civilizational collapse. News of the attempted assassination of Donald Trump—the first one—had just pinged: a young man named Thomas Crooks had shot at Trump from a

rooftop near a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, striking his right ear. Trump had stood, with blood on his face, and shouted to his crowd, “Fight, fight, fight!” The shooter’s motives were unknown, but Republicans were blaming Democrats. “File charges against Joseph R. Biden for inciting an assassination,” Representative Mike Collins posted on X. Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene accused the “evil” Democratic Party of attempting “murder.” Miller’s phone began to make the sound of a dog barking—his ringtone—as members and employees of the ranches sent texts and e-mails.

A salesperson in Nevada was seeing a sudden increase in requests to join: “Member interest. I’m already getting previous leads texting me.”

A member in Colorado wondered if it was time to mobilize: “Should we do an alert?”

As the barking continued, I asked what Miller thought. “This could stir things up,” he said, after a heavy pause. “Things could escalate.”



"You play it all day, every day, until you can't anymore."

Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Miller, a fit and unnervingly analytical sixty-six-year-old, was wearing a Fortitude Ranch T-shirt and had a handgun holstered on his cargo pants. He grew up in Nebraska, and served as an intelligence officer in the Air Force for thirty years before retiring as a colonel, in 2010. He has long maintained a fixation on disaster. A “Unabomber-type person,” he told me, could release a bioengineered virus to kill off “mammalian weeds,” as one prominent scientist has called humans; an electromagnetic-pulse attack could cause months-long blackouts. After retiring, Miller had an idea that combined his interest in readiness for such events with an entrepreneurial streak: establishing a survival community that was both comfortable and armed to the teeth. He reached out to real-estate agents in West Virginia. “I just said I wanted a remote location with year-round water, off the beaten path, accessible in all kinds of weather,” he told me. “The first one said, ‘Oh, you’re looking for a survival location.’” After several more agents had the

same response, Miller asked one how they knew what he was after. The agent replied, “We have people from every three-letter agency in D.C. with little places out here.” Miller told me, “She even showed me a few! I thought, God dang it, people, you shouldn’t do that!” In 2015, Miller opened the first Fortitude Ranch in the mountains a couple of hours outside D.C. Its proximity to the capital was strategic. “That’s the obvious big target,” Miller told me. At the time, foreign terrorist attacks were at the top of people’s minds. “Now, for many, it’s civil war,” he said.

According to an analysis of *FEMA* data, some twenty million Americans are actively preparing for cataclysm—roughly twice as many as in 2017. Political violence, including the spectre of civil war, is one of the reasons. A recent study conducted by researchers at U.C. Davis concluded that one in three adults in the U.S., including up to half of Republicans, feel that violence is “usually or always justified” to advance certain political objectives (say, returning Trump to the White House). In May, Ray Dalio, the billionaire founder of Bridgewater Associates, one of the world’s largest hedge funds, told the *Financial Times* that he believed there was about a thirty-five-per-cent chance of civil war breaking out in America. “We are now on the brink,” Dalio said, noting that a modern civil war—though it might not involve muskets—would see the fracturing of states and widespread defiance of federal law. In June, Dalio upped his estimate to “uncomfortably more than 50 percent,” predicting “an existential battle of the hard right against the hard left in which you will have to pick a side and fight for it, or keep your head down, or flee.”

Fortitude Ranch has more than a thousand members of all political persuasions, including doctors, engineers, restaurant workers, pilots, and entrepreneurs. “I’m not some hard-core prepper survivalist,” George, a retired C.I.A. officer in Texas, who asked that I use only his first name, told me. “I don’t want to live without running water or air-conditioning or run around in the woods for long. But it’s like the old saying goes: When trouble is on the

horizon, a wise man takes precautions. Civil war is a definite possibility.” A man named Pat, who works as a computer scientist in Colorado, agreed. “The potential for violence across the country scares us,” he told me. “Fortitude Ranch is insurance.”

Miller’s goal is to open dozens of ranches around the country. There are currently seven, which range in size from ten to a hundred and sixty acres. Their precise whereabouts are officially secret, but all are strategically remote. The Colorado ranch, I can confirm, is a few hours from the closest Home Depot. On the drive in, Miller had stopped there to buy drywall for the ranch’s quonset hut—a three-story structure with a galvanized steel roof, bullet-resistant walls, and enough underground rooms to cozily house a hundred new neighbors. We pulled into a clearing with a view of the ranch: a scattering of structures on a dozen acres of arid, rocky land beneath snow-dusted peaks. There were some penned-up dogs and chickens, a greenhouse, a broken tractor.

Forty years ago, for a Ph.D. at Harvard, Miller wrote a dissertation on “underground nuclear defense shelters and field fortifications,” so I’d expected the ranch’s living quarters to look formidable, if not fancy. But as I stepped inside the quonset hut, which Miller had dubbed the Viking Lodge, my first impression was of a hastily erected college dorm. There were three dozen rooms, and half had been claimed. Members had paid between four thousand and sixty thousand dollars to join—depending on time frame (five to fifty years), group size, and amenities (en-suite toilets cost extra)—plus annual dues of up to fifteen hundred dollars. Inside the rooms, I saw bare mattresses, stacked furniture, a PlayStation, sacks of rice, pallets of canned tuna, boxes of Pop-Tarts, Costco emergency food buckets (potato potpie, vanilla pudding), packs of D batteries, pairs of snake boots, reams of toilet paper, some Dan Brown novels, and containers of coffee.

“My wife says my espresso is a religious experience,” Larry, the ranch’s assistant manager, told me, as we examined some coffee

beans he'd stockpiled. "I've got enough dark roast here to keep us all going for six months at five cups a day." Larry, who is sixty-nine, explained that his full-time job is with a "three-letter government agency" that deploys him to war zones. Like most Fortitude Ranchers, Larry could foresee society breaking down in a number of ways: a nuclear detonation, another pandemic, or rising political violence that could split the country into warring factions. He drew a crude map of the U.S. on scrap paper. Two squiggly lines partitioned off the east, the west, and the middle. "I can see three different Americas," he said. Miller had told me earlier that day that he thinks Texas, where he lives, will likely secede if Trump loses again. If Trump wins, states such as Oregon and Colorado could break apart along political lines. War might follow, even accidentally. "Maybe someone shoots Governor Abbott and then other nuts start shooting at Fort Hood," Miller said. "The media misreports it and some militias form and fight. It would be irrational, but irrational wars are perfectly normal."

So what then? When disaster nears, Larry told me, an alert will go out to members via an app. (If messages can't be sent, "it'll be pretty obvious you should go to the nearest ranch," he added.) Only paid-up members will be allowed in. Pets are welcome, though they might be consumed in a pinch. Each ranch, Larry explained, has a natural water source and a year's worth of food per member. But, because that food may run out, there are also—where possible—farm animals, fishponds, fruit trees, edible bugs, and "survival crops," including Jerusalem artichokes, which yield roughly sixty times more calories per acre than beef. But the tuber, I learned, can also be hard to digest. "Constipation in a SHTF ain't going to be pretty," one commenter, using prepper shorthand for "shit hits the fan," posted on a Reddit thread about Fortitude Ranch. Larry reassured me, "Coffee helps."

After walking past a reading nook, Larry and I climbed a spiral staircase to a roof deck with a grill and solar panels. During a collapse, ranch members would come here to survey for threats.

There were waist-high walls, which, Larry told me admiringly, “can sop up an AK round.” He gestured out at the wilderness. “A thousand-yard shot? I own you.” Earlier, Miller had casually remarked that members would “shallow-bury dead marauders”—his preferred term for attackers—to produce worms for our chickens.” I’d seen the chickens, but I asked Larry where the weapons were. He led me to a neighboring log cabin and opened a hidden door. Shotguns, pistols, AR-15s, and boxes of ammo sat by a bunk bed, along with a crossbow. “There’s enough here for at least a month of fighting off marauders,” Larry said. One member of another ranch, he added, has cached nineteen guns and thirty thousand rounds just for himself.

Back at the Viking Lodge, I met Benjamin, a middle-aged restaurant manager, who was hanging around the ranch, as members sometimes do. He was marinating lamb in a subterranean kitchen. Lunchtime. “You want to be a minimum of five miles off pavement,” Benjamin said. “We’re ten and a half.” I asked about the possibility of marauders. “We’ve got plans to contend with them from the time they get to the gate,” he said. “There’s a lot of ambush spots.” Military know-how distinguishes Fortitude from “your average prepper bugout setup,” Miller had told me. “Solo preppers will mostly get wiped out.” Most of the ranches have a few members with medical training, which will help, too. “We don’t recruit for skills,” Miller said. “But it’s nice when members are useful.” Before I left, Larry had me do some target practice. From various distances, I fired an AR-15 at a paper plate pinned to a tree. Members would soon gather for preëlection firearm trainings of their own.

Larry and Miller have their quarrels—for example, over whether to raise tilapia in a cattle trough inside the hut. (Larry thinks it would require too much energy; Miller wants fresh fish.) But they agree that the period between now and the Presidential Inauguration is a time of especially high risk. The morning after my visit, Miller sent out his monthly newsletter early. “Trump assassination attempt

moves us closer to Civil War,” he wrote. “We are of course monitoring this situation, and will issue an alert if irrational violence erupts, bad people and looters exploit it, and law and order breaks down.” The ranches would be prepared during Election Day and the uncertain period to follow. Miller told me, “Trump is still dodging the question of whether he’ll accept the results. We’ll be ready.”

There has been a growing understanding, felt on a sensory level, of what the World Economic Forum recently referred to as the “polycrisis.” A warming planet does not exist in a vacuum, separate from global pandemics and widening wealth gaps; crises amplify one another. Still, some stand out. A recent study found that half of Americans expect a second civil war to happen “in the next few years,” even if the specifics vary according to one’s politics and imagination. A liberal writer in Los Angeles recently told me that he imagines “duelling militias, like the Lebanese civil war,” following a “fascist takeover” in January. A family member of mine who supports Trump told me that she believes a more traditional civil war will begin, “if they kill Trump.” She wasn’t clear who “they” are. But she reminded me that, like many of her friends, she is well armed. (I was aware; I’d once stumbled upon one of her guns hidden behind a toaster.) A progressive lawyer I know in Atlanta, who is Jewish, bought an AR-15 after January 6th as a hedge against antisemitic and political violence. “If Harris wins, tensions could escalate,” he said. “The divisions in the country are so strong, and they’re not going to go away.”

Some politicians are even speaking about civil war publicly. In July, after Trump selected J. D. Vance as his running mate, George Lang, a Republican state senator in Ohio, told a crowd at a campaign rally, “I’m afraid if we lose this one, it’s going to take a civil war to save the country.” He went on, “And if we come down to a civil war I’m glad we got people like . . . Bikers for Trump on our side.” Lang later apologized for the incendiary remarks, but he is hardly alone in expressing such sentiment. Kevin Roberts, the

president of the Heritage Foundation, recently referred to a “second American revolution,” now under way, “which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be.” The pro-Trump commentator Tim Pool has invoked “civil war” dozens of times on X, where he has more than two million followers. Marjorie Taylor Greene prefers calling for “a national divorce.” Trump increasingly refers to the “enemies within.” It’s not just rhetoric. A Reuters investigation identified more than two hundred cases of political violence between January 6, 2021, and August of last year, and noted that “America is grappling with the biggest and most sustained increase in political violence since the 1970s.”

Last year, Michael Haas, a former political-science professor at the University of Hawaii, published a book titled “Beyond Polarized American Democracy: From Mass Society to Coups and Civil War.” Haas, who is now eighty-six and has retired to Los Angeles, told me that he, too, is more concerned than ever about the threat of civil war. He thinks that it could begin with an armed attempt to stop the counting of electoral votes in December. “They’ll start shooting,” Haas told me. “And in the chaos they—these pro-Trump anarchists—become the party of power. That’s where Sinclair Lewis hit it right on the button.” (Lewis’s novel “It Can’t Happen Here,” from 1935, imagines a fascist leader imposing totalitarian rule over the United States.) “The reason they want anarchy is they will be in charge. They have the guns.” I asked Haas what preparations he’s made for such a conflict. He seemed to be relying mainly on topography. “I live on a hill with a gate that’s usually closed,” he told me.

Barbara Walter, a professor at U.C. San Diego and an expert on civil war, recently detailed a worst-case election scenario. Trump loses, and protests of the result, inflamed by the former President, turn into riots. What’s left of the Oath Keepers and the Proud Boys join in. Assassinations first target Republicans deemed traitorous. “The Adam Kinzingers and Liz Cheneys of the world,” Walter said. The mob turns on minorities, immigrants, and other scapegoat

communities. Judges are shot. The worst of this violence occurs in fairly diverse states—Georgia, Nevada, Arizona—as it did during Reconstruction in places where whites felt their privilege endangered, such as Birmingham and Memphis. An economically powerful red state, perhaps Texas, attempts to secede. Ignoring the lessons of Ruby Ridge and Waco, the Harris Administration uses disproportionate force to deter other states from following suit. Innocent people die. Everyday Americans are radicalized by the apparent validation of the extremists’ claim that federal power is the enemy. Civil war is on its way. Walter’s scenario gets foggy from there, but we know that economic growth declines during civil wars, as do health outcomes. Travel is hard. Most troubling to Walter, outside actors get involved. “China, Russia, and Iran would want to help Texas militias,” Walter told me. “Texas could become a dictatorship run by some crazy guy whose best friends are Putin and Xi Jinping.”

Such a chain of events still seems unlikely. But Anna Maria Bounds, a sociology professor at Queens College, told me that people are already “taking sides and prepping for violence.” Mark Zuckerberg has reportedly spent more than a hundred million dollars building what *Wired* called “an opulent techno-Xanadu” on a Hawaiian island, “complete with underground shelter and what appears to be a blast-resistant door.” Average Americans are preparing in less costly ways. Some are stocking up on toilet paper, or buying Taser guns or fish antibiotics. (They’re cheaper than human antibiotics but lack F.D.A. approval.) Others are getting Lasik, filling gas cans, or withdrawing “go money” from the bank. A Utah company called Armormax has been bulletproofing vehicles for three decades. Until recently, most customers were foreign dignitaries with fancy cars. Now many Americans are arming normal ones. Protecting a vehicle’s glass from .44-calibre or 9-millimetre fire starts at around forty thousand dollars. For twice that, an entire vehicle, including its tires, can be made AR-15- and M16-proof. Domestic demand for these services is nearly

seven times what it was in 2020. “We’re selling as many as we can build,” Mark Burton, the C.E.O., told me. On the company’s blog, he recently wrote a post with a section called “How to Survive a Civil War.” (Advice: “Make sure that the gas tank is full.”)



“Don’t worry—if we miss the curtain we’ll just fumble our way to our seats while noisily complaining about the unreliability of the subway.”

Cartoon by P. C. Vey

In late September, the *Wall Street Journal* published a story titled “The Most Surprising New Gun Owners Are U.S. Liberals.” It noted the recent creation of gun groups marketed to Democrats, including one in Los Angeles called L.A. Progressive Shooters. Nearly three in ten liberals now own guns, according to a University of Chicago survey; researchers at Johns Hopkins have determined that more than half of Democratic gun buyers since 2020 are first-time owners. One of them is Bradley Garrett, a forty-three-year-old academic and the author of “Bunker,” an account of

Americans planning for the end times. This sort of prepping seems to have increased in the run-up to the election, he said. “You can imagine infighting breaking out in pockets of the United States, and progressives would be at a severe disadvantage,” he told me. “They don’t have the weapons or the preparation.” Garrett, who lives in Southern California, bought a shotgun this spring: “I’m on a five-acre ranch pretty far out. But, if things devolved in L.A. very quickly, I can imagine people fleeing to the desert and looking for a refuge—and that’s not gonna be at my house.” Others are taking less militaristic measures. A recent attendee of a Homesteaders of America event where participants preserved food told me that some were preparing provisions in case of political violence. “They kept talking about being ready for when ‘they come,’ ” she recalled. “Just ‘they.’ ”

In May, I spoke on the phone with a man named John Ramey, who was vague about his location. “I’m at the homestead of someone who hired me to help him choose where and how to build a home to deal with the full range of threats,” he said. The panhandle of Idaho and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan are both good places to weather the worst of climate change, he explained, “but, depending on your politics, you’re very clearly going to choose one over the other for the threat of civil war.”

Ramey has done as much as anyone to help the act of prepping trade its tinfoil hat for an Eagle Scout badge. He worked as a Silicon Valley investor and entrepreneur, and then as an “innovations adviser” in the Obama Administration. In 2018, he launched a Web site called the Prepared, a resource for people interested in disaster packing lists, gear reviews, and emergency plans, offered in a refreshingly measured tone. Readers can learn how to use two-way radios, safely store water, and obtain body armor. Also, where to buy the best wet wipes. When Ramey sold the site, in 2022, it had eight million annual readers. “Preparedness is now part of modern adulting,” he said.

Today, Ramey is a disaster consultant who, among other services, helps clients build fortified homesteads in rural areas. His own politics seem to lie in a no man's land: he's a supporter of both expansive gun rights and expanding the number of Justices on the Supreme Court. But, like Drew Miller, he doesn't particularly care who hires him. "There's the guy quoting a bullshit Newsmaxy thing about how 'eight hundred thousand illegals have a voter I.D.,'" he told me of his customers. "Then, there's a Silicon Valley leader, a blue-hearted liberal, who'll point to what the Supreme Court is doing with Roe. They've both concluded the system is broken." Twice during our recent conversations, Ramey quoted a grim Thomas Jefferson line: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." He told me, "It's proven in human history that you create an institution, you create rules, and they'll eventually reach their endgame. Things become unrepairable. The only answer is to build a new house." He meant this both metaphorically and literally. "A client worked for an elections bureau in a blue state during the last cycle and the MAGAs wanted to kill him," he said. "So he sold his house and left." (Such threats have since become commonplace. In Georgia, election officials have started keeping Narcan beside voting tabulators, after receiving a spate of fentanyl-laced letters. In Pennsylvania, a building that houses an elections office is now encircled by a barricade of protective boulders.)

In early August, I met Ramey in the mountains of central Colorado. He is a tall, languid man in his late thirties who sometimes lapses into tech-bro speak, as when referring to his "founder" pals. A few weeks earlier, a federal judge had dismissed Jack Smith's classified-documents case against Trump, in a move that many considered partisan. "Our society put a lot of effort into building systems for redress, like the justice system," Ramey told me. "But when they fail—as they are now—we go back to the only tool available: violence." He showed me around the remote mountain home of one of his family members, for whom he had created an

elaborate prepping setup. Cisterns held three thousand gallons of water; solar panels and batteries stored three weeks of power; dehydrated food was stacked high in a barn. “The people talking about civil war are not pariahs anymore,” he said.

We sat down on a porch with a friend of Ramey’s, Chris Ellis, who’d just come from a cold swim in a nearby alpine lake. In the course of a decade, Ellis conducted military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo and then earned a Ph.D. in political science from Cornell. In 2023, he became the chief of future operations for the United States Northern Command, which is in charge of assessing disaster threats to the U.S. “We look at everything from fentanyl to nuclear threats and wildfires,” he said. “The only conversation I have not had is zombie apocalypse.” (Ellis spoke to me as a private individual, not on behalf of the Department of Defense.) Ellis and Ramey diverge on the likelihood of civil war. “Are there concerning things happening? Yes,” Ellis said. “But I don’t like ‘civil war’ being thrown around.” Still, he acknowledged a real fraying of the social fabric.

Most people, Ellis and Ramey concede, can’t afford a worst-case homestead. But they can make their current homes more resilient by tightening the screws on the front door, adding window bars, securing a backup power source, and getting to know their neighbors. “The people around you are often your best protection,” Ellis said. “Say hello.” And, if all else fails, drive. Ramey took me out to his Ford F-350. “I’ll show you my bag in the back seat,” he said. Bugout bags are an essential prepper accessory, subject to endless dissection and debate. Dion Coleman, who goes by Marine X on his YouTube channel, recommends packing pepper gel in anticipation of political unrest, to “disengage the enemy and get away,” as he put it to me recently. Coleman said that a Bic lighter offers a cheap combat hack: “Hold it in your fist and you’re less likely to break fingers when you throw a punch.” Bugout stashes are ultimately idiosyncratic. “I have guns, gold, potassium iodide, antibiotics, batteries, water, gas masks from the Israeli Defense

Force,” Sam Altman, the C.E.O. of OpenAI, has said. The writer Walter Kirn recently told his hundred and seventy thousand followers on X that, along with Oreo cookies and a multi-tool, his car’s bugout kit has “an emergency library of essential world literature,” including “The Arabian Nights” and “old copies of Norton Anthologies.” These, he explained, are to “restart civilization.” Reached by phone, Kirn noted a number of other books in the trunk—“Moby-Dick,” Sherlock Holmes, and a compendium of Oxford philosophy—and joked that, using the contents of his car, he could “probably find Christ Church college again.” He went on, “In a real breakdown, I might be able to trade them or teach. Prepping is really a meditation on what you value.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Ramey pulled a first-aid kit from his bugout bag. “If you get shot in the lung, I can save you,” he said. Next, he took out a portable solar panel for charging devices. He withdrew charging cables,

laminated maps, a compass (“‘Death by G.P.S.’ is a term in the search-and-rescue community”), duct tape, a multi-tool, a battery bank, a ham radio, a USB drive containing vital personal documents, food that wouldn’t cause thirst or require cooking (“compressed bricks of carbs held together by coconut”), a butane stove, a lightweight sleeping bag, a set of clothes, a water filter, two water bottles (“Two is one, and one is none”), a waterproof deck of cards (“mental health”), a wad of cash, and—with comment—a 9-millimetre pistol.

Ramey asked how I was feeling. I was, to use a phrase he likes, somewhere near “the bottom of the ladder in the pit of despair.” He nodded. Time to climb out. Start by stockpiling two weeks of food, water, and power, he advised, calling this “turtle mode.” He also suggested learning new skills. Knowing how to use a gun is good, he said, but so is being able to make a fire and read a map. Ramey repeated a prepper truism: “The more you know, the less you need.”

I called up some survival schools, which are now catering to a new clientele. “It used to be mostly soldier-of-fortune and doomsday-prepper guys who took the courses,” Shane Hobel, who runs Mountain Scout, in East Fishkill, New York, told me recently. “Now it’s women. Even Democrats. People who used to make fun of my school.” He said that he’s noticed a “quiet desperation building into a slow hum: people concerned about political unrest, the dollar dropping.” He teaches how to improvise rustic shelter, use tools and weapons, rely on camouflage, and administer first aid. Dave Canterbury, the founder of the Pathfinder school, in Ohio, and the author of the popular Bushcraft book series, told me that his courses are gaining popularity, too, though most of his students aren’t specific about why they’ve come. “They probably don’t want to end up on watch lists,” he said. “And, anyway, it’s nobody’s business.”

Anamaria Teodorescu, who immigrated to the U.S. from Romania twenty-two years ago and now lives in New Jersey, decided to pursue survival education last year because, she told me, “America is dying.” She sees food shortages and election malfeasance on the horizon. “I lived through it in Romania,” she said. “Hungry people won’t ask for bread—they’ll kill for it.” She’s taken ten of Hobel’s courses, bringing her six-year-old daughter along. “She learned camouflage a couple of weeks ago,” Teodorescu said. Hobel shared other stories. The parents of a group of homeschoilers had signed up because, they said, the government can’t be trusted. An elderly Jewish couple in Greenwich Village had learned how to repurpose sidewalk detritus (cardboard can be used for warmth; scraps of clothing can filter water or mark trails), but “they wanted more,” Hobel said. He helped them plan an escape route from their home. Among Hobel’s special offerings is a course on the “art of invisibility”—also helpful, he said, in times of unrest. “Never walk down the street with your viewpoint,” he told me. “Always walk with the viewpoint of the person who wants to attack you. When he turns around to look at you, you’ll already be behind the dumpster.” I tried this while walking my dog.

At Fieldcraft Survival, a training outfit in Provo, Utah, students study jujitsu and firearms. The school recently débuted Program 62—a reference to the Homestead Act of 1862, which was designed to grant land to Americans who hadn’t fought for the Confederacy in the Civil War—in which online students create personal preparedness plans and learn about things like ballistic sunglasses, conflict code words, canning, and sealing chest wounds (cost: eight hundred and fifty dollars). Greg Lapin, an instructor at Fieldcraft, told me that most clients “can’t do ten burpees in a row or run up two flights of stairs” and will be “dead within the first five minutes of a gunfight.” He added, “What you should be doing now to prepare is get a gym membership.”

I already had one. So, in September, I visited Sarcraft, a survival school closer to my home, in Atlanta. Alex Bryant, a thirty-three-

year-old Eagle Scout, started it in 2017. For the first few years, his students mostly were white outdoor enthusiasts and military types, but lately he's had an influx of newcomers "who've never hunted, fished, or started a fire," he told me. "They realize that we have the markers of a very tumultuous time." He will soon begin teaching a course related to civil unrest, in which students pack "get home" bags. In the meantime, they continue to learn the essentials: shelter, fire, foraging. A wealth-management adviser who lives in an Atlanta suburb told me that he took Sarcraft's introductory navigation course this summer to prepare for "some militant right-wing nutjobs pulling off acts of violence around the election." He added, "Some people just buy guns. I wanted to know how to get home, too."

Another Sarcraft navigation seminar recently took place in the hills of northern Georgia. Eight of us sat on wooden benches in an open-air shelter, including Ray and Rachel, a father and daughter from Braselton, who had just stocked up on emergency food from 4patriots.com; a young woman named Valerie, from Sharpsburg, who works in finance at a Fortune 500 company and had recently taken up archery; and a middle-aged scientist from Atlanta who was considering buying a gun. Our instructor was a stout, silver-haired veteran of the 82nd Airborne Division named Buck Freitag. "Nobody is shooting at us yet," Freitag deadpanned, when an acorn smacked the metal roof. "If it's gunfire, I'll tell everyone to get down." The second assassination attempt on Trump in a little more than two months had taken place only a few days earlier. A man named Ryan Routh had allegedly set up an SKS-style rifle in the bushes lining the Mar-a-Lago golf course. The Secret Service spotted his weapon before he could fire. "I tried my best," a note that he'd reportedly left behind read. "It is up to you now to finish the job." He offered a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to anyone who did so. At the navigation course, a tattooed mechanic named Mark, sitting next to me with his notebook open, shook his head.

“Now they’re going to start talking about taking our guns again,” he told me. “That could start a civil war.”

Shaun, a bearded fifty-nine-year-old insurance-claims adjuster and a Sarcraft graduate, who was assisting Freitag, nodded. “We’re heading for a societal upset,” he said. “I look at what Scripture says about what’s coming, and I believe it.” Moments later, Mark showed me his Glock, tucked in his belt. “It’s already happened,” he said. “Revolutionary War. Civil War. No society lasts. We’re on the edge again.” When society collapses, the biggest threat, he figures, will be “the ex-Navy *seal* that’s come out of retirement. The government is paying him. All this guy knows is blood. He’s Rambo. And if he’s got a killing itinerary and they’re paying the bill, that’s all he cares about.” Mark had seen something about this on YouTube. At the moment, he felt reasonably prepared. He can shoot, ride a motorcycle, and administer first aid. He has a bugout bag in his truck. But he wanted to know how to “read the squiggly lines on a map.”

Freitag passed out compasses and demonstrated how to plot a precise path. We split into groups, each with a handful of navigation targets: metal posts with buckets on them, labelled with a letter indicated on our map. I was partnered with Mark, who decided to pretend that we were fleeing government troops. “*Federales*,” Mark exclaimed. “We’re trying to get free from *federales!*” We reached the first target, a bucket marked “Q”—for “Quebec,” Mark determined, a safe haven from the authorities coming for our guns. After pausing for a moment, we headed to the next target and stumbled off course into someone’s yard. A Confederate flag was visible on the porch. “See, that wasn’t so long ago,” Mark said.

Most experts think that another full-scale American civil war is highly unlikely in the near term. Ellis, the future-operations director, explained that it would take leadership, funding, and a singularly explosive disagreement to start such a conflict. “The

eighteen-sixties had slavery,” he said. “You may despise your uncle at Thanksgiving. But do you disagree about something enough to get in a gray coat, he gets in a blue coat, and you meet on a field of battle to shoot at each other?” And if so, he said, who are the opposing generals? Could Erik Prince—the founder of Blackwater, who recently said, “Maybe it’s worth going to war over defining what a gender is”—command a *MAGA* army? Would an Antifa member lead a coalition of the left? America has periodic eruptions of political unrest, Ellis argued, but none has come close to a civil war. “It’s not Black Lives Matter protests, or January 6th, or Thomas Crooks,” he said. Even the hypothetical secession of Texas might fall short of provoking civil war. “President Harris would have a decision,” Ellis theorized. “Am I going to commit federal forces to bring a rebellious state to heel through war? Or am I just going to send in the military and treat it more like a civil criminal action and arrest Governor Abbott and the legislature that voted for this to happen?”

Garrett, the author of “Bunker,” thinks that there is still too much fellow-feeling in America for a civil war—a conclusion he reached while witnessing surprising moments of coöperation and camaraderie between militaristic *MAGA* types and back-to-the-land hippies at bunker communities that he has visited in recent years. Some recent research can be read optimistically, too: only three per cent of U.S. adults—around eight million people—are “very or completely willing to threaten, injure, or kill to advance a political aim,” according to the U.C. Davis study. Sarah Kreps, a professor of government at Cornell, pointed me to another reason for hope. “I’ve heard about the ‘cyber 9/11’ or the ‘cyber Pearl Harbor’ for at least two decades,” she said, referring to the possibility of a large-scale hack that causes national paralysis. “Nothing remotely of that magnitude has happened. So it’s this question of whether these were just fearmongers, or whether that prediction of an apocalyptic scenario was, in fact, a reason why it didn’t happen.” The more we discuss threats, Kreps said, “the more we guard against them.” In

this way, the civil-war talk of late has, counterintuitively, given her reason for optimism. “As these scenarios get gamed out, the political space has more capacity to anticipate and guard against them,” she told me. Still, our deepening obsession with civil war points to something real. “It’s not 1861,” Bounds, the sociology professor, said. “But there’s a hostility growing in this country.”

For those who remain concerned about civil war but can’t leave the couch, there are apps. Earlier this year, Drew Miller, of Fortitude Ranch, released one called Collapse Survivor, whose full suite of features costs ten dollars a year. In addition to helping users assemble survival supplies, and alerting them to impending disasters “before the government will,” the app allows users to play out a number of disaster scenarios, including “AI Uranium Enrichment Terrorist Nuclear Attacks,” “Grid Down, Cyber,” and “End of Earth Asteroid.” (Pro tip: gather bugs.)

This summer, I spent an hour going through one of Miller’s civil-war scenarios. It had several precipitating events, according to the troubling text that filled my smartphone’s screen: killings at Democratic events and offices; attacks on judges and courthouses; a proposed AR-15 ban.

A Democratic congresswoman announced, “This is a civil war, and if we don’t start fighting fire with fire, we will lose.” There was widespread looting and home invasions. Police quit. Prison inmates escaped. A neglected nuclear reactor released tons of radiation. Members of Greenpeace killed climate deniers, and police shot curfew breakers. Millions of residents fled New York and other cities after they were suddenly seized by gangs. Militias spread. Food dwindled. Biden died of a stroke after winning a close election—this was before he dropped out—and Kamala Harris was sworn in, prompting Trump to announce, “If she stays on as an unelected President you’re really going to see violence, this country truly ripped apart.”

I was prompted with questions as the crisis worsened. If there was a ten-per-cent chance of being shot or severely injured at a voting precinct, would you vote? A private militia is forming in your neighborhood—will you join? Where is a safe location to bug out? Some of the questions, I noticed, seemed to point to the wisdom of joining Fortitude Ranch. For most of them, I had no answer. At the end of the simulation, Texas seceded in what was dubbed Texit, and various counties in Oregon and Colorado did the same, creating “American Oregon” and “Real Colorado.” The narration concluded, “The *POTUS* election collapse is over, but the U.S. breakup and civil war has just begun.” Suddenly thirsty, I went to the sink.

A post-simulation summary appeared on my screen: I was among the survivors. I plugged the phone into an outlet and went for a long walk. It was a late summer day in America. I smiled at my neighbors and wondered what plans they’d made. I considered the lay of the land more closely now, and noted what was edible, and what would be edible soon, in the parks and the public spaces I passed. When I got home, I did something I’d been putting off: I began to pack a bag. ♦



Charles Bethea, a staff writer, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2008. He covers crime, politics, food, local media, and the American South.

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

[A Reporter at Large](#)

The Shipwreck Detective

Nigel Pickford has spent a lifetime searching for sunken treasure—without leaving dry land.

By [Sam Knight](#)

November 4, 2024



“You get to know whether you’re right or not,” Nigel Pickford said, of identifying wrecks. “That doesn’t often happen with history.”

Illustration by Owen Pomery

The wreck was like a bug on the wall, a jumbly shape splayed on the abyssal plain. It was noticed by a team of autonomous-underwater-vehicle operators on board a subsea exploration vessel, working at an undisclosed location in the Atlantic Ocean, about a thousand miles from the nearest shore. The analysts belonged to a small private company that specializes in deep-sea search operations; I have been asked not to name it. They were looking for something else. In the past decade, the company has helped to transform the exploration of the seabed by deploying fleets of A.U.V.s—underwater drones—which cruise in formation, mapping large areas of the ocean floor with high-definition imagery.

“We find wrecks everywhere, just blunder into them,” Mensun Bound, a maritime archeologist who works frequently with the company, told me. The pressures of time and money mean that it is usually not possible to stop. (Top-of-the-line search vessels can cost about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars a day to charter.) “Sometimes it’s heartbreaking,” Bound said. A few years ago, he was with a team that stumbled across a wreck in the Indian Ocean. They had a few hours to spare, so they brought a sodden box up to the surface. It was full of books. “That was the most exciting thing I’ve ever found in my life,” Bound said. “But then the question becomes: What do we do with it?” The seabed is a complicated, as well as an expensive, place to operate in. So they put it back.

This Atlantic wreck was beguiling. An R.O.V.—a remotely operated vehicle, connected by a cable to the exploration vessel—was sent down to take a closer look. It was the remains of an old wooden sailing ship, stuffed with cargo, lying some six thousand metres below the surface—much deeper than the Titanic. The contents seemed to be Asian in origin: intricate lacquered screens and bolts of cloth, thousands of slender rattan canes, and an extraordinary array of porcelain, all preserved in the darkness of the ocean. “It was just cascading in these spills down around the slopes and undulations of the seabed,” Bound recalled. “And there were barrels there, which hadn’t been opened. They were sitting there intact.”

There is something almost dangerously tantalizing about an undiscovered shipwreck. It exists on the edge of the real, containing death and desire. Lost ships are lost knowledge, waiting to be regained. “It’s like popping the locks on an old suitcase and you lift the lid,” Bound told me. Bound grew up on the Falkland Islands in the nineteen-fifties. In 2022, he found the Endurance, Ernest Shackleton’s polar-exploration ship, under the ice of the Weddell Sea, off Antarctica. “On a shipwreck, everything, in theory, that was there on that ship when it went down is still there,” he said. “It’s all the product of one unpremeditated instant of time.”

What was the ship? There was an obvious person to ask. In 1993, Bound had been searching for the remains of a nineteenth-century English trading vessel, the Caroline, in the Straits of Malacca, in Southeast Asia, when he and his colleagues pulled up a much older, bronze cannon instead. The cannon was marked with a relief of a sailing ship, the name of the Dutch East India Company, and a date, 1604. “I had no idea what it was doing there or anything,” Bound said. But he had heard of a self-taught shipwreck researcher, based in England, who was said to have an unusually broad grasp of the world’s lost vessels. Bound contacted the researcher, Nigel Pickford, by satellite phone from the ship.

Within twenty-four hours, Pickford replied, saying that Bound and his team were on the site of the Battle of Cape Rachado, which was fought between Portuguese and Dutch fleets over several days in August, 1606. The cannon probably belonged to a ship called the Nassau. “He said, ‘O.K., you found one wreck by itself,’ ” Bound recalled. “‘There should be three wrecks nearby.’ And he even gave us a rough direction.”

Just over a kilometre away, Bound and his team found the wreck mounds of three more ships—another Dutch warship, the Middelburg, and two Portuguese vessels, the São Salvador and Dom Duarte de Guerra’s Galleon—which had become tangled together and sunk in flames. “There they were, still tied together on the bottom of the Straits of Malacca, just as they’d gone down,” Bound said. “You could see the violence.” A Portuguese cannon was bent like an elbow, with fragments of a Dutch cannonball embedded inside it.



"I came, I saw, I didn't know anybody."

Cartoon by Roland High

Two years later, Bound led an excavation of the site on behalf of the National Museum of Malaysia. "Had it not been for Nigel, that would never have happened," he said. I asked Bound whether there were any other experts, comparable to Pickford, whom he could have called in that situation. "I can't think of anybody of his calibre," he replied. "I can think of one or two others. But they are more swashbuckling, let's say." The shipwreck world swims with hucksters; Pickford deals in facts that you can use. "He is a serious scholar," Bound said. "His approach, his attention to detail, his note-taking, the insight that he brings."

News of the Atlantic discovery found its way to Pickford within a few days. Earlier this year, he showed me images taken by the R.O.V. on his laptop, in a modern apartment decorated with contemporary art and Asian ceramics, overlooking the rooftops of

Cambridge. Pickford is seventy-eight, with white hair, crooked teeth, and a mild, understated manner that could be mistaken entirely for gentleness, or English politeness, but is also the mark of a lifetime spent among secrets.

“My things are not always well organized. I’ve got so much bloody stuff,” Pickford muttered, clicking around on his desktop. A bookshelf next to him held a seven-volume history of the Royal Navy and a copy of “Dictionary of Disasters at Sea During the Age of Steam.” “I think it’s this one,” Pickford said. The screen suddenly filled with barrels, china, and chests. A ghostly sword lay on the ocean floor. We stared for a few moments. “It’s incredibly real, isn’t it?” he said.

Pickford is fascinated by the era of early colonial expansion and also, to be frank, by treasure. “There are millions of shipwrecks going back millennia, obviously. From an archeological point of view, I suppose they’re all of interest,” he told me. “From a treasure-hunting point of view, about naught point naught one of them are of interest.” Pickford nicknamed the unknown wreck Deep Pots and, without anybody ever formally asking him to, he set out to identify the vessel.

Pickford is the purveyor of a singular sort of information. In the course of fifty years, his research has led to the discovery of dozens of shipwrecks, containing more than two hundred million dollars’ worth of recovered cargoes. Clients—specialist salvage companies and their investors—tend to call him, rather than the other way around. “I never really bother to look for people,” he said. His work encompasses every ocean and a time span of roughly five centuries. One day, when we were chatting, Pickford mentioned that he had been hired to investigate a couple of wrecks near the Comoro Islands, off the coast of Mozambique, in East Africa. “I can’t tell you anything about them,” he said, affably enough.

Pickford works on a retainer or for between five and ten per cent of the proceeds of any treasure that is recovered. Because of a medical condition, Mallory-Weiss syndrome, which can lead to severe internal bleeding if he vomits, he does not go to sea. Instead, Pickford is a creature of libraries and maritime archives, which he returns to again and again, a missable figure in a tweed coat with elbow patches, standing aside to let you pass.

In 1994, Pickford published “The Atlas of Shipwrecks and Treasure,” which included a gazetteer of more than fourteen hundred shipwrecks and has become something of a reference work in the field. “As well as greed, there has to be a love of gambling, a strong tendency to dream, a boundless optimism, a passion for quests, an enjoyment of physical risks, and a perverse desire to attempt that which is inherently difficult,” he wrote, of looking for vanished ships. Pickford introduced the gazetteer with a quote from “The Tempest”: “O, the cry did knock / Against my very heart! Poor souls, they perish’d!” He dedicated the book to his father, Thomas, who was also a shipwreck researcher.

“He’s not an adventurer,” Pickford’s wife, Rosamund, told me. “He’s a detective.” Other people involved in the shipwreck world—maritime archeologists, divers, treasure hunters—speak of the thrill and addiction of their discoveries. But for Pickford these pangs of elation tend to be private, if not silent: opening an e-mail, taking a phone call, deciphering a centuries-old cargo manifest in a climate-controlled basement somewhere. Pickford enjoys the binary outcomes of his work. The diamonds are in the strong room, or they aren’t. “You get to know whether you’re right or not,” he said. “That doesn’t often happen with history.” The moment that Pickford craves is when the two realms collide—the archive and the artifact—and the years in between suddenly melt away. “I think it’s something fairly embedded in our psyche, actually, this desire,” he said. “It’s connecting with the past, really. It’s all about time.”

A porcelain expert who studied images from the Deep Pots wreck dated the pieces on the seabed to the last twenty years of the seventeenth century. Pickford went to his files and tried to narrow down possible candidates for the vessel. The wreck's position, in the mid-Atlantic, suggested that he was looking for a ship that had been returning to Europe from Asia via the Caribbean when it sank —a relatively uncommon route. "It was unusual," Pickford said. He thought of the Azie, a Dutch East India Company ship that sank in 1683 and which he had been curious about for years. He hired a researcher to scour the company's records, in The Hague, but these revealed that the Azie's crew was rescued after a storm north of Cape Verde, a thousand miles from the wreck site.

For a time, Pickford considered the Oriflamme, a French trader that disappeared while crossing the Atlantic in 1691, on its way back from Siam. But an account in the French colonial archives, in Aix-en-Provence, indicated that the Oriflamme could have made it as far as the Bay of Biscay. Next, Pickford wondered about the Modena—a grand English ship named after Mary of Modena, the wife of King James II—which traded in Asia for the East India Company. The last credible sighting of the Modena was on October 5, 1694, when passing seamen recognized pieces of her elaborate painted woodwork floating in the ocean after a violent storm. The Modena had set sail for England from Barbados just over a month before.

I had assumed that Pickford would spend most of his time re-navigating old voyages, ruminating on lee shores and the direction of winds. But treasure hunting begins and ends with cargo. "You always start off with 'What did it have on it?'" he told me. "Did it *really* have that on it?" In the case of the Deep Pots wreck, the only way to offer a tentative identification would be to find a persuasive match between what was lying on the ocean floor and what was loaded onto the vessel when she sailed.

The Modena weighed somewhere between eight hundred and a thousand tons. She was the largest ship in the East India Company's fleet when she was built, in the Blackwall docks of East London, in 1685. While much of her cargo was recorded in company correspondence, which Pickford could study at the British Library, a lot of it went undocumented, either by accident or as "private trade," to avoid certain duties.

Colonial trading ships of the period were worlds unto themselves. They went to sea for years at a time, their decks crammed with an improbable medley of people and things. When the Modena left England for India, in February, 1692, she carried soldiers, lascars, sixteen company apprentices, and a group of Armenian merchants among her passengers. Her holds contained lead, iron, a thousand pieces of woollen cloth, eight spare anchors, twenty barrels of tar, two hundred and fifty swords, thirteen chests of silver bars, medicine, and a consignment of unsold coral.

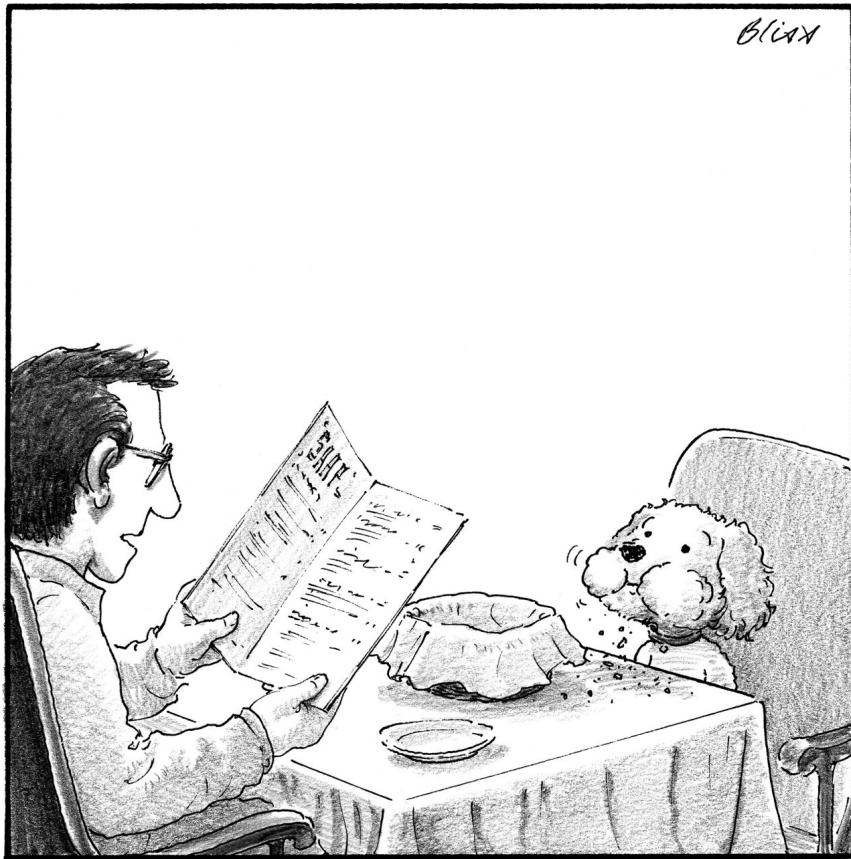
At first glance, the Modena's likely cargo on her return from Asia didn't tally with what was found at the Deep Pots site. The most conspicuous objects on the seabed were porcelain and thousands of rattan canes, intended for use as walking sticks or in furniture-making. The Modena's final trading voyage lasted almost three years—and included stops in the Canary Islands, Cape Town, Ceylon, Bombay, and Persia. But she didn't visit anywhere known to export porcelain or canes in sizable quantities.

Fortunately for Pickford, however, much of her odyssey was witnessed by Edward Barlow, the chief mate on the Sampson (another ship in the same fleet), who kept a vivid journal. Working from Barlow's descriptions and the East India Company records, Pickford spent more than two years assembling the story of the Modena. "It surprises me sometimes," he said. "Why do I enjoy digging around?" Pickford takes copious notes, with half an eye on information that could turn out to be useful on another wreck

someday. He circles back to documents that stay in his mind, and photographs them.

One day, about six months into his research, Pickford came across a letter that caught his attention. A twenty-one-year-old apprentice sailing on the Modena missed the ship on its departure from the Canary Islands, in April, 1692, and was left behind. His name was Samuel Causton. When Causton's father found out, he sent a letter, overland, to Surat, on the east coast of India, asking for his son's possessions to be unloaded and held for his arrival on a later ship. Causton's baggage was not unusual for a young administrator of the period, a mixture of gifts and personal goods that might be traded. Pickford wrote them down. The list included two cases of brandy, a box of tobacco, three beaver hats (two white, one black), and two silver watches.

Later that year, Mensun Bound, the archeologist, directed a second survey of the Deep Pots site. He worked from a laptop at the kitchen table of his home, a fifteenth-century manor outside Oxford, while an R.O.V. probed some three and a half miles below the Atlantic. At the far end of the site, among the scattered porcelain, there was a small chest—the kind that might have been used for someone's luggage.



"Try not to fill up on bread."
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

“The box was open,” Bound said. Inside were some trinkets: two china bowls, beads and buttons, the compressed remains of what might have been leather hats, and two heavily corroded, but recognizably silver, watches.

Bound called Pickford. It was as if he already knew they were there. “Everything seemed to confirm his research,” Bound said. At some point during the surveys of the wreck, a watch was brought up to the search ship and cleaned, revealing elaborate scrollwork, a jewelled interior, and its maker: Edward East, of London. East was a clockmaker to King Charles I. The King gave away one of his watches on the morning of his execution, in 1649. At the time of the Modena’s disappearance, East still had a workshop, on Temple Bar, in the heart of the city. An R.O.V. took the water-blackened watch—and its stopped time—back to the bottom of the sea.

In the course of Pickford's career, the business of prospecting for wealth in the world's oceans has changed dramatically. When he started out, in the seventies, commercial salvage firms used explosives and steel claws to rip apart wrecks on the seabed, a technique known as "smash and grab." Most recoveries were of large, nonferrous cargoes sunk during the First and Second World Wars—tin, copper, gold, and silver—and very few were lifted from more than a few hundred metres of water.

Now the most advanced operations, using technology developed for the oil-and-gas industry or subsea mining, deploy unmanned vehicles—with delicate instruments, suction cups, and laser-scanning capabilities—in waters fifteen times as deep. In 2014, Pickford helped to locate the S.S. Tilawa, a British merchant ship sunk by a Japanese submarine in the Indian Ocean in 1942. Two hundred and eighty people died in the attack. The Tilawa came to rest some four thousand metres below the surface. R.O.V.s brought up all but twenty-seven of the twenty-three hundred and ninety-one silver bars that she was carrying—a recovery rate of 98.9 per cent. (The bullion, which had been on its way to the South African mint, has a current value of about forty-five million dollars.) With enough money and expertise, almost anything can be found.

As the technology has progressed, however, the rules governing shipwrecks have tightened considerably. During the twentieth century, decades of looting by divers and unlicensed salvage companies stripped some seafloor clean. "Once, we had man's entire history as a seafarer, and everything else, literally spread out before us within easy diving depth around the Mediterranean and elsewhere," Bound told me. "And now, one by one, they've all been just picked out of existence."

In response, nation-states have toughened laws in order to protect their territorial waters. (The shores of the United Kingdom alone are thought to hold more than fifty thousand shipwrecks.) The open oceans are, in theory, regulated as well. Since 2001, according to

the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the Underwater Cultural Heritage, which has been signed by seventy-eight countries, all wrecks more than a century old should be left alone and preserved in situ “as the first option.” Commercial exploitation is banned. Parallel attempts to crack down on antiquities crimes and an increasing awareness of cultural theft mean that it is also harder to sell recovered booty once it comes to the surface.

The result is that Pickford and his clients operate in contested waters. On the one hand, they have the skills and, often, the finances to recover spectacular things. On the other hand, they are ever more likely to be challenged by states and archeologists over their right to do so. (The salvage of the Tilawa led to a five-year legal dispute and a successful appeal by the South African government in the U.K.’s Supreme Court.) When I suggested to Jessica Berry, the founder of the Maritime Archaeology Sea Trust, a British nonprofit that monitors unauthorized salvage operations, that it would be difficult for Pickford and some of his collaborators to start their careers today, she replied, “They would all be nicked.”

As a historian, it is possible for Pickford to stay apart from these matters, to some extent. “The people he’s researching for, they’re the ones that are doing the stuff that’s either right or wrong,” Alex Hildred, the head of research for the Mary Rose Trust, a charity that cares for the remains of Henry VIII’s favorite warship, told me. Others take a harder line. “I absolutely respect the quality of the research that Nigel Pickford does,” another archeologist told me. “I think that some of the people that he works with should not be allowed anywhere near historic wrecks.”

Spending time with Pickford, I couldn’t quite make up my mind. In almost every way, he was a quintessential gentleman scholar: modest, shy, comfortable with silence. Then, one day last January, I saw him crossing Sloane Square, in London, in jeans and with a bag slung over his shoulder, walking with a pair of salvage associates, and he suddenly resembled an aging safecracker,

holding out for one last job. Pickford does not disguise where his sympathies lie. If a shipwreck is found, it is human nature to look inside. He sees most archeologists as naïve and utopian. “It’s like they live in this benign world, where everyone is good and, you know, *nice* to each other. And no one’s at all acquisitive,” he said. Searching for sunken treasure has never been like that. “It’s all thorny questions. It’s the most ridiculous business,” Pickford said. “I don’t know why anyone would get involved.”

On a Sunday afternoon in early December, 1930, an Italian salvage vessel, the Artiglio, was stationed at the entrance of Quiberon Bay, off the coast of Brittany. The Artiglio, whose name means “talon,” was a converted fishing trawler and the flagship of the Società Ricuperi Marittimi (*SORIMA*), a Genoese company that pioneered the modern salvage industry. Old pictures of *SORIMA* at work look like stills from a Wes Anderson movie. Divers were lowered in large white articulated shells, which were made in Germany. They communicated with the surface by means of a telephone. The Artiglio carried half a ton of macaroni in its hold, for sustenance, and detonators stuffed in its bunk-bed drawers. When the crew struck gold, they celebrated by playing ballads on mandolins. The leader of *SORIMA* was Commendatore Giovanni Quaglia, a.k.a. the Quail, who wore a jewelled tiepin in the shape of the bird. No one had ever worked at such depths before.

That afternoon, the crew of the Artiglio was working on the remains of the Florence H., an American munitions ship that had caught fire and sunk in 1918. Because of her volatile cargo, the salvage operation had been slow at first, and nothing had gone wrong. Then, around 2 p.m., Alberto Gianni, *SORIMA*’s lead diver, fired six charges that had been laid under the Florence H. to blow the stern apart. The sea erupted. Witnesses saw a crater open and a mushroom cloud rise. The Artiglio disappeared. Twelve of her nineteen crew members were killed.

A salvor is a risktaker. Quaglia hired more divers and bought a new boat, the Artiglio II. There were still fortunes to be found. The shores of Europe were littered with wrecks from the First World War. SORIMA collected “no cure, no pay” (the equivalent of “no win, no fee”) contracts from governments and insurers, seeking to recoup their losses. In London, the company was represented by Count Giuseppe Buraggi, who lived in Mayfair. Sometime in the thirties, Buraggi hired a young Englishman, Thomas Pickford, to work with him.

Nigel doesn’t know much about his father’s early life. Thomas was born in East London in 1913. He left school at thirteen and apprenticed, for a time, as a tea-maker. But, after working with Buraggi, he was recruited by the Royal Navy. During the Second World War, five salvage firms were appointed to retrieve precious cargoes sunk by the Germans and to keep Britain’s ports accessible. The south coast was covered by Risdon Beazley Ltd., a firm named for its taciturn founder and based in Southampton. Risdon Beazley vessels helped to keep the D Day landing beaches clear, and the firm went on to become the largest salvage company in the world. After the war, Thomas, who was nicknamed the Commander for his time at the Admiralty, became Risdon Beazley’s shipwreck researcher.

Pickford grew up in a quiet, unhappy house near Richmond Park, in southwest London. His father wore a bowler hat and went off to the City each day. Sometimes he travelled overseas. Pickford’s mother, Sylvia, drank and had affairs. She left when he was a teenager. Pickford wanted to be a writer. He studied English at Cambridge, where he met Rosamund, who was still in high school. They married when she turned eighteen.

Pickford trained to become a teacher, and, for a time, the young couple lived with Pickford’s father in London. “You would never have guessed that there was any connection with shipwrecks if you went in the house,” Rosamund told me. The rooms were crowded

with glass-fronted display cabinets, full of antiques that Sylvia had bought and left behind. Thomas didn't talk much. "He was an extremely private man, I suppose you'd say," Nigel observed. Rosamund found Thomas distant, rather than stern, and prone to getting lost in his thoughts—a trait that she has noticed in Pickford, too. "Abstraction seems to run in that family," she said.

In the seventies, the postwar salvage boom faded. Metal prices were volatile. The easy pickings were gone. Risdon Beazley was acquired by Smit Tak, a Dutch rival, and the fleet was gradually depleted. (Beazley died in 1979.) Thomas was worn out. When he was asked to conduct some research on wrecks in Asia, he handed off the work to his son. There was no particular conversation about it. "I don't know why," Pickford recalled. "He suggested I might like to do it instead, rather than him, slightly out of the blue, and I thought, Well, why not?" Pickford was working as an English teacher and helping out in a couple of youth clubs. I asked whether Thomas had ever given him any advice. "No. Just gave me a load of papers," Pickford replied. It was his father's shipwreck archive. "Lots of typed letters. Lots of handwriting," Pickford said. "Actually quite good handwriting."

We were in his study in Cambridge. Pickford and his wife had moved into the apartment last year and were still transferring all his files from another property, in Kent. The top shelf of one cupboard was crammed with brown folders—his father's papers. The Risdon Beazley archive has a near-mythical status among treasure hunters and maritime historians alike. The company's records were broken up in the late seventies and scattered. But no one did more research for the firm than the Commander, and many of his documents survive.

Pickford handed me a clutch of his father's letters from 1954, relating to the sinking of the S.S. Juno in the English Channel, in 1917, and the location of its copper cargo ("bottom of No 2 hold, further quantity at bottom of No 3 hold"), as well as a note from

Beazley himself. In 1993, Pickford helped to find the R.M.S. Douro—a Victorian transatlantic liner that went down carrying twenty-eight thousand gold coins in 1882—because he was intrigued by a note of his father’s: “Douro (ph), 1882, 53,000 pounds, Bay of Biscay.” Thomas died a few years later.



“You seem nice, but between work, sleep, and the eight hours a day mysteriously lost to my phone, I just don’t have time to date.”

Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Pickford came to know his father, in a way, by reading his files. “I think I understood him much more,” he told me. Thomas was both more romantic and more pedantic than his son had imagined. “I guess I am as well, on some level,” Pickford said. While his father focussed on twentieth-century wrecks, he also harbored dreams of finding the San José, a legendary Spanish treasure ship that sank off Cartagena in 1708. (It was discovered, in 2015, by the Colombian Navy. Its location is now a state secret.) “He wasn’t as

good as me, I have to say, on the old stuff,” Pickford observed. Taken together, the research of the Pickfords, plus their share of the Risdon Beazley archive, may constitute one of the most valuable repositories of treasure information in the world.

The Deep Pots wreck reminded Pickford of another nameless ship that he identified, a quarter of a century before. Back then, Captain Mike Hatcher, a British-born treasure hunter, was searching for a Portuguese galleon around the Maluku Islands of eastern Indonesia. Hatcher began prospecting in the seventies, salvaging brass propellers from Second World War wrecks in a yacht that he sailed alone. In the eighties, he found two fabulous porcelain cargoes that, between them, sold for more than seventeen million dollars at auction. But in the spring of 1999 he was in the doldrums. There was violence in East Timor; he had to give up on the Portuguese galleon. “It was a pretty rough setup,” he said. Hatcher had a permit to search in Indonesian waters, so he called Pickford from his motor yacht, the Restless M, and asked him whether he had any other targets to track down.

In England, Pickford had recently been looking at the fifth edition of “Directions for Sailing to and from the East Indies,” published in 1843, by James Horsburgh, a Scottish sailor who became a hydrographer after being shipwrecked in the Indian Ocean. (The first edition appeared in 1809.) Horsburgh described the existence of a “large Chinese junk” on a reef in the Gaspar Strait, about two hundred and fifty miles north of Jakarta. Pickford told Hatcher about it on the phone. “I said, ‘Why don’t we go and look at this large Chinese junk?’ ”

On May 12th, after about a month of searching, two of Hatcher’s divers found three iron rings—each about a metre in diameter—spaced out evenly on the seafloor. The rings would have strengthened the masts of a large oceangoing sailing ship. Then the divers began to find porcelain, more than three hundred and fifty thousand pieces in all, many of them stacked in eerie columns, their

wooden crates having rotted away. Hatcher's team spent the next five months excavating the site, while Pickford tried to figure out what they had found. According to Horsburgh's commentary, some of the junk's passengers had been rescued by an English ship. The wreck appeared in the book's 1827 edition but not in the 1817 printing—giving Pickford a ten-year window to investigate.

By chance, while reading up on the mast rings in "Chinese Junks," a multivolume work by Louis Audemard, a French navigator known for his exploration of the Yangtze River, Pickford came across a reference to the loss of a large junk in 1822 and a rescue attempt by a ship named the Pearl. Audemard had the rescue ship's name wrong: it was actually called the Indiana. (The captain was James Pearl.) But Pickford had the clue he needed. In Dutch colonial archives in The Hague, he learned that the junk was called the Tek Sing. It may have been carrying as many as eighteen hundred people—mostly Chinese migrants—when it hit the reef. Some two hundred survived. Part of the junk's ballast had been provided by granite gravestones, brought by the migrants from China for use at the end of their lives.

The Tek Sing is, to date, the largest Chinese wooden sailing vessel ever discovered. In the fall of 2000, Nagel Auctions, a German auction house, took the best of the porcelain on a five-city tour, with stops in New York and London. A replica of the Tek Sing went on display at the railway station in Stuttgart, where the auction took place. The weeklong sale brought in slightly more than ten million dollars.

Both Hatcher and Pickford consider the Tek Sing to be a positive example of their work. They used their wits and gumption to find an extraordinary shipwreck; they made some money and added to the historical record. The British Museum holds fifteen objects from the Tek Sing, including a porcelain urinal. "You go to the British Museum . . . and there it is, 'Salvaged by Captain Hatcher,'" Hatcher told me. "Most museums in the world have got

Hatcher collections, or pieces of Hatcher. . . . Well, that's pieces from Nigel and Hatcher. And it wouldn't be there unless we did it."

Not everyone sees it that way. In 2000, the Indonesian authorities tried to stop the Tek Sing sale from happening. (Seven containers of porcelain were intercepted by Australian customs officials, but the rest made it to Germany.) Ten years later, Hatcher was declared persona non grata in Thailand after he tried to salvage a wreck in its territorial waters. When we spoke, he did not deny skirting the edges of the law. "You can't tell the truth anymore," Hatcher said. "You can make a deal with the government, Navy people, and pay them off," he said. "They close their eyes to it."

Hatcher's exploits in Southeast Asia in the eighties and nineties are now held up by conservationists as case studies of cultural theft and the careless destruction of historical sites. An archeology professor who has worked with the British government on its handling of wrecks said that what most often gets lost in treasure-hunting expeditions is a fragile archeological record of seafaring: the details of ship construction, ephemeral traces of life and death at sea, which can't be polished and sold. "You don't know what you've lost," the professor said.

There are days when Pickford wonders whether the salvage business that he has known is coming to an end. One afternoon, in his study, I asked him how many viable shipwreck targets he had in his files. "*Viable* is the key word you've used there," Pickford replied. "There's all sorts of pressures that we shouldn't be doing it at all."

Pickford's status as a freelance researcher makes him vulnerable to being marginalized by sniffy academics or unscrupulous clients, or both. We first met in the summer of 2022, in a café at the back of the British Library, where I often work. A few weeks earlier, the University of East Anglia had announced the discovery of the Gloucester, a three-hundred-and-seventy-year-old royal warship,

which had been found, half buried, near a sandbank in the North Sea.

The story made international headlines. Claire Jowitt, a history professor at U.E.A. who was researching the find, compared the wreck to the Mary Rose, which was raised from the bottom of the Solent, at fantastic expense, in 1982. The Gloucester holds a notable place in British history because it was carrying a future king, James II of England, who escaped through the window of his cabin while as many as two hundred sailors, servants, musicians, and courtiers perished. John Churchill, the first Duke of Marlborough and an ancestor of Winston's, drew his sword to protect the prince from the panicking crowd, and Samuel Pepys, the celebrated diarist and Royal Navy administrator, witnessed the sinking.

The tale of the finding of the Gloucester was picturesque, too. It was said to be the triumph, after years of fruitless searching, of Lincoln and Julian Barnwell, a pair of hobbyist divers who ran a family-owned printing company in Aylsham, a town in north Norfolk. In a promotional film, made by the university, Lincoln recalled how he decided to search for the Gloucester after spotting the name in the "Shipwreck Index of the British Isles" and details of its supposed remains. "The word 'cannon' just appeared," Lincoln said. "I picked the phone up, literally that night, and said to my brother, 'We're going to need a bigger boat.' " Then, after four years, crisscrossing five thousand nautical miles of the North Sea, the Barnwells got lucky. "The visibility was excellent. Lovely white sand, and right in front me," Lincoln recounted, raising his hands in wonder: "cannon."

But there were unexplained aspects to the story. The Barnwells said that they had found the Gloucester in 2007, some fifteen years earlier, but kept it secret. The BBC reported that the wreck's existence had been concealed for "security reasons." Hundreds of items—including a cannonball, spectacles, a pewter bowl, and

twenty-six unopened bottles of wine—had already been excavated. But the Royal Navy, which claims sovereign immunity over its lost ships, had not given permission for any of this to happen. After the news broke, I received an e-mail from a historian, suggesting that I speak to Pickford. In 2021, Pickford had published “Samuel Pepys and the Strange Wrecking of the Gloucester,” a book that had discussed the finding of the wreck, in somewhat cryptic terms, though his account had largely gone unnoticed.

In the library, Pickford told me that he had signed a contract to locate the Gloucester some twenty years earlier and that his analysis had led to the discovery of the wreck. “Very lengthy business,” he said, over a cup of tea. Since the sixties, Pickford explained, divers had been searching for the wreck off the wrong sandbank. Starting about twenty-five miles off the northeastern coast of Norfolk, there are six named sandbanks that run parallel to one another. The Leman and Ower Banks are the closest to shore. Treasure hunters looking for the Gloucester had mostly relied on the account of its captain, John Berry, who wrote, “We run ashore upon the west part of the Lemon [sic] Whilst our rudder held, we bore away West,” of the ship’s grounding, early in the morning of May 6, 1682.

Pickford started looking at the case in the eighties. He noticed in contemporaneous accounts that many seventeenth-century mariners did not distinguish accurately between the sandbanks, if they distinguished between them at all. He consulted “The English Pilot,” a set of charts published by John Seller, the king’s hydrographer, in the sixteen-seventies, and found them hopelessly muddled. Moreover, the logbooks of eyewitnesses in the royal fleet suggested that the Gloucester hit the Ower, rather than the Leman. After considering the tide height, the draft of the Gloucester, and the generally acknowledged fact that the ship “beat along the sand” before sinking, Pickford sketched a twenty-square-mile box around the Gloucester’s likely resting place. The target area was “very tiny” in the context of shipwreck research, he said.

In 2003, Pickford entered into an agreement with John Rose, a rakish businessman and treasure hunter from Great Yarmouth who wanted to find the Gloucester. Pickford introduced Rose to an acquaintance who had carried out a magnetometer survey of Pickford's search area—to detect submerged metal—a few years earlier. The survey had indicated the presence of a wreck. "Bob's your uncle, for want of a better word," Rose quipped, when we spoke. "Not that I have got an uncle."



"The crisis is lifelong. It just took me until midlife to be able to afford it."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

In the summer of 2005, according to Pickford, the Barnwells got involved. They were younger, fitter divers, with access to a fast boat that could get them out to the Ower Bank in an hour or two. Rose shared Pickford's search box and the magnetometer survey with them.

"I saw something about how they had spent years going up and down looking for it," Rose said, of the Barnwells' supposed quest. "It's ridiculous." In 2007, when the wreck was found, the group was ecstatic. Not long afterward, in the manner of all good

treasure-hunting stories, the gang fell apart. Rose ran into money trouble. The Barnwells took charge. Pickford told me that he parted company with the Barnwells after he was asked to sign an N.D.A., which would have stopped him from publishing his book, and when he suspected that they were making plans behind his back. “They want fame,” he said. “They’ve got that. They want control. And I suspect they want payback as well.”

Shipwrecks go weird. They fester. They do strange things to people’s minds. Pickford also feared that his archival work was being superseded. In 2021, Jowitt, at U.E.A., was awarded a £324,028 academic grant to research the history of the Gloucester —work that Pickford thought he had already done in his book. On June 10, 2022, the same day that the find was announced to the world, Jowitt published an article in *The English Historical Review* about the sinking, in which she accused Pickford of making transcription errors and coming to “spurious conclusions about what happened and why.” Neither Jowitt nor U.E.A. has ever acknowledged Pickford’s contribution to the ship’s discovery. “I feel I’ve been completely deleted from the historical record,” Pickford said.

People who admire Pickford’s work think that he should have been a professor of maritime history. “That was his proper calling,” Bound said. Others blame him for working as a gun for hire. “His background of dealing with some very, very shady people . . . has meant he’s never been really seen as a serious individual,” the professor who has advised the U.K. government said. “That’s not to say his research is bad. I think he produces the goods.”

The search for the Gloucester is a case in point. It was a treasure quest from the start. According to the accounts of Augurship 320, the commercial entity set up to salvage the wreck, the company borrowed hundreds of thousands of pounds from investors, in the hope of selling off the Gloucester’s wine, treasure, and other antiquities. A document shared by Julian Barnwell estimated that

an auction of the Gloucester treasure could raise twenty million pounds. (Pickford's cut was put at just over five hundred thousand.) A separate presentation, circulated by Rose and offering a "low risk, high reward and fun" business opportunity, stated, optimistically, that the crown jewels might have been on board.

Treasure hunting is rife with dubious schemes that don't go anywhere and, ultimately, ruin wreck sites. Seventeen years after the Gloucester was found, the identity of the wreck has still not been conclusively verified by archeologists, and the Receiver of Wreck, the official body that adjudicates salvage cases in the U.K., has yet to make a decision about what to do with the objects recovered by the Barnwells. "In the meantime, H.M.S. Gloucester and her artifacts should remain undisturbed," a Royal Navy spokesperson told me. The project appears stuck. The Barnwells, the Gloucester 1682 Trust—which is raising money for the preservation of the wreck—and Jowitt, at U.E.A., all declined to comment on Pickford's version of events. "It's a mess," the archeology professor told me. "It's an absolute mess."

The silver watches played on Pickford's mind. At the very least, they suggested that the Deep Pots wreck could be an English ship. But the coincidence with the details of Samuel Causton's baggage was too striking to ignore. "The watches were the critical point, where it just seemed, Oh, it's got to be," Pickford said. And yet what he had actually found in the archives were instructions to take Causton's possessions *off* the Modena in India—not to send them back home. "You waver a bit," Pickford said. "Other days, you think, No, it's not one hundred per cent." There were other problems to solve, too, not least how the bulk of the Deep Pots cargo—the porcelain and the canes on the seafloor—could have been carried by the Modena.

Pickford began to pay more attention to an incident that occurred on the Modena's outward voyage, in the summer of 1692. The Modena reached Cape Town in July, a little over a month after

another English ship, the Orange, had foundered on rocks nearby, in Table Bay. The Orange had been on its way back to England from Madras. Three of her crew had drowned, but much of her cargo had been saved. Divers were sent down for the rest. “We made such shifts that we took up out of the bottom of her ten bales of goods,” Barlow recorded in his journal. It was an early salvage operation. Most of the recovered merchandise was transferred to the Modena.

Pickford had known about the Orange for years. But he had been unaware of the fate of her cargo. About a year into his Deep Pots research, the rest of the puzzle seemed to fall into place. To his delight, Pickford found a letter ordering Causton’s possessions—the hats, the watches, etc.—to be put back on the Modena, after all. Poor Causton had died, and his family asked for his goods to be sent home. “If you wanted a eureka moment, it was those watches going back on the ship,” Pickford told me. He also learned that the ill-fated Orange had been carrying separate consignments of porcelain and canes.

The Orange had been loaded in an unusual way. She had arrived in Madras, a booming English colony, with her holds partially empty after an unsuccessful trading mission. Her chief cargo was rattan canes, from the island of Sumatra. The governor of the settlement at the time was Elihu Yale, one of the East India Company’s richest and most influential officials. Yale was born in Boston but left New England when he was three and spent his childhood in London. He had been working out of Madras for twenty years. A prominent diamond dealer, slave trader, and alleged poisoner of troublesome opponents, he knew an opportunity when he saw one. Yale ordered the Orange’s empty holds to be filled with private cargoes from the colony’s merchants—including “China goods”: porcelain, lacquer, and textiles—a rare relaxation of the East India Company’s rules.

According to Pickford’s calculations, the Orange had space for up to a hundred tons of China goods. Yale himself stood to profit. In

the previous two years, he and his brother, Thomas, had run a pair of trading missions to Canton and were looking for a way to get their goods to Europe. Yale consigned other valuables, too.

Pickford uncovered a letter to Yale from a passenger who survived the sinking of the Orange, describing “thirty-seven bulses”—purses—of diamonds that had been saved from the wreck.

The Orange left Madras in February, 1692. Later that year, Yale was removed from his role, on charges of corruption. He returned to England in 1699. He spent the rest of his life in increasing seclusion, dividing his time between houses in London and Wales, ensconced in his wealth and collections. “To my wicked wife . . .” he wrote, leaving a memorable blank space in his will. In 1718, three years before his death, he was asked to make a donation to the Collegiate School of Connecticut, in New Haven, which was training young men to work for the Church and the state. He sent nine bales of goods, which were sold for five hundred and sixty-two pounds, along with four hundred and seventeen books and a portrait of King George I. The school became Yale.

Pickford wrote up his research on the Deep Pots wreck. In June, he sent me a manuscript called “Lost Worlds.” It was three hundred and twenty-six pages of closely typed history, a forensic accounting of broken bowsprits, sudden hurricanes, scurvy outbreaks, and Yale’s missing diamonds. “There’s still a big question mark about those diamonds and where the hell they are,” Pickford said.

He was ninety-per-cent sure that the wreck was the Modena. “That final nailing would only happen with some sort of excavation,” he said. In the two years in which we had talked, there were meetings among investors about a possible salvage attempt in the Atlantic. But nothing ever materialized. The wreck was too deep, the rewards too uncertain, the ethics unclear. The lacquer, the porcelain, the swords, the silver watches are all still there, strewn on the ocean floor. The diamonds, too? I asked Pickford once whether he would be content if the wreck were left alone. Wasn’t

the satisfaction of his work, ultimately, to solve the puzzle, to uncover the secrets of the perish'd souls? “Not entirely, no,” Pickford said, correcting me gently. “I don’t think for my work that is *entirely* the point.” I was forgetting the treasure, which he never does. ♦



Sam Knight is a London-based staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of the column *Letter from the U.K.* His first book is “*The Premonitions Bureau: A True Account of Death Foretold*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/the-shipwreck-detective>

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

Shouts & Murmurs

• [Life Advice with Animal Analogies](#)

By Viktoria Shulevich | Live like a fish? A mountain lion? A butterfly? A beaver? A menagerie of unideal options.

[Shouts & Murmurs](#)

Life Advice with Animal Analogies

By [Viktoria Shulevich](#)

November 4, 2024

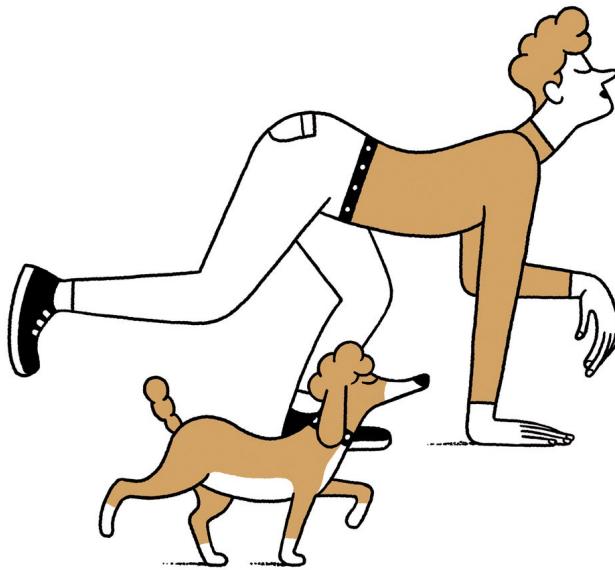


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Go with the flow like a dead fish.

If you don't like where the flow is going, stop the flow like a beaver does with wood.

Laughter is the best medicine, unless you laugh like a hyena, in which case you should laugh like a hamster. (Hamsters don't laugh.)

Pursue your goals with passion and determination like a mountain lion stalking a household pet.

Remember that it's all about the journey, not the destination. So enjoy the views along the way like a mountain lion watching a household pet's owner heading off to work.

No matter what life throws at you, always keep one foot on the ground like a pink flamingo and your head buried in the sand like an ostrich. This may sound impossible, but you can do it if you practice Pilates.

Age gracefully but invisibly, like a pigeon.

Patience is a virtue. Be patient like a mountain lion when the household pet's owner returns home because she forgot her phone.

Take big swings like a howler monkey, and don't be afraid of crashing into a tree like a howler monkey that is bad at judging distance.

Visualize your future self emerging from a cocoon as a beautiful butterfly. Then lower your expectations, because butterflies emerge from a chrysalis, not a cocoon, so you are actually a moth. Accept your moth identity and fly toward a flame.

Always move forward like a shark. Unless there is a shark approaching you, in which case scurry sideways like a crab.

Be mindful and notice the little things, like a mountain lion suddenly noticing the electric fence.

When life gives you lemons, eat the lemons off the ground under the cover of night like a possum.

Love what you do like a bear hunting salmon. Do what you love like a salmon futilely attempting to thrash upstream away from a bear.

Change is good—it's the only thing that's certain in life. Embrace change like a snake shedding its skin, but stay true to your authentic self. If your authentic self is the skin you just shed, go find it and put it back on. If it shrivelled and no longer fits, make a vest out of it and wear your true self as a layer when it gets chilly.

Work hard and keep your eyes on the prize like a mountain lion digging a hole under the electric fence.

Ignorance is bliss. Be blissfully happy as a clam that doesn't know it's at a clambake.

Remember that life is what happens while you're busy making plans to eat a household pet but sometimes you find yourself covered in mud, sitting alone in a hole under an electric fence, no closer to the household pet than you were eight hours ago and wondering if it's even worth it, but you've already dug a pretty deep hole so you should probably just keep going so that you don't feel like a total loser. But then it starts raining, so you say fuck it.

Follow your gut like a cow with four stomachs, but don't always trust your gut. It could be indigestion. ♦

Viktoria Shulevich has contributed to The New Yorker, McSweeney's, and WBUR.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/life-advice-with-animal-analogies>

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

Fiction

• “[The Honest Island](#)”

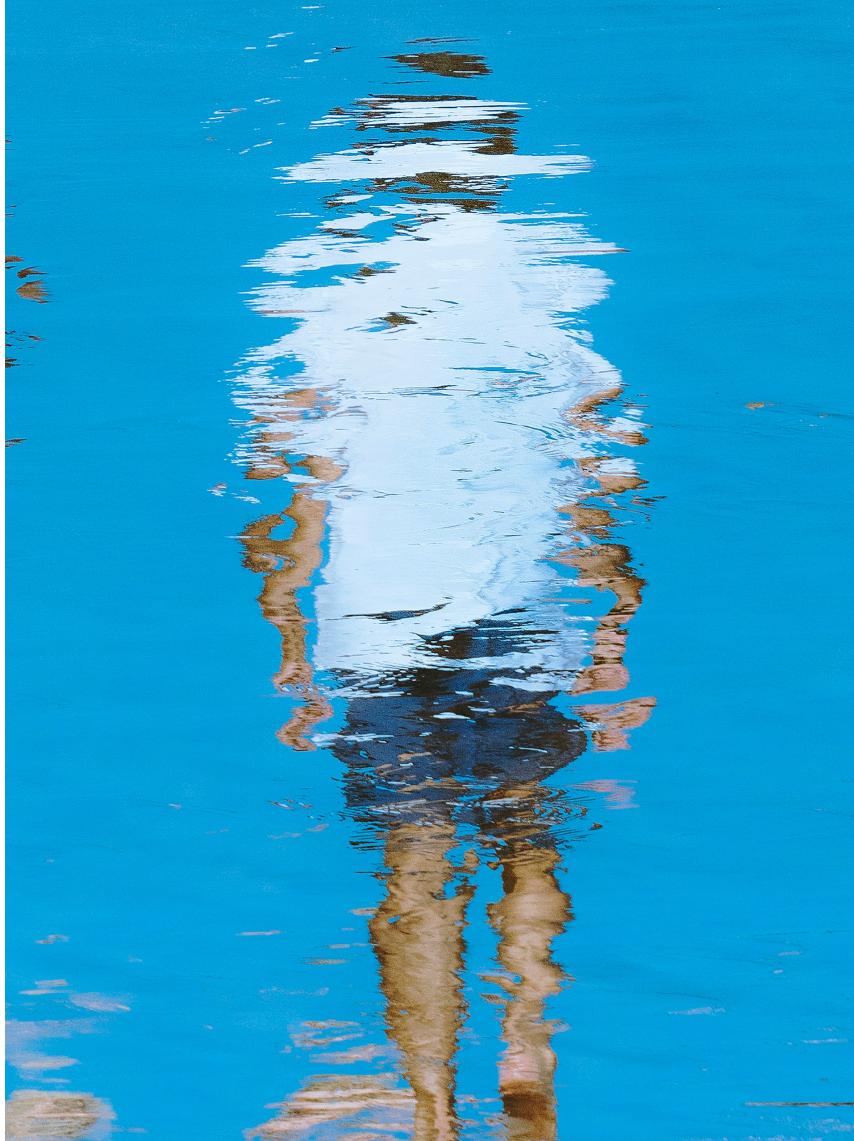
By Greg Jackson | Only as the memory faded and he struggled to detain it did he realize, with a start, that he had remembered something.

[Fiction](#)

The Honest Island

By [Greg Jackson](#)

November 3, 2024



Photograph by Yosigo

Craint did not know when he had come to the island or why he had come. He had ransacked his mind but he could not remember and he could not recall many other things besides. The period before his arrival, for instance. He knew he came from elsewhere. His appearance made that abundantly clear, and he did not speak the

islanders' language, although between gestures and the few words of his own language the islanders knew, he could communicate most of his basic needs.

The island was small. If one cared to, one could walk from one end to the other in a matter of hours. To reach the southern tip, where there was a swimming beach, he sometimes took one of the small buses that circulated throughout the day. Across the hazy sea to the south, one saw a city on a far-off coastline, with factories lining its harbor, whose tall chimneys emitted knotted white streams. An unmaintained road led from the swimming beach into steep hills above, where an abandoned complex of concrete structures had been overrun by bushes and ivy. To the north, not visible from the beach, was a distant shore, where rows of mountains resembling jagged waves disappeared into the mist.

The island itself had a teardrop shape. Craint knew this from a map at the bus depot and another at the ferry terminal. Its northern half had been given over to mining ventures. Large machines dug up the rocky waste and pulverized it into powder and gravel. He had seen images of this in the small museum devoted to the island's history, where, unable to read the explanatory texts, he had had to invent his own history from the photographs and dates.

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

The problems with his memory made Craint reluctant to ask questions that might cause him to appear foolish. At his hotel he refrained from asking how many nights he had stayed, afraid such an inquiry might call attention to the bill he had no means of paying. For now, at least, the proprietors seemed unconcerned about their guest's ability to meet his obligations. Every morning at quarter past eight they served him the same breakfast with the cheerful, deferential hospitality common on the island and an awkward, laughing manner that seemed less an expression of

amusement at his curious, ongoing sojourn than an apology for the barriers to communication between them.

He had stopped asking about the ferry service. Someone had taped a handwritten sign on pale-pink paper to the ticket booth announcing the service's suspension. With the proprietors of the hotel and various other locals he had broached the topic of when the service might resume, but from everyone he received the same reply: "Soon." He could get nothing more definite.

For a week or so, he crossed the island to the ferry slip each day, but before long he abandoned these forays as pointless. The harbor had a derelict air, its large docks empty and the plaza devoid of people. Between the jutting concrete pier and the breakwater, a line of boats bobbed gently in the waves. But he observed no traffic on the water, just a few fishermen at dusk, making for the sea.

Although beyond a certain point in the past all memory faded for Craint, like vision straining into the seaborne mist, he understood that this was odd and that he had not always suffered this privation. Having arrived one day, the affliction, he believed, would similarly depart. He needed only to be patient. One day he would remember again. One day the ferry would resume its runs.

In the absence of anything pointing to the time before or the time to come, routine assumed a central importance in his life. It steadied him just when, toward the end of day, the glassy stillness of his existence threatened to send him into a futile rage. As if a world so placid and unresponsive could excite only the opposite sensations in him. He crossed the street to the small store facing his hotel and bought two beers from the elderly woman at the counter, who, seeing him, would gesture to the refrigerator in back and announce, "Beer!" Although at first he'd rolled his eyes at this, in time he found comfort in the precise repetition of the encounter. At the register, she handed over his change beneath a small staticky TV

that played strange, lurid shows in the local language which Craint could not begin to understand.

He took his beers to the village harbor, where the sun, hovering low above the island, lacquered the water in milk-gold, and drank them slowly, sitting on the retaining wall and watching as the sun ripened to a fiery stain in the west. It was his favorite time of day. Soon a mournful blue light would rise over the islands in the sea. Soon the delicious possibility of sleep would rise within him and, with it, the hope that he would slumber deeply and remember everything when he awoke.

It was not the case that Craint had no dealings with the islanders. It was a small community, and he recognized many people and they recognized him. Passing, they often greeted one another. At the cafés and restaurants, the waiters knew enough to seat him by himself.

And then there was the girl. As with so much else, he did not remember how they had settled on their routine, but every few days, in the evening, he would call at the house she and her father shared. Her father, a little frail in an ageless way, would greet him each time with the same question: “Happy?” Always this, as if to say, “And you are well?” And Craint would smile and nod, even if deciding whether he was happy or not seemed as impossible and meaningless as determining the precise color of the sea.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Greg Jackson read “The Honest Island.”](#)

The girl would gently incline her head in greeting, and then they would walk together through the village, past the brimming lotus pond and along the narrow drainage canals to where steps descended to an empty beach. No one swam here. He had, in fact, never seen another person on the beach, just a few skinny cats,

whose curious eyes followed them as their footfalls imprinted the coarse ochre sand.

Often they walked without speaking. Sometimes Craint, to break the silence, gave voice to stray thoughts. Other times he spoke more personally, laying bare his fear and confusion, the helplessness he felt at knowing so little about his present circumstances or when, if ever, his memory would return.

The days were unbearably hot. The heat lingered late into the evening and the air grew moist and filmy as it cooled. The locals preferred to remain inside, and because their windowless houses guarded their privacy the village often had a disquieting air of desolation.

After their walk, they ate dinner with the girl's father. They followed this with tea, making, by way of smiles and small noises, a show of companionability, and then Craint would bid them good night. On these evenings, he would return to his hotel room to drink the beers with which he beckoned sleep.

Although certain his words meant nothing to the girl, Craint believed she understood some part of what he expressed, the contours of feeling or meaning, like the pale outline of the mountains to the north. Did she pity him? Did she know why he had come? Just once she had stopped him, taking hold of his arm and causing him to break off midsentence. He met her gaze, breathing like a startled horse, but he could not respond to the request in her eyes, and after a time she turned away.

She was slight and pale, with the bluish lips of one who has swum too long in cold water. By look and complexion she was an islander; no one would mistake them for kin, although it was not easy to put the difference between them into words. In fact, having studied the island's inhabitants, Craint had come to realize that he was not the only foreigner there. The others simply, by way of

dress and style, blended in, keeping to the company of local families to which they seemed to belong.

So his days passed: breakfast, a stroll across the island or a bus ride to the southern beach, lunch followed by an afternoon siesta in the shade of a seaside palm. By the time the shadows were lengthening on the sand, he could feel a panic stirring within him. The noise of the cicadas throbbed terribly in the trees. He strained into the unyielding depths where memory was meant to lie and understood that another day would pass without delivering any alteration in his condition. Then at last the hour would arrive for him to drink his beers, and as the possibility of sleep arose, so sounded faint chords of hope.

But every morning, in those obscure beats by which the light and solidity of day replace the liquid remnants of dream, the reality of his situation would return to him and drain his heart of any comfort sleep had brought. The full weight of his confusion, the blank impenetrable wall between him and the past, and his anticipation of the long hours ahead would settle on him so oppressively he sometimes pounded his head with his fists.

He had to make an effort to compose himself. Before dressing and heading to breakfast, he often looked again through his few personal articles, as if these might, one day, disclose a message or a clue he had failed to notice or understand. There were his clothes, piled in a jumble in his suitcase, his cache of local currency, a felt-tip pen, and on the bedside table a few small piles of rocks he was in the habit of making.

It was always the same arrangement: a tiny pyramid of four stones, three for the base and one resting on top. The folded piece of paper in his wallet was perhaps the most pregnant and inscrutable remnant of all. On it was a drawing of what looked like a ring with a square gemstone lying on its side and, in his own hand, a sentence copied from an unknown source: “We do not concern

ourselves with the death of animals, for animals live in an eternal present.”

The houses in town stuck to an old style of batten siding and wood treated to appear a tarry brown, but here and there signs of a modern influence showed through. The gas stations had the dingy look of gas stations everywhere, mottled with the stains of oil and exhaust. The concrete seawall could only have been a few decades old, and the municipal buildings had a familiar utilitarian air. Only the town hall made a distinctive architectural statement. It stood notably higher than the surrounding buildings, with three generous stories, a steep metal roof, and eccentric brick design.

The first time Craint saw the man, he was emerging from this building into the blistering sun. He had the bewildered, blinking look of one new to a place. His clothes, his features, his manner altogether announced his foreignness. He was the first newcomer Craint could remember seeing. The man consulted a sheet of paper in his hand several times before setting off across the parking lot. Craint followed at a distance, intrigued by the novelty of the man’s arrival.

After no more than a minute or two, Craint understood that the man was headed for the same hotel where he’d been staying. It was too much to call it a hotel, really; an inn or a B. and B. would better describe the establishment. Craint could not recall there having been any other guests during his stay, but the state of his memory did not entirely rule out the possibility. As the man climbed the steps, he stood on the sidewalk and was watching, pleasantly carried away by the idea that the newcomer might shed light on certain matters, when one of the innkeepers called out to him. The innkeeper seemed uncomfortable at seeing him, and Craint held up a hand in reassurance. But now the newcomer had caught sight of Craint as well and gave a wide toothy grin and a jovial “Ahoy!”

“Budger’s the name,” he said. He had, as Craint surmised, just arrived on the island. He announced this without any self-consciousness in a loud, unguarded voice so out of place that Craint looked around instinctively to see if anyone else took notice. “Fresh off the boat,” he said a second time. “Always this hot?”

“Yes,” said Craint. “It seems that way.”

“Well, time of year, I guess.”

Timidly, Craint asked if the man then knew what time of year it was.

“Naturally. Don’t you?” He chuckled good-naturedly. “That would be the breakfast talking, I suppose. Why, it’s July, nearly the end of the month.”

Craint did not follow the man’s meaning, but he was glad to know that it was July. This situated him for the first time he could remember in something more solid than the rhythms of his repetitive days.

“Too early for a drink?” the man asked hopefully. “What else is there to do in this bloody heat? I’ll just get my things settled in my room. You’ll wait, won’t you?”



"It's ageism, plain and simple."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson

At the small café in the naked, sandy courtyard Craint watched the man's face redden. He was perspiring, and the heat and beer brought color to his cheeks. Though it was not quite lunchtime, they ate. "Not bad, not bad. Takes getting used to, I imagine," the man said. "The whole setup, I mean. Not saying I have any regrets, you understand, but it's a change. My first day and all that. But—" He paused and looked at Craint. "What does one *do* here? There must be something to occupy the time."

Craint looked past the man into the hot, languid air. He explained about the swimming beach and the importance of resting in the afternoon and the ease of traversing the island on foot and the beauty of the sunsets. The paltriness of this routine impressed itself on him as he spoke, and it surprised him that he didn't have more to offer. He must be forgetting something. His memory again. He mentioned how peaceful it was to drink beer in the evening while the sun expired and a blue light rose over the islands in the sea.

The man was not listening closely. “They give you a girl, I guess.” It was not phrased as a question, but in the silence that followed Craint saw that he expected a response.

“Give you?”

“Fresh blood, you know. All we have to offer, I suppose.” The man laughed.

Craint felt an urge to object, but he could think of nothing definite to say. “You know, it’s the funniest thing but my memory hasn’t been very good of late. Maybe it’s the heat. I’m afraid I might not be as much help to you as you thought.”

The man’s grin had a conspiratorial edge. “No, no. Don’t mention it. It’s all to be expected. I had my doubts, you know, but I see I worried unnecessarily. It’s a comfort, really. A load off the mind. Literally, hey! I’m awfully lucky to have someone to show me around. I had the impression I’d be on my own.”

It was hot that day even by the island’s standards. The man had retreated to the cool refuge of his room. Craint lay in the shade on the local beach, watched by a white-and-gray cat, which eventually abandoned the hope that Craint might surprise it in some pleasant way. He never actually slept during these siestas but merely rested and let his mind wander. *They give you a girl, I guess.* What had he meant? Well, it was July, late July, hence the heat. Had it been cooler when he first arrived? He didn’t know.

At his side were three stone pyramids in the sand. It gave him comfort to assemble these small cairns, the sort of comfort a photograph of loved ones might offer during a period of absence or an extended stay in a strange room. He didn’t know why it should bring him this peace, but he didn’t question it, for of all things it was what made him feel in some way *himself*, not merely a mind free-floating in the world.

Like the cat, he mused. Did it have memories, true memories, or coming upon something familiar did it simply feel a sense of recognition? Did a cat really have hopes, and, if so, how far into the future did these extend? A few seconds? A minute? What had the girl wanted from him when she stopped him and took his arm? What could anyone want from a wreck like him?

He must have closed his eyes, for within the dusky red mist of his idling vision he heard a voice too crisp and loud to be his own thoughts addressing him. “Had a lie-down and a shower. Feel like a new man altogether. You planning to sleep all day?”

The man stood over him in swim trunks and a T-shirt, a flaccid baseball cap on his head and sunscreen smeared in white gouts over his cheeks and nose. He looked outfitted for a beach-volleyball match, his spindly pale legs freckled and hairy. He was tall by island standards, taller even than Craint, and though Craint certainly resembled him more than he did the islanders, he found the man’s appearance in bad taste, even ridiculous.

Craint was light-headed as he struggled to his feet. “Easy,” the man said. “Hey, what are all these little piles of rocks, then?”

Craint shrugged. “I don’t really know.”

The man toed a stone from the base of a pyramid, causing it to fall. “I was just telling myself, far too hot for anything but a swim. Fancy showing me that beach?”

They rode south in a small bus that hugged the cliff before descending through an inland village and depositing them at its terminal by the swimming beach. The city on the far coast was just visible through the haze. It made a grim impression, too distant to reveal any sign of life but the rising ribbons of smoke.

“What’s that, now?” the man said. “Sort of spoils the view, doesn’t it? Grubby kind of place.” He had taken off his hat and shirt and set them atop his sandals. No one else was swimming. In fact, Craint had only ever seen children swimming at the beach and he wondered whether the islanders thought it undignified or inappropriate for adults to swim. “Reckon my things are safe if I take a dip? Bad business being a thief on an island, I’d think.” He waded in. “Not very refreshing, is it? Bit like a bathtub.”

Craint sat on the sand and looked around him at the southerly islands and the gray city veiled in mist and the man splashing an awful lot as he swam and the concrete ruins in the hills. He had a memory of holding someone as they swam. He could not picture the person. He remembered more the holding and the splashing, the wild legs kicking—a sensation more than an image. It seemed so natural to remember this that the novelty of remembering at all did not occur to him immediately. Only as the memory faded and he struggled to detain it did he realize, with a start, that he had remembered *something*. A faint impression, pulsing briefly, but somehow solid. The man’s ridiculous splashing now awoke a strange tender feeling in Craint, such as one might feel for something dear and helpless.

He must have been smiling, because when the man emerged from the water he said, “What’s all that, now? I know I’m not much of a swimmer. But was it as embarrassing as all that?”

Craint shook his head. He had been thinking of something else entirely, he said. He saw the man glance to his side and open his mouth, before deciding to hold his tongue. There in the sand sat another small pyramid of stones.

“Have you been up there?” asked Budger. Craint followed his gaze to the hills above.

“I haven’t, no.”

“Shall we give it a look, then?”

“It’s not allowed.”

“Not allowed? Says who?”

Craint was about to speak when he realized he had no answer. Why had he said it wasn’t allowed?

“It used to be an observatory,” said the man. “Or was it a laboratory? Something like that, in any case.”

“How do you know?”

Budger yawned. “Bloke on the boat told me. Asked him what was up in the hills.”

The walk was not as steep as Craint had expected. An overgrown service road snaked through the hills, taking a roundabout route that never rose above a modest incline. Trees and vines overhung the road, and the pavement was cracked and breaking up along the shoulders, but none of it made for a difficult climb, only a bit sticky in the stagnant heat.

The deafening sound of the cicadas rose from within the lush growth at the side of the road. The man breathed heavily, mostly, Craint decided, because he insisted on talking throughout the climb. He talked about this and that. He had had a promising career, but it had levelled off. Gone slack. It wasn’t that he *minded* the work, but you reach a certain age, you know, and you start wondering what it’s all for. And *who* it’s for. And you ask yourself why it seemed quite so important. And is this it, then, the course charted long ago, steady on until the legs and lungs give out? And then eternity in a box for your troubles! Not that he was one to complain. No, he’d been a regular trouper for years. Decades, if you were the literal sort. And that was the clear, easy sailing. That was the *best* of it. What prepared you for the thunderclap in the

midst of the backbreaking toil? The thunderclap, and then the rains, the storms. Did he, Craint, care to relate or share, perhaps, what had impelled him to— No. No, it wasn’t right to ask. Load off the mind and all that. Probably didn’t even know what he was talking about—ha! Yes, that would be nice. Something to look forward to.

The road turned inland and ran through the shade of a valley in the hills. A slender creek fell like smoke into a pond choked with lotus flowers. The trees listed over the path, eclipsing the sun. The man was still talking when Craint said, “Do you have any idea what this means? It’s odd. I seem to have copied it down, but I can’t make head or tail of it. Something about how animals live in an eternal present and that’s why we don’t care about their deaths.”

The man frowned at Craint in such a way that he immediately regretted mentioning it. “Why are you on about that now?” They had come to the edge of a crumbling paved lot. Weeds grew everywhere through seams in the buckling asphalt.

“We do not concern ourselves with the death of animals, for animals live in an eternal present. That’s what you mean? How does the rest go. . . . Without hope to point forward or memory to point back, existence has no meaning. And therefore death has no meaning. Cheerful, isn’t it?”

“But what does it mean? Why did I write it down?”

The man’s frown deepened. “Why you wrote it down is because you read it, same as me. But what it means I can’t say better than you. It’s philosophy. The deer whose antlers grew so large and heavy it couldn’t survive. Went extinct. I forgot what else. A lot of rubbish, I’d say.”

A wooded path off the lot emerged onto a clear promontory high above the sea. They could see the forms of islands, and farther

islands behind those, and the shorefront city wrapped in haze and, in the sky, the full face of a daytime moon.

At last they had a clear view of the ruins. Before them, emerging from the hillside, a wall of curved concrete ran toward the sea.

“That was good of them. Left the door open for us,” said Budger, making for a set of heavy doors, one of which stood ajar.

Craint climbed the hill to where the land ran even with the top of the wall. He could now see that the concrete wall was the exterior of a circular building with a flat roof and a round courtyard in the middle. He stepped out onto the roof and remembered the drawing on the folded paper, the ring lying on its side.

“You sly dog,” he heard from the courtyard below. Peering over the lip of the roof, he saw Budger grinning up at him.

“What is it?”

“Come see yourself.”

Craint entered the courtyard through a broad unlit corridor that encircled it. Budger stood to one side, a glint of sun speckling his eye. “Haven’t been up here before—I bet!”

At his feet in the weedy yard stood pile upon pile of stones, dozens of tiny pyramids just like the ones Craint so often assembled on the beach.

“I wasn’t lying. I told you, my memory has been exceedingly poor of late.”

A large cairn, constructed from rugged blocks of broken concrete, held open a door at the northern edge of the yard. Budger eyed Craint warily. “I wouldn’t mind your going first.”

In the dark corridor an interior door led into what must have been the hill itself. The rusted hinges gave some resistance, but Craint managed to open it partway. His eyes strained into the blackness. He could hardly see a thing. The only illumination was what passed through the corridor from the courtyard, a wedge of cold, muted light on the cement floor.

“Any skeletons in the closet, then?” called Budger from outside.
“Don’t fancy some nasty surprise. And on my first day!”

Accustomed to the sun, Craint’s eyes adjusted only gradually. What he could see of the room was bare. Slowly, in such a way that at first he didn’t know whether it was his vision or his imagination disclosing forms in the impenetrable dark, his eyes picked out a minute glow, like a shred of nacre, at the far end. He moved with blind caution. It was the corner of something covered in cloth.

He lifted the cloth gently. A faintly luminous rectangle the size of a small portrait rested against the wall. A mirror, he thought, raising it to his eyes. He must have made a startled noise, because he heard Budger say, “What’s that? You alive in there?” The image in the mirror shocked him. It was his face, but a grotesque version of it—wild and red and covered in lesions. He looked, he thought, more like the man, Budger, than he cared to admit. “Place gives me the creeps,” he heard muttered from outside, but this barely registered. It struck him, as he looked at the image in the mirror, that he could not remember the last time he had seen his face. He could not recall a single mirror on the island. Strange that he had not remarked on this before. The face that confronted him was haggard and gaunt, its hair and beard unkempt. But what he had taken for lesions or a rash, he now saw, were blemishes in the surface of the mirror itself. And there was some sort of writing on it as well.

Budger was standing by the door. Craint almost walked into him as he emerged with the mirror into the blinding light.

“Hey, what have you got?”

Craint ignored this and blinked to urge focus into his eyes. Below his face in the mirror were three names: Virginie, Cassandre, and Paul. The names stirred something in him, a sediment of deep feeling, but he couldn’t organize his thoughts with the man peering over his shoulder.

“Who are they?” asked Budger.

In his mind, Craint saw a small group huddled together on a misty pier. The three names below his face made a kind of pyramid. Then he had a thought. “Say, what time did you arrive this morning? Do you know?”

“Couldn’t tell you, but bloody early,” said Budger. “Sun wasn’t even up.”

The prefect sat very straight in his high-backed chair. Either the man was quite short or the chair excessively tall, for it continued on for about a foot above his head. He had set his pen on the blotter with great care, parallel to the table’s edge, and now appraised Craint closely. It was early and otherwise silent in the town hall.

“You are not experiencing an easy or natural transition,” he remarked.

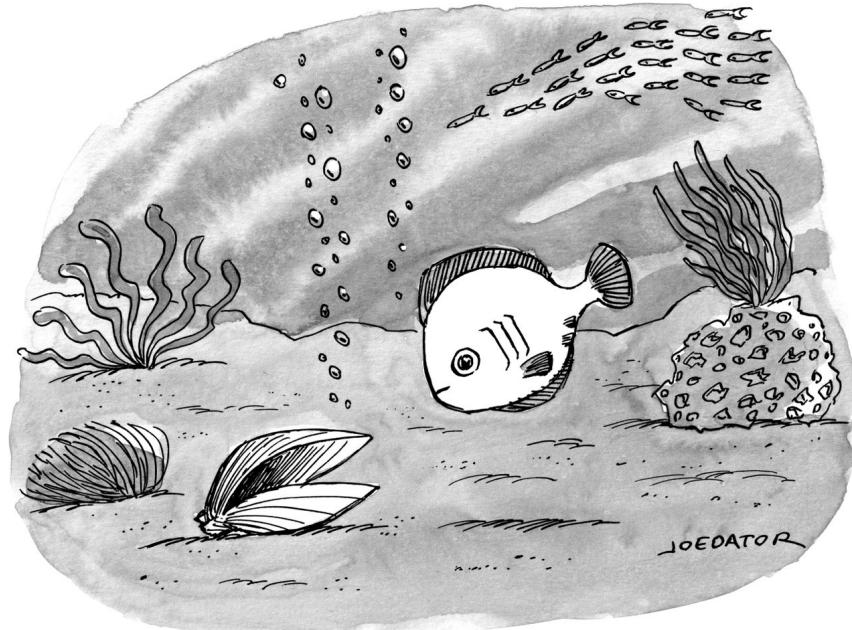
Sensitive to the inequality in their positions, Craint gave a guarded reply. “I suppose not.”

“These things are not unprecedented,” said the man. “Not altogether unprecedented, but very rare.” Craint was silent. “You persist in clinging to the past.”

“I don’t *feel* I am.” Craint regretted the protest in his voice. “I remember very little.”

“But you do remember. That is enough. Enough to light the fuse of . . . curiosity.” It struck Craint vaguely that the man had prepared certain phrases ahead of time. Loath to confirm his suspicions, he did not mention the memory of splashing, the young body in his arms, kicking with life. He did not mention the odd feeling, like some exquisite, longed-for pain, that had pierced him when he read the names. “The girl is not to your liking, perhaps? Lila.”

Was that her name, then? He must have known it once. “On the contrary,” said Craint. “I find her very nice.”



“Happy? Yeah, sure, I guess I’m as happy as something with zero locomotion and no discernible features or extremities can be.”

Cartoon by Joe Dator

The prefect ran a hand through his hair. It seemed a notable betrayal of emotion in one so disciplined. Everything about his manner and dress suggested a composure rigid to the point of fragility. He eyed the pen, closed his eyes briefly, then returned his gaze to Craint. “But in what lies your resistance, if not the girl?” He said this almost to himself. “It was a mistake for you to cross paths.”

Craint frowned. “Me and the girl? Lila?”

“The girl? No, you and the new— Mr. Budger.”

Gingerly Craint said, “Perhaps it would be best if I left.”

Registering the man’s alarm and uncertain what in his words had provoked it, he quickly clarified. “Leave the island, I mean. Try my luck somewhere else.”

“Your luck?” the man said in bafflement. “Now, now. There is no reason to run immediately to . . . extremes. There is much we could try before considering so radical an option. Returning to the initial dosage, for instance.”

“Dosage?”

The man’s smile had certain elements of a wince. “It is only an idea. But let’s have no more talk of leaving, yes?”

Craint could not hide his distress. “Am I trapped here, then?”

“Trapped?” The man laughed lightly. “What are you saying? You came here—of your own decision. I have your paperwork. If you would care to see your signature?”

Craint felt short of breath. “That’s all right,” he managed to croak. “I am sure everything is in order, but—” He paused. “May I ask a question?” The man sighed and waved a hand in assent. Though evidently troubled by the situation, he seemed to find Craint amusing, or at least curious. “How long have I been here?”

His smile was now the kindly, forbearing smile of someone asked a minor kindness by the condemned. “How long? Three months, if you must know. Three months, although—how swiftly time moves! —it will be four next week.” His tone was wistful. “You were so grateful when you came. . . .”

In his room he splashed water on his face. The absence of any mirror now struck him as somewhat sinister. He would have liked a

haircut and a shave, he thought, as he dried himself, combed his hair with his fingers, and filled his pockets with tissues. But there was no time for that.

The note saying that the prefect was expecting him first thing had been waiting for him when he returned to the hotel the night before. Now it was after nine, and he had missed his morning meal. In what passed for a dining room, two tables beside the reception desk, he saw Budger sitting before a tray of empty dishes. The man had a glassy look in his eyes but seemed to rouse himself at Craint's arrival.

"Hello there. Had a bit of a lie-in, did you?"

Craint took the seat across from him. The innkeepers, he could see, had begun busying themselves with his breakfast.

"Had a bit of a lie-in?" the man persisted.

"Yes, that's right."

"The heat'll do that. Takes it right out of you." The man's yawn brought a smile to his face. "Always this hot, is it?"

Craint looked at him but could find no trace of mischief or buried meaning. He said simply, "Yes, it seems that way."

The innkeepers laid out his breakfast. He poked around at its contents. Although he was quite hungry, the thought of the food now revolted him.

"Nothing to do for it but go for a swim, I say. There's supposed to be a swimming beach, south end of the island. Very nice, I've heard. Perhaps you'd be good enough to show me."

Craint nodded, chewing his food. He removed a tissue from his pocket and, affecting to cough, discreetly deposited the food in it

and returned the balled tissue to his empty pocket.

“Gladly.”

“My luck, then,” the man said brightly. He beamed a pure, ingenuous smile at Craint. “Terrible good fortune. I was under the impression I’d be on my own.” Then, frowning at his own omission, he added, “Budger’s the name.”

Darkness filled the room, broken only softly by light from the street at the edges of the curtains. Craint had tried to rest, but the fear of sleeping deeply until morning had caused him to wake with a start every few minutes to check the time. Eventually he gave up on sleep and fixed his mind on the names on the mirror and the faint memories that pulsed suggestively in the recesses of his mind. They were not memories as such, but intimations, wan trickles of illumination like the light from outside. A great weight of feeling attached itself to these blurry forms, as to vestigial snatches of a dream.

At four, he rose and dressed himself. He dressed quietly, leaving the lights off and donning the outfit he had laid on the chair the night before. He took his wallet but didn’t bother with his suitcase. The less noise and encumbrance the better. He was careful at the door not to let the latch sound.

Out in the street the roadside lamps blazed in the dark. It could have been any time of night, but he knew that in only an hour the sky would begin to brighten. He walked quickly and quietly, making a point not to look at the cars passing him.

That there were cars at all at this hour convinced him he had been correct in his surmise. He passed out of the village and beyond the school. In no time he had reached the crest of the hill from which the road began its gradual descent toward the town in the west. His

progress was quick. He could never believe quite how small the island was, how quickly one crossed it on foot.

The street lamps of the town below now came into view and the floodlit lots of its closed shops. The traffic had picked up. A clock face outside a bank showed he was on time; he would reach the harbor by quarter to five. That was assuming he was correct, but the line of cars gave him confidence. He felt almost giddy. The feeling rose like the pitch of singing insects, and he had to urge stillness on his breath. At the corner where the road turned into the harbor, however, he was helpless to stop the pounding in his chest. There, for the first time, Craint saw a ferry in the slip, lit up as if for Christmas, with people streaming from the open apron at its bow. He moved against this tide, which was dispersing toward the town, and joined the line waiting to board. No one gave him a second glance. The ticket-taker accepted the bill he offered without looking up and moved on quickly to the next passenger. Beneath the weight of wheels and feet, the ship's ramp clanged and echoed as he boarded. He climbed the metal stairs to the upper deck, where he leaned against a painted railing and looked back toward the light-spangled town below and the island's dark inland hills.

The faintest light had just come into the sky, revealing the subtle silhouettes of other islands. Promptly, with one short blast of the foghorn, the boat lurched under his feet. The engines hummed. Beneath their vibration he felt a gliding sense of release, as if of gravity loosening its grip.

The ferry moved slowly out of the harbor, through the channel formed by a neighboring island. High-voltage towers surmounted this islet, the cables themselves, in the dimness, no more than spider's silk floating in the air. He thought he could just discern a hint of blue in the inky sea as they motored past the northern reaches of the island, where, inland somewhere, vast machines dug up the matter of the island and crushed it into tiny stones. But all he could see were the crescents of empty beaches beneath the cliffs.

In the open sea, the engines roared to life and the boat gathered speed. The sky brightened more rapidly now. The rows of mountains appeared on the mainland to the north, receding into the mist, and the blue water churned a smoky white as the hull left broad furrows in its wake. The light culled a green hue from the water, too. During the day, Craint recalled, it often had a clear rust color. Impossible to say what color it really was. Always shifting, like a mood.

The wind off the water brushed back his hair. Why had he come to the island? Would he ever know? What had he been hoping to find, to escape? Maybe someone would tell him. Maybe one day he would remember. Or maybe one mystery we had to live with was that there were not always reasons for our decisions, not in the way we imagined, and only after the fact did we grope for explanations in the hazy recesses of our souls.

The boat sped on, closing the distance to the shore. He could see the ferry terminal now, and the nearby pier where a few people stood watching the boat arrive. He did not know how, in the morning mist, he recognized the group of three standing on the pier: Virginie, Cassandre, and little Paul—the children huddled, on either side, beneath the arms of their mother. Something ineffable in posture or spirit gave them away. His heart leapt. He felt an indescribable emotion, indescribable because like the color of the sea it was too many things. Elation and nausea and tenderness and fear. He felt so happy, and he felt as well the anguish and dread that lived in and alongside the streaming channels of joy. ♦

Greg Jackson is the author of the short-story collection “*Prodigals*.” His début novel, “*The Dimensions of a Cave*,” will be published in 2023.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/the-honest-island-fiction-greg-jackson>

The Critics

- **[How Far Can Political Ads Go to Swing the Vote?](#)**

By Vinson Cunningham | In her commercials, Kamala Harris walks a line between illuminating the issues and acknowledging the world-historic craziness of her opponent; Donald Trump targets his base.

- **[The Artificial State](#)**

By Jill Lepore | As American civic life has become increasingly shaped by algorithms, trust in government has plummeted. Is there any turning back?

- **[The Brothers Grimm Were Dark for a Reason](#)**

By Jennifer Wilson | Their version of “Cinderella” or “Rapunzel” could be disturbing. But turning Germany into a unified nation, they believed, meant unearthing its authentic culture.

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

“Disrupted City,” “Q&A,” “Model Home,” and “Canoes.”

- **[Charles Ives, Connoisseur of Chaos](#)**

By Alex Ross | Celebrating the composer’s hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, at a festival in Bloomington, Indiana.

[On Television](#)

How Far Can Political Ads Go to Swing the Vote?

In her commercials, Kamala Harris walks a line between illuminating the issues and acknowledging the world-historic craziness of her opponent; Donald Trump targets his base.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

November 1, 2024



No Democrat since 2015—no primary-tortured Republican, either—has landed on a single, all-encompassing anti-Trump message to hammer home.

Photo illustration by Keith Negley; Source photographs from Getty; Allison Joyce / Getty; Logan Cyrus / Getty; Shelby Tauber / Reuters; Sam Wolfe / Reuters; Evan Vucci / AP

On a mid-October Sunday not long ago—sun high, wind cool—I was in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for a book festival, and I took a stroll. There were few people on the streets—like the population of a lot of capital cities, Harrisburg’s swells on weekdays with lawyers and lobbyists and legislative staffers, and dwindle on the weekends. But, on the façades of small businesses and in the doorways of private homes, I could see evidence of political activity. Across from the sparkling Susquehanna River, there was a row of Democratic lawn signs: Malcolm Kenyatta for auditor general, Bob Casey for U.S. Senate, and, most important, in white letters atop a periwinkle not unlike that of the sky, Kamala Harris for President. Loose pamphlets were scattered over the ground. Behind a screen door on a side street, I saw a Sharpied message scribbled with evident irritation: "NO Political Flier."

I was looking for a sports bar, both to watch the Eagles play the Browns—when in Rome—and to look out for any ads that might be running with the swing-state crowd in mind. The current political season, dense with incident and overcast with grim premonitions, feels more difficult than usual to take in at just a glance. Too much is happening. No ad-maker in the world could be expected to keep up with the waterfall of events: assassination attempts, abrupt abrogations, morbid rallies with ominous lighting foreshadowing a future in which the nation is one big L.E.D.-lit Death Star. And the rapid fracturing of what we’re still straining to call mass media makes it so that you can’t really be sure whether what you’re seeing on TV is the story your fellow-citizens are also following.

Sometimes, when I take a YouTube tour through the small rotation of rambling, male-centric podcasts hosted by bombastic former rappers that keep me up to date on the doings in contemporary hip-hop, I’ll get a Harris ad that seems targeted to people like me: Black men who want her to win and who feel disillusioned by the news. Harris, in the ad, looks wan and stern, even slightly annoyed —possibly it was the last bit of work in a long day. “Don’t forget

that little thing for the Black manosphere,” some staffer might have said, prompting a weary sigh from the Vice-President. “Polls show us this is the closest Presidential campaign in sixty years,” she tells viewers. “We might be the underdogs in this race, but I believe in you, I believe in our team, and let’s get to work.” The title of the video is gently catastrophist: “We Are Falling Behind.” I doubt that the suburban moms of Philadelphia, Atlanta, Milwaukee, Raleigh, and Tucson—those mega-voters whose votes matter so much more than mine, in New York City—get bureaucratic business, both panicked and encouraging, like this. Maybe watching TV in a more consequential state, I thought, would help me understand a bit better.

I found the right bar—the crowd didn’t conform to any type that I could discern. The bartenders had tattoos down to their wrists and up to their necks; one woman wore glasses and a black-and-white kaffiyeh, telegraphing her support for Palestinians in Gaza under siege; a guy had a gray hoodie on beneath an Eagles jersey. When the Browns blocked an Eagles field goal, got the ball, and ran it back for a touchdown, the hoodie guy had an angry fit. “That is the most Philadelphia shit I’ve ever seen,” he shouted as he settled his tab.

If an ad for either candidate ran, nobody noticed it.

In New York, we get bombarded with barbs by local pols. Mike Lawler, the Republican congressman who represents Rockland and Putnam counties, wants you to know that Mondaire Jones, his Democratic challenger, has been endorsed by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. One of his ads portrays Jones as a radical, his color washed out, with the words “Defunding Police” beneath his face. Gotcha. Lawler never mentions Donald Trump, and his choice of issue, public safety, makes the ad almost quaint, like it could have been plucked from the pre-Trump era—say, 2012, when the paint-by-numbers Republican Mitt Romney was at the top of the ticket.

There's an increasingly loony, dark, semi-fascist faction within the Republican House, to be sure—you might even call it the ruling faction. Famous names like Marjorie Taylor Greene, Lauren Boebert, and Matt Gaetz get so much press and screen time that they appear to have successfully taken over their party. But guys like Lawler, stranded in blue states, seem to be sticking their fingers into their ears and hoping for the chaos to pass over like a long storm. (Without a rare and sustained display of conscience from them, it won't.)

Sometimes I detect a hint of a similar sort of poll-tested nostalgia in Harris's commercials, or, more precisely, a struggle between acknowledging Trump's world-historic strangeness and sticking to the issues that feel native to a Presidential campaign. One ad starts out showing kids on their bikes and elders at a kitchen table—then there's a menacing angle on some imposing buildings down on Wall Street. It's a swift, reproachful reading of Project 2025, the much ballyhooed blueprint for a second Trump term. The warnings, in bold letters, pour forward with total clarity. Trump means "*HIGHER COSTS ON GROCERIES*" and "*CUTS TO SOCIAL SECURITY AND MEDICARE*" and "*TAX BREAKS FOR BILLIONAIRES*" and a "*NATIONAL ABORTION BAN*." That stuff is scary and, by my lights, probably true, but it also represents a fairly standard line of attack by a Democrat against any Republican candidate of the past quarter century. And, yes: part of Trump's danger is how, even amid his exotic behaviors and promises of novelty, he can quite easily conform to the broken, often fatal status quo that preceded his Presidency. But then the commercial ends with a litany of exceptional adjectives describing Trump in all his uniqueness, only notionally connected to the issues, in a foreboding stack: "*UNHINGED / UNSTABLE / UNCHECKED*."

Which: true. But the ad, just like the candidate behind it, is trying to do so much work—to speak to frazzled parents and to worried seniors and, crucially, to women eager to preserve sovereignty over their bodies and lives. But you've also got to talk about the crazy,

right? The crazy's too important to bracket off in its own commercial, I guess. The impression the ad leaves, though, is of a campaign overstretched by the miasmic spread of its opponent's toxicity.

The bureaucratic and technical competency of Harris's campaign is one of the stronger cases for her candidacy. Her team excels at raising money, making more or less slick ads like the “*UNHINGED*” one, setting up energetic-looking rallies with optimally diverse cross-sections from the crowd placed just behind the podium. At the biggest moment of her public career, Harris is evidently able to run a smooth operation, largely devoid of internal drama. But in her rhetoric, both personal and commercial, she reminds me of a decent free safety on an otherwise bad defensive unit, zagging back and forth, overcome by potential disasters to tamp down. She’s not alone in this: no Democrat since 2015—no primary-tortured Republican, either—has landed on a single, all-encompassing anti-Trump message to hit and hammer home.

Trump, on the other hand, seems to be communicating in a language that only his biggest fans can decipher completely. Implicitly, his crowd cries out like the speaker of Robert Frost’s poem “Choose Something Like a Star”: “Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade. / Use language we can comprehend.” Trump never fails to answer in the affirmative, even if it means that nobody else can pick up the signal. If Harris is still opening her arms, in search of new constituencies to persuade, Trump is drilling his way down a narrow path, apparently content to stick with his true pals and keep playing the hits.

If he ends up casting a wide net—chipping away at some groups of Black and Latino men—it’s because more kinds of Americans are willfully imagining themselves into comradeship with him, not the other way around. Trump does Trump and dares you to join in. Surely this confidence in the loyalty of his audience is why, just the other day, in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, he felt comfortable enough to

go on for more than ten minutes about its home-town golf god, Arnold Palmer, punctuating the hagiographic reminiscence—itself an advertisement for the days of the “good old boy”—with a wisecrack about the size of Palmer’s, well, club?

“This is a guy that was all man,” Trump said, playing to his primarily male voter base, near and far. “I refuse to say it”—no, he didn’t—but, when he took showers with the other pros, they came out of there, they said, ‘Oh, my God, that’s unbelievable.’ ” Then he laughed at his own joke sincerely, the way you do when you’re surrounded by friends.

The same insider logic is at work in Trump’s campaign ads. During the World Series, a bizarre commercial ran. It starts off with DJ Envy and Charlamagne tha God—the co-hosts of the radio show “The Breakfast Club” and notable Harris supporters—quizzically reading about her policy to support “taxpayer-funded sex changes for prisoners.”

“Hell no, I don’t want my taxpayer dollars going to that!” Charlamagne shouts.

Soon, a narrator out of a movie trailer begins in a rumbling voice meant to convey peril and light humor all at once: “Kamala is for they/them. President Trump is for *you*.” The ad ends with a total non sequitur: Trump hugging an elderly Black woman. The U.S. Capitol sits behind them. Guys who look like law-enforcement officers stand nearby. The woman’s eyes are squeezed shut, and her hand grasps at Trump’s elbow. Her face is placid and grateful, set in ecstasy or prayer. Presumably, she’s happy, too happy for feeble words, that Donald Trump shares her unprompted dislike for trans people, but the ad doesn’t make that clear. She’s a hugger and her President is, too—that’s all. (“The Breakfast Club” ’s producers have issued a cease-and-desist order to Trump’s campaign.) And so there you are, taking in the ballgame with your kids, hoping to transmit to them the beauties of America’s pastime but also

impatiently waiting to hear some vile slurry, apropos of nothing, about transitioning behind bars. The ad refuses—just as Trump himself refuses—to leave its watchers lukewarm.

One source of Trump's instinctive, inimitable political talent is that, for him, oratory and advertisement are entirely coeval domains. If he's talking, he's selling. He never commits to one activity and forgets about the other. His recent three-hour conversation with the podcaster and notional comedian Joe Rogan was a master class in this regard—it was more infomercial than interview. Even at this late date in the campaign, Trump was still busily branding. "The word 'tariff,'" he said, beaming proudly, as if he'd coined it. "It's more beautiful than 'love.'" Blockheaded protectionism never sounded so sweet.

During his already infamous rally at Madison Square Garden, Trump, at times, surrendered himself to the quick-cut propulsion of televised ads. The rally was an extravaganza during which Hulk Hogan ripped his shirt off, Dr. Phil sold snake oil, and Tucker Carlson giggled all the way through a block of quasi-Nazi text—just a bunch of dudes displaying skills that they've honed down the years.

But I was most riveted and confused at the moments when Trump, after making some mendacious claim, would veer away from his speech and let a nativist video about immigration play. It seemed like a tacit acknowledgment of what so many of us feel: that this campaign is a watershed in our nation's already magical-realist political history, that speech—elliptical and wild like Trump's, or nervously surveilled like Harris's—is often unequal to the emergencies of the moment, that some things must be seen, high up on the screen, to be believed. ♦



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

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/how-far-can-political-ads-go-to-swing-the-vote>

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

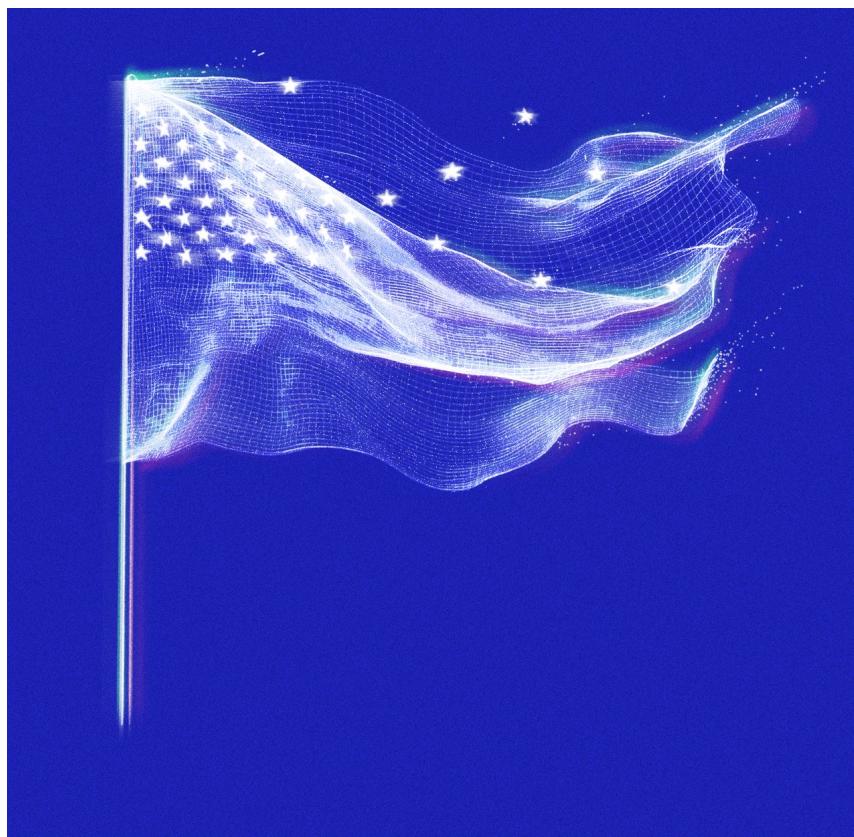
[A Critic at Large](#)

The Artificial State

As American civic life has become increasingly shaped by algorithms, trust in government has plummeted. Is there any turning back?

By [Jill Lepore](#)

November 4, 2024



The artificial state involves the reduction of politics to the digital manipulations of attention-mining algorithms, the diminishment of citizenship to minutely message-tested online engagement. Predictive algorithms do the work of rallying support, communicating with constituents, even crafting policy.

Illustration by Mark Pernice

“Jacob Javits of New York is the first United States senator to become fully automated,” the Chicago *Tribune* announced in 1962 from the Republican state convention in Buffalo, where an electronic Javits spat out slips of paper with answers to questions about everything from Cuba’s missiles (“a serious threat”) to the Cubs’ prospects (dim). “Mr. Javits also harbors thoughts on

medical care for the elderly, Berlin, the communist menace,” and more than a hundred other subjects, the *Tribune* reported after an interview with the machine.

Javits may have been the first automated American politician, but he wasn’t the last. Since the nineteen-sixties, much of American public life has become automated, driven by computers and predictive algorithms that can do the political work of rallying support, running campaigns, communicating with constituents, and even crafting policy. In that same stretch of time, the proportion of Americans who say that they trust the U.S. government to do what is right most of the time has fallen from nearly eighty per cent to about twenty per cent. Automated politics, it would seem, makes for very bad government, helping produce an electorate that is alienated, polarized, and mistrustful, and elected officials who are paralyzed by their ability to calculate, in advance, the likely consequences of their actions, down to the last lost primary or donated dollar.

Kamala Harris’s 2024 campaign was vastly influenced by the data-driven ad tester Future Forward, the biggest *PAC* in the United States. Donald Trump, for all his piffle about his indifference to data, is as much a creature of automated politics as anyone. The man doesn’t stay on message, but his campaign does. The 2016 Trump campaign hired Cambridge Analytica, which exploited the data of up to eighty-seven million Facebook users to create targeted messaging. “I pretty much used Facebook to get Trump elected in 2016,” a Trump campaign adviser, Brad Parscale, boasted. This year, the R.N.C. is working with Parscale’s A.I. company, Campaign Nucleus. And although the Trump campaign insists that it “does not engage in or utilize A.I.,” it does use “a set of proprietary algorithmic tools.”

These days, Americans are worried not only about this election but about this democracy and its future. In September, the Stanford Digital Economy Lab, part of the Stanford Institute for Human-

Centered Artificial Intelligence, released “[The Digitalist Papers: Artificial Intelligence and Democracy in America](#),” billed as the Federalist Papers for the twenty-first century. Most of the essays, chiefly written by tech executives and academics, advance the theory that the automation of politics through artificial intelligence could save American democracy. Critics take a rather different view. In the book “[Algorithms and the End of Politics: How Technology Shapes 21st-Century American Life](#),” the political economist Scott Timcke, using Marxism to look at Muskism, argues that “datafication”—converting “human practices into computational artefacts”—promotes neoliberalism, automates inequality, and decreases freedom.

Most developments in the automation of politics have historically happened first in the United States, but they spread quicker than a keystroke. More than four billion people, a record-breaking number of humans, are eligible to vote in elections around the world in 2024, including in the United States, the European Union, India, Indonesia, Russia, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Mexico, and South Africa. Whatever problems the automation of politics creates, it creates everywhere. In “[Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us](#),” Mathias Risse, a Rawlsian political philosopher, issues an urgent call for a new category to be added to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “epistemic rights,” meaning the right to know and to be known, or—as may well be more sought after—the right to remain unknown. “Democracy and technology, specifically AI, are by no means natural allies,” Risse writes, arguing that preserving democracy will require making hard choices about technology. So far, those choices are being made by corporations, especially American corporations, and especially in the United States, where people now live in what can be best understood as an artificial state.

The artificial state is not a shadow government. It’s not a conspiracy. There’s nothing secret about it. The artificial state is a

digital-communications infrastructure used by political strategists and private corporations to organize and automate political discourse. It is the reduction of politics to the digital manipulation of attention-mining algorithms, the trussing of government by corporate-owned digital architecture, the diminishment of citizenship to minutely message-tested online engagement. An entire generation of Americans can no longer imagine any other system and, wisely, have very little faith in this one. (According to a Harvard poll from 2021, more than half of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine believe that American democracy either is “in trouble” or has already “failed.”) Within the artificial state, nearly every element of American democratic life—civil society, representative government, a free press, free expression, and faith in elections—is vulnerable to subversion. In lieu of decision-making by democratic deliberation, the artificial state offers prediction by calculation, the capture of the public sphere by data-driven commerce, and the replacement of humans with machines—drones in the place of the demos.

All nation-states are “imagined communities,” as the political theorist Benedict Anderson once memorably wrote. No nation is natural, like a mountain or a forest or a species of whale. They’re all inventions, mostly of modernity, and especially of the long nineteenth century that began in 1776 and ended in 1914. But, with the development of general-purpose computing in the nineteen-fifties (the first *UNIVAC*, or Universal Automatic Computer, was built in 1951 for the U.S. Census Bureau) and the founding of the field of artificial intelligence in 1956, the workings of politics—once quaintly referred to, metaphorically, as the “political machine”—began to be outsourced to actual machines.

The mainframe computer, the personal computer, the Internet, data science, machine learning, and large language models have made possible astounding advances in scientific research, communication, education, public health, and a thousand other realms of human endeavor. But their effects on political discourse,

representative democracy, and constitutional government have been, on the whole, malign. Liberal democratic states make citizens; the artificial state makes trolls.

Building an artificial state took decades, and it happened mainly by accident. In 1959, the Democratic Party, desperate to win back the White House, considered retaining the services of a startup staffed by computer scientists, political scientists, and admen, whose “People Machine” could run simulations on an artificial electorate and tell a party’s nominee what to say, to whom, and when.

“Without prejudicing your judgment, my own opinion is that such a thing (a) cannot work, (b) is immoral, (c) should be declared illegal,” Adlai Stevenson’s adviser Newton Minow wrote to the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., a confidant of John F. Kennedy. Schlesinger agreed, saying, “I shudder at the implication for public leadership of the notion . . . that a man shouldn’t say something until it is cleared with the machine,” but added that he didn’t want “to be a party to choking off new ideas.” The Kennedy campaign went ahead, hiring the Simulmatics Corporation to run predictions on an I.B.M. 704. (I investigated the history of Simulmatics in a 2020 book, [“If Then.”](#)) “It is the nature of politics that men must always act on the basis of uncertain fact,” Theodore H. White wrote in his prize-winning account of the Kennedy campaign, [“The Making of the President.”](#) Otherwise, “politics would be an exact science in which our purposes and destiny could be left to great impersonal computers.” But a transition had already begun. As the New York *Herald Tribune* put it, “a big, bulky monster called a ‘Simulmatics’ ” had been Kennedy’s “secret weapon.”

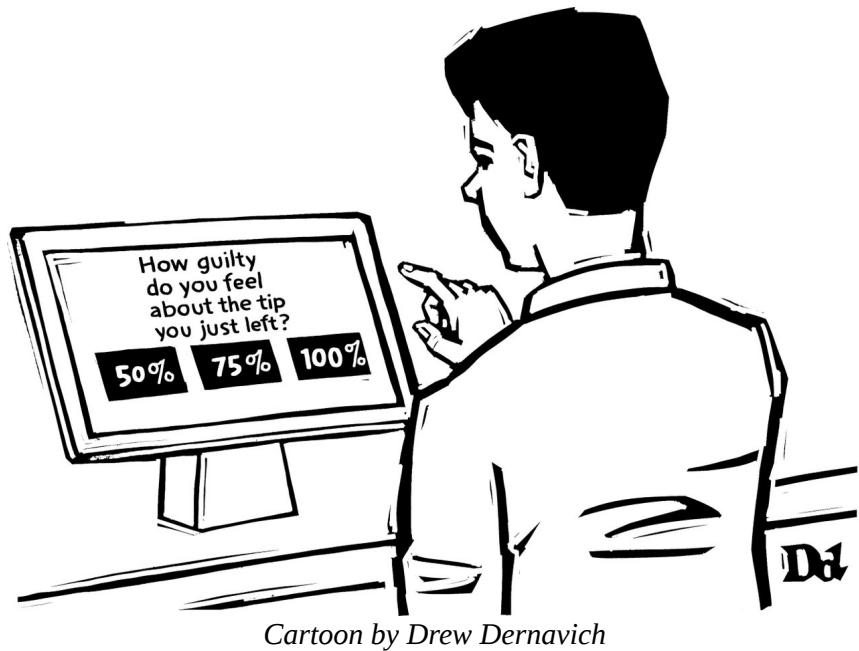
There was no grand plan, no sinister scheme. Instead, there were dedicated people trying to do their jobs as effectively as possible using the latest technologies, with the result that year by year and decade by decade, in both politics and journalism, automated data processing and targeted messaging replaced face-to-face interaction and mass circulation in the interest of speed, efficiency, and personalization. Meanwhile, polarization grew and trust in

government fell, and, for reasons that, to be sure, were driven by forces that went beyond technological change, Americans became lonelier and angrier; more susceptible to conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and frauds; and also more likely to believe that much of what they once thought was true was in fact a lie.

In 1972, Stewart Brand suggested that the personal computer could bring “power to the people.” Three years later, the *New York Times*, with CBS, released the nation’s first media-run poll, at once diminishing the role of man-on-the-street reporting and abandoning the long-standing reluctance of news organizations to conduct polls. In 1984, Apple released a TV ad suggesting that its new Macintosh would topple Orwellian totalitarianism. In the nineteen-nineties, Clinton-and-Gore-era Democrats promised, in one manifesto, that “thanks to the near-miraculous capabilities of micro-electronics, we are vanquishing scarcity.” In 1993, *Wired* reported that “life in cyberspace seems to be shaping up exactly like Thomas Jefferson would have wanted: founded on the primacy of individual liberty and a commitment to pluralism, diversity and community.” Seven years later, *Wired* announced, “We are, as a nation, better educated, more tolerant, and more connected because of—not in spite of—the convergence of the Internet and public life.” No such era of tolerance ever arrived.

In the virtual political reality of the twenty-first century, much of public discourse is controlled by private corporations that manufacture, and profit from, political extremism, even as they purport to be committed to democratic governance. At every stage in the emergence of the artificial state, tech leaders have promised that the latest new tools would be good for democracy, and for freedom, no matter the mounting evidence to the contrary. In 2014, Twitter released what it called “The Twitter Government and Elections Handbook,” which informed legislators that its platform is “the Town Hall Meeting . . . in Your Pocket.” The company, which has since become X, is a privately held corporation that could withhold from public scrutiny data about its users or

operations. It is not a democratic institution. Facebook's vaunted mission as of 2017 was "to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together." Facebook, now Meta, is a corporation that has historically been ruled by the mantra of its C.E.O., [Mark Zuckerberg](#): "company over country." It is not a democratic institution. "The most problematic aspect of Facebook's power is Mark's unilateral control over speech," [Chris Hughes](#), a Facebook co-founder, wrote in 2019. "There is no precedent for his ability to monitor, organize and even censor the conversations of two billion people."



Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

Newer social-media companies have not forged a different path. Nearly half of American [TikTok](#) users under thirty say they use the platform to follow politics or political issues, and about the same percentage believe that TikTok is "mostly good" for democracy. In 2021, a report by the Department of Homeland Security concluded that TikTok's algorithm had unintentionally driven support for the [January 6th](#) insurrection at the Capitol. This year, a study conducted in Germany alleged that TikTok promoted far-right candidates to young voters. It is not a democratic institution.

It's not as though these platforms couldn't become good for democracy, if they were to be reinvented as well-regulated, public-

interested digital utilities. “[Algorithms for the People: Democracy in the Age of AI](#),” an extremely thoughtful 2023 book by the British Labour Party M.P. Josh Simons, offers a political theory of machine learning—explaining the politics of search-result ranking, for instance—and expresses confidence that legislators can “develop structures of governance within which corporations design infrastructural ranking systems that create a healthy public sphere and civic information architecture.” This isn’t a new idea, and it’s one shared by Risse, who follows many earlier writers, including Ethan Zuckerman, in proposing a public-interested digital infrastructure, “like creating parks and libraries for the internet.” Where Risse endorses epistemic rights as a new kind of human right, Simons proposes an A.I. Equality Act, to “assert political equality as a guiding principle in the design and deployment of predictive tools.” If twenty-first-century democracy feels half dead, Simons believes that working through these challenges will bring it back to life. That can’t happen fast enough, because, year by year, the problems get more difficult to solve.

In the artificial state, at least as much political speech is made by bots—programs that, mimicking human behavior, execute automated tasks—as by humans. The Internet became “inverted” in 2012, when, for the first time on record, bots were more active online than people were. This helped generate a conspiracy theory, known as the dead-Internet theory, that everything on the Internet is fake. “It’s ridiculous, but possibly not *that* ridiculous?” the Internet beat reporter Kaitlyn Tiffany wrote in *The Atlantic*. Although Cambridge Analytica’s targeting of voters using Facebook data in the 2016 election was met with condemnation, what it did seemed little different from the way news organizations had come to treat their own political coverage, driven less by editorial judgment than by search-engine optimization.

Social media made many things worse. “For Twitter to deserve public trust, it must be politically neutral,” [Elon Musk](#) tweeted, when he was taking over the company in 2022. By 2023, X had, by

some estimates, become inverted: one study found that nearly two out of three of its accounts appeared to be bots. (An X-commissioned study said that the amount was closer to eleven per cent.) Despite Musk's promise to rid the platform of them, X now seems to have more bots than ever before. Earlier this year, Musk estimated that there would soon be two, three, or four bots for every human on the planet. (He's building the technology that could allow us to abandon the planet, so long as no pesky government stops him. "Unless current trends for absurd regulatory overreach are reversed, humanity will be confined to Earth forever," Musk recently declared.) Zuckerberg, once widely discussed as a possible Democratic candidate for the Presidency, gave up on American politics, refusing to try to fix what he's broken and instead devoting himself to his personal "wellness," the refuge of all scoundrels; he has also privately reinvented himself as a libertarian. This fall, Musk not only endorsed Trump but, dressed in black and describing himself as "dark MAGA," appeared at a Trump rally to warn Americans that, if they don't vote, "this will be the last election." But this very sense—the dark and uncanny precarity of it all, the exhausted rhetoric of existential risk, the fear that everything might collapse because everything is at once so fragile and so fake, so untrustworthy and so unreal—is itself a creation of the artificial state.

The building of the artificial state came at the expense of the natural world. "The modern world worships the gods of speed and quantity, and of the quick and easy profit, and out of this idolatry monstrous evils have arisen," Rachel Carson warned in the preface to a 1964 book called "[Animal Machines](#)," the "Silent Spring" of factory farming, which involved the raising of animals from birth to death in cages hardly bigger than themselves. "Yet the evils go long unrecognised," Carson wrote. "Even those who create them manage by some devious rationalising to blind themselves to the harm they have done society." The artificial state is the factory farming of public life, the sorting and segmenting, the isolation and

alienation, the destruction of human community. Meanwhile, the immense energy and water consumption required to build, expand, and maintain the coming A.I. infrastructure threatens to roll back gains made by environmental regulation in the past half century.

This election season, even as hurricanes battered North Carolina and Florida, the natural world has been notably absent from both the Trump and the Harris campaigns. Trump, who used to describe climate change as a hoax, has not substantially altered that position. (“You know, they have no idea what’s going to happen,” he said this summer. “It’s weather.”) Harris, despite having been part of an Administration that produced perhaps the most important environmental law in a generation, has seemed to distance herself from environmentalism as she attempts to take back the language of freedom from her opponent. But, as the historian Sunil Amrith writes in his essential new book, “[The Burning Earth: A History](#),” the rhetoric of freedom has become bound up with the triumph of the artificial over the natural: “Into the pursuit of freedom there crept, over time, a notion previously unthinkable: that true human autonomy entailed a liberation from the binding constraints of nature.”

Risse’s “Political Theory of the Digital Age” laid out a philosopher’s thought experiment, a “Grand Democratic AI Utopia,” in which democracy would work at machine scale. Judges would be replaced with sophisticated algorithms, legislators with “AI-driven collective choice systems.” He wrote that “nobody has so far seriously proposed anything like this,” and cautioned that we would be “ill advised to be guided by such a utopia.” But his book was published last year, and since then fantasies of a Grand Democratic AI Utopia have cropped up all over the place.

In “The Techno-Optimist Manifesto,” posted last October, [Marc Andreessen](#), the venture capitalist and notable Trump-Vance supporter, delivered a delusional account of human history as the triumph of the “techno-capital machine” over the constraints of

nature. “We had a problem of isolation, so we invented the Internet,” Andreessen proclaimed, preposterously. The solution is at hand: “We believe Artificial Intelligence is our alchemy, our Philosopher’s Stone—we are literally making sand think.” This September, OpenAI’s Sam Altman posted an essay in which he argued that generative A.I. is “the most consequential fact about all of history so far,” and that humanity is on the cusp of solving every problem. “There are a lot of details we still have to figure out,” Altman wrote, unironically, “but it’s a mistake to get distracted by any particular challenge.” The following month, not to be outdone, Dario Amodei, the C.E.O. of Anthropic, a rival of [OpenAI](#), published a blog post called “Machines of Loving Grace: How AI Could Transform the World for the Better,” in which he predicted that A.I. could lead, in five to ten years, to “the defeat of most diseases, the growth in biological and cognitive freedom, the lifting of billions of people out of poverty to share in the new technologies, a renaissance of liberal democracy and human rights”—developments that will happen so fast and be so overwhelming that many of us will be “literally moved to tears.” Someone will be crying. That much is true.

Having built an information infrastructure that classifies and divides humans and drives them to ideological extremes, these same people and corporations are now building machines that purport to undo the very damage they have caused, much in the same way that geoengineering schemes seek to address catastrophic climate by using the very logic and tools that created the problem. In a study funded in part by M.I.T.’s Generative AI Initiative and published in *Science* this fall, conspiracy-minded Americans were subjected to long exchanges with a deprogramming chatbot. “The treatment reduced participants’ belief in their chosen conspiracy theory by 20% on average,” the researchers concluded. They don’t seem to have bothered to establish control groups who might, for instance, have been asked

to read articles and books, or—seemingly beyond the realm of imagination—converse with another human.

The same spirit of inquiry-as-boosterism lies behind “The Digitalist Papers.” It brings together venture-capital magical thinking about a Grand Democratic AI Utopia with the kind of social science that imagines improving machines but cannot imagine helping people by way of, say, funding for public education. The self-described Federalist Papers for the age of artificial intelligence propose schemes that include digital citizen assemblies and “actionable strategies for successfully transitioning to a new era of governance whereby AI recommends courses of action to the humans” in places like legislatures and courtrooms. In one of the essays, “The Potential for AI to Restore Local Community Connectedness,” the former C.E.O. of Nextdoor touts the ability of the company’s “AI Kindness Reminder” to reduce “the creation of uncivil and harmful content.” Eric Schmidt, the former C.E.O. of Google, boasts that “the coming of AGI may herald less of a new world order and more of an improved version of our current liberal order: Democracy 2.0.” John Cochrane, a Hoover Institution economist, delights at this news: “As birthrates continue to decline, the issue is not too few jobs, but too few people. Artificial ‘people’ may be coming along just in time!” All but alone among the Digitalist Papers’ contributors, the legal scholar Lawrence Lessig sounds a note of caution: “The likely effect of AI will make an already broken political system even worse.”

The artificial state is not alive; it cannot be killed. But, because it is something built, it can be dismantled, if enough people decide to sell it off for parts. Other very stubborn systems for organizing human societies have been dismantled before. The divine right of kings, feudalism, human bondage. Compared with those, this one might be easy. It begins with naming it. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified the member of the Kennedy family to whom Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was a confidant.



Jill Lepore is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and a professor at Harvard. She is the author of several books, including “*The Deadline*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/the-artificial-state>

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

[Books](#)

The Brothers Grimm Were Dark for a Reason

Their version of “Cinderella” or “Rapunzel” could be disturbing. But turning Germany into a unified nation, they believed, meant unearthing its authentic culture.

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

November 4, 2024



Jacob and Wilhelm's riches-to-rags childhood had its fairy-tale aspects.
Illustration by Golden Cosmos

Once upon a time, a family by the name of Grimm carried on a life that was anything but. In the wooded German state of Hessen, Philipp, a town clerk, lived with his wife, Dorothea, and their

children in a quaint cottage. Its exterior was an inviting light red, and its doors tan, as if made of gingerbread. The drawing room had been wallpapered with pictures of huntsmen, onto whose faces the two eldest boys, Jacob and Wilhelm (born in 1785 and 1786, respectively), would cheekily pencil in beards. Soon, Philipp was promoted to serve as the magistrate of a town nearby, and the Grimms moved into a stately home staffed with maids, a cook, and a coachman. Every Christmas, the family decorated a tree with apples, as was the German custom. In the summer, the children ventured into the surrounding woods to collect butterflies and flowers, confident they could find their way back home.

Then, one day, a dark cloud appeared, as if summoned by a witch jealous of their domestic idyll. In 1796, Philipp, only forty-four years old, succumbed to pneumonia. Jacob later recalled seeing his father's body being measured for a coffin. Dorothea and her children were ordered to clear out. Without Philipp's income, they were forced for a time to shelter in an almshouse just next door—cursed with a view of their former home and the courtyard where they once played, happily, until what came after.

Jacob and Wilhelm, the Brothers Grimm, experienced the kind of sharp reversal of fortune characteristic of the genre that became synonymous with their name: the fairy tale. A prince turned into a frog; a beloved daughter reduced to a scullery maid. Where the French rendition of “Cinderella,” by Charles Perrault, opens with Cinderella already in tatters, laboring away for her stepmother, the Grimms’ version, “Aschenputtel,” begins with the heroine’s mother on her deathbed. Ann Schmiesing, the author of [“The Brothers Grimm: A Biography”](#) (Yale), observes that the change transforms a “story of ‘rags to riches’ to ‘riches to rags to riches’—a trajectory, incidentally, that parallels the Grimms’ experience.” The Grimms’ version hacks away at the French tale in other ways. When the prince shows up with the fateful slipper, Aschenputtel’s stepsisters slash at their heels to make their feet fit. Each makes it to the gates of the castle before the prince notices blood gushing everywhere.

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



The dark tenor of the Grimms' fairy tales is almost a punch line at this point, and their surname, which means "wrathful" in German, hasn't helped. Even in their lifetime, the brothers were subjected to the obligatory punning. Jacob, an accomplished philologist, thanked a friend for resisting the urge to crack the obvious joke after he published his book "German Grammar": "I do so appreciate that you have not chided my *Grammar* as a *Grimmer*." In truth, there's an almost comical severity to their tales, among them "How Some Children Played at Slaughtering," in which a pair of siblings, having just seen their father butcher a pig, try out the act on each other. In "Briar Rose," the Grimms' version of "Sleeping Beauty," suitors trying to reach the slumbering maiden become snagged on the briar hedge surrounding her castle, dying "miserable deaths."

These stories amount to wish fulfillment for people who want to believe stereotypes about German austerity, which may be a measure of the Grimms' success. Their aim in collecting such folklore—alongside the fairy tales, the Grimms published legends, songs, myths—was to create a cohesive national identity for German speakers. It's why the brothers, especially Jacob, also wrote books on German philology and began what was intended to be the most comprehensive dictionary of the German language, the Deutsches Wörterbuch. (Toiling into their final years, they got as far as *frucht*, fruit.)

The Grimms were Germanists before there was a Germany. When they were born, “Germany” contained what the historian Perry Anderson describes as a “maze of dwarfish princedoms,” and they died not long before the country’s unification, in 1871. In between, the outlines of their homeland shifted again and again, with the Napoleonic invasion of Hessen, in 1806, the Congress of Vienna and post-Napoleonic redivisions of Europe, and, eventually, the rise of Otto von Bismarck. Amid such geographic disarray, the Grimms believed that shared language and cultural traditions could be the connective yarn of a people, their people. All that was needed was a fellow, or two, to come along with a spinning wheel.

Though posterity has conjoined them, Jacob and Wilhelm were two rather disparate men. Wilhelm was the bon vivant to Jacob’s introvert. The elder was the more accomplished scholar. Jacob’s research on phonetics established what is still known today in linguistics as Grimm’s law. (He had noticed patterns by which consonants from other Indo-European languages altered as they made their way into German.) When, in their mid-fifties, the brothers accepted appointments at the University of Berlin, Jacob spurned any honors and illustrious positions that would take him away from his desk. “I would happily don a homespun smock of the coarsest material and strive for nothing other than that,” he joked to a friend. Meanwhile, Wilhelm’s diary from that period shows him watching a production of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” strolling through the botanical gardens, and taking in the Cabinet of Art, where Napoleon’s hat was on display. A “rare day without any visit,” he noted in one entry.

And yet a joint biography is the only kind that feels appropriate; posthumously disentangling one brother from the other seems tantamount to desecrating a corpse, for Jacob and Wilhelm were ardently inseparable. When, during their undergraduate years, Jacob briefly worked abroad for one of their professors, Wilhelm wrote to him, “When you left, I thought my heart would tear in two. I couldn’t stand it. You certainly don’t know how much I love

you.” Jacob pledged that it would never happen again, and sketched out what he hoped their life would look like after they completed their studies: “We will presumably at last live quite withdrawn and isolated, for we will not have many friends, and I do not enjoy acquaintances. We shall want to work with each other quite collaboratively and to cut off all other affairs.” When Wilhelm married, Jacob lived with his brother and new sister-in-law. A friend once addressed the brothers in a letter as “My dear double hooks!”

Their bond was forged through their shared history of loss and social isolation. After Philipp’s death, Jacob and Wilhelm no longer enjoyed the status that came with being the sons of a magistrate. Matriculating at the University of Marburg, in their late teens, they had to pay their own way; stipends were typically reserved for the sons of aristocrats and landowners. Jacob saw his situation at Marburg as akin to the slights that the German people—lacking the political and economic advantages that came with being part of a nation-state—suffered on the European stage. He wrote in his autobiography, “Sparseness spurs a person to industriousness and work, keeps one from many a distraction and infuses one with noble pride that keeps one conscious of self-achievement in contrast to what social class and wealth provide. . . . A great deal of what Germans have achieved overall should be attributed to the fact that they are not a rich folk.”

While at the university, the brothers came under the influence of Friedrich Carl von Savigny, a young law professor who maintained that laws should not be imposed upon a people but, rather, be derived from them. A legislator, then, must be a kind of historian, or, better yet, a philologist, alert to a people’s desires as expressed in their language and storytelling. In a study of the Brothers Grimm and German nationalism, the scholar Jakob Norberg argues that, if Plato prescribed a “philosopher king” to rule the city-state, the Grimms envisioned a “philologist king” to lead the nation-state.

It was also at Marburg, and through Savigny, that the Grimms fell in with Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, two wellborn writers who had begun to amass German folk songs, aiming to capture the *Volksseele*—the soul of the people—that predated the European Enlightenment and French neoclassicism. Arnim and Brentano were founding members of what became known as Heidelberg Romanticism. If early German Romanticism, which flowered in Jena, in the seventeen-nineties, prized the “individual, subjective worldview,” Schmiesing writes, “the Heidelberg Romantics celebrated folk and heroic literature because they saw in it the collective experience of a people.”

Savigny’s dictum situated the national will in the hearts, or, more precisely, on the tongues, of common folk. Though the Grimms began by helping Arnim and Brentano, they came to see themselves as uniquely fluent, by virtue both of their family’s impoverishment and of the lore surrounding their home state of Hessen. They would gather many of their fairy tales there, convinced that the region’s relative remove from commercial roads preserved its authentically German character.

Hessen also had a touch of myth to it. The land had been settled in ancient times by the Chatti people, described by the Roman historian Tacitus as being brawnier than other Germanic tribes. With much of its rugged terrain a hindrance to agriculture, mercenaries became a primary export. Twenty-five per cent of British land forces in the American Revolutionary War were Hessian. (Washington Irving’s headless horseman was rumored to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper.) The philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte, a father of German nationalism, even accused Europeans of deliberately keeping German lands fragmented—the better to enlist German valor for their own conquests. It was on this embattled landscape that the Grimms set about stitching together a cultural heritage that they could raise as a flag.

A foe for the ages had appeared. Napoleon's conquest of Germanic lands was a watershed moment for German Romanticism. "Soon everything changed from the ground up," Wilhem recalled, of French troops occupying his home town of Kassel, in 1806.

"Foreign people, foreign customs, and in the streets and on walks a foreign, loudly spoken language." Hessen was subsumed into the Kingdom of Westphalia, led by Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon's hapless brother, who had scarcely learned more than three words of German: those for "tomorrow," "again," and "jolly." (This earned him the moniker King Jolly.) Jérôme was rumored to bathe in red wine, which, Schmiesing writes, "underscored his foreignness in a region accustomed to white wine."

Jacob actually served as Jérôme's personal librarian, but his real vocation was as a kind of foot soldier-folklorist amid the Napoleonic Wars. He later assembled a group of folklorists who took an oath to "honor the fatherland" through the "rescuing of our folk literature." The tales they gathered were bread crumbs that would guide the German people to their cultural home.

The first volume of the Grimms' "Children's and Household Tales" was published in December of 1812. It contained eighty-six stories, including classics like "Rapunzel," "Hansel and Gretel," "Snow White," "Rumpelstiltskin," "Briar Rose," and "Little Red Riding Hood," along with extensive footnotes. Critics weren't sure what to make of a collection of "children's tales" that came with scholarly addenda and randy animals. "Mrs. Fox," where a fox with nine tails, which scan as furry phallic symbols, tests his wife's faithfulness, was not the kind of bedtime story that parents had in mind. The same went for "Rapunzel," in which the fairy (not the witch) realizes that her long-tressed prisoner has been receiving visits from the prince when, one day, Rapunzel asks, "Why are my clothes becoming too tight?" For the Grimms, what mattered was to be authentic, not appropriate, and fairy tales, across many literary traditions, weren't always intended for children. According to the scholar Maria Tatar, these were folktales shared among

adults after hours, while the children were asleep. She cites a French version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” in which the big bad wolf has designs on the little girl that are not gastronomical. In that version, she does what amounts to a striptease, peeling off her clothes as the disguised wolf watches from the bed, giving fresher context to “What big hands you have!”

Then, there was the matter of the Grimms’ language—sparse, hectic, visceral, unfiltered. In the preface, the brothers boasted of the collection’s fidelity to their sources: “No circumstance has been poeticized, beautified, or altered.” Well, that much was clear, complained the Grimms’ old friend Clemens Brentano, who thought they went too far. “If you want to display children’s clothes,” Brentano wrote, “you can do that with fidelity without bringing out an outfit that has all the buttons torn off, dirt smeared on it, and the shirt hanging out of the pants.” But the Grimms wanted to preserve the culture of the common folk, not to make the folk sound cultured.



“You don’t gasp at my miracles anymore.”
Cartoon by Edward Steed

Schmiesing’s biography of the Grimms is the first major English-language one in decades. It can be dense with details, but when I read Murray B. Peppard’s [“Paths Through the Forest”](#) (1971), a more approachable biography of the Grimms, I found myself

missing Schmiesing's unrulier thickets of Prussian bureaucrats and long asides about German grammar. Hers is hearty German fare. It also presents findings that complicate the brothers' image as ethnographic purists.

The popular perception of how the Grimms collected their tales was captured in an illustration that appeared in an eighteen-nineties German magazine: Jacob and Wilhelm are shown visiting a humble cottage, listening to an older peasant woman. "This rustic scene did not actually take place," Schmiesing writes. The Grimms' informants tended to be well-educated women from affluent families who retrieved stories from villagers and servants in their employ. The woman in the illustration, Dorothea Viehmann, was indeed one of the Grimms' poorer informants, but her tales were not as "genuinely Hessian" as the brothers once described them. She was of Huguenot extraction on her father's side, accounting, scholars have speculated, for the French influence on some of her stories.

Schmiesing also revisits the scholarship on Wilhelm's change in editorial policy. Possibly in response to critical disapprobation, he updated the second version of "Children's and Household Tales" to satisfy nineteenth-century gender norms. In the first edition, the story of Hansel and Gretel begins with their mother telling their father to abandon the siblings in the woods. In the second edition, the father's wife—the archetypal evil stepmother—makes the order, because it was unseemly to suggest that a biological mother would dispose of her children so coolly. (The father going along with it all—just fine!)

Although their legacy may be as German Mother Geese, the brothers regarded their fairy-tale volumes as one project among many, and hardly the most important. In 1829, the Grimms, then in their forties, took jobs as librarians at the University of Göttingen, in the kingdom of Hanover. There, Jacob published "German Mythology" (1835). He believed that, just as etymologists could

identify features of ancient languages through modern descendants, he could approximate ancient German mythology through folklore. He scoured ballads, fairy tales, and legends for references to heroes, wise women, dwarfs, giants, ghosts, cures, magic, and more.

Unlike “Children’s and Household Tales,” “German Mythology” was a national, and nationalist, sensation. The book positively rejuvenated the composer Richard Wagner. In his autobiography, “My Life,” Wagner wrote of encountering “German Mythology”: “Before my mind’s eye, a world of figures soon built itself up, which in turn revealed themselves in such unexpectedly sculptural form and so primordially recognizable that, when I saw them clearly before me and heard their speech within me, I finally could not comprehend whence came this almost tangible familiarity and certainty of their bearing. I cannot describe the effect of this on the disposition of my soul as anything other than a complete rebirth.” With “German Mythology,” Jacob had hoped to defend his ancestors—the Germanic peoples who invaded the Roman Empire—against allegations of barbarism. It’s a defense that, Schmiesing writes, “was at times overtly racialized.” Though Wilhelm praised the fairy tales of Sierra Leone, Jacob once wrote an article in which he called fetishism “a descending into dullness and coarseness, like that which rules the wild Negro,” and insisted that it was “essentially foreign to a people like our ancestors, which as soon as it appears in history, acts worthily and freely and speaks a finely wrought language that is closely related to that of the noblest peoples of antiquity.”

The Grimms’ professional lives were as unstable as the borders of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1837, a new monarch dissolved Hanover’s legislative assemblies and cast aside its constitution. Jacob and Wilhelm, joining five of their colleagues, signed a statement in protest. The dissenters—who were ordered to leave Hanover within three days—became known as the Göttingen Seven, and their act of defiance was later enshrined in German

history as a banner moment in the nation's path to democracy. Wilhelm even revised a fairy tale with the episode in mind. In an earlier version of a story titled "The Blue Light," a man leaves the military because he is too old to fight. In the new version, the protagonist is a wounded soldier who is discharged by his sovereign with the words "You can go home now. I no longer need you, and you shall receive no more money from me. I give wages only to those who can serve me."

The detail of wages withheld spoke to the financial straits in which Jacob and Wilhelm now found themselves. In 1840, Arnim's widow implored the Prussian prince, Friedrich Wilhelm IV, to find positions for two of her friends, whom she did not name. After doing some digging, the Prince learned their identities, and wrote back, "The fruit of my grim researching was—two researching Grimms!" Alexander von Humboldt, the celebrated geographer and naturalist, arranged for the brothers to pursue their scholarship in Berlin on a combined salary of three thousand thalers, to be divided as they pleased "since they live like man and wife."

Two years later, Humboldt came to Jacob with a question. The Prussian court was announcing a new honor for achievements in the arts and sciences. Could Jacob advise on how a specific word in the statute should be spelled? The word in question: *deutsch*.

The project that would preoccupy the Grimms for the remainder of their lives was the Deutsches Wörterbuch—the German dictionary. A publishing house in Leipzig had pitched them the idea in 1838, but Jacob hesitated. He had concerns about the systematizing of language, and about German-language classes in schools—he cherished the idea of the mother tongue being imparted by actual mothers. Still, the Grimms had models for a different kind of lexicon. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language, from the mid-eighteenth century, had been part of a movement away from rigid language textbooks. Entries featured texts drawn from various periods, giving a sense of how language changed over

time. Johnson and others believed that dictionaries could record, and not merely dictate, the expressions of a people, in a version of what Savigny, the Grimms' old professor at Marburg, had preached about the law.

Just as they had worked with informants on their fairy tales, the Grimms solicited dictionary entries from more than eighty contributors, including professors, philologists, and preachers. The results could be enchanting. The first entry was for the letter “A”:

A, the noblest and most primordial of any sound, resounding with fullness from the chest and throat, first and easiest sound that a child will learn to produce, and which the alphabets of most languages rightfully put at the beginning.

The men worked twelve hours a day to meet publishing deadlines, but they managed to sneak in some fun. In the complete first volume, which appeared in 1854, the Grimms included Wilhelm's affectionate nickname for his wife, *bierlümmer* (beer lout). It took them sixteen years to finish that first section—which ended with the entry for *biermolke* (beer whey)—but the quibbles rolled in almost immediately. Catholics complained about the preponderance of word-usage examples from Martin Luther, and about the tone of certain entries. The one for *ablass* (indulgence) read, “Principally the ecclesiastical remission of sin for money . . . against which the Reformation victoriously inveighed.” Jacob believed that the capitalization of common nouns was an inorganic import and did away with it, a choice that inspired parodies in the German press.

Despite their critics, the Grimms carried on. In their hands, the dictionary was a form of political speech, the only kind that ever worked for them. In 1848, amid the wave of nationalist revolutions across Europe, Jacob was invited to serve as a representative at the Frankfurt National Assembly, a body convened in an effort to create a unified German state. But the meeting descended into factionalism as competing class and geographical interests revealed

the country to be far more divided than Jacob had fantasized. The brothers retreated to their study to work on the dictionary. Every letter was a step toward the goal—if not a unified Germany, then at least a unified German people, connected by words, and by familial bickering about their meaning.

On December 16, 1859, Wilhelm died, at the age of seventy-three, following complications from back surgery. Jacob sat by his bedside and counted each of his brother's last breaths. Four years later, Jacob followed. Stricken with an inflamed liver and then a stroke, he lay in bed conscious but unable to speak. He reached for a picture of Wilhelm and brought it up to his face, and died not long afterward. The two are buried in Berlin as they lived, side by side.

In 1871, Kaiser Wilhelm ascended to the throne of a newly unified Germany. In Goslar, a northern town in the Harz Mountains, an imperial palace was renovated to include a fresco drawing of “Briar Rose,” symbolizing a long-slumbering, finally awakened German identity. It was the fairy-tale ending the Grimms had dreamed of, and, as in many of their stories, there was no happily ever after.

The Grimms’ stories, with their promise of bodying forth an authentically Teutonic spirit, were so sought after during the Nazi years that Allied occupying forces temporarily banned them after the war. Scholars have since stressed that their nationalism was rooted in a shared cultural and linguistic heritage, not blood and soil. Still, the task of narrating the lives of Jacob and Wilhelm remains as thorny as the hedge that trapped Briar Rose’s suitors. As Schmiesing writes, it “entails navigating between too naively or too judgmentally presenting the nineteenth-century constructions of Germany and Germanness to which they contributed.”

In truth, this ambivalence existed for Jacob, too, who worried that the standardization of German in schools might downgrade dialects and the very folk speech that their lives had been devoted to

capturing. The brothers knew better than anyone that every story of enchantment is also a story of disenchantment, and their lifelong cause was no exception. The nation has proved to be humanity's most cherished fairy tale, and its grimdest. ♦



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

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/the-brothers-grimmm-a-biography-ann-schmiesing-book-review>

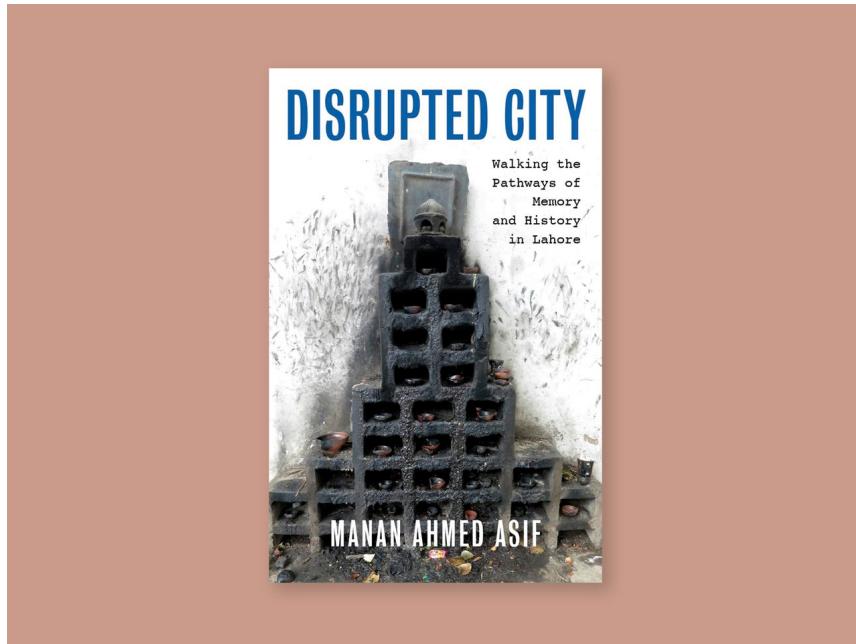
| [Section menu](#) | [Main menu](#) |

[Books](#)

Briefly Noted

“Disrupted City,” “Q&A,” “Model Home,” and “Canoes.”

November 4, 2024



Disrupted City, by *Manan Ahmed Asif* (*New Press*). In this engaging book, a professor of South Asian history invites readers to take a walk with him through Lahore, the city of his birth. As he winds past monuments and bazaars—evoking a rich cast of characters who have called Lahore home for more than a millennium—he contemplates how this ancient city has changed since Partition, in 1947. Muslim families like his settled into the homes of displaced Sikhs and Hindus as part of a calamity that remade the population by forcing people “to move without much, to put down shallow roots, to remember even less.” But, as Asif demonstrates, walking through a city can be an act of remembering its past.



Q&A, by *Adrian Tomine* (*Drawn & Quarterly*). Structured as a series of answers to questions from readers, this book, by a noted graphic novelist, is part advice manual for aspiring cartoonists, part memoir. Tomine, who taught himself to draw as a “defense against chaos and loneliness,” started self-publishing at sixteen, and he has worked steadily for nearly thirty years now. He reflects candidly and wittily on topics including the solitary nature of cartooning, writing to artist idols, parenthood’s influence on his art, and adapting a graphic novel into a screenplay (“Shortcomings”). His writing, by turns encouraging and nostalgic, is interspersed with life-drawing sketches and with panels from his graphic novels.

What We're Reading

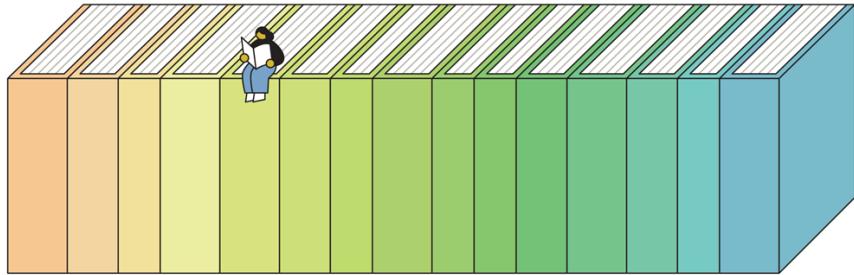
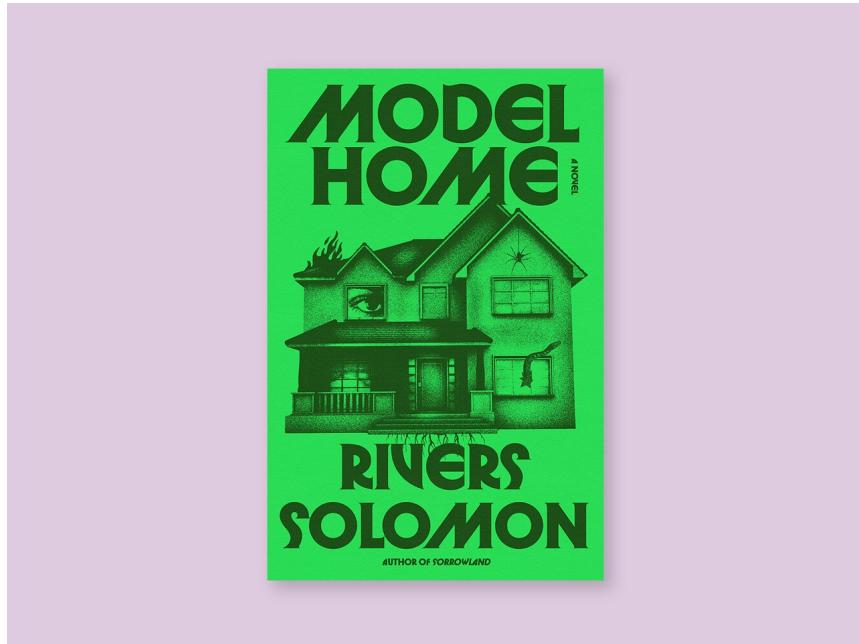


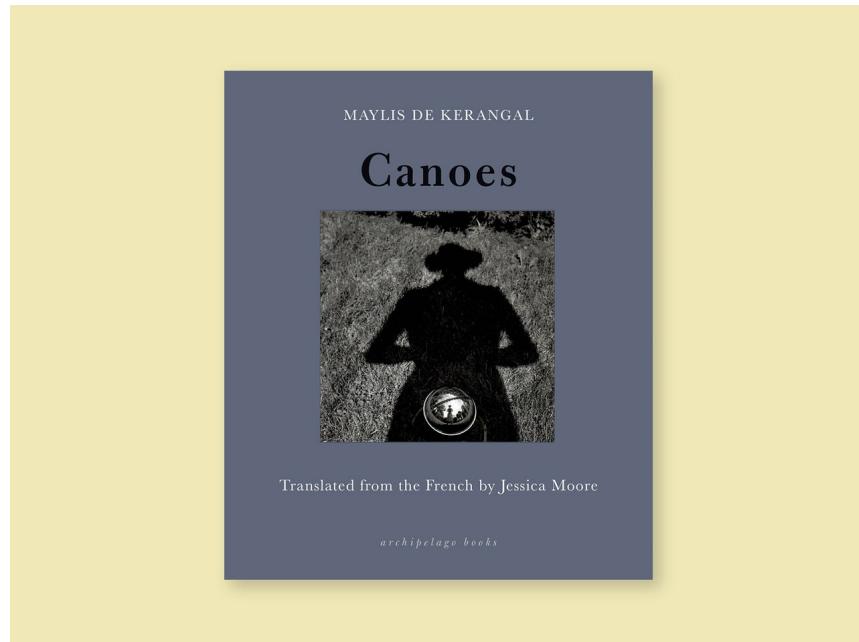
Illustration by Rose Wong

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Model Home, by Rivers Solomon (MCD x FSG). “Being well versed in the specific tropes of a genre should save me from worry, but knowledge has never saved anyone”—so observes Ezri, the Oxford-educated, nonbinary narrator of Solomon’s novel, which adapts the conventions of haunted-house fiction. After their parents —onetime paragons of “Black Excellence”—meet a grisly death in the affluent, white gated community in Texas where their family once lived, Ezri is summoned back to their childhood home, a place they have long regarded as haunted. As Ezri and their sisters parse supernatural horrors from earthbound ones, Solomon succeeds in

evoking an atmosphere in which there is more than one way to feel haunted.



Canoes, by *Maylis de Kerangal*, translated from the French by *Jessica Moore* (Archipelago). This stylish collection opens with a narrator getting her jaw molded while a dentist shows her a photo of “a human jawbone from the mesolithic,” an image that establishes the oral and historical fixations that give de Kerangal’s mostly plotless stories their energy. A deep sensitivity to language elevates the mundanity of these narrators’ lives: one listens to radio static and feels that she is “crossing another dimension of reality in a breaststroke, immersed in the crackling of electromagnetic waves.” In another story, a narrator is asked to recite and record a poem by mysterious sisters who have undertaken “a monumental work that aimed to restore to literature its oral aspect, to embody it, to give each text a voice all its own, the right one”—a project not dissimilar to de Kerangal’s.

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/disrupted-city-q-and-a-model-home-canoe>

[Musical Events](#)

Charles Ives, Connoisseur of Chaos

Celebrating the composer's hundred-and-fiftieth birthday, at a festival in Bloomington, Indiana.

By [Alex Ross](#)

November 4, 2024



Ives can be seen as an American counterpart to Mahler, storming toward the future while mourning the past.

Illustration by David Plunkert

In 1921, Charles E. Ives, a wealthy co-proprietor of the New York life-insurance firm Ives & Myrick, launched a bid to rebrand himself as an American Beethoven. He sent copies of his Second Piano Sonata, titled “Concord, Mass., 1840-1860,” to hundreds of musicians, critics, and patrons across the United States. The first movement, “Emerson,” begins with a kind of axe-swinging gesture: an octave B gets smashed into dissonant splinters. Fractured impressions of Hawthorne, the Alcotts, and Thoreau

ensue. Most of the recipients dismissed the composer as a crank, but a few were spellbound by his transcendentalist conjurations, and a cult began to grow. In 1939, the pianist John Kirkpatrick played the “Concord” at Town Hall, eliciting critical awe. In 1947, Ives’s Third Symphony, a stately mashup of Christian hymns, won him a Pulitzer Prize. In 1951, Leonard Bernstein led the New York Philharmonic in the première of the raucous, joyous Second Symphony. By century’s end, Ives had seemingly been canonized as the craggy patriarch of American music; in the mid-nineties, I attended three festivals centered on him.

Lately, though, Ives has drifted to the margins again. The hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of his birth, on October 20th, passed with little fanfare. Carnegie Hall is presenting very little by Ives this season, and the Philharmonic is playing nothing at all. It fell to the Jacobs School of Music, at Indiana University Bloomington, to mount a proper tribute—“Charles Ives at 150,” a nine-day festival in early October. Part of the neglect has to do with the fact that craggy patriarchs are no longer in fashion, particularly ones who were prone to misogynistic and homophobic rhetoric, as Ives was. But the deeper problem is that American musical organizations have grown perilously risk-averse. Something has gone wrong when the Berliner Festspiele features Ives in depth while New York overlooks him.

American music offers nothing better than Ives at his best. My touchstone is “Three Places in New England” (1912-21), which the Jacobs School Philharmonic performed in Bloomington. The final movement, “The Housatonic at Stockbridge,” evokes a Sunday-morning walk that Ives took with his wife, Harmony, along the Housatonic River: mist rising off the water, a church choir in the distance. After a polyrhythmic depiction of the currents, we hear the hymn “Dorrnance,” first in a major-key context and then in darksome minor. A cacophony builds, indicating a maelstrom of inner feeling. In its wake, the hymn steals back in for two quick-fading measures. A bittersweet progression stops mid-phrase. The

vision vanishes. This incomparable ending not only replicates the blindsiding impact of nature's sublimities; it also conveys how such epiphanies echo in our memory, forming sites of perpetual longing.

"Charles Ives at 150," which was organized by the Ives scholar J. Peter Burkholder and the cultural historian Joseph Horowitz, concentrated largely on smaller-scale scores: chamber-orchestra pieces, chamber and piano music, choral music, and songs. This emphasis was welcome, because the composer's more intimate work belies the image of him as a dilettante, a tinkerer, or—in Bernstein's regrettable characterization—a "primitive." Ives received rigorous training, first from his father, the ace bandmaster George Ives, and then from Horatio Parker at Yale. He often defied Western musical conventions, but he knew them all the same.

On my first night in Bloomington, I heard the violinist Stefan Jackiw and the pianist Jeremy Denk play Ives's four violin sonatas, in reverse order. (The duo has also recorded them for the Nonesuch label.) When I was first discovering Ives, I remember being disappointed by these scores: they seemed tame next to the convulsions of the "Concord" and the Fourth Symphony. Ives's legendary status initially rested on his reputation as a maverick pioneer who supposedly had beaten Schoenberg in the race to the atonal pole. In fact, he didn't, and it hardly matters. What sets Ives apart is his masterly fusion of disparate materials: tattered old tunes, newfangled dissonances, received classical forms, self-fashioned streams of consciousness. As Horowitz has argued, Ives is really an American counterpart to Mahler, who stormed toward the future while mourning the past.

Consider Ives's Fourth Violin Sonata, which packs a cosmos of ideas into nine fleeting minutes. At the festival, Burkholder came onstage to explicate an Ivesian process that he calls "cumulative form," in which the principal thematic material of a movement emerges only at the end, rather than at the beginning. The themes, as so often with this composer, are drawn from the hymnal: "Old,

Old Story,” “Jesus Loves Me,” “Shall We Gather at the River.” They become manifest first as fleeting fragments, and only if you know them in advance can you catch the transformations they undergo. Burkholder pointed out a passage in the Fourth’s middle movement in which segments of “Jesus Loves Me” unfold simultaneously in two distinct keys. Adding to the complexity of the undertaking—and to its emotional import—are quotations from a Fugue in B-flat composed by Ives’s father. This is meta-counterpoint, spanning genres and generations.

There is nothing analytical about Jackiw and Denk’s rendition, which translates all those formal intricacies into an infectious colloquy of voices. Distinguished violinists from Joseph Szigeti to Hilary Hahn have tackled the Fourth Sonata, yet Jackiw sets a new standard, running the gamut from boisterous fiddling to solitary chant, with sly parodies of overcooked Romanticism along the way. Denk, whose enthusiasm for Ives deepened after he took a course from Burkholder more than thirty years ago, keeps pace with Jackiw’s code-switching and fills in the brooding meditations that hover behind Ives’s games and pranks. The Fourth has another eerie Ivesian ending—“Shall We Gather at the River” cuts off abruptly—but Jackiw and Denk find a midnight comedy in it: the violin’s progressively blurrier articulation and the piano’s progressively sketchier pounding suggest a jam session that slides toward stupor.

Ives rises or falls on the performers’ degree of belief. Musicians must become actors playing roles, hollering certain motifs and muttering others. Some of that theatrical engagement was missing in the Pacifica Quartet’s account of Ives’s string quartets, which came two nights after the Jackiw-Denk concert. The middle movement of the Second Quartet, which portrays heated arguments among four friends, needed a more characterful delineation of the clashing lines. The finale, by contrast, is Ives in visionary mode, as the friends set aside their differences and take a walk under the

stars. Here, the *Pacifica* played with devout focus, bringing us into the territory of late Beethoven and late Shostakovich.

Various pianists tackled Ives in Bloomington, among them the eighty-nine-year-old Gilbert Kalish, who gave a stupendously assured reading of the little-heard First Sonata. Later in the month, at the Piano Spheres series in Los Angeles, I witnessed powerhouse performances of both sonatas by Stephen Drury. The “Concord” is the more spectacular piece, with its mystical dissonances, its thunderous citations of Beethoven’s Fifth, its wrenching lyrical oases. But the First is just as potent. Sparing in its use of preexisting material, it proceeds from abstract oratory to madcap ragtime dances and back again. The closing gesture is, of course, enigmatic: a crashing “Amen” cadence in A major gives way to a three-note question mark, pianissimo.

Something similar happens in a blistering Ives song titled “Nov. 2, 1920,” which denounces the election of Warren G. Harding and the ascendancy of Republican laissez-faire economics. (Ives, an eccentric capitalist, believed that personal fortunes should be capped at a hundred thousand dollars.) The song’s text concludes in an ostensibly hopeful mood: “A heritage we’ve thrown away; but we’ll find it again.” The music, though, falls short of its implied C-major triumph and trails off into silence. In the end, the most radical thing about Ives is his refusal of simple stories, his acceptance of uncertainty, his readiness for the unknown. ♦



Alex Ross has been the magazine's music critic since 1996. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#).”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/charles-ives-at-150-music-review>

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

Poems

- **“Creation Theory”**

By Joy Harjo | “I was earth grasping for air. / No one in this universe fit precisely anywhere.”

- **“Two Kinds of Ending”**

By Vona Groarke | “She’d be waiting; eye to the window, / ear to the door.”

[Poems](#)

Creation Theory

By [Joy Harjo](#)

November 4, 2024

First it was me in the mother-and-father universe—
I emerged precariously as an unstable element
In the province of fire and water.
I came out fighting. I was not a princess.
I should have been a boy.
I was earth grasping for air.
No one in this universe fit precisely anywhere.
And then you, my brother, arrived eighteen months
Afterward, on a winter day,
Along with my mother who had disappeared
To bring me back a gift.
It was you, a baby who was already an old man
Who even before kindergarten would search
The house for cigarette butts to smoke,
Empties to glean the last drops of liquid high.
In the myth of us, you were the warrior-usurper,
Earth boy come in to claim territory,
To inherit the kingdom of mother and father.
I was the protector of my homeland.
I bit your thigh and made a mark, and because
I was an honorable competitor we made a pact
To stand by each other, no matter the weather
As our freshly inhabited parental planet
Turned and turned, and the world of us
Disintegrated and broke.
We were never able to put it back together.
You were a rambunctious cowboy driving semis, circling

The country, always looking for our father, whose friends called him Chief—

He was lost in the embrace of sirens in an underworld bar somewhere far.

I was Indian, fighting for our sovereign rights and becoming A poet; still, it was you and me, no matter our orbits Which rarely met. I was always escaping danger, and you were part of my looking back.

We ran and ran, but no one can outrun the story.

And yet, I am standing here beside you and you are not here.

The memory of you laughs, tells your rodeo tales of trips And girls, and there are always cars to buy and sell.

I'm still figuring out how to keep you alive.

That's why I'm here, in these words, grabbing your arm.

I saved your life twice. Once on earth. Once in water.

The third time, I reached for you, but you disappeared.

When I lean back into those years when our father fathered, And our mother mothered, we go running out into the yard And there's a universe there.

No one will ever hurt us.

No one will ever leave.

Joy Harjo served three terms as U.S. Poet Laureate. Her books include the poetry collection “Weaving Sundown in a Scarlet Light” and the memoir “Poet Warrior.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/creation-theory-joy-harjo-poem>

[Poems](#)

Two Kinds of Ending

By [Vona Groarke](#)

November 4, 2024

She'd be waiting; eye to the window,
ear to the door, a day behind her
she thinks of, morning and afternoon,
as two sullen plaits of rain
clipped, tightly, to her skull;

then thinks of him
feels the silt of him thickening
in her lungs, her throat, her mouth.

If it weren't for the small body
starfished in the top third
of the deep-blue bed,
one hand open, the other burled
inside hot milk breath,

she'd tear page 100 from his
every favorite novel, she would;
leave the flitters in the shape of a noose
on the marble countertop.

Let him riddle that in her being gone:
words hard against new edges ripped
by a hand all innocence.

But how can it be?
She asks it, ringless, to budge
the evening a small bit to the right.

There now. Oranges. Plums.

This is drawn from “Infinity Pool.”

Vona Groarke, the writer-in-residence at St. John’s College, Cambridge, is the author of poetry collections including “*Infinity Pool*.”

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/11/11/two-kinds-of-ending-vona-groarke-poem>

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

Cartoons

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

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

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

Drawings from the November 11, 2024, magazine.

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/contest>

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

<https://www.newyorker.com/gallery/cartoons-from-the-november-11-2024-issue>

Puzzles & Games

- **[The Crossword: Wednesday, October 30, 2024](#)**

By Caitlin Reid | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, October 30, 2024

A *beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [Caitlin Reid](#)

October 30, 2024



[Caitlin Reid](#) has been constructing crosswords since 2017. Her puzzles have appeared in the *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*.

<https://www.newyorker.com/puzzles-and-games-dept/crossword/2024/10/30>