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August 23, 2024

Jackson Arn

The New Yorker's art critic

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

The Filipina artist Pacita Abad—who visited at least sixty countries, learning from Afghan embroidery, Mexican muralism, Javanese dyeing, Sri Lankan masks, and Pakistani quilts—makes me think of Reno, Nevada, the biggest little city in the world. In the thirty-two years preceding her death, at fifty-eight, in 2004, she stitched and painted whole metropolises of *stuff*, more than fifty of which appear in her MoMA PS1 retrospective (through Sept. 2). And yet her creations (truly some of the biggest little art you'll ever see) never exhaust. All the shades and shapes and textures have been adroitly squeezed in—it's as though the entire visible spectrum were a thing that you could hold in your fist.



Detail of “European Mask” (1990).

Art work by Pacita Abad / Courtesy MOMA; Photograph by Kris Graves

Abad was living in Boston when, in the early eighties, she began sewing canvases into padded patches and encrusting the results—quilts called *trapuntos*—with paint, beads, sequins, and an archivist’s nervous breakdown’s worth of other materials.

“European Mask” (pictured) is, if you can believe it, one of the more subdued examples in the show, which has received critical hosannas galore since originating at the Walker Art Center, last year. It is odd how certain “tragically unappreciated” artists are converted into marble busts of themselves shortly after they die.

This is supposed to be a compliment, of course, but can sometimes seem like a guilty way of balancing out neglect, with much the same outcome: the artist, now presented as incapable of anything but greatness, is hard to see straight, the art even harder. Abad's work strikes me as more hit-or-miss than the raves suggest, though this is part of its charisma: in her *trapuntos*, as on any city street, there is plenty to delight in and plenty to wince at. She isn't going for perfection; her specialty is a bright vitality that's always a few paces ahead, inviting you to chase after it. Happy trails.



About Town

Jazz

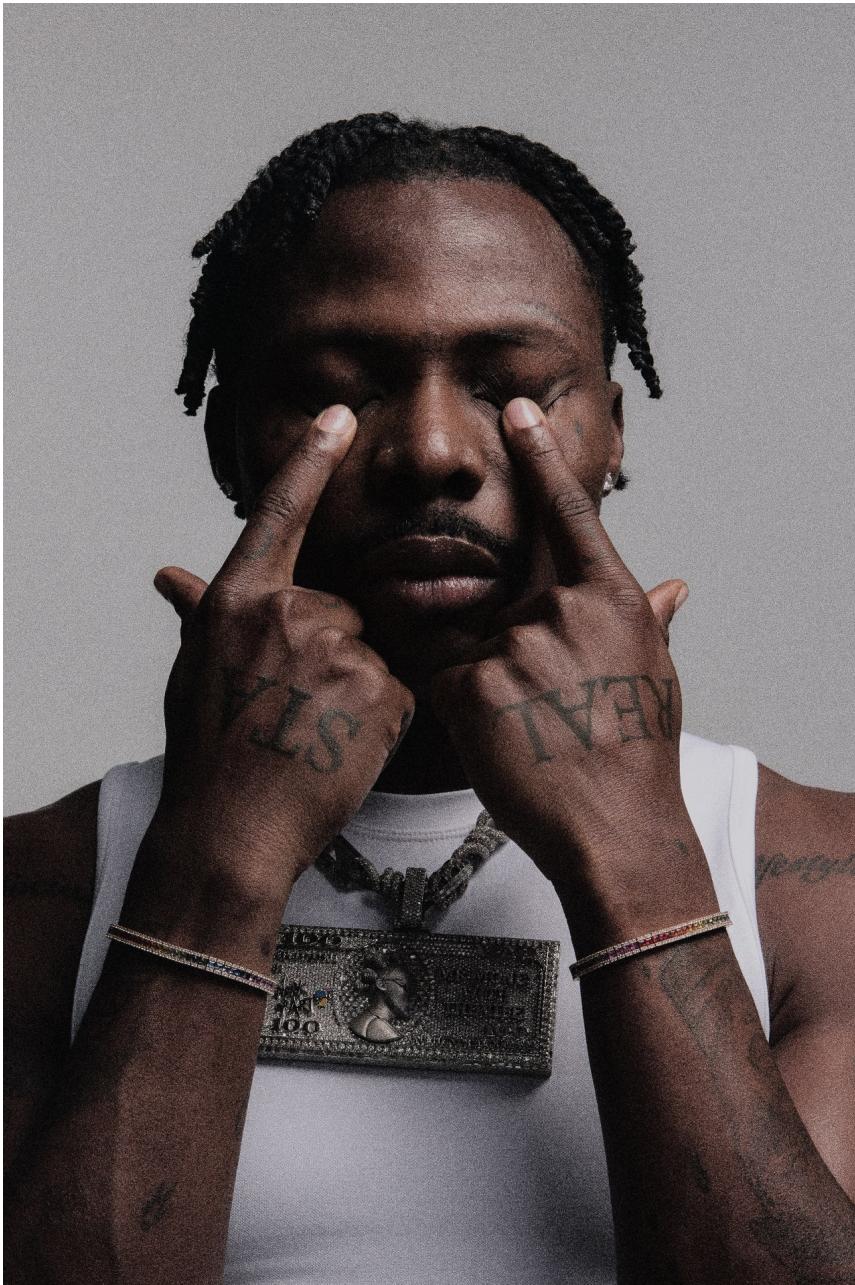
Shabaka Hutchings began as the saxophonist in such groups as Sons of Kemet and the Comet Is Coming, his style satiny yet vigorous. In 2023, he announced that he would put down the sax, and, performing as **Shabaka**, he took up woodwinds. That year, the project “Afrikan Culture” found him embracing the *shakuhachi*, a Japanese bamboo flute, as a sort of centering exercise, in pursuit of meditation and ritual awakening, clearly under the thrall of his chosen instrument. He continued to channel reeds with “Perceive Its Beauty, Acknowledge Its Grace,” from April, a serene album of rich soundscapes embodying the instruction of its title, which feels like a personal mantra.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Blue Note*; Sept. 3-8.)

Classical

Despite a recent, sudden collapse of a ceiling in its host’s historic main house, the **Boscobel Chamber Music Festival** goes on as scheduled and with spirit intact. Select musicians join Arnaud

Sussmann, the artistic director of Palm Beach's Chamber Music Society, near Cold Spring—perhaps the exact antithesis of Palm Beach—for a series of performances held on sprawling grounds. This year's festival includes an array of quintets from Mozart to Farrenc, with various non-quintets by Brahms, Dohnanyi, and more. And no need to fear: performances will occur either outside or under ceilings that have yet to crumble.—*Jane Bua (Boscobel, Garrison, N.Y.; Aug. 30-Sept. 8.)*

Afro-Pop



Photograph by Walter Banks

The Nigerian singer **Asake** crashed into African music's upper echelon as an innovator in street pop, a sound born in the twenty-tens that brought the swagger of hip-hop closer to the struggles of inner-city Lagos. His story was local, but his methods were much broader: as one of the earliest West African adopters of the South African house form amapiano, Asake took the genre's rubbery underpinning, the log drum, and affixed its rhythms to choral chants and the fuji music of the Yoruba people. Since finally cracking the code of this throbbing style on the 2022 hit single, "Mr. Money," he has released a new album each year; his latest, "Lungu Boy," out this month, seems to look out at Afro-pop and its reverberations and point to Asake at a convergence of the diaspora.

—S.P. (*Madison Square Garden; Aug. 30.*)

Broadway

In the olden days of 1958, Mary Rodgers (the daughter of the musical-theatre great Richard), Marshall Barer, Dean Fuller, and Jay Thompson adapted Hans Christian Andersen's "The Princess and the Pea" into a musical. As "**Once Upon a Mattress**," it found favor with the public, eventually transferring to Broadway and loosing a young Carol Burnett upon the world. Now, transferring from City Center, it returns, featuring the Tony-crowned Sutton Foster as Winnifred the Woebegone. She must prove herself a true princess to win the hand of Prince Dauntless (Michael Urie), whose mother tests her by hiding a pea in a stack of mattresses—a threat to the sleep of only an exquisitely sensitive royal. The show's frolicsome score, colorful costumes, and even more colorful performances will please most; only the exceedingly sensitive would grow restless on account of a pea-size plot.—*Dan Stahl* (*Hudson; through Nov. 30.*)

Dance



Mark Morris Dance Group performing “Gloria.”

Photograph by Marc Royce

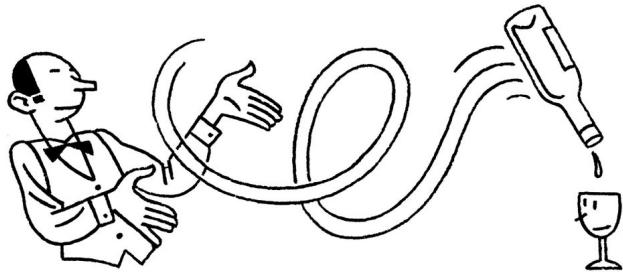
Some works of art contain multitudes, and so it is with Mark Morris’s “Gloria,” into which, back in 1981, the young Morris managed to somehow channel the glory and pain of life itself, with just ten dancers. The music, Vivaldi’s choral work “Gloria in D,” helps, too. Grandeur, joy, fortitude, playfulness, terror—they’re all there. The dance is, in echt-Morris style, wonderfully humane and unfussy, and often quite witty. Dancers crawl and slither like beasts, only to rise and traverse space with buoyant steps. At Bryant Park, **Mark Morris Dance Group** performs to a recorded score—a pity. Still, it’s a great piece, worth seeing under any circumstances.—*Marina Harss (Bryant Park, Aug. 31.)*

Movies

One of the most distinctive recent rediscoveries of international cinema, the Iranian director Bahram Beyzai’s 1974 drama, “**The Stranger and the Fog**,” is both a passionate romance and a teeming action film, uniting history and legend, anthropology and mysticism. In a pre-modern seaside village, a small boat washes

ashore with a castaway, a man named Ayat, who is viewed with suspicion by the townspeople, particularly by a woman named Rana, whose own husband was lost at sea a year ago. The two fall in love and marry, but Ayat—increasingly paranoid in the face of vague accusations and looming rumors—commits an act of violence that sparks a large-scale battle. Beyzāēi fills the frame with whirling pageantry and frenzied theatrics, and he conjures a mythical world that's eye-catchingly ornate and ruthlessly bloody.

—*Richard Brody* (*Film at Lincoln Center; opens Aug. 30.*)



Bar Tab

Taran Dugal visits a Bushwick conversation pit.

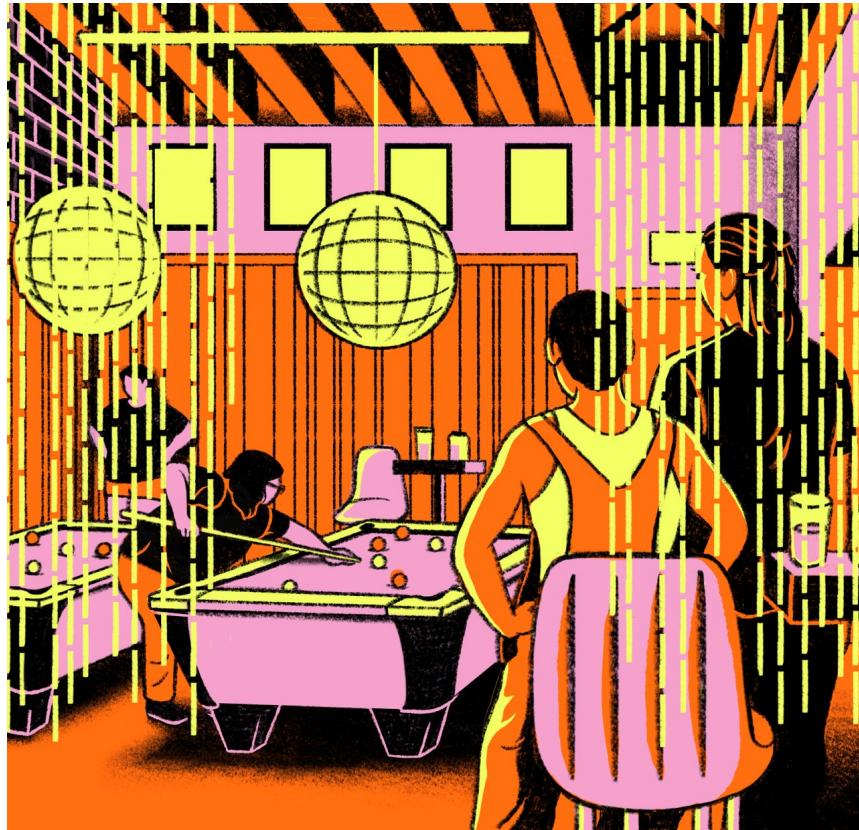


Illustration by Claire Merchlinsky

Not too long ago (ten years), in a neighborhood only slightly far away (Bushwick), poets, rockers, and actors took the L train just far enough to find a place to gentrify, and then put down shallow roots. Andy Simmons, one of the owners of the bar **Carousel** (36 Wyckoff Ave., Brooklyn), which opened last year, seemed to have this bohemian migration in mind when the place was designed. “I wanted it to feel like a 1973 house party in Laurel Canyon,” he said, and, in many ways, it does. Take a spin around the room, and you’ll find a worn vintage photo booth, pool tables, a conversation pit lined in scarlet velvet, and a wood-panelled dance area, complete with a mini-library (Haruki Murakami, John Irving). Smack in the middle is a glass-walled atrium where patrons can stop in for a quick smoke. On a recent weekend, however, a pair of curious onlookers encountered a scene that was distinctly un-seventies, and almost entirely devoid of local artists. Deep in the conversation pit, they found themselves surrounded by buttoned-up bankers, who drowned out the observers’ dialogue with tirades about “liabilities” and “R.O.I.s.” Ears ringing, the two made their

way to the atrium, where a short-lived discussion with some Parliament-puffing actresses was interrupted by a gaggle of suits banging on the glass. The duo, sipping fervently through the cacophony, was pleasantly mollified by the Pink Malone, a wonderfully sweet watermelon-and-tequila cocktail, and the Carousel Lager, a silky-smooth invention of the local brewer KCBC. Such delights were almost enough to make the onlookers forget that the creative haven they'd envisioned had turned out to be more of a watering hole for adventuring Manhattanites. As they ordered one final round, they overheard a patron surveying the chaos: "So *this* is what Bushwick is like, huh?"

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [A friendship-breakup playlist](#)
 - [Bananas: Not just for slipping on](#)
 - ["Underwater," by Hannah Kingsley-Ma](#)
-

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[The Food Scene](#)

A “Top Chef” Winner Reheats at Il Totano

A buzzy new Italian-ish spot from Harold Dieterle doesn’t seem to know what kind of restaurant it’s trying to be.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

August 18, 2024



Il Totano’s low ceilings, tight quarters, and garish colors evoke the feeling of being stuck below deck on a new-money schooner.

Photographs by Victor Llorente for *The New Yorker*

You’re reading the [Food Scene](#) newsletter, Helen Rosner’s guide to what, where, and how to eat. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

Nearly a decade ago, the chef Harold Dieterle decided to shut down his restaurants and, more or less, declare emotional bankruptcy. “It’s gotten to the point where I’m not having fun and enjoying myself,” he told Eater, in a [2015 interview](#). “I’m not saying I never want to return to the restaurant business, but right now, I’m feeling a little beat up and a little tired.” He’d won “Top Chef” nine years earlier, the champion of the series’ very first season, and used that momentum to open a trio of quite wonderful spots in the city, playing with different culinary palettes—New American, Thai, German—but all warm and welcoming and strikingly serious about their food. I still think yearningly about the duck larb at Kin Shop,

rich and bright and blisteringly spicy. When Dieterle's restaurants went dark, it was a real loss.



An arugula salad topped with fried calamari and chunks of soppressata reads more Jersey Shore than Amalfi Coast.

He's back now, after a decade in the wilderness (consulting, mostly), running the kitchen at Il Totano, a new restaurant on the garden level of a West Thirteenth Street brownstone. The space was, for quite a long time, the downtown outpost of the bivalve-oriented bistro Flex Mussels, whose owners, the Shapiro restaurateur family, have partnered with Dieterle in this new venture. The brief is coastal Italian: Flex's moody, slightly industrial interior has been overhauled in a riot of yellows, oranges, and lapis blue; images of assorted aquatic creatures—the restaurant's name means “the squid”—frolic around the rims of dishes and on the walls of the rest rooms. Wicker-shaded light fixtures in the back dining room call to mind rustic fishing baskets; wavy blue-and-white wallpaper in the front room evokes the stripes of beach-club umbrellas. In the narrow passage that bridges the two spaces, which opens on one side to the kitchen, you're likely to catch sight of Dieterle, stoic, focussed, running a stick of glowing charcoal over an orange fillet of arctic char, or checking the arrangement of royal red shrimp atop a yellow puddle of peperoncini-and-butter sauce.

At his previous restaurants, as on “Top Chef,” Dieterle became known as a technician, meticulous and controlled rather than expressive and freewheeling. That exactitude is most evident here in his lineup of crudos, a sharp and optimistic way to begin a meal. Raspberry-pink petals of bluefin tuna are arranged atop a circle of briny caponata; pale ribbons of Kona kampachi flutter in a pool of passion-fruit colatura; that coal-touched arctic char, sweet-fleshed and faintly smoky, is thinly sliced, the pieces fanned out over an earthy, silky celery vinaigrette, then topped with a thrillingly savory condiment of burnt chilies. Much of the seafood served at Il Totano is dry-aged, in a glass-fronted case near the kitchen. The process is similar to that used for high-end steaks—controlled moisture levels, quite a bit of time—though with fish the aging process is measured in days rather than weeks. The result is flesh with a tightened texture, and flavor that’s both concentrated and softened—a brilliant technique to apply to crudo, where there’s nothing for the fish to hide behind. It works just as beautifully when cooked: after a few days of Dieterle’s ministrations, branzino, normally a pleasant nothing of a fish, a backdrop for the flavors of its garnitures, becomes something complex and subtle, grilled to crisp perfection and served with an unctuous take on [tonnato sauce](#) made from tuna collar.

Despite these bright spots, I found the over-all experience at Il Totano bizarrely off-kilter. The space, sitting a few steps below street level, is narrow and near-windowless; its low ceilings, tight quarters, and garish colors give an impression less of the lemon-scented hillsides of Sicily than of being stuck below deck on a new-money schooner. In fact, very little at Il Totano evoked the Tyrrhenian pleasures promised by the branding and décor. Not that it’s misery; it’s just not very Italian. The pastas are oddly forgettable, with the exception of the terrific duck meatballs—a callback to a Thai-inspired dish that Dieterle cooked on a long-ago episode of “Top Chef,” and which became a signature at his first restaurant, Perilla. It’s served with a scant handful of mint-flecked

cavatelli, which, I assume, is what earned it a spot on this menu. In fact, most of the dishes I found exciting seemed to draw their sparkle from anywhere but Italy: that tropically inflected kampachi crudo; a savory and somewhat Teutonic fried pork cutlet under a tangle of bitter greens; a first-rate salad of arugula topped with fried calamari and chunks of soppressata that reads more Jersey Shore than Amalfi Coast. The cocktails are on another planet entirely: for some reason, they're mostly named after kids' shows from the previous century—Snorks, Wuzzles, Rainbow Brite. It's the sort of forced, dated cheekiness you might expect at an airport bistro, not a swank new West Village joint with hot-spot aspirations.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

Italian seafood, a quirky Village brownstone, an iconic “Top Chef” winner’s triumphant return: the combination should be magic, or at least magnetic. The fact that it isn’t strikes me as out of synch with what I remember of Dieterle’s approach to cooking from his earlier forays—though it does seem more or less in line with how it feels to eat at the other restaurants created by his new business partners. Dinner at Hoexters, the Shapiros’ new Upper East Side brasserie, has the five-years-ago feel of date night in the suburbs; Flex Mussels (whose uptown location remains open) is a mid-tier bistro getting most of its mileage out of a food pun. This is, I suppose, more a matter of taste than of flavor. Despite their cringey names, Il Totano’s cocktails are solid, especially the Inspector Gadget, a sherry-splashed Martini that’s jauntily garnished with a caper berry. The plump shrimp dressed in peperoncini butter are tender and sweet (even if it stings to have to pay extra for the focaccia that the soppable sauce demands). The linguine with clams is textbook—tender pasta, briny littlenecks, garlicky garlic, salty pink nubs of guanciale—and that’s good enough, when it comes to linguine with

clams. But everything about the restaurant, its successes as much as its missteps, points to all the ways that it could have been more. ♦



Helen Rosner, a staff writer, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, *The Food Scene*.

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By Jonathan Blitzer | At the Democratic National Convention, the sense of relief was as overwhelming as the general euphoria—but the campaign against Donald Trump has only just begun.

- **[Wine, Candlelight, and Singing Swamp Weeds](#)**

By Oren Peleg | At Vespertine, the Michelin-starred California restaurant, Jordan Kahn has cooked up a soundtrack with Sigur Rós's Jónsi Birgisson. The featured musician: a patch of reeds.

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By Jake Offenhartz | The perfumer who created such scents as Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds and Clinique's Happy assesses the eau de Gowanus, one of Brooklyn's most pungent odors.

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By Sheila Yasmin Marikar | Gray Malin, a photographer whose customers include Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sanchez, is now turning his eye to dream houses.

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By Sofia Warren | Taylor? Beyoncé? What everyone was really thinking at the D.N.C.

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Can Kamala Harris Keep Up the Excitement Through Election Day?

At the Democratic National Convention, the sense of relief was as overwhelming as the general euphoria—but the campaign against Donald Trump has only just begun.

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

August 24, 2024

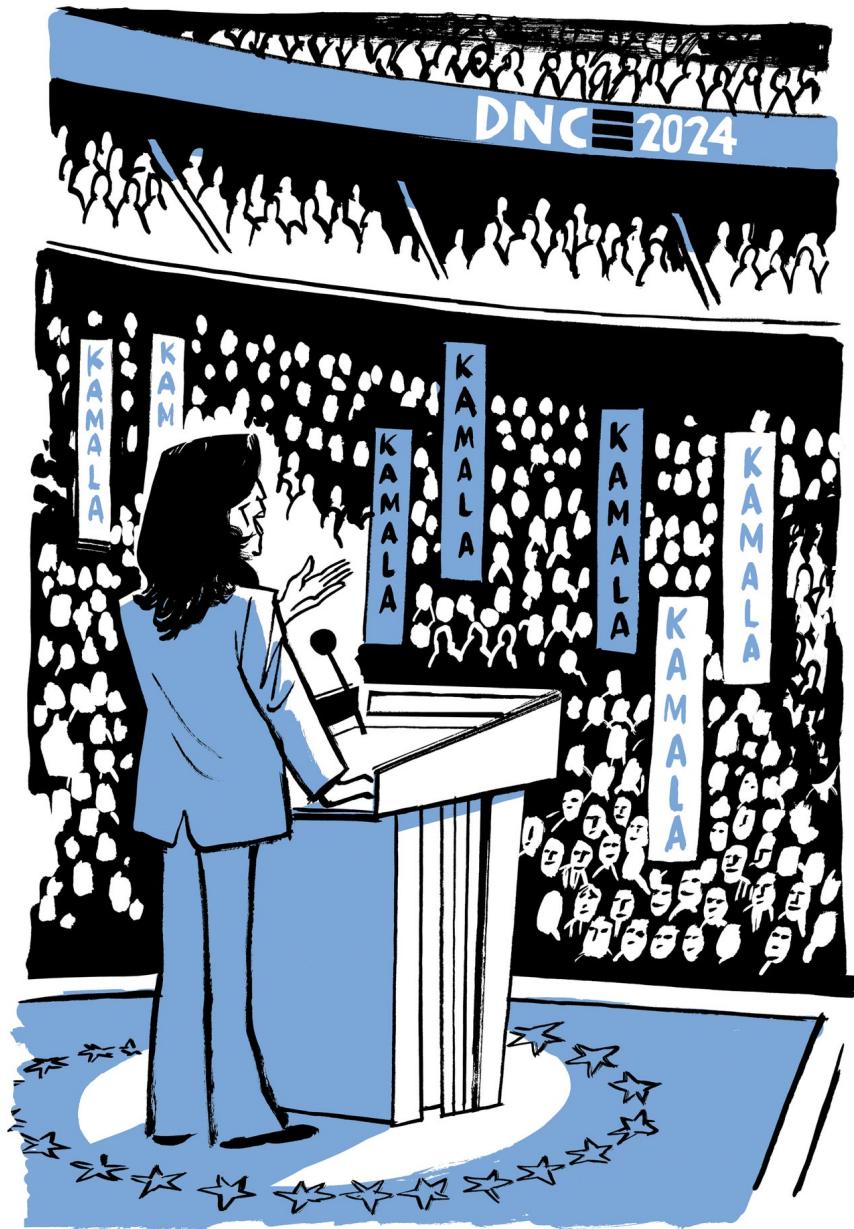


Illustration by João Fazenda

On the second night of the Democratic National Convention, in Chicago, Kamala Harris suddenly appeared on the jumbotron at the United Center. Many in the audience seemed momentarily confused—the candidate, who had already made a surprise appearance the night before, wasn’t due back onstage until later in the week. Harris and her running mate, Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota, were being beamed in from the Fiserv Forum, in Milwaukee, where they were holding a rally for more than fifteen thousand supporters. “I’ll see you in two days, Chicago,” Harris said, with a wave. If a nominating Convention is traditionally a pep rally for the superfans, the Democrats were turning it into a popularity contest. Fiserv Forum was the site of the Republican National Convention, where, in July, Donald Trump officially became his party’s nominee. In a single night—four weeks into her Presidential campaign and less than three months before Election Day—Harris was filling two stadiums.

Can the excitement last? Harris, the Vice-President of a historically unpopular incumbent, is an improbable change candidate. And yet in both arenas last week, the sense of relief was as overwhelming as the general euphoria. Barely a month earlier, with President Joe Biden clinging to a failing candidacy, internal polls put the chances of a Democratic victory in the single digits. Now those odds are roughly even. In Chicago, it was both revealing and understandable that the enthusiasm was greatest when Biden stayed out of view. He delivered a knotty, emotional speech on Monday, at once a testament to all he had achieved as President and a reminder that it wasn’t enough. Many of the speakers addressed him graciously; one of the week’s refrains was “Thank you, Joe.” But if the Democrats were proud of Biden for his historic abdication, they were prouder still of themselves for accomplishing what the Republicans, who remained in thrall to their doddering candidate, had failed to do.

Without an octogenarian at the top of the ticket, the Democratic Party could pitch itself, for the first time in years, as being closer in

age, spirit, and experience to the national electorate. Trump, whose entire campaign was built around the contrast between his strength and Biden's weakness, looked angry and old. At the Convention, he was as much the punch line as the foil. He was weird, small, deranged—"a scab," as Shawn Fain, the head of the United Auto Workers, put it. The uniqueness of Harris's identity—as a Black woman of South Asian descent, a symbol of a young, diverse, and hopeful country—was perhaps the great subtext of the Convention, celebrated and honored at every turn but rarely put forward as the explicit subject of her story. What made 2024 a historic election was the question of whether American democracy could survive against Trump.

Harris, for the most part, is still campaigning on the agenda of the Administration in which she serves. (Early in the week, the D.N.C. ratified its ninety-four-page platform but failed to delete references to Biden's "second term.") Many of those policies—on climate change, health care, public infrastructure, and student debt—are overwhelmingly popular with Democratic voters. Others—on the Middle East and immigration—are more complicated. Democrats assume that Biden's age, and not his positions, is what has made him so unpopular. Harris and her advisers clearly think that her priority should be to sell herself as a person, rather than to dwell on policy specifics. With so little time before the election, this may be the right move, but it's also a high-wire act. At a breakout session during the Convention, Julie Chávez Rodríguez, the campaign manager Harris inherited from Biden, was called to a microphone to give a "campaign update." Hundreds cheered after she spoke; only as she left the stage could someone be overheard saying, in a bemused voice, "Wait, so, what was the update?"

State organizers have told reporters that the volunteers flocking to local campaign offices don't care about policy questions; the energy is about the candidate and the sense of possibility that she brought to a moribund race. One often overlooked fact of Harris's campaign is the work that she's been doing since the Supreme

Court overturned a constitutional right to abortion access, in the summer of 2022. This year alone, she made more than eighty trips to talk about reproductive rights in two dozen states. Someone close to the campaign said that Harris's contacts on the ground were one reason she was able to lock up the nomination so decisively. These efforts may also help with the general election. According to Amy Walter, of the Cook Political Report, in such a tight race the population that could prove decisive is that of young undecided women who are anxious about inflation but also moderate and pro-choice.

By most measures, Harris is polling ahead of Trump in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, and may have a slight advantage in Arizona and North Carolina; she has narrowed Trump's lead in states like Nevada and Georgia. But behind closed doors Democrats in Chicago were urging caution. As the *Times* pointed out, Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden both led Trump by greater margins at this point in their respective races of 2016 and 2020. David Axelrod, the former Obama strategist, said on the eve of the Convention that if the election were held that day Trump may well win.

When Harris finally addressed the Convention, on Thursday night, she acknowledged the dramatic circumstances of her candidacy. "I'm no stranger to unlikely journeys," she said. Her voice, subdued at first, grew more forceful as she described how the modesty of her upbringing—the daughter of a single immigrant mother, reared by neighbors, "none of them family by blood, and all of them family by love"—hardened into the purpose of a career prosecutor. Her only client, she said, was "the people." A few minutes later, she reprised the line to attack Trump, who, she said, "would use the immense powers of the Presidency . . . to serve the only client he has ever had—himself."

No one in the United Center could possibly doubt the righteousness of her cause. And, in a steady, intimate way, Harris seemed to be

proving a crucial point. The applause was as fervent when she spoke about abortion rights as it was when she called for an end to the war in Gaza. For now, it was the messenger that mattered most. ♦



Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. His first book, “*Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here*,” was published in January, 2024.

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[Fine Dining Dept.](#)

Wine, Candlelight, and Singing Swamp Weeds

At Vespertine, the Michelin-starred California restaurant, Jordan Kahn has cooked up a soundtrack with Sigur Rós's Jónsi Birgisson. The featured musician: a patch of reeds.

By [Oren Peleg](#)

August 26, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

These days, earning a Michelin star requires more than just making good food and hiring attentive waiters. Alinea, in Chicago, serves a green-apple-flavored balloon dessert that actually floats. (Three stars.) Iris, in Norway, is a restaurant that itself floats—it sits in a fjord and is accessible only by boat. (One star.) One of the newest recipients of two Michelin stars is Vespertine, in Culver City, California. The restaurant is housed in a four-story building designed by the architect Eric Owen Moss that looks like a warped and rusted waffle iron. The fourteen-course menus (three hundred and ninety-five dollars per person, with beverage pairings starting at a hundred and twenty-five dollars) are constructed around narratives that are known in full only to Vespertine's chef and creative director, Jordan Kahn. One menu came to Kahn after he and his wife partook in a sacred *temazcal* ceremony in Mexico; it includes a dish called the Obsidian Mirror, which uses a gel made of smoked mussels to create a disk-shaped, fully edible black mirror.

On a recent evening, Kahn was in Vespertine's garden, preparing his latest innovation: for a dining-room soundtrack, he was recording the sound of his plants. "In our restaurant, since it's so unique and specific, we couldn't play existing music because it would just seem alien," Kahn, who was dressed in all black and had an asymmetrical haircut, said. To come up with the concept album, Kahn had recruited Jónsi Birgisson, the front man of the Icelandic avant-garde rock band Sigur Rós; Paul Corley, a composer who produces the band; and C. J. Baran, a songwriter and producer who works with Carly Rae Jepsen.

As Kahn waited for the trio to arrive, he walked past a shallow pond within a bed of geometric concrete shapes. The pond is in fact a tidal pool, he explained: "It raises and lowers with the Pacific."

He stopped in front of a patch of equisetum—a shoulder-high reed that looks like a cross between asparagus and bamboo which would be the night's featured musician. "The idea that I have, and I'll see

what the boys think, is to build a forest of this, and we start creating a percussive track with all the sounds,” he said.

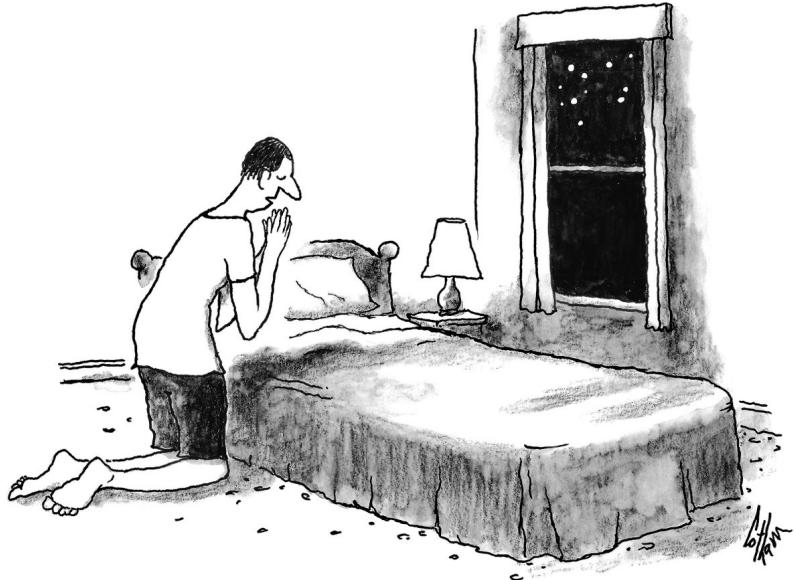
A few minutes later, the boys appeared. Kahn guided them to a table in the second-floor dining room to plan. Baran looked bleary, having just flown in from London. Corley and Birgisson were dressed in loose, dark garments.

“I actually met Jónsi through a mutual friend—this Icelandic, crazy woman who is amazing,” Kahn said. That was eight years ago. The woman had helped him smuggle some rye starter into the U.S. from Reykjavík. When Kahn went to pick it up at her house, he noticed photos on the wall of her with Birgisson and his Sigur Rós bandmates. Kahn was a fan, and he asked her if she knew Birgisson. “She’s, like, ‘Yeah, all Icelandic people are either related or close.’ ”

Eventually, when Birgisson and Corley performed in L.A., Kahn cooked an edible installation for the occasion. Kahn said, “We did this crazy sound bath at the Sowden House,” a site associated with the Black Dahlia murder. Later, Birgisson invited Kahn to his birthday party. “He was making perfume cocktails and there was a mariachi band,” Kahn said.

“A gay mariachi band,” Birgisson said. “Cooking, performing, making music—it’s all connected.”

At the table, the four discussed their vision for the soundtrack. “I see it as a very sculptural thing in the garden—very nature-y,” Birgisson said, sipping red wine.



“But I don’t blame you—I blame poor officiating.”

Cartoon by Frank Cotham

“You want it to feel really cozy,” Corley said. “Maybe having some of the reeds on their own with a bit of reverb and, like, a flutter or a swell. And then people look over and see them. Maybe that’s a cool thing?”

The equisetum track would be added to a roughly ninety-minute score the trio had débuted around the time of Vespertine’s post-pandemic reopening, this past April. The compositions center on organic elements that are manipulated beyond recognition. (They are meant to echo the restaurant’s dishes.) “There’s a ton of random sounds you would never even know were there, stretched and put through a million effects,” Baran explained. Trees groaning in the wind, underwater ambience off the coasts of Iceland, Indonesia, and Los Angeles.

Corley hiked up an Icelandic glacier called Vatnajökull to record a crevasse. “I was going for the creaking sound,” he said.

The group headed into the garden to get to work. Baran pulled out his phone and captured the rustle of an equisetum patch. A bird began to chirp. “That’s the sound!” he said. “That’s what we needed.”

Across the garden, Corley, in headphones, held a professional recording device up to another thicket of reeds. Birgisson ran his hands through them. “It’s like A.S.M.R.,” he said.

For a final crescendo, the four gathered around one patch. Birgisson and Kahn shook the reeds as Corley and Baran recorded. The dry bristling was almost metallic. The sound continued for several seconds in the warm Southern California night. Then a rumble overhead interrupted the moment.

“It’s a fucking plane in the sky!” Birgisson shouted. “Dammit!”

“No,” Corley said, listening through his headphones. “I think it’s really good, actually.” ♦

Oren Peleg is a journalist and a screenwriter based in Los Angeles.

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[Gowanus Report](#)

Along the Gowanus Canal, Notes of Tar and Manure

The perfumer who created such scents as Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds and Clinique's Happy assesses the eau de Gowanus, one of Brooklyn's most pungent odors.

By [Jake Offenhartz](#)

August 26, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Not long ago, the residents of Gowanus, in Brooklyn, began to notice that the smell of their canal, known for its unpleasant odor since the Gilded Age, had reached a new level of pungency. An ongoing Superfund cleanup, begun in 2020, along with the hubbub of development projects and the raw sewage that flows into the canal whenever it rains, had stirred up an unpredictable blend of contaminants. Ridding the waterway of its stinky pollutants is a years-long process. For now, the city has a temporary fix: perfumery. The Department of Environmental Protection, with the help of what it calls an “odor-neutralizing misting system,” has been pumping citrus and “Christmas” scents near the canal—a civic version of the powder-room staple Poo-Pourri.

Is it working? Maybe not. The Christmas scent drew complaints for its cloying cinnamon notes. Frustrations boiled over last month at a virtual meeting of the Gowanus Advisory Board. “I’ve lived in this neighborhood for fifty years,” one resident told the board. “I’ve smelt *bad*. But I have never smelled the canal as bad as it is now.”

On a recent afternoon, Raymond Matts, a fragrance designer (or “nose”) who once led various perfume departments at Estée Lauder and Elizabeth Arden, travelled to the canal’s banks to assess the situation. From the Whole Foods parking lot, Matts got his first whiff of eau de Gowanus: he discerned a note of oak moss, similar to the base he’d used for Elizabeth Taylor’s White Diamonds perfume, in 1991. His nostrils twitched. “I’m getting a sulfuric, like when you smell matchsticks after they’ve been lit,” he said. “You’ll find this in some amber notes we use.” It was ninety degrees, low tide—what locals call the “ripe time.”

Matts, a trim sixty-two-year-old resident of the Upper East Side, wore hiking pants and a fitted T-shirt. He had never been to Gowanus. As he crossed the Third Street Bridge, he gazed down at the gunmetal-gray water, dappled with rainbow flecks like the sparkles created by a disco ball. “There really is a symphony of odors,” he said. He picked up a “metallic,” followed by an

“animalic note,” which made him think of castoreum, a milky substance that’s found in the anal gland of beavers and used in chypre perfumes. “The fresher smell is fishy, then underneath that you get flashes of suède,” he continued. “It’s giving depth to that fresh aspect of it.”

The dead end of Bond Street brought another aroma. “It’s almost like tar. But the fresher part of tar,” he said, sniffing, unaware that he was standing on a brownfield, where, for a century, viscous coal tars had leached into the soil beneath a former gas plant.

It reminded him that he had once slipped a butyric note—reminiscent of vomit—into the recipe for Clinique’s Happy, a best-seller. “It’s typical of what we do in perfumery,” he said. “Some of the ugliest things we create beauty out of.”

On a new esplanade overlooking the canal, an odor review was solicited from a shirtless man in his thirties, a resident of an adjacent luxury condo. “Sometimes it has that ‘I feel like I’m going to throw up and can’t breathe’ smell,” he said. He added that he had not expected such a potent odor when he moved in two years ago; the sales pitch had promised a “picturesque waterfront park.”

Above the Union Street Bridge, the marine notes Matts had identified before gave way to something sharper. “Putrid suède and, like, a dead animal that’s been in the walls,” Matts said. He also detected horse manure. His eyes appeared to be watering.

In search of relief and shade, Matts wandered into a mechanic’s garage. A man inside, Louis Jager, said that he used to work as a chemical compounder for Technology Flavors & Fragrances, Inc. He’d been around strong odors all his life. But, after thirty-plus years in Gowanus, he was more or less accustomed to the stink. “When you don’t smell it anymore, that means it’s a part of you,” he said.

“Nasal fatigue,” Matts said, using the technical term. He took a few final sniffs, then walked off toward the F train.

A couple of days later, John Prince, who is overseeing the Superfund program, agreed to look at Matts’s findings. The coal tar Matts had sniffed likely contained naphthalene, a toxic compound found in mothballs. The sulfur came from belched-up sewer gas, or the breakdown of industrial contaminants and seaweed. As for the metallics, the canal is full of residual copper, mercury, lead, and arsenic. The dead-animal smell was a no-brainer: carcasses are found in the canal all the time, although, as far as Prince knew, it’d been a while since anyone pulled up a horse. ♦

Jake Offenhardt is a reporter for the Associated Press covering New York City.

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[Montecito Postcard](#)

Putting a Fine-Art Touch on Fixer-Uppers

Gray Malin, a photographer whose customers include Jeff Bezos and Lauren Sanchez, is now turning his eye to dream houses.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)

August 26, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

You can view art (e.g., at a museum). You can “immerse yourself” in art (“Immersive Van Gogh,” currently at a Las Vegas shopping

mall). But can you vacation in art?

“To go from photographing the getaway to making the getaway, it’s like art becoming reality,” the photographer Gray Malin said the other day. He was sitting behind the wheel of a blue Range Rover, dressed in a denim shirt, white jeans, and raffia loafers, cruising up the 101 to his latest work: a house he has renovated in Montecito, California, in order to rent to visitors. “How I vacation is how I want you to vacation,” he said.

As an artist, Malin specializes in glossy portraits of the good life: beaches, boats, a plane landing in St. Bart’s. A former fixture at Los Angeles-area flea markets, where he sold his matted photographs for sixty-five dollars a pop, these days he sells his photos to such collectors as Reese Witherspoon and Meghan Markle. Lauren Sanchez and Jeff Bezos own a custom aerial photograph of Malin’s, as well as a framed print of balloon letters bobbing over an exotic vista. (Malin declined to say which one; options include an image of the words “I am busy” over a turquoise sea.)

Of Sanchez and Bezos, Malin said, “It tickles me to think that they can scroll on my Web site and find images that bring them such joy, knowing that they can afford some of the most famous artists of all time.” In March, Malin was invited to Bezos’s annual conference, *MARS* (Machine Learning, Automation, Robotics, and Space). “I was one of the few artists,” Malin said. “The topics were so wild.” NASA missions, laundry-folding robots. “They had a robot painting portraits.” It made him realize that quite soon he might have to provide proof that he actually travels to all the places he photographs—Antarctica, Bhutan, the Bolivian salt flats—“and that it wasn’t just A.I.”

In addition to framed limited editions, Malin’s company sells photo-emblazoned coasters, phone cases, and jigsaw puzzles. “Millionaires and billionaires love the brand,” he said, “but so does the Midwest sort of Target shopper.” (Malin counts himself among

the latter group.) At his Brentwood studio, he offers consultations to would-be collectors. “We charge them ninety-five dollars to make sure that they show up,” he said. “We make cocktails, we pick out frames.”

A year ago, a beach house that Malin had once rented with his husband came on the market. “It was a run-down, tired Airbnb,” he said. Malin bought the house for \$5.2 million and spent \$1.5 million renovating it, intending to rent it out. He partnered with Williams-Sonoma for the kitchen, Don Julio for the bar, and Goop for the bathrooms, with the brands covering the costs of appliances, tequila, and guava-scented shampoo.

He pulled into the driveway of the Montecito house, a whitewashed Craftsman. Outside, preparations for an unveiling party were under way. “The bathrooms need towels,” Jeff Richardson, Malin’s husband and the C.O.O. of his company, said. An uni shucker wanted to know where to set up. “Just for aesthetics, can we move the workstation next to the barbecue?” an assistant asked. Malin bustled around, adjusting lounge chairs and plumping cushions.

“I’m going to take a look inside,” he said to Richardson. “Do you want to be a peach and open these umbrellas?”

Malin breezed through a den—the walls were covered with his aerial beachscapes—and an office for two, featuring several shots of dogs lounging poolside. (“We did cats once,” Malin said. “People were, like, ‘Please don’t.’ ”) He paused before a portrait of women dancing atop a table laden with champagne. “When you come in, I want you to feel like a party, like you can channel this energy,” he said. (Rates for the house start at twenty-five hundred dollars per night, plus a security deposit.)

He set out towels and smoothed sheets. “I need to put a book or two on that bar shelf,” he said. From out back, the sound of a cocktail shaker could be heard. “I guess I should get a margarita,”

Malin said. Guests—an assortment of Santa Barbara socialites, nearby resort employees, and family—arrived and slipped on disposable booties. “I know, it’s terrible,” Malin said, “but people are staying here this weekend.”

Giving a tour, he showed off a bedroom with big yellow camellias printed on the window shades. “We put instructions here,” he said, pointing to a line of text glued to the window frame. “Please gently pull the ring,” it began, in a tiny font. “I hope it’s enough,” he went on. “I just imagine some renter going, ‘Whatever!’, and pulling it off the wall.” ♦

Sheila Yasmin Marikar has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2016. Her latest novel is “*Friends in Napa*.”

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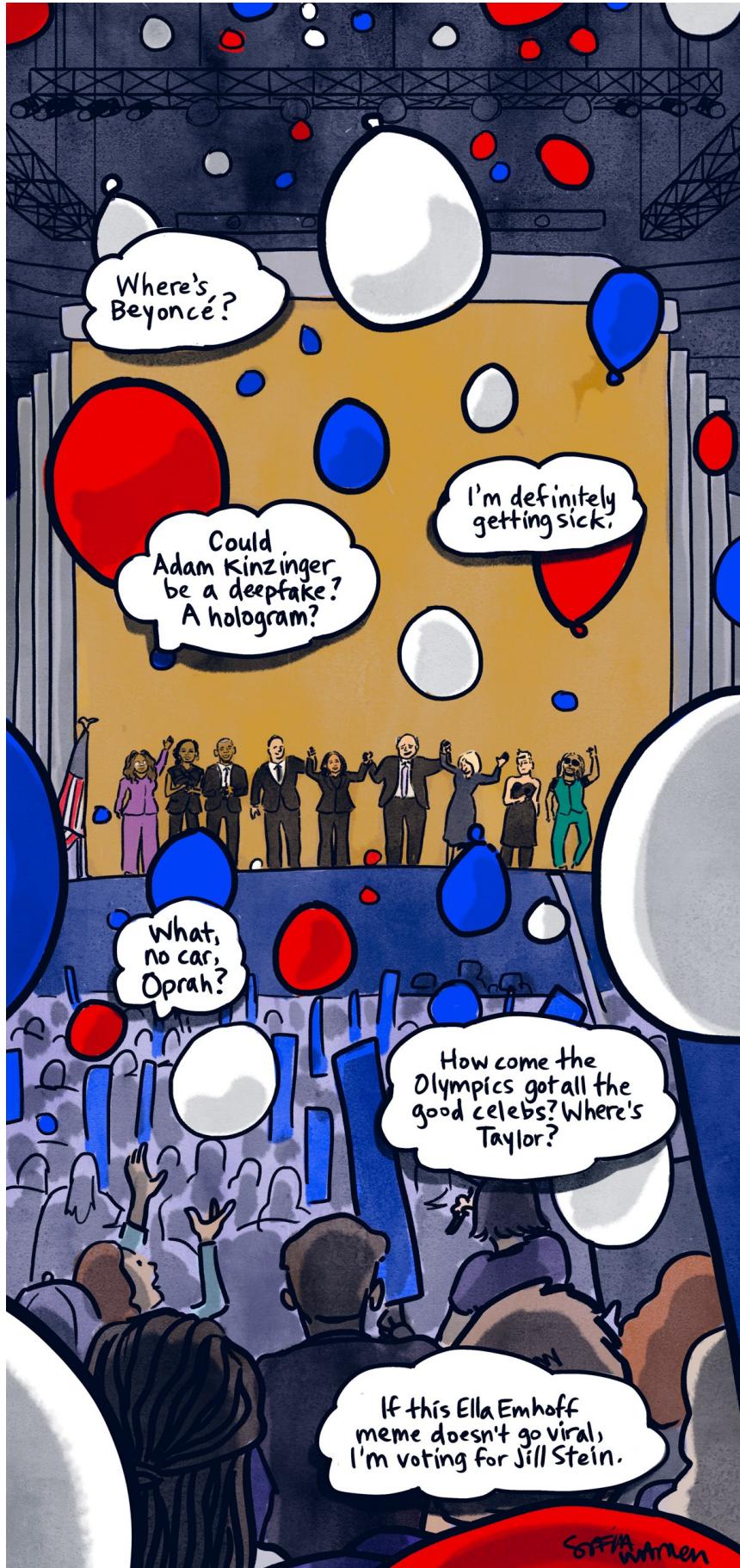
[Sketchpad](#)

Convention Sketchpad by Sofia Warren

Taylor? Beyoncé? What everyone was really thinking at the D.N.C.

By [Sofia Warren](#)

August 26, 2024



Sofia Warren has contributed cartoons and writing to *The New Yorker* since 2017. She is the author of the graphic memoir “*Radical: My Year with a Socialist Senator.*”

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The Death of School 10

How declining enrollment is threatening the future of American public education.

By [Alec MacGillis](#)

August 26, 2024



The building that housed Rochester's now shuttered School 10. Such closures "rend the community," a professor of education said.

Photographs by Joshua Rashaad McFadden for The New Yorker

This article is a collaboration between The New Yorker and ProPublica.

In the nineteen-nineties, when Liberia descended into civil war, the Kpor family fled to Ivory Coast. A few years later, in 1999, they were approved for resettlement in the United States, and ended up in Rochester, New York. Janice Kpor, who was eleven at the time, jokingly wonders whether her elders were under the impression that they were moving to New York City. What she remembers most about their arrival is the trees: it was May, yet many were only just starting to bud. “It was, like, ‘Where are we?’ ” she said. “It was completely different.”

But the Kpors adapted and flourished. Janice lived with her father in an affordable-housing complex close to other family members, and she attended the city's public schools before enrolling in St. John Fisher University, just outside the city, where she got a bachelor's degree in sociology and African American studies. She found work as a social-service case manager and eventually started running a group home for disabled adults.

She also became highly involved in the schooling of her three children, whom she was raising with her partner, the father of the younger two, a truck driver from Ghana. Education had always been highly valued in her family: one of her grandmothers had been a principal in Liberia, and her mother, who remained there, is a teacher. Last fall, when school started, Kpor was the president of the parent-teacher organization at School 10, the Dr. Walter Cooper Academy, where her youngest child, Thomasena, was in kindergarten. Her middle child had also attended the school.

Kpor took pleasure in dropping by the school, a handsome two-story structure that was built in 1916 and underwent a full renovation and expansion several years ago. The school was in the Nineteenth Ward, in southwest Rochester, a predominantly Black, working- and middle-class neighborhood of century-old homes. The principal, Eva Thomas, oversaw a staff that prided itself on maintaining a warm environment for two hundred and ninety-nine students, from kindergarten through sixth grade, more than ninety per cent of whom were Black or Latino. Student art work filled the hallways, and parent participation was encouraged. School 10 dated only to 2009—the building had housed different programs before that—but it had strong ties to the neighborhood, owing partly to its namesake, a pioneering Black research scientist who, at the age of ninety-five, still made frequent visits to speak to students. “When parents chose to go to this particular school, it was because of the community that they have within our school, the culture that they have,” Kpor told me.

Because she was also engaged in citywide advocacy, through a group called the Parent Leadership Advisory Council, Kpor knew that the Rochester City School District faced major challenges. Enrollment had declined from nearly thirty-four thousand in 2003 to less than twenty-three thousand last year, the result of flight to the suburbs, falling birth rates, and the expansion of local charter schools, whose student population had grown from less than two thousand to nearly eight thousand during that time. Between 2020 and 2022, the district's enrollment had dropped by more than ten per cent.

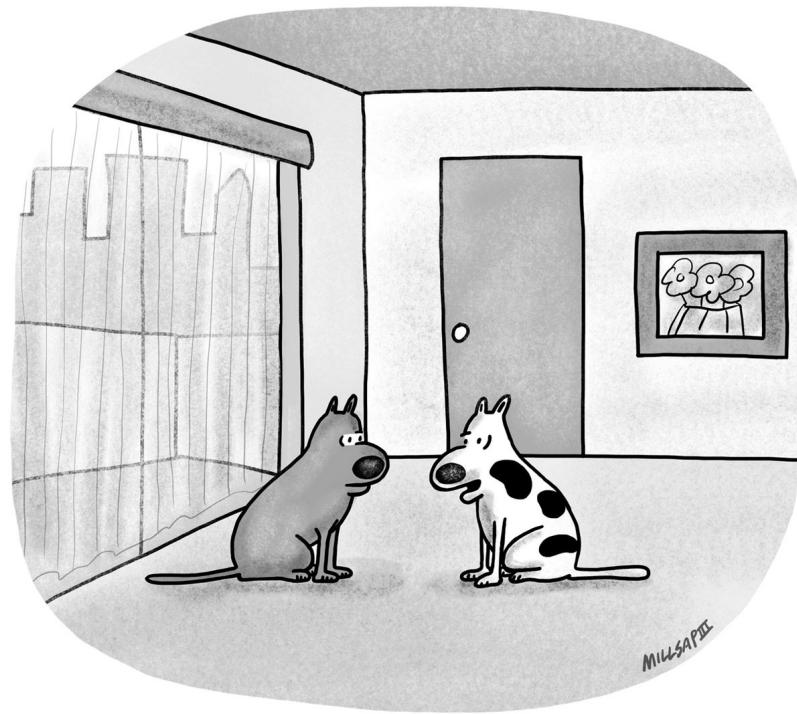
The situation in Rochester was a particularly acute example of a nationwide trend. Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, public-school enrollment has declined by about a million students, and researchers attribute the drop to families switching to private schools—aided by an expansion of voucher programs in many red and purple states—and to homeschooling, which has seen especially strong growth. In addition, as of last year, an estimated fifty thousand students are unaccounted for—many of them are simply not in school.

During the pandemic, Rochester kept its schools closed to in-person instruction longer than any other district in New York besides Buffalo, and throughout the country some of the largest enrollment declines have come in districts that embraced remote learning. Some parents pulled their children out of public schools because they worried about the inadequacy of virtual learning; others did so, after the eventual return to school, because classroom behavior had deteriorated following the hiatus. In these places, a stark reality now looms: schools have far more space than they need, with higher costs for heating and cooling, building upkeep, and staffing than their enrollment justifies. During the pandemic, the federal government gave a hundred and ninety billion dollars to school districts, but that money is about to run dry. Even some relatively prosperous communities face large drops in enrollment: in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where enrollment has fallen by more than

a thousand students since the fall of 2019, the city is planning to lay off some ninety teachers; Santa Clara, which is part of Silicon Valley, has seen a decrease of fourteen per cent in a decade.

On September 12, 2023, less than a week after the school year started, Rochester's school board held what appeared to be a routine subcommittee meeting. The room was mostly empty as the district's superintendent, Carmine Peluso, presented what the district called a "reconfiguration plan."

A decade earlier, twenty-six hundred kindergarten students had enrolled in Rochester's schools—roughly three-quarters of the children born in the city five years before. But in recent years, Peluso said, that proportion had sunk to about half.



"I howl because it's what I'm good at."

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Within ten years, Peluso said, "if we continue on this trend and we don't address this, we're going to be at a district of under fourteen thousand students." The fourth-largest city in New York, with a relatively stable population of about two hundred and ten thousand,

was projecting that its school system would soon enroll only about a third of the city's current school-age population.

Peluso then recommended that the Rochester school district close eleven of its forty-five schools at the end of the school year. Kpor, who was watching the meeting online, was taken aback. Five buildings would be shuttered altogether; the other six would be put to use by other schools in the district.

School 10 was among the second group. The school would cease to exist, and its building, with its new gymnasium-auditorium and its light-filled two-story atrium, would be turned over to a public Montessori school for pre-K through sixth grade, which had been sharing space with another school.

Kpor was stunned. The building was newly renovated. She had heard at a recent PTA meeting that its students' over-all performance was improving. And now it was being shut down? "I was in disbelief," she said. "It was a stab in the back."

School closures are a fact of life in a country as dynamic as the United States. Cities boom, then bust or stagnate, leaving public infrastructure that is incommensurate with present needs. The brick elementary school where I attended kindergarten and first grade, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, was closed in the early eighties, as the city's population declined, and then was razed to make way for a shopping plaza.

Still, there is a pathos to a closed school that doesn't apply to a shuttered courthouse or post office. The abandonment of a building once full of young voices is an indelible sign of the action having moved elsewhere. There is a tangible cost, too. Researchers have found that students whose schools have been closed often experience declines in attendance and achievement, and that they tend to be less likely to graduate from college or find employment. Closures tend to fall disproportionately on majority-Black schools,

even beyond what would be expected on the basis of enrollment and performance data. In some cities, efforts to close underpopulated schools have become major political issues. In 2013, Chicago, facing a billion-dollar budget deficit and falling enrollment, closed forty-nine schools, the largest mass closure in the country's history. After months of marches and protests, twelve thousand students and eleven hundred staff members were displaced.

Now, as a result of the nationwide decline in enrollment, many cities will have to engage in disruption at a previously unseen scale. "School closures are difficult events that rend the community, the fabric of the community," Thomas Dee, a professor of education at Stanford, said. He has been collecting data on declining enrollment in partnership with the Associated Press. "The concern I have is that it's going to be yet another layer of the educational harm of the pandemic."

Janice Kpor knew that her family was, in a sense, part of the problem. Her oldest child, Virginia, had flourished in the early grades, so her school put her on an accelerated track, but it declined to move her up a grade, as Kpor had desired. Wanting her daughter to be sufficiently challenged, Kpor opted for the area's Urban-Suburban program, in which students can apply to transfer to one of the many smaller school districts that surround Rochester; if a district is interested in a student, it offers the family a slot. The program began in 1965, and there are now about a thousand children enrolled. Virginia began attending school in Brockport, where she had access to more extracurricular activities.

Supporters call Urban-Suburban a step toward integration in a region where city schools are eighty-five per cent Black and Latino and suburban districts are heavily white. But critics see it as a way for suburban districts to draw some of the most engaged families out of the city's schools; the selectiveness of the suburban districts helps explain why close to a quarter of the students remaining in

the city system qualify for special-education services. (The local charter schools are also selective.) One suburban district, Rush-Henrietta, assured residents that it would weed out participants who brought “city issues” with them, as Justin Murphy, a reporter for the Rochester *Democrat & Chronicle*, wrote in his book, “Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger,” a history of segregation in the city’s schools.

Kpor understood these concerns even as she watched Virginia thrive in the suburbs, then go on to attend the Rochester Institute of Technology. As Kpor saw it, each child’s situation was unique, and she tried to make decisions accordingly. “It’s where they’re at,” she said. “It’s not all or nothing for me.”

She enrolled her middle child, Steven, in School 10 for kindergarten and immediately liked the school, but stability was elusive. First, the school moved to temporary quarters for the renovation. Then came disagreements with a teacher who thought that her son’s behavioral issues stemmed from A.D.H.D. Then the pandemic arrived, and her son spent the final months of second grade and most of third on Zoom. For fourth grade, she decided to try Urban-Suburban again. He was accepted by Brockport, which sent a bus to pick him up every morning.

Other parents shared similar accounts with me of the aftermath of the pandemic closures. Ruthy Brown said that, after the reopening, her children’s school was rowdier than before, with more frequent fights and disturbances in the classroom; a charter school with uniforms suddenly seemed appealing. Isabel Rosa, too, moved her son to a charter school, because his classmates were “going bonkers” when they finally returned to in-person instruction. (She changed her mind after he was bullied by a charter-school security guard.) Carmen Torres, who works at a local advocacy organization, the Children’s Agenda, watched one of her client families get so frustrated by virtual instruction that they switched to

homeschooling. “Enough is enough,” Torres recalled the mother saying. “My kids need to learn how to read.”

But, when it came time to enroll Thomasena, Kpor resolved to stick with the district, and she was so hopeful about her daughter’s future at School 10 that she took the prospect of its closure with great umbrage. She and other parents struggled to understand the decision. One of the reasons School 10 was chosen to close was that it was in receivership—a designation for public schools rated in the bottom five per cent in the state, among Peluso’s criteria for closure—but Kpor knew that the receivership was due not only to low test scores but also to the school’s high rate of absenteeism, which was, she believed, because the school roster was outdated, filled with students who were no longer there. According to a board member, the state had also placed School 10 on a list of dangerous schools, partly owing to an incident in which a student had been found with a pocketknife.

Making matters worse, for Kpor, was that the building was going to be turned over to another program, School 53, the Montessori school. It would be one thing for School 10 to be shut down because the district needed to cut costs. But the building had just been renovated at great expense, an investment intended for School 10, and now those students and teachers were being evicted to make room for others. “It was more of an insult,” Kpor said, “because now you have this place and all these kids and a whole bunch of new kids in the same building, so what is the logic of, quote-unquote, closing the school?”

The awkwardness of this was not lost on the parents of School 53. The school had a slightly higher proportion of white families and a lower one of economically disadvantaged students than School 10, and it was expected to draw additional white families once it moved to its new building. “The perception is that you’ve got the kids at this protected, special school—you can see the difference between what they get and what we get,” Robert Rodgers, a parent

at School 53, told me. “If I was a parent at School 10, I would be livid.”

After Peluso announced the plan, the district held two public forums, followed by sessions at the targeted schools. The School 10 auditorium was packed for its session, and Kpor lined up at the microphone to speak. She asked Peluso if Thomasena and her classmates would get priority for placement in School 53, so that they could stay in the building. “I do not want her to go to any other school,” she said. “Every time we think we’re doing something right for our kids, someone comes in and dictates to us that our choices are not valid.” Kpor was encouraged to hear Peluso say that School 10 kids would get priority.



Janice Kpor, whose youngest child had just started at School 10 when the city announced its closure.

On October 19th, five weeks after the announcement, the school board met to vote on the closures. During the public-comment period, a teacher from School 2 pleaded with the board to let its students enroll at the school that would be replacing it. A teacher from School 106 asked that the vote be delayed until after board members visited every school, including hers, which was engaged in a yearlong special project geared toward the coming total solar eclipse, so that they could get a more visceral sense of the school's value. The principal of School 29, Joseph Baldino, asked that the school's many students with autism-spectrum disorder be kept together, along with their teachers, during the reassignment.

"They're unique, they're beautiful, and they don't do real well with change," he said. Chrissy Miller, a parent at the school, said of her son, "He loves his staff . . . he loves his teachers, and he wants everybody to stay together as one."

In the end, the closures passed, five to two.

In September, 2020, as many public schools in Democratic-leaning states started the new academic year with remote learning, I asked Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, whether she worried about the long-term effects on public education. What if too many families left the system in favor of homeschooling or private schools—many of which had reopened—and didn't come back? She wasn't concerned about such hypotheticals. "At the end of the day, kids need to be together in community," she said.

The news from a growing number of districts suggests that the institution of public schooling has indeed suffered a lasting blow, even in cities that are better funded than Rochester. In Seattle, parents anticipate the closure of twenty elementary schools. The state of Ohio has witnessed a major expansion of private-school vouchers; in Columbus, a task force is recommending the closure of nine schools.

In Rochester, the continuing effects of the pandemic weighed heavily on some. Camille Simmons, who joined the school board in 2021, told me, “A lot of children felt the result of those decisions.” She went on, “There were a lot of entities at play, there were so many conversations going on. I think we should have brought children back much sooner.”

Adam Urbanski, the longtime president of the Rochester teachers’ union, said that the union had believed schools should not reopen until the district could guarantee high air quality, and it had not been able to. “When I reflect back on it, I know that I erred on the side of safety, and I do not regret the position that we took,” he said.

But Rebecca Hetherington, the owner of a small embroidery company and the former head of the Parent Leadership Advisory Council, the group Kpor was part of, feared that the district would soon lack the critical mass to remain viable. “I am concerned there is a tipping point and we’re past it,” she said. Rachel Barnhart, a former TV news reporter who attended city schools and now serves in the county legislature, agreed. “It’s like you’re watching institutions decline in real time,” she told me. “Anchors of the community are disappearing.” School districts have long aspired to imbue their communities with certain shared values and learning standards, but such commonality now seemed inconceivable.

By the spring of 2024, parents at the eleven targeted schools were too busy trying to figure out where their children would be going in the fall to worry about the long term. A mother at School 39, Rachel Dixon, who lived so close to the school that she could carry her kindergartner there, was on the wait list for School 52 but had been assigned to School 50. She wasn’t even sure where that was. Chrissy Miller was upset that School 29’s students with autism were being more broadly dispersed than promised; she worried that her son’s assigned school wasn’t equipped for students with special needs. Many of her fellow School 29 parents were now considering

homeschooling or moving, she said, and added, “We don’t have trust in the district at all.” It was easy to envision how the closures could compound the problem, leading to even fewer students and even more closures.

Thomasena had been assigned to School 45, which was close to her family’s home but less convenient for Kpor than School 10, which was closer to her work. Kpor wondered how many other families were in similar situations, with assignments that didn’t take into account the specific context of their lives. “All of this plays into why kids are not going to school,” she said. “You’re placing kids in locations that don’t meet the families’ needs.”

She had taken Peluso’s word that students from School 10 would be given priority at the Montessori school taking its place, and she was disappointed to learn that Thomasena was thirtieth on the wait list there. It was also unclear to her which branch of the central office was handling placement appeals. “It’s all a jumble, and no one really knows how things work,” she said.

On March 26th, as families were dealing with the overhaul, Peluso announced that he was leaving the district to become the superintendent of the Churchville-Chili district, in the suburbs. The district was far smaller than Rochester, with some thirty-eight hundred students, more than seventy per cent of them white, but the job paid nearly as much. “It’s one of the hardest decisions I’ve had,” Peluso said at a news conference. “There’s a lot of commitment I’ve had to this district.” Rodgers, the School 53 parent, told me, “This hurts. It’s another situation where the suburbs are taking something from the city.”

Parents and district staff tried to make sense of Peluso’s departure. Some people speculated that he had grown tired of the treatment he was receiving from certain board members. Other people wondered if he simply wanted a less challenging district. Peluso told me, “It was the best decision for me and my family.”

In late June, I returned to Rochester for the final days of the school year. I stayed at School 31 Lofts, a hotel in a former schoolhouse that was built in 1919. (The Web site advertises “Whimsy_{History}Serenity.”) An empty hallway was still marked with a “Fallout Shelter” sign. I stayed in a room that, judging from its size and location, might have been a faculty lounge.

One afternoon, I met with Demario Strickland, a deputy superintendent who’d been named interim superintendent while the school board searched for a permanent replacement for Peluso. Strickland, a genial thirty-nine-year-old Buffalo native who moved to Rochester last year, was the seventh superintendent of the district since 2016. He told me that he was not surprised the closures had prompted such protests. “School closures are traumatic in itself,” he said.

But he defended the district against several of the criticisms I had heard from parents. School 10 had been improving, he said, but still fell short on some metrics. “Even though they met demonstrable progress, we still had to look at proficiency, and we still had to look at receivership,” he said. And, he added, School 53 had limited slots available, so the district had made no promises to parents of School 10 about having priority.

Still, he said, the district could perhaps have been more empathetic in its approach. “This process has taught me that, in a sense, people don’t care about the money,” he said. “When you make these decisions, you really have to think about the heart. That’s something we could have done a little more. It makes sense—we’re wasting money, throwing money away, we have all these vacancies, that makes sense to us. But our families don’t care about that. Our families want their school to stay open—they don’t want to do away with it.”



At the end of the academic year, Rochester closed eleven of its forty-five schools, including School 39.

I asked him whether he worried that the district's enrollment decline might continue until the system could no longer sustain itself, as Hetherington and Barnhart feared. "I try not to get scared about the future," he said.

On the second-to-last day of the school year, I went to School 10 to join Kpor at the end-of-year ceremony for Thomasena's kindergarten class. She and her fourteen classmates sang songs, demonstrated spelling on the whiteboard, and rose one by one to say what they had liked best about kindergarten. "Education and learning," Thomasena, a tall girl with her front teeth just coming in, said. "When it's the weekend," one boy said, to the laughter of parents.

It was not hard to see why Kpor and other parents were sorry to leave the school, with its gleaming new tile work and hardwood-composite hallway floorboards. A few weeks earlier, the latest assessment results had shown improvement for School 10, putting it close to citywide averages. "All of us are going to be going to different places, but I hope one day that I get to see you again," the class's teacher, Karen Lewis, said.

Kpor was still waiting to find out if she had moved up on the list for School 53. I asked if she might have Thomasena apply for Urban-Suburban, like her siblings, and she said she was hoping it would work out in the district. “I still have faith,” she said. Outside, I met a parent who was worried about how her daughter would fare at her new school after having been at School 10 with the same special-needs classmates and teacher for the past three years. “The school has been amazing,” she said.

The next day, I attended a school-wide Rites of Achievement ceremony in the gym. Parents cheered as students received awards for Dr. Walter Cooper Character Traits—Responsibility, Integrity, Compassion, Leadership, Perseverance, and Courage. (Thomasena won for Courage.) Thomas, the principal, called up the school’s entire staff, name by name. The shrieks from the assembled children for their favorite teachers and aides indicated the hold that even a school officially deemed subpar can have on its students and families: this had been their home, a hundred and eighty days a year, for as long as seven years.

Walter Cooper himself was there, watching from a thronelike chair with gilt edges. Eventually, he addressed the children for the last time, recounting his upbringing with a father who had received no formal schooling, a mother who preached the value of education, and six siblings, all but one of whom had gone to college. “The rule was we had to have a library card at seven. We didn’t have a lot in this community, but we had books,” he said. “There are always things in the street for you, but there is much more in books. . . . The guiding thesis is: books will set you free.”

The children sang a final song: “I am a Cooper kid, a Dr. Walter Cooper kid, I am, I am / I stand up for what’s right, even when the world is wrong.” Sylvia Cooksey, a retired administrator who is also a pastor, gave the final speech. “No matter where you go, where you end up, you are taking part of this school with you,” she

said. “You are taking Dr. Walter Cooper with you. We’re going to hear all over Rochester, ‘That child is from School 10.’ ”

After the assembly, I asked Cooper what he made of the closure. “It’s tragic,” he said. “It points to the fundamental instability in the future of the schools. Children need stability, and they aren’t getting it in terms of the educational process.”

Wanda Zawadzki, a physical-education teacher who had worked at the school for eight years and received some of the loudest shrieks from the kids, stood looking forlorn. She recalled the time a class had persuaded the city to tear down an abandoned house across the street, and the time a boy had brought her smartphone to her after she dropped it outside. “My other school, that phone would have been gone,” she said. “It’s the integrity here.” Like many teachers at the targeted schools, she was still waiting for her transfer assignment. “This was supposed to be my last home,” she said.

And then it was dismissal time. It was school tradition to have the staff come out at the end of every school year and wave at the departing buses as they did two ceremonial loops around the block. Speakers blared music from the back of a pickup, and the teachers danced and waved. “We love you,” Principal Thomas called out.

It was quieter over at School 29, the school with many special-needs kids. The children were gone, and one teacher, Latoya Crockton-Brown, walked alone to her car. She had spent nineteen years at the school, which will be closing completely. “We’re not doing well at all,” she said, of herself and her colleagues. “This was a family school. It’s very disheartening. Even the children cried today.”

She was wearing a T-shirt that read “Forever School 29 / 1965 to Now.” The school had done a lot in recent days to aid the transition —bringing in a snow-cone truck and a cotton-candy machine, hosting a school dance. “One girl said she feels like she’s never

going to make friends like she had here,” Crockton-Brown said. “But we have to move on. We have no other choice.” ♦

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Alec MacGillis, a reporter for ProPublica, is the author of “*Fulfillment: America in the Shadow of Amazon*.”

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Real-Estate Shopping for the Apocalypse

Thirty-nine per cent of Americans believe that we're living in end times, and the market for underground hideouts is heating up.

By [Patricia Marx](#)

August 26, 2024



When you buy your own personal bunker, your starter home can be your finisher home, too.

Illustration by Allan Sanders

What if they're right? What if a nuke drops, or climate change turns the world into a foaming puddle, or the next pandemic is spread through selfies? Billionaires have recently been spending millions building themselves customized bunkers, in the hope that they can ride out the apocalypse in splendor. In January, a video surfaced of the rapper Rick Ross bragging that his bunker will be better than Elon Musk's bunker. (Musk is not known to have a bunker, but that's a detail.) Ross's bunker will have multiple "wings" and a "water maker." Also, plenty of canned goods. Ross's bunker might even have its own bunker. But what about me—and, if I'm being generous, you? Are there affordable underground shelters available for us to hole up in?

A few months back, I started to scan real-estate Web sites. Hmm, I wondered. Might throw pillows brighten up the underground

scheelite mine in Beaver County, Utah, that was converted into a community fallout shelter during the Cold War (a steal at nine hundred and ninety-five thousand dollars, when you consider how many light-bulb filaments you could make from the leftover tungsten you could knock loose)? Or how about the concrete-and-steel stronghold in Hilliard, Ohio, built by A.T. & T. and the Army in 1971 to protect the nation's communications system in case of nuclear attack? It comes with a "1970's-era smoking room." (Note to self: Take up smoking a few months before world ends.) Would house guests get the hint if I mentioned that my new home had three-thousand-pound blast-proof doors? (\$1.25 million for nine acres.)

I considered breaking the bank (\$4.9 million) for a compound in Battle Creek, Michigan: more than two hundred and ninety acres encompassing several dwellings, the largest being a fourteen-thousand-square-foot affair that looks like a soap opera's idea of a mansion, with indoor pool and "high-end" appliances (if there's a Miele waffle-maker, I need that house!)—and, below, a spacious bunker with its own shooting range and grow room. (Phew! Who can survive without daily fresh fenugreek?) Unfortunately, the owner of that particular McBunker wouldn't allow me to tour the place, because I couldn't show proof of funding. This is a standard requirement when shopping for bunkers; so few "comps" exist that banks cannot assess their value, and thus won't give mortgages.

After weeks of scrolling, I found a handful of dream hideaways on the market whose sellers were willing to let me take a tour. There were two bunkers in Montana, one of which sleeps at least ninety; a prepper bunker in Missouri that features an inconspicuous entrance and a conspicuous arsenal of guns (not included in sale, but makes you think twice before criticizing the kitchen-countertop choice); a defunct missile-silo site in North Dakota; and a twenty-thousand-square-foot cave in Arkansas used by its previous owner to raise earthworms. (Favorite bit of real-estate marketing copy: "The worm room speaks for itself.")

Two Earth Sheltered (Bunker) Homes on +/-7 acres in the beautiful Paradise Valley of SW MT. . . . The second earth home shelter is +/-6000 sf. . . . Over 300 feet long underground, with 2 floor levels living area, and a basement storage area. Many small BR, with options for bunk beds; 1 master suite. 11 toilets, 7 showers, 15 sinks. 2 alcohol cook stoves/ovens. . . .

—\$1,550,000, Survival Realty

I decided to tour the larger of the two advertised earth homes in Montana. Theresa Lunn, a local real-estate broker who specializes in bunker sales, showed me around. From the outside, this hole in the ground looked as if it could be the home of a paranoid hobbit. Built into an otherwise unremarkable snow-speckled knoll is a three-foot-thick concrete slab, artfully flanked by boulders. Positioned in the slab was a rusty steel door so tiny that I would have to duck to enter. Lunn took out a small key and struggled for a long while to open a padlock that secured a heavy chain around the door handles.

We were at the end of a long dirt road in the middle of Paradise Valley, not far from Yellowstone Park, but exactly where, I cannot reveal. I promised Lunn, who'd promised the seller, that the location would remain secret.

She had told me earlier that this was the largest of four getaways originally built in 1989 by a member of the Church Universal and Triumphant, a cult led by Elizabeth Clare Prophet, who predicted that nuclear Armageddon would occur in the spring of 1990, and urged her thousands of followers to bunker down ASAP. (She'd previously sent out a "save the date" claiming that the world would end the previous October, but she changed her mind.)

After Lunn got the door open, she ushered me into what looked like a large drainage pipe with ten feet of headroom, painted in a cheery

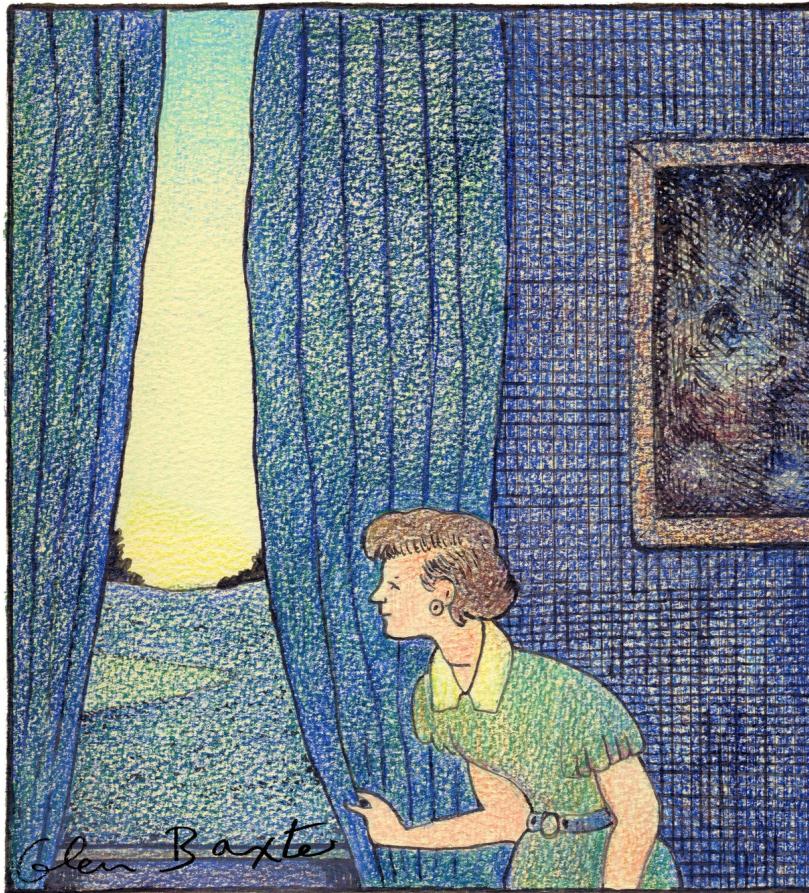
shade of teal. This was the bunker's entry hall. I made a mental note that, if I were to move in, I'd relocate the cartons of apple juice, canning jars, and other jumbled supplies piled there to the food pantry in the basement. Better yet, I'd toss them. I noticed that a bunch of the stuff was expired. Among the stored food: a three-foot-tall barrel of walnuts and cartons of barley, adzuki beans, "health food" mayonnaise, "home storage" wheat, and abundant bacon bits.

Just past the entryway, there is, for your convenience after a long day out in the radiation, a roomy decontamination shower alongside handy instructional posters. For example, "Eyes: Irrigate with large amounts of normal saline or water. Direct flow from inner angle (close to nose) toward outer angle of eye. Save fluid and survey. . . . If okay, wrap [self] in blanket and proceed to your room." "Your room" would likely be a nook the size of a substantial walk-in closet containing four wooden bunks; some of the beds I saw were painted a Laura Ashley-adjacent shade of lilac (which coördinated with the chintz floral coverlets but not with the brown industrial carpeting or the blobby blown-insulation walls). If you are lucky enough to get the master bedroom, you'll find a good amount of space and privacy, as well as a life-size marble-composite statue of the Virgin Mary watching over you. On a side table, I spied a souvenir copy of *USA Today* from September 12, 2001, with the headline "ACT OF WAR."

"What I think is the most inadequate thing about the bunker is the laundry facility," Lunn said. "When everybody's out working in the fields or whatever, growing their own stuff, and then comes home. . . ." She raised an eyebrow. On a more positive note, she pointed out that the temperature never drops much below forty-eight degrees: "The cool thing is that the pipes never freeze!" When I asked her whom she viewed as her ideal buyer, she said, "It takes a special type. But at this price point, you couldn't even pour the concrete used here."

On the drive back to my hotel, I asked Lunn, partly as a joke, where the weapons were kept. “You weren’t shown them,” she said, dryly, then explained one of the regular gambits of the bunker-selling trade: “It’s very common to put in the listing that there are hidden doors and bookcases and rooms that will be shown to the buyer only once the property is purchased.” As we drove through picturesque mountain scenery, Lunn said that eighty per cent of the houses we were passing had bunkers underneath. There isn’t much bunker inventory these days, however, because owners don’t want to sell.

What was the most pressing fear, I asked. “You can just feel the general uneasiness,” she answered, and explained that a lot of her clients are “in the know”—meaning former C.I.A. or F.B.I. agents, ex-military, or ex-police. She asked, “Do you know why they all want property above twenty-five hundred feet?” Hint: It’s not for the views. An ex-NASA guy had told her that soon the water will rise, “and climate change has nothing to do with it.” Rather, it’s because “two or three planets or asteroids are going to collide and mess up the natural spinning of the Earth.”



I COULD JUST MAKE OUT THE
OMINOUS TRIANGLE OF POLENTA

Cartoon by Glen Baxter

I asked to what extent current events affect the bunker market. “Business improved after the Baltimore bridge collapsed,” she said. “Nothing like a big old boat taking out a bridge.” (Lunn has heard that the Russians or the Chinese were behind it, but let’s not get into that.) Among the eight or nine buyers who’ve come to tour the bunker I saw, she said that most were looking for a solid investment and protection against “an N.B.C. event”—nuclear, biological, or chemical devastation. “Or civil unrest, if there’s another biological attack on the country—as there has been once,” she said with a grim smile, referring to COVID-19.

The address of the bunker that Lunn showed me that day was listed as “123 Discreet Location, Montana.” I realized that selling

something whose selling point is that nobody knows where it is presents a marketing challenge. Before heading out on my bunker tour, I had asked one broker about visiting Vivos Indiana, a multilevel underground complex “strategically located in Midwestern America,” according to its Web site. It’s operated on a “country club ownership model”; vacancies go for thirty-five thousand dollars per person. I was told that, as a reporter, if I were to visit, I would be picked up at the nearest town, Terre Haute, and, after I surrendered my phone, would be either put in a van with blacked-out windows, or be blindfolded several miles from the listing. I declined, thereby missing out on seeing what the Vivos Web site describes as an “impervious” complex that was built during the Cold War. Boasting twelve-foot ceilings, a checkerboard backsplash in the kitchen, plenty of board games, and leather sofas that look as if they came from Restoration Hardware, the place is guaranteed to withstand a twenty-megaton blast. And they’re concerned about intruders?

According to a 2023 YouGov poll of a thousand respondents, sixty-six per cent are worried that the human race will be wiped out by nuclear weapons; roughly the same number worry that we will be killed off by a world war; fifty-three per cent think the next pandemic could do us in; fifty-two per cent bet on climate change; forty-six per cent on A.I.; forty-two per cent on an act of God; thirty-seven per cent on an asteroid; thirty-one per cent global inability to have children; twenty-five per cent an alien invasion. Only a small chunk of people believe the end will come in the next ten years. But for the eight per cent who believe it’s “very likely,” that’s soon enough to make their starter home their finisher home, too. In 2022, the Pew Research Center found that thirty-nine per cent of adults in the United States believe we are living in end times.

Discover the ultimate retreat . . . a custom-built Underground Prepper Bunker that perfectly balances security and comfort. . . . Step inside the 1,250-square-foot bunker and

experience a space designed to be both welcoming and practical. With three well-appointed bedrooms and two full bathrooms, there's plenty of room for family or guests . . . while the large kitchen and expansive pantry make meal preparation and food storage effortless. . . . The full-size shower and tub provide a refreshing escape from the demands of self-sufficient living.

—\$284,900, Special Finds, Unique Properties

These are the directions a visitor is given for how to reach the bunker listed above. On the outskirts of Mountain Grove (a town motto: "Take a closer look") is a country road. Take that, and after you pass a lot of farmland and occasional fields of grazing cattle, you'll come to a sign.

NOTICE

NO TRESPASSING

Anyone Found On This Property Will Be Shot On Sight.

No Government Entity Is Allowed On This Property.

If You Wish To Enter You Must Have a Valid Warrant.

Wouldn't a few potted petunias be a better way to enhance curb appeal? But now you're on the premises; if still alive, read on. If an intruder: the barnlike galvanized-steel structure in front of you is a decoy; it contains twelve hundred and fifty square feet of nothing. The real house is underneath, and is breachable only via a set of stairs that is revealed when a diversionary staircase is retracted, using a remote control.

This bunker is for sale by owner, and the owner is Malachi Twigg, an Orthodox Jew who wears a yarmulke on his head and a Glock 17 on his hip. While Twigg showed me around, he explained that he built his retreat after moving from Chicago twelve years ago, as a precaution against tornadoes and invasions. Except for the lack of windows—"Nope, never miss them. You want to look outside, go

outside,” he told me—the space feels like a regular apartment, with nice-sized rooms branching off a central hallway. Amenities include cedar-lined closets, taupe wall-to-wall carpeting, and an in-unit washer and dryer. Mounted in a wooden case, where others might have displayed their Hummel figurines, was a pair of assault rifles.

I asked Twigg how old he was. “Fifty-four? Oh, fifty-six,” he said. “What’s the point in counting during end times?” He explained that Biblical math, which is evidently very precise, suggests that—to make a long Armageddon short—“a bunch of countries” are going to gang up against Israel within six years; the Messiah will “get personally involved” and “wipe out two-thirds of the world’s population.” But, wait, there’s a feel-good ending: “All bad people will be gone.” Specifically, he added, in two hundred and sixteen years.

Most definitions of a bunker stipulate that the shelter be underground and used as protection from attack (or storms). In other words, dirt plus danger. Although the word comes from a Scottish term for “bench” which first appeared in the eighteenth century, bunkers have been around a lot longer than that. Consider, for instance, the sprawling subterranean cities of Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey. The cities’ groundwork was laid in ancient times, but they served as hideouts from the Muslim Arabs during the Arab-Byzantine Wars, starting in the seventh century A.D., and they continued to be used for centuries, affording refuge from the baddie du jour. Bunkers (and their cousins, trenches) were used extensively in Europe during both World Wars as cover against enemy fire, storage for weapons, and command centers. It was the Cold War, though, that ushered in the golden age of bunkers. Several European governments considered it their responsibility to provide safe hiding places for their citizens. No nation took this more seriously than Switzerland. In the nineteen-sixties, the country mandated the construction of shelter space for every inhabitant; today there are roughly nine million bunker spots for a

population of 8.8 million—enough for some refugees to bring a plus-one.

In this country, the powers that be took a different approach—one made explicit in the subtitle of Garrett Graff’s 2017 book, “Raven Rock: The Story of the U.S. Government’s Secret Plan to Save Itself—While the Rest of Us Die.” Although President Eisenhower opposed a federally financed shelter program, worried that it could lead to a too-powerful military-industrial complex, President Kennedy implemented a program by which basements in churches and schools were turned into fallout shelters, marked with those signs that resemble yellow-and-black pizza slices.

Meanwhile, even if you ended up blown to smithereens, your leaders would be thriving in undercover fortresses. A number of these facilities remain, including one in Culpeper, Virginia, that was meant to house hundreds of Federal Reserve employees. Probably the most ambitious government bunker was code-named Project Greek Island, a shelter seven hundred and twenty feet beneath the Greenbrier resort, in West Virginia. Built clandestinely in the late fifties, it was intended to house the entire U.S. Congress. After passing through a twenty-five-ton blast door that blends in with the Greenbrier’s garden-club décor, our elected officials could safely be squirrelled away à la Dr. Strangelove. The facility had a cafeteria that could serve four hundred, a television studio, and a trash incinerator that could do double duty as a crematorium. It is now open to the public for tours.

This property, for sale by owner, was one of 4 Sprint Missile Sites located approximately 10-20 miles from a central radar control site. Constructed in the early 1970’s, these bases were a last line of defense meant to intercept ICBMs coming over the North Pole. . . . This facility would make an ideal investment opportunity for a number of uses. Among them being, but not limited to:

- . secure survival retreat/community
- . secure data storage facility
- . cannabis grow site
- . cold storage facility

—\$799,500, ClearingandSettlement.com

From my hotel in Langdon, North Dakota, a small town seventeen miles from the Canadian border which holds the U.S. record outside Alaska for the longest stretch of below-zero weather, it's an easy fifteen-minute drive to Anna and Jim Cleveland's nuclear-bomb-resistant compound. I would soon learn that it's an easy drive from anywhere to anywhere in North Dakota; as the Avis car-rental guy at the Grand Forks airport told me, "There are no turns in North Dakota." You know you've arrived at the Clevelands' place when you see two Stonehenge-y monoliths of concrete rising from the earth. One is an exhaust stack for the generators that used to be buried below; the other is a fresh-air intake. Clustered nearby are twelve shallow fibreglass domes that look like a conference of igloos designed by Louis Kahn. Each dome caps a thirty-five-foot-deep silo that formerly housed a short-range missile.

Anna and Jim Cleveland, fifty and sixty-three, welcomed me to their maximum-security home. Because of cost considerations and shifts in strategy, Congress voted to decommission their missile base, along with the four other sites that made up the Stanley R. Mickelsen Safeguard Complex, in October of 1975, one day after the facilities became fully operational.

We entered the houseplant-filled hallway of what was once the aboveground guard shack. In this building, a twenty-four-hundred-square-foot one-story structure made of beige poured concrete with a flat roof and a row of windows, security personnel would vet visitors before opening the gate that allowed entry onto the premises. For the last nine years, the guard shack has been home to

Anna and Jim, plus various permutations of their thirteen children and two cats.

“We had a good-sized home in Nebraska, but when we had family get-togethers it was too small,” Jim said.

“And taxes were killing us,” Anna added.

Jim: “It’s not that we were necessarily looking for a bunker, but when you have a structure that’s underground, you don’t get taxed on the underground.” (Fact check: The taxation of underground shelters is largely determined by the state or municipality.)

They nabbed the property, which had been derelict for forty years, for next to nothing in a General Services Administration auction. But turning their bargain-basement fixer-upper into living quarters was daunting, and more expensive than they’d anticipated. They hadn’t planned on cramming the whole family into the guard shack. Anna said, “So what we envisioned when we bought the place just didn’t work.”

Their dream gone askew, the Clevelands put their missile base on the market only a year after they purchased it. In the ten years since then, fewer than five potential buyers have gone to see it. Hundreds have phoned or written about the listing, however, detailing such fantasies as turning the property into a survival community, a munitions plant, a cryptocurrency data center, or a mausoleum for cremated remains. Most inquiries, the Clevelands said, are fear-driven. “Everybody’s got a theory,” Anna said, “and everybody is just freaking out about something.”

Jim chimed in, “We even had somebody that kept talking about zombies.” Care to place a bid?

Before closing the deal, let’s walk the hundred or so yards from the guard shack to the bunker itself and take a quick tour of the

underscape. The entrance is through a structure that could be a brutalist one-car garage dug into a hillock. Nearby, something that looks like a maquette of a Richard Serra sculpture is a gun-discharge station, a rusty cannister once used by G.I.s to insure that their guns were bullet-free before bringing them indoors. (It could make a serviceable umbrella stand.) After you pass through the exterior doors, you traverse a seventy-five-foot concrete tunnel, lit by strings of Christmas lights. (“Cheery,” Jim said.) At the end of the tunnel is a blast door, a behemoth weighing several tons. Twenty feet later is a second blast door, which opens onto a hundred-and-forty-five-foot hallway.

Inside, it’s so quiet that you can hear a nuclear bomb not drop. The Clevelands walked me through a warren of interconnected chambers. First we visited what they call the Tentacle Room—a gray space that had clusters of flexible electrical conduit dangling from the ceiling like rigatoni. Next was the Suspended Room, where, back in the day, missile-firing computers sat on a metal platform that was suspended from the ceiling by giant Wonka-esque springs so as to minimize any shaking caused by a nuclear detonation in the vicinity. Other cavernous rooms contained industrial fans, metal lockers, and a movie-theatre-size popcorn-maker.

When the Clevelands’ kids were young and the guard shack felt cramped, they used to go down into the bunker to play video games and do homework. Jim and Anna now use a section of the windowless lair as a studio; they have a business making mail-order kits for model-railroad enthusiasts. It can get chilly twenty-four feet below the earth’s surface, so the Clevelands initially heated the space with coal. This proved unwieldy. I saw, scattered around, the boiler they installed for the coal, the forklift they used to unload it, and the long lineup of metal bins in which it was stored. “That was silly, but we do silly things,” Jim said. Today, they wear layers of sweaters and use space heaters when they work.



“She hasn’t texted back—should I send her my ear?”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein and Philip Ettinger

The studio itself had a Santa’s-workshop vibe. The boxes lining the shelves were brimming with adorable miniature versions of the world above, intended to accessorize toy-train environments (the labels read, for instance, “Beanery Diner,” “Pete’s Tavern,” “Barrel and Box Company”). There’s room to accommodate thirty or more elves, but before reporting to work after a nuclear attack, they’d have to deposit their radiation-contaminated pointy shoes in the closet marked “*FOOT GEAR DROP*.”

Most of the people who visit or call about the bunker are “driven by panic stuff,” Jim said. “But we are putting a positive spin on the marketing. This is a great community in a beautiful place to live. If the end of the world happens, you’re in a good spot, too. But guess what? The sun’s going to come up tomorrow, and my taxes are still due.”

If vintage charm isn’t your thing, you might consider a hot-off-the-factory-floor bunker from Atlas Survival Shelters, prefab or custom-made to your whims and worries. “I sell on average a bunker a day,” Ron Hubbard, the founder of the company, told me over the phone from his headquarters, in Sulphur Springs, Texas. “Sales have been quite steady since *COVID* started, in 2020, and it

hasn't slowed down. The war in Ukraine was a big influence, and the war in Israel gave us a tiny spike," he added.

Hubbard said that his customers are typically married, about fifty-five. Sixty per cent are male, ninety-nine per cent are conservative Christians. "At this time, Democrats are not buying bunkers," he said. "I don't understand it, but I guess they think everything's fine." Most Atlas shelters cost between a hundred thousand and five hundred thousand dollars, but they can go as low as twenty thousand and as high as several million. At the most affordable end is a precast-concrete number that Hubbard calls "a true working man's off-the-shelf." It comes with four cot-like bunks inside what looks like a giant bowler hat, but one with a watertight aluminum hatch and a polypropylene ladder.

I asked Hubbard if he'd seen the rendering that recently circulated of a bunker planned for a mogul in the U.S. which has a thirty-foot-deep moat that can set itself on fire in the event of an assault. He hadn't, but he said that he'd worked with such high-net-worth individuals as the Tate brothers of Romania and the YouTuber known as MrBeast—he even lent a bunker for the Kardashians to try on their reality show. "Your normal non-eccentric billionaire is not wasteful with his money," he told me. "They might put in a few bunkers, but they don't want to spend more than a million for each. They might want a game room, but they don't get too crazy."

Hubbard has his own bunker, of course—a twelve-year-old fifty-footer equipped with a Swiss air system, gas-tight doors, and a mudroom. In December of 2012, he stayed inside it for eleven days, coinciding with the time frame that many people (reading the Mayan calendar erroneously) predicted would see the end of the world. Did he feel sheepish about that? "Look, I make bunkers," he said. "I'm not crazy. But if the world did end, at least I was in my bunker."

If you have been looking for your own personal safe place, you already know properties like this don't come along very often. . . . This is a legitimate very large and spectacular dry limestone cave. . . . The first of the three large rooms inside the cave is what my friend called the worm room. It was in this room that he ran his business of raising earthworms. . . . He had a very successful business going and shipped his worms and worm casting fertilizer to all parts of the US. . . . The worm room is . . . silent, still, and ancient. It is cool in the summer and warm in the winter. And the musical acoustics of the room need to be heard in person to be fully appreciated.

—\$1,500,000, Survival Realty

Bring your architect and your imagination—and maybe a flashlight—and, oh, while you're at it, perhaps a pail to catch the water dripping from the stalactites. But first let yourself onto the property—ninety acres of deciduous woods in Arkansas with a trailer home and two large unfinished structures made from upcycled materials like tires. Locate the fence with the handwritten corrugated-metal sign that reads "*WE BITE GO AWAY*," a nice complement to the one at the cave entrance that says "*TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT. SURVIVORS WILL BE SHOT AGAIN*." The two signs were posted by the previous owner, a semi-recluse named John Nelson (in the event that his food stockpiles ran out, he planned to eat squirrels). Nelson, who died in 2022, willed the cave and its environs to three friends.

Two of those friends agreed to show me around the place: John Perry, a potter who looks like a folksinger and describes himself as a Bernie guy, and Tom Crum, a retired *FEMA* employee who, with his painter's-brush mustache and a pair of overalls, called to mind the host of a children's TV show. Marketing the cave as a bunker was the idea of the third friend, Rob Repin, a gold miner who lives in Washington State. Noting the high number of anxious rich people around these days, Rob wrote in an e-mail to me,

“advertising as an underground shelter seems like the most bang for the buck.” In 2015, he’d bought part of a railroad tunnel in Oregon and flipped it for a hefty profit.

As Perry and Crum led me into the cave’s front room, where Nelson slept and ate, I was reminded of those old Lower East Side apartments that had the bathtub in the kitchen: Nelson had set up a shower and a faucet by connecting pipes to a rain barrel. He’d installed electricity, but the lights weren’t working the day I visited. Next stop was the vaunted worm room, reached by tiptoeing over the dirt floor. It was here, in an open space bigger than three pickleball courts, with a ceiling height of fifteen to twenty feet, that Nelson’s tens of thousands of earthworms lived, in plastic kiddie pools.

“Tell her about the time the worms—” Crum said to Perry.

“Well,” Perry interrupted, “one time, the power had gone out, and John heard this sound through the whole cave.” Perry made a slurping noise. “The earthworms were crawling all over the walls. And glistening. That’s why he kept the lights on all the time.” Evidently, if you’re a worm, lights-out means “Paaar-ty!”

Using our phone flashlights, we stumbled through a narrow passageway, through stacks of Styrofoam cups that Nelson had packed the worms in before shipping them to his worm customers. “The cave goes on for miles. I wish we had more lights, so you could see how beautiful it is,” Perry said. “Lights-out” had become a trigger phrase for me, but luckily we called it quits and made our way back to sunshine.

Later, musing about other uses for the vast worm room, I envisioned an ideal home theatre for staging a Plato-inspired shadow play or an immersive “Flintstones” remake. Or, with a cute sectional sofa, soft lighting, and a cozy area rug, you could turn this man cave into a woman cave. A skylight might be nice, too.

The next night, arriving home from my bunker-shopping trip, tired and jittery, I opened my apartment door and heard a sustained, ear-shattering beeping. My heart began to pound. Was this *it*? The end?! Nope. My smoke detector needed a new battery. My doomsayer friends weren't right. Yet. ♦

Patricia Marx is a staff writer. Her children's book "*Tired Town*," illustrated by Roz Chast, was published in October, 2023.

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Why Was It So Hard for the Democrats to Replace Biden?

After the President's debate with Trump, Democratic politicians felt paralyzed. At the D.N.C., they felt giddy relief. How did they do it?

By [Andrew Marantz](#)

August 23, 2024



"It seems absurd now how long we spent going, 'We can't change nominees, it'll be chaos,' " Peter Welch, the junior senator from Vermont and an early voice calling for Joe Biden to step aside, said.

"This sure doesn't feel like chaos to me."

Photographs by Natalie Keyssar for The New Yorker

The buttons said “Frat Bros for Harris” and “Hillbillies for Harris” and “Banned Book Readers for Harris” and “Unity 2024.” The stickers said “demo(b)rat” and “Existing in Context” and “F*ck Project 2025” and “Hotties for Harris.” The Washington State delegation wore “Cowboy Kamala” sashes and cowboy hats fringed with flashing lights. (“The Smithsonian already came by to collect one,” Shasti Conrad, the head of the delegation, told me.) Some pieces of merch seemed to have been printed in June—a T-shirt with images of Joe Biden, Barack Obama, Bill Clinton, and Jimmy Carter, but no Kamala Harris—and others were designed sometime between late July, when Biden left the race, and mid-August, when people started arriving in Chicago for the

Democratic National Convention. It surely wasn't spontaneous when Biden finished his keynote speech and Harris told him, within view of the cameras, "I love you so much." Still, stagecraft and all, it did feel a bit like Unity 2024. "Two months ago, it was impossible to contemplate that anyone other than Biden could unite the Party," Peter Welch, the junior senator from Vermont, told me. "Then it was people tiptoeing around, going, 'O.K., he's not the best messenger, but we can't address that without tearing the Party apart.' Now that's all ancient history."

There are two U.S. senators from Vermont, one of whom is a household name. After Biden delivered perhaps the worst televised debate performance in American Presidential history, Bernie Sanders, the senior senator, became one of his staunchest defenders. A vast majority of voters told pollsters that Biden was too old to run, and there were widespread calls for him to drop out of the race. Yet Sanders insinuated that these calls may have been artificially orchestrated by élites—"a small group of people," he called them, "not ordinary people."

Meanwhile, Welch was making the opposite case. After serving eight terms in the House, Welch, who is seventy-seven, was elected to the Senate as part of the 2022 "freshman class." Among his classmates were J. D. Vance, with whom he co-sponsored a bill expanding rural Internet access, and John Fetterman, who told Politico that Welch was "the nicest dude in D.C." On the night of the debate, the Senate was in recess, and Welch was at home with his wife in Norwich, Vermont. "I was in the other room, and Margaret goes, 'You've got to watch this,'" Welch told me. He was disturbed by Biden's garbled answers, but perhaps even more disturbed by the split-screen shots of Biden standing slack-jawed and glassy-eyed, looking lost. "Right away, I knew," he said. "You can't make people unsee this." The following day, his staff drove him to various events—a meet and greet with dairy farmers in Waitsfield, a media conference in Burlington. Whatever the ostensible topic, the only thing that people wanted to talk about

was the debate. “It was maybe eighty-twenty, or ninety-ten, in favor of ‘Biden cannot be our nominee,’ ” Welch told me. “And this is in *Vermont*”—the state that gave the President his widest margin of victory in 2020. From the car, Welch called every Democratic insider he could get on the line—strategists, pollsters, about a dozen senators—and laid out, in painful detail, his sense that Biden had become a liability. “Some of them openly agreed with my analysis, some were more circumspect,” Welch recalled. (As a Democratic Party boss in nineteenth-century Boston put it, “Don’t write when you can talk; don’t talk when you can nod your head.”) “No one seemed eager to take it on. But no one told me I was wrong.”

THE COMPLETE Book of CAREGIVING



Cartoon by Kim Warp

Like most red-blooded Americans, members of Congress have group chats. On debate night, and for days afterward, these were full of conflicting emotions: shock, outrage, false bravado, sheer dread. Welch has several text threads with House and Senate colleagues, including a Signal thread with messages that

periodically self-erase. The prevailing sentiment was: Someone has to do something. But what, exactly? “There is no such entity as ‘the Democrats,’ ” Chris Murphy, a Democratic senator from Connecticut, told me. “When the Party acts, it’s the result of a set of individual decisions, either coördinated or, sometimes, surprisingly uncoördinated.” The House was in session on the night of the debate, and more than a dozen representatives, all moderate Democrats, gathered at a watch party in D.C. hosted by Jake Auchincloss, of Massachusetts, which quickly turned funereal. “About fifteen minutes in, we cracked open the bourbon,” Jim Himes, a congressman from Connecticut, told me. “I’m getting messages from everyone I know outside D.C.—‘Fix this!’—but it’s not like there’s a red phone I can pick up and on the other end is the smoke-filled room. The Party is—I don’t want to call it rudderless, but it’s amorphous.”

Some Democrats in the House joined Sanders in trying to breathe the embers of Biden’s candidacy back to life. “Maybe I’m being too risk-averse,” Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said, in an Instagram live stream, about the possibility of switching candidates. “Maybe I’m taking a big ‘L.’ ” Many, if not most, believed that Biden was on track to lose, and to bring House and Senate Democrats in close races down with him, but that there was nothing they could do about it. “The last thing you want to do is be out there grandstanding, risking your reputation,” Welch told me, “for a fight you’ve got no chance of winning anyway.” Adam Smith, a congressman from Washington State, told me that, the day after the debate, “I called up the White House and went, ‘Guys, we all know what has to happen here.’ I hung up thinking, He’ll do the honorable thing. And instead I watched the palace guard go, ‘Nope, fuck off,’ and start circling the wagons.” Washington is full of Biden loyalists, and loyalists often hold grudges. “I was so critical of my Republican colleagues who would say terrible things about Trump until he came to power, and then they just fell in line,” Senator Martin Heinrich, of New Mexico, told me. “I thought we

had a responsibility to show that we can be different. And, at times, I wasn't sure whether we would." In mid-July, shortly after the assassination attempt on Donald Trump, an unnamed House Democrat told Axios, "We've all resigned ourselves to a second Trump presidency."

The Democratic Party used to be a formidable institution run by thuggish bosses and shifty insiders. (Say what you will about Boss Tweed, but he wouldn't have let an unpopular candidate run for mayor of New York—he would have given bribes, or made threats, until he got his way.) For most of the twentieth century, primary elections were nonbinding "beauty contests," when they happened at all. Nominees for President were picked at the Convention, by the élites in the room, and the power struggles could be brutal. But reforms enacted after the 1968 Convention made primaries binding, and stripped Party insiders of much of their power. The idea was to make the Democratic Party more democratic, but the nominating process also became less nimble. One trade-off, not much contemplated at the time, was that in the event of some unlikely glitch—say, a candidate who clinched the nomination but then, on live television, demonstrated that he was unfit to run—the Party would be stuck. "The upside of the new system is that it got us away from the old smoke-filled rooms," Elaine Kamarck, a longtime leader of the D.N.C., said. "The downside of the new system is that, every once in a while, it royally fucks up."

The twenty-three days between Biden's debate performance and the end of his candidacy were a high-stakes natural experiment playing out both in private and in public. A dangerous or incompetent President can be impeached, but neither political party has a formal mechanism by which elected officials (or party elders, or George Clooney) can force a presumptive nominee out of the race. "A corporation has a board that can replace the C.E.O.," Senator Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, told me. "Our party doesn't have anything like that." The Democratic National Committee is nominally quasi-independent, but everyone knows

that the buck stops with the Democratic President, when there is one. When Kamarck wrote the Party's platform, she sent a draft to the White House first. James Zogby, a D.N.C. member since 1993, said that he has tried to make the organization "less like an extension of the White House," but that, "if anything, it has gone in the wrong direction." In the end, Biden stepped aside, and this year's Convention, which once seemed poised to be a poker-faced slog, instead became an ecstatic celebration. But it could easily have gone the other way.



Peter Welch was among the few congressional Democrats to call on Joe Biden to step aside in the wake of the first Presidential debate.

After the Presidential debate, lawmakers returned to Washington and continued their frantic conversations. But a culture of rectitude and risk aversion, especially in the Senate, caused almost all of them to toe the party line. John Hickenlooper, a senator from Colorado, told me, "Meetings were cancelled so that people could keep talking about it, into the night." Still, he said, the Senate Majority Leader, Chuck Schumer, advised his caucus to "keep our powder dry until we could speak with one voice." Whenever Welch passed reporters in the halls, he was expected to put on a smile and stay quiet. Was this how America stumbled into authoritarianism, with a polite smile and a "no comment"? He called his best friend in Vermont, "a guy who's been a kind of moral touchstone for me

over the years,” and talked through all the Washington-insider reasons to hold his tongue. Sure, the friend replied, you could give yourself those excuses. Or you could just say what you and most of your constituents are thinking.

On July 10th, Welch decided to speak out. “I understand why President Biden wants to run,” he wrote in the *Washington Post*. “But he needs to reassess whether he is the best candidate to do so. In my view, he is not.” At the time, Welch had almost no political cover. Just nine House Democrats had called on Biden to step aside; Welch was the only senator to do so. “I had a lot of affection for Joe Biden—I thought he was a great President—but I didn’t go way back with the guy the way some of my colleagues did,” he told me. “Maybe that made it easier for me to separate the personal from the political.” It’s said that every senator looks in the mirror and sees a future President, but Welch is one of the rare senators with no aspirations of running for higher office, or even of chairing an important committee. This left him “totally liberated” to speak his mind. He added, “And maybe I also had the advantage of being new enough to the Senate that I didn’t really know the rules.”

“A political party,” according to the political scientist E. E. Schattschneider, “is an organized attempt to get control of the government.” He wrote this in 1942, and it remains the canonical definition. It sounds obvious, until you look closely. For one thing, it implies that a party that is not trying to win (“We’ve all resigned ourselves to a second Trump presidency”) is not, in some fundamental sense, a real party at all. For another thing, Schattschneider locates a party’s beating heart within its leaders, not its voters. “The Democratic party is not an association of the twenty-seven million people who voted for Mr. Roosevelt,” he wrote. “It is manifestly impossible for twenty-seven million Democrats to control the Democratic party.” If this was élitist, it was also typical of its time. (In 1942, few readers needed to be reminded why it might be dangerous to view politicians as irrefutable tribunes of the will of the people.) And then there’s the

word “organized.” When members of Congress do TV hits from the Capitol, they often stand next to a statue of Will Rogers, a humorist from the early twentieth century, who joked, “I don’t belong to any organized political party—I am a Democrat.” Smith, the congressman from Washington State, told me, “I always thought that Will Rogers thing was just a punch line. Then I got here and went, Oh, maybe he was being too nice.”

The Founders cautioned against factional discord and then immediately succumbed to it. In 1824, four Democratic-Republicans ran for President. Andrew Jackson, a charismatic war hero, won the popular vote, but they all fell short of an Electoral College majority. The House—led by Speaker Henry Clay, who despised Jackson—handed the Presidency to John Quincy Adams, the Republic’s first nepo baby. (Jacksonians dubbed this the “corrupt bargain” after Adams, returning the favor, named Clay his Secretary of State.) Martin Van Buren, then a senator from New York, decided that this was no way to run a country. He started developing the mass party as we know it, with the goal of “substituting *party principle* for *personal preference*”: the Democratic Party, then also known as the Democracy. Under Van Buren’s control, the Party didn’t just run candidates every few years; it wove itself into the fabric of daily life, establishing partisan newspapers, local social clubs, and patronage networks that engendered fierce loyalty. When the Party needed votes in the South, Van Buren courted the South Carolinian John C. Calhoun to be Jackson’s running mate; a few years later, when Van Buren concluded that Calhoun posed a threat to the nation, and to the Party, he promptly dumped him. Among contemporary historians, Van Buren is having a bit of a moment. In “Realigners,” a sweeping reassessment of “partisan hacks” and “political visionaries,” Timothy Shenk portrays him as both. “What It Took to Win,” Michael Kazin’s recent history of the Democratic Party, traces a narrative “from the rise of Martin Van Buren, the first party builder, to Nancy Pelosi.” Kazin writes that the Jackson campaign

set up local clubs where Democrats “munched on barbecue, and mounted street parades . . . ‘party’ was functioning both as a noun and an intransitive verb.”

Every party boss who has ever implemented a reform has claimed to be doing it on behalf of the people. Yet some bosses really have tried to help the organization and its constituents, while also helping themselves. Robert (Fighting Bob) La Follette, a Progressive Republican, crusaded against the Party machine; when they went low, he went low more effectively. In 1904, while running for reelection as governor of Wisconsin, he pledged to implement direct voting in local primaries, a pro-democracy reform that would also benefit him politically. His opponents planned to block his renomination, by force if necessary, by flooding the state Convention, held in a university gym, with fake electors bearing counterfeit badges. La Follette hired a construction crew to work overnight, surrounding the gym with barbed wire, and a dozen college football players, “physically able to meet any emergency,” to guard the door. He nearly split the Party, but he got what he wanted.

Woodrow Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke in 1919, six years into his Presidency, but he was still determined to run for a third term. “The President’s whole left side was paralyzed,” Wilson’s personal secretary wrote in a memoir. “Looking at me he said: ‘I want to show them that I can still fight and that I am not afraid.’ ” As Party insiders took sleeper trains to San Francisco for the Democratic Convention the following year, they started talking, and a consensus emerged: no matter what Wilson said, the Party was not with him. The governor of Alabama was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* as saying that Wilson’s renomination would spell “party suicide.” More than halfway through the Convention, Wilson gave in. “When it comes to a party’s internal decision-making, democracy should not be the only criterion, or even the main one,” Sam Rosenfeld, a political scientist at Colgate University, told me. “You want parties that are open to input, but

above all you want them to be able to reach decisions that mean they can gain power and achieve things. That's the whole point."



Realizing that not every moment in life will be deep, or meaningful, or vibrating with energy that would give him the fulfillment that he'd always hoped for, Todd unloaded the dishwasher.

Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

One of the provocative claims in "The Hollow Parties," a new book by Rosenfeld and Daniel Schlozman, a political-science professor at Johns Hopkins, is that Franklin D. Roosevelt's most enduring legacy was the instantiation of the "personalistic presidency." The New Deal was a monumental achievement, but the Democrats under F.D.R. were whatever F.D.R. wanted them to be. (In 1932, when he flew to Chicago to accept the Democratic Party's nomination in person, it was seen as an unprecedented display of personal ambition.) Then came Truman's "bomb power," Lyndon Johnson's arm-twisting, and the ever-expanding imperial Presidency. By the time we get to Nixon and Reagan and Trump and Biden, the average President's self-understanding is essentially "*Le parti, c'est moi.*"

In January, 1968, the final year of Johnson's first term, the President told Horace Busby, a speechwriter who acted as his Boswell, that his renomination was assured: "Somebody may try,

but they can't take it away." Two months later, though, Eugene McCarthy, a little-known antiwar senator from Minnesota, came surprisingly close to winning the New Hampshire primary. Then Robert F. Kennedy, the glamorous senator from New York, entered the race. Johnson, spooked, decided to drop out. He was rattled by his loosening grip on power, and by his declining health, but he seemed to take consolation in knowing that his decision would be a bombshell that only he could drop. When he let Busby in on his secret plan to retire, "a smile played across his face," Busby wrote. "'That,' he said, 'ought to surprise the living hell out of them.'"

Kennedy was assassinated, and McCarthy won most of the remaining primaries. Yet the delegates at that summer's Convention, in Chicago, ended up nominating Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's Vice-President and an avatar of the Democratic establishment. For this and other reasons, the 1968 Convention was consumed by acrimony, both inside the hall and on the streets. To avoid such a damaging spectacle at future Conventions, the Democrats enacted what was later called the robot rule—instead of acting as free agents, the delegates were now warm bodies who had to do as they were told. Conventions became anticlimactic, pro-forma pageants where the presumptive nominee became the official nominee.

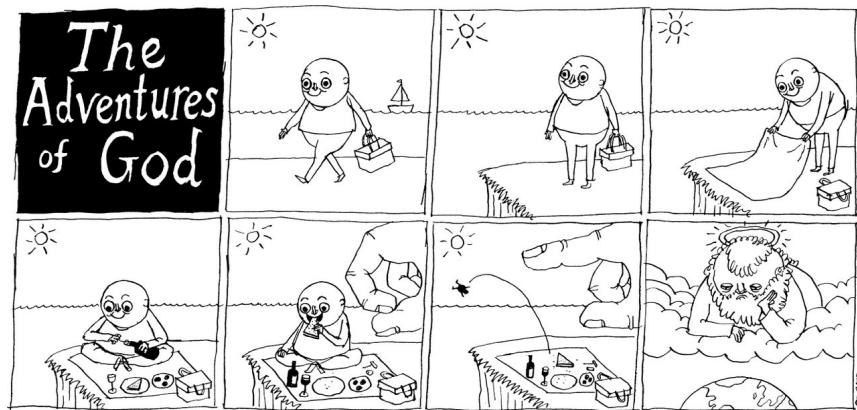
One of the central debates in political science concerns whether the two major American parties are—and these are technical terms—"strong" or "weak" parties. Everyone agrees that the old party machines were strong. By comparison, the contemporary parties look weak: the voters have more say, which seems fairer but also messier. "The Hollow Parties" complicates this dichotomy by describing both parties as lumbering leviathans, "seemingly everywhere and nowhere, overbearing and enfeebled, all at once." Even as they have grown more formalized, the parties have been hollowed out by their respective "party blobs": super PACs, think tanks, media figures, and other "paraparty organizations." Some of

this hollowness is infrastructural. Why should the Democrats go to the trouble of building a block-by-block canvassing operation if MoveOn or the National Education Association is already doing it for them? Some of it is ideological. It's hard for the Republican Party to turn down the donor base and voter enthusiasm provided by a group such as the National Rifle Association; but, as the N.R.A. keeps pushing for more radical policies, Republican lawmakers may find themselves boxed in. Barack Obama was personally popular enough that he could have won a third term, but he didn't leave behind a Party organization capable of delivering a Democratic successor. Trump's nomination in 2016 was a vivid example of party fecklessness: Ted Cruz and John Kasich scrambled to pull off a brokered Convention; *National Review* published a special issue, featuring twenty-two leading conservatives, under the banner "Against Trump." By November, most Republican insiders had boarded the *MAGA* train. After that, the Republican blob came to encompass QAnon and Stop the Steal, and the Party fielded fatuous candidates who either lost (Kari Lake) or won but seemed uninterested in legislating (Marjorie Taylor Greene). A more functional party might have cultivated better candidates, or created stronger disincentives to going off the rails. But, in the age of hollowness, the President and the blob were in charge, not the Party.

"The Hollow Parties" came out in May, the month that Trump was convicted of thirty-four felonies, and it was largely received as a gloss on the hollowed-out G.O.P. Then the Presidential debate, in June, cast a harsh light on the hollowness of the Democrats. When I spoke to Schlozman recently, he assured me that he had not somehow engineered this summer's news as a viral marketing campaign. In the book, Schlozman and Rosenfeld declare themselves "partisans of parties," which they know is an increasingly unpopular view. "I think it's possible to feel some nostalgia for how parties, at their best, took people with divergent interests and helped them figure out how to live together,"

Schlozman told me. “Or to feel, at least, some trepidation about what happens when those institutions fail.”

The Russell Senate Office Building is hushed, with high ceilings and wide marble corridors, like a half-vacant luxury hotel or an expensive hospital. When senators want to land culture-war jabs, they can express themselves on social media, or via their office swag. (Liberals fly trans-pride flags outside their office doors; conservatives fly Israeli flags; at least one Republican senator has started flying the Appeal to Heaven flag, which was carried by some rioters on January 6th and recently got Justice Samuel Alito into trouble.) But in person, in the Senate cloakroom or at the gym, it’s forever 1950, and the rule is clubby cordiality. “Best-dressed man in Washington,” Welch said as we walked past Mitt Romney in a hallway. After a warm chat with Lindsey Graham, he said, “Lindsey has been really helpful to me on some Judiciary Committee stuff, though I don’t know if he’d want me to admit that.” Most senators carry themselves like movie stars, but Welch comes across as a small-town public defender, which he was. Unusually for a person in his position, but usefully for journalists, he sometimes reflexively says what he’s thinking. When he and I found ourselves in a cramped elevator with Senator Sherrod Brown, of Ohio, Welch said, “Sherrod, we were just talking about the Biden thing. Did you want to explain why you ended up where you did?” Brown blanched and looked at the floor. No comment.



Welch is trim and energetic, with tortoiseshell glasses and silver hair—the sort of senior citizen who is inevitably described as “spry.” Unlike Teddy Roosevelt, who combined smooth diplomacy with Machiavellian threats, Welch speaks softly and carries a small stick. He endorsed Bernie Sanders for President—“Bernie has helped me out over the years, and I’ve tried to help him out”—but his political style is closer to Biden’s. In his Washington office, his staffers’ desks are decorated with innocuous memes (“Welch” written on a “brat”-green background) and knickknacks, including a copy of “Our Revolution,” the 2016 campaign book by Sanders, with Sanders’s name replaced by Welch’s. The joke is obvious: before his high-profile rift with the Party over Biden’s candidacy, no one could have mistaken Welch for a revolutionary.

In the days after the debate, Senator Mark R. Warner, of Virginia, informally polled many of his Democratic colleagues, and it appeared that all but one had grave concerns about Biden staying in the race. (Warner would neither confirm nor deny to me that the lone senator was Sanders. “Bernie saw all the corporate donors coming after Biden, and his sense was, These people have always been opposed to the pro-worker parts of Biden’s agenda,” a longtime Sanders aide told me. “And then to have all these backstabbing machinations, the insiders coördinating to push Biden out—I think he was reminded of what happened to him.”) Three of Biden’s top aides met with Democratic senators, hoping to restore their confidence, but the meeting had the opposite effect. Senator Michael Bennet, of Colorado, normally a mild-mannered pragmatist, asked if the campaign had any internal polling data to allay his fears that Biden would lose, but the aides could offer only vague platitudes. One senator, a stolid institutionalist, seemed to be on the verge of tears. “The notion that this was just some bed-wetting by Party élites was completely contrary to what I saw,” Bennet told me. “It was several of us saying to the campaign, Show us a plan, because otherwise Trump is going to win, and our kids and grandkids will never forgive us.” On a Zoom call with a

political-action committee associated with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, Mike Levin, of California, told Biden directly that the overwhelming majority of his constituents wanted Biden to step aside. Biden responded, “I think I know what I’m doing,” and the call ended soon after that. The following day, on a call between Biden and centrist Democrats in the House, Jason Crow, from Colorado, said that voters were “losing confidence” that Biden could “project strength.” Biden responded, “I don’t want to hear that crap.” Adam Smith, the representative from Washington, told me, “It was really defensive, and frankly a bit weird.” Another Democratic representative put it to me even more vividly: “We were all prepared for ‘This is so sad, we’re going to have to take the car keys away from Grandpa.’ We were not prepared for the scenario where you try to take the keys away from Grandpa and Grandpa points a gun at your head.”

In the following days, Smith “kept trying to push the snowball over the hill,” but he couldn’t tell whether the snowball was growing or melting. Through a donor in Hollywood, he tried to get celebrities involved. “I know someone who knows Hunter Biden, so I even tried that angle,” Smith said. He spoke out several times a day on cable news, which seemed to make an impression on his colleagues. “One member stopped me in the hall and said, ‘All right, you guilted me into it,’ ” Smith told me. “I actually hugged him.” Before Welch made his doubts public, he had sent word to the White House, and to Schumer’s office, about his decision. “They weren’t thrilled, but they didn’t try to stop me,” Welch said. He appeared on MSNBC the day after Biden said that he would drop out only “if the Lord Almighty” told him to. “The job for our party is to defeat Donald Trump,” Welch said. “This isn’t a decision for the Lord Almighty.”

Party insiders tried to signal to the public, and to each other, what should happen next. Zogby, the member of the D.N.C., wrote a memo explaining how the Party could conduct a quick “mini-primary” to select a new candidate. James Carville, a former

strategist for Bill Clinton, supported this plan. He told me, in July, “Mini-primary, blitz primary—call it whatever the fuck you want, just put ‘em all onstage and let ‘em fight it out.” (I started to ask a follow-up question, based on his knowledge of how the D.N.C. works, but he cut me off: “I have no idea how it works. Nobody has any fucking idea how it works, ’cause it doesn’t fucking work.”)

The Democratic Convention was scheduled for August, but the D.N.C., apparently at the urging of the White House, had decided to make the nomination official a month early, via Zoom, like trying to rush a shotgun wedding before anyone could get cold feet. “They really overstepped with that one,” Representative Jared Huffman, of California, told me. He drafted a letter of protest, and texted other members of Congress for their support. “But some of the people I texted were apparently double agents, back-channelling everything we were saying to the White House,” he said. David Axelrod, formerly Obama’s chief campaign strategist, told me, “The D.N.C. votes on things, but all roads lead back to the President.”

In total, apart from Welch, only three Democratic senators publicly urged Biden to step aside. Neither Schumer nor Hakeem Jeffries, the House Minority Leader, were seen as major factors in the process. A few people cracked jokes about how the congressional leadership was acting more like the congressional followership. Adam Smith told me that, after a while, “I went, O.K., this just isn’t going to happen.”

But Nancy Pelosi, the former Speaker of the House, continued to push, using a combination of private conversations, press leaks, and carefully calibrated public statements. On July 10th, Pelosi appeared on “Morning Joe,” on MSNBC, setting off a frenzy of Beltway tasseography. “It’s up to the President to decide if he is going to run,” she said, even though Biden had insisted repeatedly that he’d made up his mind. “We’re all encouraging him to make

that decision.” (“Such a gangster move,” a ranking House committee member told me.) More recently, when asked on CBS whether she had led a “pressure campaign,” she replied, “I didn’t call one person.” That may be true, but there are other ways to use a phone. At one point, Welch sent Pelosi a long text message, sharing his fears about Biden’s candidacy, and she promptly sent him a brief but affirmative reply. (Some next-generation Robert Caro may already be at work on a multivolume biography of Pelosi, scrambling after screenshotted texts.) It’s also possible that Pelosi didn’t initiate calls, but that she sometimes picked up when her phone rang. Lloyd Doggett, a Democrat from Texas and the first member of Congress to call on Biden to withdraw, told me that, before he did so, “I had a conversation with Pelosi. . . . It seemed to me that there was a recognition of the severity of the problem.” On the cover of her new memoir, “The Art of Power,” Pelosi looms over the National Mall in a white pants suit. “She knew how much time she had on the clock, and she kept ratcheting up the pain until the Biden people got the message,” Smith told me. “An absolute master class.”



“At this point in your career, your only possible promotion is to management, where you will stop doing the work you love and use a skill set you don’t have and we don’t teach.”

Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

To get from the Russell building to the Capitol, senators pass through an air-conditioned tunnel and a gantlet of narrow foyers, where they are politely accosted by paparazzi in business suits: the Senate press corps. Two days after Biden dropped out, and a day after Kamala Harris became the presumptive nominee, she had already broken fund-raising records, pulled even with Trump in some polls, and flooded social media with goofy, approachable memes. Every Democrat I spoke to expressed palpable relief, as if they'd just spent three weeks staring down a firing squad only to find out that the rifles had been filled with confetti all along. "It seems absurd now how long we spent going, 'We can't change nominees, it'll be chaos,'" Welch told me.

At one point, I played paparazzo myself, half jogging after Bernie Sanders to ask him why he'd so vehemently defended Biden. "No, no, no," Sanders said, shaking me off.

Welch, for his part, did not seem to be in a hurry.

"Senator, have you been briefed on 'brat'?" a reporter asked.

Sort of—at least enough to know which part of speech it was.

"Senator, have you officially endorsed Harris for President yet?" another said.

"Of course I have," Welch said. "You think I just fell out of a coconut tree?"

Back in his office, Welch talked on speakerphone with Elaine Kamarck, the D.N.C. leader. He had planned to ask her what might happen if there was an open Convention. But that was now academic: none of Harris's potential opponents showed any interest in challenging her. "We'll still find something to fight about," Welch said.

“You remember ‘80, don’t you, Peter?” Kamarck asked. “What a mess.” In 1980, when President Jimmy Carter ran for reelection, Senator Ted Kennedy ran against him in the primary, lost, and took his challenge to the Convention, hoping to persuade delegates to switch to his side. This failed, because of the robot rule. After 1980, that rule was quietly replaced by Rule 13(J), which states that delegates “shall in all good conscience reflect the sentiments of those who elected them.” It’s not clear what this means, because it has never been tested, but it seems to provide some wiggle room. If Biden had refused to bow out, and delegates decided that their “good conscience” required them to nominate someone else, could Party insiders have overpowered a President? “We’ve never had to find out,” Kamarck said. “So far, anyway.”

The special cocktails at the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund party, on the first night of this year’s Democratic Convention, were the Madam President (vodka and muddled blackberries), the Brat (Midori sour), and the Coconuts for Kamala (coconut tequila, mint, and lime). The speakers were Sophia Bush (“Is she, like, a *Bush Bush*? ” “No, she’s from ‘One Tree Hill’ ”) and Maura Healey (“What show is she from?” “She’s the governor of Massachusetts”). “We are not dangerous,” an m.c. said, introducing a lineup of drag performers. “We are love. We are America. But don’t mess with a drag queen, honey, or we will stomp you with our stiletto heels.”

Debra Cleaver, the founder of VoteAmerica and Vote.org, wore a button-down shirt and a Zabar’s baseball cap. “I can’t believe they’re letting straights in here,” she joked. “I think you should have to be at least ten per cent queer to enter.” She was with a straight friend, a woman wearing a jumpsuit, who did not take offense. After the Convention, the friend planned to go to Burning Man, where she had always wanted to run a voter-registration drive. She and Cleaver compared “playa names,” Burning Man monikers that carry over from year to year. “Mine is Rainbow,” Cleaver admitted. Her friend laughed and said, “Mine is Nancy Pelosi.”

The prime-time speeches and roll-call votes took place in the United Center, the arena where the Bulls play, but there were Convention-themed events across the city. The InterContinental hotel hosted nightly “Float While They Vote” happy hours in the pool, where civic-minded swimmers could keep up with a live stream of the proceedings while sipping “patriotic cocktails.” In Union Park, a few thousand pro-Palestinian protesters gathered for a March on the D.N.C., chanting about “Genocide Joe” and “Killer Kamala.” The Chicago History Museum hosted a walking tour, visiting the sites of Chicago Conventions from 1860 to 1968. In 1968, Welch was in Chicago, on leave from college, working as a housing organizer. “The protests then felt existential,” he told me. “The protesters now have reasonable demands, but it doesn’t feel like the end of the Party.”



Dean Phillips, a congressman from Minnesota, launched a Presidential campaign in October. He blames his failure on informal collusion—a “culture of silence” pervading the Democratic Party and its allies.

The Pennsylvania delegation hosted a breakfast in a hotel ballroom where the first speaker, already a bit hoarse at seven in the morning, was Governor Josh Shapiro. “ ‘The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’ has a whole lot of letters in it, but we really live by three letters,” he told the delegates, and the TV cameras behind them. “G.S.D.: gettin’ stuff done.” Then came a procession of folksy Midwestern governors—J. B. Pritzker, of Illinois, Gretchen Whitmer, of Michigan, and the one who was recently named

Harris's running mate, Tim Walz, of Minnesota. Walz tried to pander to the western Pennsylvanians by alluding to the beloved convenience-store chain Sheetz; this just annoyed the eastern Pennsylvanians, who heckled him with cries of "Wawa!" Rookie mistake.

During the day, the D.N.C. hosted panels and exhibitions in a vast convention center. There was an election-tech pavilion sponsored by Microsoft, a panel called "Go Dox Yourself" sponsored by Yahoo, and a display of Presidential footwear sponsored by a shoe company. One exhibit, called "The Coconut Club," had three fake-brick walls with colorful signage. (Creed No. 1: "Be yourself and do you.") I walked around to the open end, curious if there would be something on the inside—a café, or maybe a place to sit—but it was just an empty shell.

The last person I met at the LGBTQ+ Victory Fund party was Dwayne Bensing, a lawyer from Delaware and one of the state's nineteen delegates. Biden won all of Delaware's Democratic delegates, of course—Joe Biden *is* Delaware politics—but, the day after the debate, Bensing started to have doubts. "I know I'm pledged to Biden, but fifty million people just saw what I saw," Bensing recalled thinking. "Doesn't the Party have to say something, for our own credibility?" On a Signal chat that included all of the Delaware delegates, he shared a piece by the *Times* editorial board calling on Biden to step aside, quoting a sentence that urged Democrats to "find the courage to speak plain truths." The response in the chat was not enthusiastic. "The majority of the press are bought into optics over substance," one delegate wrote. Bensing reread the rules, especially Rule 13(J). "I asked the people in charge, 'If "all good conscience" doesn't apply here, when would it apply?' But they shut down that line of questioning pretty quick." In the Signal chat, he posted polling data showing that most Democratic voters wanted Biden out of the race, but the other delegates dismissed the polls. Bensing told me, "If we're not even

going to be the ‘We believe in facts’ party, then what are we, exactly?”

In a sense, the apprehension about Biden’s renomination started before 2024. Thirteen years earlier, when Biden was Vice-President of the United States, he visited Minneapolis for a fund-raiser at the home of Dean Phillips, a moderate Democratic donor and an heir to a liquor fortune. “He was charming, in command—really impressive,” Phillips recalled recently. “He spent time with my kids, made them feel like they were the only people in the room.” Five years later, the morning after Donald Trump was elected, Phillips promised his teen-age daughters, as they wept at the breakfast table, that he would do something for what was being called the resistance. He ran for Congress, and won, flipping his suburban district from red to blue for the first time since 1960. During the 2020 Presidential campaign, when Biden said that he viewed himself as “a bridge” to the next generation of Party leaders, Phillips was reassured: “I thought, O.K., his age makes me a bit nervous, but he’ll make a fine one-term President.”

In 2021, Phillips watched Biden address the Democratic House caucus for half an hour, to ask for support for an infrastructure bill. “He was disjointed, wandering off script—it was really jarring,” Phillips recalled. “At the end, Pelosi went to the podium, looking frustrated, and said something like ‘If the President isn’t going to make his pitch, then I guess I’ll have to.’ It was sort of played off as a joke, but I did not find it funny.” (Andrew Bates, a White House staffer who was in the room, told me that the President did not go off message.)

Two years later, when Biden announced his reëlection campaign, Phillips said that, in private, most Democrats in Congress were “surprised, and quite disappointed.” (Other congressional Democrats told me that they had no reason to worry about Biden’s capacities at that point.) “It felt like we were sleepwalking into another 2016 disaster, only this time we knew it,” Phillips

continued. He tried to encourage either Whitmer or Pritzker to run against Biden in the primary, but, he says, they wouldn't even return his calls. He also contacted several Democratic consultants, some of whom would speak only on the condition of anonymity, for fear of being blacklisted. "Their sense was, Yeah, we're in big trouble, but it's too late," Phillips said. We were talking in Phillips's tony town house, a few blocks from the Capitol—Edison bulbs, fresh white orchids, an original George McGovern campaign poster printed by Alexander Calder. Some members of Congress sleep on cots in their offices or room together, like middle-aged frat boys, but Phillips has the means, and the temperament, to live alone.

In October, 2023, Phillips announced that he would run for President himself. During our interview, he vacillated between framing his candidacy as purely symbolic ("I was less George Washington than Paul Revere, trying to sound the alarm") and as an unlikely but genuine attempt to win. He didn't come close, of course. He blames informal collusion—"a culture of silence" pervading the Democratic Party and its allies in the media, the consultancies, and the rest of the blob. "I couldn't in good conscience ask my colleagues in Congress to support me—they'd be destroying their own careers," he said. "I had a network of donors who could have financially supported the campaign, but most of them were too scared to touch it. If you want to maintain your access to power, you have every incentive not to speak up."

When Phillips ran for President, he decided not to run for reelection in the House. He'll retire from politics in January. If he is aggrieved, he doesn't show it. For the most part, he seems faintly embarrassed about the position he finds himself in: a literal conspiracy theorist, albeit one who plaintively insists that the conspiracy he's disclosing is not only real but an open secret. "I don't have direct evidence of coördination between the White House and MSNBC, for instance," he told me. "But I have no doubt, if you just connect the dots, that there's a lot of that sort of

thing going on.” His campaign consultants were alumni from the John McCain, Andrew Yang, and Bernie Sanders campaigns.

“When I saw how hard the Democratic establishment was working to freeze me out, I tweeted an apology to Bernie,” Phillips told me. “The gist was, When you complained about Democratic collusion, I dismissed you as a sore loser, but you were absolutely right.”

During the Presidential debate, Phillips said, his immediate reaction “was just sadness, and also surprise that everyone was so surprised. Was this not what everyone was seeing all along?” His colleagues in the House were now ready to admit that his critiques looked prescient. “He’s been vindicated on the question of Biden’s age,” one of them told me. “But the reason Dean didn’t get farther as a Presidential candidate is that Dean was never a convincing candidate.” Phillips appeared on “Face the Nation,” saying, “‘Pass the torch,’ the term that everybody’s using now . . . is exactly what I called for a year ago.” He was on vacation in Italy the morning after the Biden-Trump debate, and he woke up to more than a thousand missed calls and texts. He read me one, from a Democratic colleague: “I just called so I could give you the joy of saying ‘I told you so’ to someone.”

In Chicago, Phillips walked into the United Center wearing a pocket square and suède loafers. “This feeling of rebirth, instead of the funeral we were anticipating—it’s uniquely gratifying,” he said. He ran into Wiley Nickel, a Democratic congressman from North Carolina, and clapped him on the back. “When Dean announced, I said, ‘Look, this is a democracy, I respect anyone’s right to run,’ ” Nickel told me. I asked him if he’d received pushback from the Party for taking that position. “Well, I didn’t say it publicly,” he admitted. Phillips moved on, walking around the inner perimeter of the United Center—not a victory lap, exactly, but a sort of vindication lap. “You’re kicking ass, brother,” an admirer said. “I just wanted to shake your hand,” another said. More than one person said “It could’ve been you!,” to which Phillips’s response was “All’s well that friggin’ ends well.” On the main stage, Harris

made a “surprise appearance,” wearing a tan Chloé suit, and the crowd went wild. “That’s my President!” a man in a sequinned hat shouted. The following day, with an assist from Lil Jon, the delegates reaffirmed her nomination.

In 2022, when Liz Truss flamed out as Prime Minister of the U.K., the Conservative Party picked a new leader within four days. American parties don’t work that way. Still, it took less than a month for Walz to rise from near-obscurity to Harris’s running mate—a choice that most Democrats feel great about, at least so far. That selection was made by Party insiders, not by voters, but that doesn’t worry Julia Azari, a political scientist at Marquette University, in part because she is skeptical that the current primary system gives voters much meaningful choice, anyway. In open cycles, the primary race is so interminable that most people stop paying attention; in reelection years, the incumbent almost always wins. “Smoke-filled rooms—or vape-filled rooms, whatever they would be now—are not the right paradigm,” Azari told me. “But you can’t just throw it open and say, ‘Great, voters got to participate, so all is well.’”

Several people in Chicago suggested that, after the near-miss the Democrats had just witnessed, surely the Party would consider changing its rules. Phillips thought that House and Senate Democrats should hold votes of confidence, by secret ballot, to let Presidents know when they’d lost the trust of their party. Kamarck proposed a “peer review” process: before candidates ran for the nomination, they would have to be pre-approved by elected Party leaders. “This would weed out the jokers like Marianne Williamson, or Donald Trump, who can’t even tell you what the nuclear triad is,” she told me. “People who have no business being President, frankly, who are just there to sell books.” A stickier question is what a peer-review system would mean for a candidate like Bernie Sanders—someone who passes Kamarck’s nuclear-triad test but breaks with the Party’s dominant ideology in a way that thrills voters yet alarms Party insiders.

Theda Skocpol, a Harvard political scientist who was once Daniel Schlozman's dissertation adviser, doesn't quite buy his argument that the Democrats are a hollow shell—after all, replacing their nominee was an unprecedented test, and they passed it—but she does concede that the Party's infrastructure has eroded over time, and there is no quick fix for that. “Look, I'm a structuralist, but you can't just change the rules to prevent the last problem you had,” she told me. “The iron law of institutional analysis is: A procedural reform intended to have outcome X almost never does.” After 1980, to counterbalance the robot rule, the D.N.C. added “superdelegates,” Party elders whose votes were unpledged, allowing them to swing as they saw fit. But after 2016, when Bernie Sanders felt that Party-insider chicanery deprived him of a fair shot at the nomination, their power was diminished. “I love Bernie, but the basic problem here is that the D.N.C. is a fund-raising organization, not a real party organization with real oversight power,” James Zogby told me. “Tweaking the rules won't get us there.”

Between daytime sessions, I met up with Schlozman in the convention center, and we bought breakfast burritos from a kiosk. There were no tables in sight, but lots of empty space, so we sat cross-legged and ate our burritos on the floor. Looking around, he referred to the proceedings as a “blob Convention.” Corporate-sponsored galas, podcast tapings, side meetings between influence-peddlers—“There's a lot happening, a lot of money being spent and favors being exchanged, but the formal Party, the actual nomination, is almost incidental.” The best goalies don't need to pull off many miraculous diving saves, because they've already cut off the angles to prevent clear shots on goal. Similarly, a robust party may not have required a last-ditch scramble to save itself from probable disaster. “I understand the temptation to memory-hole the month of July and just go with ‘It all turned out great!’” he told me earlier. “What I'm saying is, if the Party is healthy, then why did this have to be such a crisis, and why did it come so close

to not happening?” The way Schlozman saw it, the whole episode was “an edge case showing the outer limits” of the Democratic Party’s hollowness: the Party was vigorous enough to pull it off, but just barely. “The optimistic case,” he said, “would be ‘An effort like this has to have a focal point. This time it was Pelosi, and next time it’ll be someone else.’ The more pessimistic case is ‘Nancy Pelosi learned at her father’s knee, in postwar Baltimore, how to do hard-charging backroom politics. No one learns those skills anymore, and after her they’ll retire the model.’ ” When we’d finished our burritos, we stopped by one of the convention-center rooms, where Chuck Schumer was addressing the Labor Council. “This is a happy Convention,” Schumer said. “America is smiling from ear to ear.” Next up was Josh Shapiro, who, now that it was afternoon, gave the PG-13 version of his stump speech (“G.S.D.: gettin’ shit done”).

Maybe I was taking all the talk of strength and weakness too literally—and surely the many soirées with open bars and complimentary Chicago-style hot dogs didn’t help—but I got it in my head that prescriptions for party reform may be like exercise tips. Anyone selling one weird trick to get shredded is probably a huckster; the real answer, and also the last answer anyone wants to hear, is that building the institutional body you want will take a lot of time and effort, and may involve a bunch of inner-core work that will remain mostly invisible. At the end of “The Hollow Parties,” Schlozman and Rosenfeld offer a model for such long-term party rejuvenation: the “Reid Machine.” Harry Reid, the long-serving senator from Nevada, was a D.C. power broker, but he never lost touch with his state’s Democratic Party. If anything, he micromanaged it, increasing its full-time staff tenfold and filling it with his people, and he “aggressively recruited candidates for office up and down the ticket.” As a result, Schlozman and Rosenfeld argue, Nevada remains a competitive state for Democrats, whereas others, like Florida, have slipped out of reach. “Democrats have put their stock in national candidates, but the real

work of party-building is local and year-round,” Michael Kazin told me. “Give people places to show up, fun things to do—opportunities to identify with the party as such, not just with a celebrity nominee.”

In Washington, three days after Biden ended his candidacy, Welch had gone to a dinner in the Great Hall of the Library of Congress, a Beaux-Arts showpiece that makes the Senate buildings look shabby. His former colleagues in the House greeted him with a mixture of pride and passive-aggressiveness, as if he were a home-town boy made good. “I released my statement on Biden the same day you did, but you totally upstaged me,” Earl Blumenauer, a bow-tied congressman from Oregon, said. “‘Oh, a *senator* has something to say, let’s all listen to the *senator!*’”

At dinner, Welch struck up a conversation with Jared Huffman, of California, and I asked them both whether the Party should make any structural reforms in light of the Biden affair.

“No more uncontested primaries,” Huffman said.

“I’m not sure it’s a systemic thing,” Welch said. “We had a good President who got too old. We didn’t see it, and then we did. I think it’s a one-off.”

“I know he wants to be remembered as Cincinnatus, willingly giving up power,” Huffman added, referring to the Roman leader who was said to have resigned to become a farmer. “The fact is, he desperately wanted to run out the clock and hang on to power.”

Welch asked, “But isn’t that what we all want?” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Peter Welch’s congressional title in a photo caption.



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

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Personal History

Early Scenes

Remembering a childhood in the South Bronx.

By [Al Pacino](#)

August 26, 2024



As an aspiring actor, Pacino, seen here in 1972, would practice Shakespeare monologues while wandering the city streets.

Photograph by Jerry Schatzberg / Trunk Archive

My mother began taking me to the movies when I was a little boy of three or four. She worked at factory and other menial jobs during the day, and when she came home I was the only company she had. Afterward, I'd go through the characters in my head and bring them to life, one by one, in our apartment.

The movies were a place where my single mother could hide in the dark and not have to share her Sonny Boy with anyone else. That was her nickname for me. She had picked it up from the popular song by Al Jolson, which she often sang to me.

When I was born, in 1940, my father, Salvatore Pacino, was all of eighteen, and my mother, Rose Gerardi Pacino, was just a few years older. Suffice it to say that they were young parents, even for the time. I probably hadn't even turned two when they split up. My mother and I lived in a series of furnished rooms in Harlem and then moved into her parents' apartment, in the South Bronx. We hardly got any financial support from my father. Eventually, we were allotted five dollars a month by a court, just enough to cover our expenses at my grandparents' place.

The earliest memory I have of being with both my parents is of watching a movie with my mother in the balcony of the Dover Theatre when I was around four. It was some sort of melodrama for adults, and my mother was transfixed. My attention wandered, and I looked down from the balcony. I saw a man walking around below, looking for something. He was wearing the dress uniform of an M.P.—my father served as a military-police soldier during the Second World War. He must have seemed familiar, because I instinctively shouted out, “Dada!” My mother shushed me. I shouted for him again: “Dada!” She kept whispering, “Shh—quiet!” She didn’t want him to find her.

He did, though. When the film was over, I remember the three of us walking down a dark street, the Dover marquee receding behind us. Each parent held one of my hands. Out of my right eye, I saw a holster on my father’s waist, a huge gun with a pearl-white handle sticking out of it. Years later, I played a cop in the film “Heat,” and my character carried a gun with a handle like that. Even as a child, I understood: That’s *dangerous*. And then my father was gone, off to the war. He eventually came back, but not to us.

My mother’s parents lived in a six-story tenement on Bryant Avenue, in a three-room apartment on the top floor, where the rents were cheapest. Sometimes we would have as many as six or seven people living there at once. I slept between my grandparents or in a daybed in the living room, where I never knew who might end up

camped out next to me—a relative passing through town, maybe my mother’s brother, back from his own stint in the war. He had been in the Pacific and would take wooden matchsticks and put them in his ears to drown out the explosions he couldn’t stop hearing.

My mother’s father was born Vincenzo Giovanni Gerardi, and he came from an old Sicilian town whose name, I would later learn, was Corleone. When he was four years old, he came to America, possibly illegally, where he became James Gerardi. By then, he had already lost his mother; his father, who was a bit of a dictator, had remarried and moved with his children and new wife to Harlem. My grandfather didn’t get along with his stepmother, so at nine he quit school and ran away to work on a coal truck. He didn’t come back until he was fifteen. He wandered around upper Manhattan and the Bronx—this was in the early nineteen-hundreds, when it was still largely farmland—doing apprentice jobs or working in the fields. He was the first real father figure I had.

When I was six, I came home from my first day of school and found him shaving in our bathroom. He was in front of the mirror, in a BVD shirt with his suspenders down at his sides. I was standing in the open doorway.

“Granddad, this kid in school did a very bad thing. So I went and told the teacher, and she punished that kid.”

Without missing a stroke, my grandfather said, “So you’re a rat, huh?” It was a casual observation, as if he were saying, “You like the piano? I didn’t know that.” His words hit me right in the solar plexus. I never ratted on anybody in my life again. (Although right now, as I write this, I guess I’m ratting on myself.)

His wife—my grandmother Kate—had blond hair and blue eyes, like Mae West, which was a rarity among Italians. We were the only Italians in our neighborhood, and she was known for her

kitchen. When I'd be going out the door, she would stop me with a wet cloth, which always seemed to be in one of her hands, to say, "Wipe the gravy off your face. People will think you're Italian."

America had just spent four years fighting Italy, and though many Italian Americans had gone overseas to help, others were labelled enemy aliens and put in internment camps. There was still a stigma against us.

Our little stretch between Longfellow Avenue and Bryant Avenue, from 171st Street up to 174th Street, was a mixture of nationalities and ethnicities. In the summertime, when we went on the roof of our tenement to cool off because there was no air-conditioning, you'd hear all kinds of languages and dialects. The farther north you went, the more prosperous the families were. We were not prosperous. We were getting by. My grandfather was a plasterer who worked during the week. Plasterers were highly sought after at the time. He had developed an expertise and was appreciated for what he did. He built the wall that separated our alleyway from the alleyway of the building next door for our landlord, who loved it so much that he kept our family's rent at thirty-eight dollars and eighty cents a month for as long as we lived there.

I was an only child, and until I was six I wasn't allowed out of the tenement by myself—the neighborhood was somewhat unsafe. My only companions, aside from my grandparents, my mother, and a little dog named Trixie, were the characters I brought to life from the movies. I had a little silent routine I did for my relatives from "The Lost Weekend"—starring Ray Milland as a self-destructive alcoholic—in which I pretended to ransack an apartment, looking for booze. The grownups seemed to find it amusing. Even at five years old, I would think, What are they laughing at? This man is fighting for his life.

My mother was a beautiful woman, but she was emotionally fragile. She would occasionally visit a psychiatrist when Granddad had the money to pay for her sessions. I wasn't aware that my

mother was having problems until one day when I was six years old and getting ready to go out and play. I was sitting in a chair in the kitchen while my mother laced up my shoes and put a sweater on me to keep me warm, and I noticed that she was crying. I wondered what the matter was, but I didn't know how to ask. She was kissing me all over, and right before I left she gave me a great big hug. It was unusual, but I was eager to get downstairs and meet up with the other kids, and I gave it no more thought.



"Ideally, we'd have less closet space."

Cartoon by Michael Maslin

We had been outside for about an hour when we saw a commotion in the street. People were running toward my grandparents' tenement. Someone said to me, "I think it's your mother." I didn't believe it, but I started running with them. There was an ambulance in front of the building, and there, coming out the front doors, carried on a stretcher, was my mother. She had attempted suicide.

This was not explained to me; I had to piece together what had happened. I knew that she had left a note and that she was sent to recover at Bellevue Hospital. That period is kind of a blank to me, but I do remember sitting around the kitchen table, where the grownups were discussing what to do. Years later, I made the film "Dog Day Afternoon," and one of its final images, showing the actor John Cazale's character, already dead, being taken away on a stretcher, made me think of the moment I saw my mother brought out to that ambulance. But I don't think she wanted to die then, not

yet. She came back to our household alive, and I went out into the streets.

As a kid, I ran with a crew that included my three best friends: Clifffy, Bruce, and Petey. We were on the prowl, hungry for life. To this day, one of my favorite memories is coming down the stairs and out onto the street in front of my tenement building on a bright Saturday morning in the spring. I couldn't have been more than ten years old. I remember looking down the block, and there was Bruce, about fifty yards away. He turned and smiled, and I smiled, too, because we knew the day was full of potential.

Every few blocks were vacant lots where victory gardens had been planted at the height of the war. By then, they were wrecked and full of debris. Once in a while, when you looked down at the sidewalk along the lots, you'd see a blade of grass growing up out of the concrete. That's what my friend, the acting teacher Lee Strasberg, once called talent: a blade of grass growing up out of a block of concrete.

One winter day, I was skating on the ice over the Bronx River. We didn't have ice skates, so I was wearing a pair of sneakers, doing pirouettes, showing off for my friend Jesus Diaz, who was standing at the shore. One moment I was laughing and he was cheering me on, then suddenly I broke through the surface and plunged into the freezing water below. Every time I tried to crawl out, the ice broke further and I kept falling back in. I think I would have drowned if it wasn't for Jesus Diaz. He found a stick twice his size, spread himself out as far as he could from the shore, and pulled me to safety.

Another day, I was walking on top of a thin, iron fence, doing my tightrope dance. It had been raining all morning, and, sure enough, I slipped and fell, and the iron bar hit me directly between my legs. I was in such pain that I could hardly walk. An older guy saw me groaning in the street, picked me up, and carried me to my aunt

Marie's apartment. She was my mother's younger sister, and she lived on the third floor in the same building as my grandparents. The Samaritan threw me on a bed and said, "Take care, man."

It was customary for doctors to go to people's houses in those days. While my family waited for Dr. Tanenbaum to come, I lay there on the bed, with my pants down around my ankles as the three women in my life—my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother—poked and prodded at my penis in a semi-panic. I thought, God, please take me now.

Our South Bronx neighborhood was full of characters. There was a guy in his late thirties or early forties who wore a suit and a collared shirt with a loose, tattered tie. He looked like he had gone to a Sunday service and got ashes spilled all over him. He would quietly walk the streets by himself; when he spoke, the only thing he said was "You don't kill time—time kills you." That was it. Our instincts told us he was different than we were, but we just accepted him. There was more privacy back then, a certain propriety and distance that people gave one another.

When Cliffy, Bruce, Petey, and I got a little older, eleven or twelve, we spent hours lying flat on our stomachs as we fished through sewer gratings for lost coins. This was not an idle pursuit—fifty cents was a game changer. On Saturday nights, we would see guys just a few years older than us who had started to date, taking girls out to the movies or on the subway, and we'd get up on the storefront roofs and pelt them with trash. Sometimes we'd split up a head of lettuce and toss it at them. A string bean thrown from twenty feet away could really sting.

In the summer, we opened up the hydrants, which made us heroes to all the young mothers who let their small children play in the water. We hitched ourselves to the backs of buses, jumped over turnstiles in the subway. If we wanted food, we'd steal it. We never paid for anything.

We played the old street games, like kick the can, stickball, and ring-a-levio, which involved splitting up into two teams. If you could stick one foot in the circle that was the other team's jail and shout "Free all!," your whole gang would get sprung. Kids were known to jump off buildings just to get a foot in that circle.

We were always either chasing someone or being chased. When we'd see cops, we'd yell out, "Hey, what's a penny made out of?" And then we'd all answer, "Dirty copper!" The cops would yawn or laugh or take off after us, depending on their mood. But we all knew the neighborhood cop on our beat; he kept an eye on us. I don't know how much violence he stopped, but we grew to love him, and he got a kick out of us. I always thought the guy had a crush on my mother. He'd ask me questions about her, and even at age eleven I sort of knew why.

There were a few others in our little gang—Jesus Diaz, Bibby, Johnny Rivera, Smoky, Salty, and Kenny Lipper, who would go on to become the deputy mayor of New York City under Ed Koch. (I later did a film called "City Hall," directed by Harold Becker, which was based on his experience.) But Cliffy, Bruce, Petey, and me were the top bananas. They called me Sonny, and Pacchi, their nickname for "Pacino." They also called me Pistachio, because I liked pistachio ice cream. If we had to choose someone as our leader, it would be Cliffy or Petey. Petey was a tough Irish kid. Cliffy was a true original. Even at thirteen, he was never without a copy of Dostoyevsky in his back pocket. He had talent. He had looks. And he had four older brothers who beat the shit out of him every day. He was full of trickery. You never had to ask him, "What are we going to do today?" He always had a scheme.

Often, when I looked down from my apartment window, I would see my friends—a pack of wild, pubescent wolves with sly smiles—looking up at me from the alley, calling out, "Come on down, Sonny Boy! We got something for ya!" One morning, Cliffy showed up with a huge German shepherd. He yelled up, "Hey,

Sonny, wanna look at my dog? He's my new friend, and his name is Hans!" He had got it from somewhere. Cliffy wasn't known for taking dogs. Cars were more his thing. Once, he stole a garbage truck. He also used to burglarize houses—at a certain point, he could no longer go to New Jersey because he was wanted by the police there. He would tease me because I never did any of the drugs that he was into. He'd say, "Sonny doesn't need drugs—he's high on himself!"

There was one thing that divided me from the rest of the gang. My grandfather had instilled a love of sports in me: he was a lifelong baseball and boxing fan. He grew up rooting for the New York Yankees before they were even the Yankees—as a poor kid, he would watch their games through holes in the fence at Hilltop Park. Later, the Yankees got their own stadium, known as the House That Ruth Built, after Babe Ruth. That stadium is in the background of a scene in "Serpico"—shot by Sidney Lumet with such beauty—in which my character, Serpico, meets with a crew of corrupt cops. It was filmed the same day the actress Tuesday Weld and I broke up, and, if you notice the look on my face, you can tell I was pretty sad.

My grandfather would sometimes take me to baseball games, and we'd sit way up in the grandstand—the cheap seats. I didn't think of myself as being disadvantaged—the more expensive box seats were just another block in the neighborhood, another tribe. The difference between Cliffy and me was that Cliffy would see those same box seats and want to go down there. If there was a line to get into a movie, he'd cut in front of someone and just go right in. It was like nobody existed but him.

I played baseball for the Police Athletic League team in my neighborhood. Sports were of no interest to Cliffy and the other guys, so it was almost like I lived two lives: my life with the gang, and my life with my *PAL* teammates. One day, as I was coming back from a game in a bad neighborhood, a group of four or five

guys not much older than I was got the jump on me; they had knives and God knows what else, and they said, “Give us the glove.” They knew I had no money, and I knew I was losing my glove, which my grandfather had bought for me. I went home in tears. If only I’d had Cliffy, Petey, and Bruce with me. It wasn’t just comfortable for us to be together in our group—it was necessary.

At the edge of the Bronx River, about four blocks from our homes, sat the Dutch houses, or the Dutchies. Built by Dutch settlers, they were ancient buildings, now dilapidated but not quite abandoned. Herman Wouk wrote about them in his novel “City Boy,” describing the surrounding territory as an area of “odorous heaps.” When we felt really daring, we would venture out to those ruins, which were populated by wayward kids and runaways—Boonies, we called them, because they lived on Boone Avenue. Wild plants grew along the riverbanks, including bamboo that kids would cut down and carve into knives, bows, and arrows. The Boonies lived in shacks, and the lore was that they had poison on the ends of their homemade weapons.

One day, I was on Bryant Avenue and saw the rest of the gang limping back from the Dutchies, looking defeated. Cliffy was covered in blood. He noticed the expression on my face and shouted, “It’s not me! It’s Petey’s blood!” Behind him was Petey, blood gushing from his wrist. They had been making their way down a hill when Cliffy suddenly screamed, “Look out, there’s a Boony there!” He shouted out a name that was notorious in the area at the time. Even now I can’t bring myself to say it. Cliffy had only been kidding, but the other kids scrambled in every direction. Unfortunately, Petey stumbled and fell, landing hard on something sharp and jagged that sliced through his left wrist. The cut was so deep that it went all the way down to the nerves. It was horrible, all because of a dumb prank.

The doctors eventually stitched Petey up, but in a botched way, so he couldn't move his hand correctly. Cliffy always blamed himself for what happened.

I'm taking a bath in my grandparents' apartment when I hear a rumbling in the alleyway downstairs. From five stories below, the voices reach up to my bathroom window:

"Sonny!"

"Hey, Pacchi!"

"Sonn-ayyyyyyy! "

These are my friends calling to me. But something is preventing me from leaping out of the tub, throwing on my clothes, and joining them. I don't mean my conscience; I mean my mother. She is telling me I am not allowed. She says it's late and tomorrow is a school day and any boys who come to shout in the alley at that time of night aren't the sort of boys I should be spending my time with, and, anyway, the answer is no.

I hate her for this. These friends are everything in my life that means something to me. And then one day I'm fifty-two, looking in the vanity mirror at my face, fat with shaving cream, wondering whom I should thank in an acceptance speech for an award I'm about to receive. I think back to that moment in the bath, and I realize that I'm still here because of my mother. Of course, that's who I have to thank. She's the one who parried me away from a path that led to delinquency and violence, to the heroin that eventually killed Petey, Cliffy, and Bruce. I lost all three that way. I was not exactly under strict surveillance, but my mother paid attention to where I was. I believe she saved my life.



Pacino's nicknames as a kid included Sonny, Pacchi, and Pistachio, because he liked pistachio ice cream.

Photograph courtesy the author / Mark Scarola

I was lucky that I had people who were looking out for me, even if I didn't always appreciate it at the time. One of those people was my junior-high teacher Blanche Rothstein, who selected me to read passages from the Bible at our student assemblies. I didn't come from a particularly religious family. My mother had sent me to catechism class, and I wore a little white suit for my first Holy Communion, and that was it. But when I read from the Book of Psalms in a big booming voice—"He that walketh uprightly, and

worketh righteousness, and speaketh the truth in his heart”—I could feel how powerful the words were.

Soon I was performing in school plays like “The Melting Pot,” a pageant celebrating the many nations whose people had contributed to the greatness of America. I was there to represent Italy, along with a ten-year-old girl with dark hair and olive skin. Our class put on “The King and I,” and I was cast as Louis, the son of the heroine, Anna. I sang a song with the kid who played the young Prince of Siam, about being puzzled by how grownups behaved. I didn’t take acting very seriously at that point—it was just a way to get out my energy, and especially to get out of classes. But I somehow became the guy that you simply had to have in these school productions.

In eighth grade, we put on “Home Sweet Homicide,” and I was cast as a kid who helps his widowed mother solve a murder at the house next door. Before I went onstage, someone told me that both my parents were in the audience. It threw me off. To this day, I don’t want to know who’s in the audience on opening night.

Still, I felt at home onstage. I liked that people were paying attention to me. Right after the show, my mother and my father, who was now an accountant living in East Harlem with a new wife and child, took me out to Howard Johnson’s, and we all toasted my success. A feeling of warmth and belonging came over me. It was probably the first time in my entire life that I saw my parents talking to each other pleasantly, not arguing about anything. At one point, my father even touched my mother’s hand with his own—was he flirting with her? It all felt so easy and natural.

When I was fifteen, a troupe of actors, as if out of some bygone century, came to the Bronx’s old Elsmere Theatre, on Crotona Parkway, to put on a production of “The Seagull,” by Anton Chekhov. The ornate theatre seated more than fifteen hundred

people, and an audience of about fifteen came to see the play. Two of those audience members were my friend Bruce and me.

I don't know how much of the play I really understood, with all its unrequited romances and the tragic character of Konstantin, but I was riveted by the performances. I saw myself in the lives of those fictional characters.

From then on, I started carrying Chekhov's works around with me, amazed at the idea that I could have access to his writing whenever I wanted. I had just got into the High School of Performing Arts in Manhattan, and so had Cliffy, who had also acted in middle school and was very good. In the mornings, we'd ride the train together from the Bronx and emerge at Forty-second Street and Broadway. For the four blocks we walked up to P.A., we were mesmerized by the tourists and gawkers. One day, as we turned a corner, I saw Paul Newman, the movie star, walk by with someone, and I thought to myself, Wow, he's a real person, with real friends he talks to when there are no cameras around.

On one train ride, Cliffy's thoughts were focussed on the teacher of our voice-and-speech class. She was an intelligent and sophisticated woman whose claim to fame was that she had dated Marlon Brando. Cliffy said to me, "I'm going to feel her breasts." From the way he said it, it was clear this was something he had been thinking about for a while. I said, "What?" He said, "Watch. You'll see."

The class began that morning as it normally did, with the teacher giving us our lesson in her deep, resonant voice. Before long, Cliffy got up. He said something to her, I don't know what, and suddenly the two of them were tussling. Then Cliffy reached his arms around her from the back, turned her around to face the class, and there he was, behind her, with both hands on her breasts. He looked at me and smiled.

This was the act of someone with no propriety, no limitations, and no conscience. Most of the students were silent. I broke into laughter, as did a classmate named John. It was just an involuntary reaction to the shock of what Cliffy had done. I loved Cliffy, but I was genuinely horrified by this trespass. John and I got tossed out of the classroom for the day, which I spent in the principal's office until my mother arrived and apologized on my behalf. Cliffy was thrown out of school, and then thrown out of his house. After that, he disappeared from my life for a while.

One afternoon, I went out for lunch at a coffee shop near school, and there, taking orders behind the counter, was one of the actors from the performance of "The Seagull" that I had seen in the Bronx. I was a little bit starstruck, and I said, "I saw you the other night! Oh, my God, you were so great!" I couldn't believe I was talking to him. He seemed pleased to have a doting fan.

By day, he wore a waiter's outfit, and by night he performed in a play. One was a job, and the other was his artistic calling. He was an actor moving from role to role and theatre to theatre, like actors have done for hundreds of years. This was how I came to understand acting as a profession. You did whatever work paid you so you could keep acting, and, if you could find a way to actually get paid for acting someday, all the better.

Just before I turned sixteen, my mother started seeing someone new. She would say to me, "You know, we may live in Texas or Florida," meaning her and her husband-to-be. I was relieved in a way, but I didn't see how I belonged in this arrangement. This man was around fifty; I thought, This guy probably doesn't want me around, plus I wanted the apartment to myself. By now, my grandparents had moved farther uptown, to an apartment on 233rd Street, so it was just me and my mother living on Bryant Avenue.

Then their engagement was abruptly cancelled. The guy didn't even have the decency to tell her in person. He sent her a telegram

saying that he couldn't go through with it. When she received it, she was sitting at our kitchen table, and I was leaning against the arch of our hallway. Four feet away was the door, which I was always aiming for.

When she told me the engagement was off, I actually said to her, "I knew that was too good to be true." It was one of the most terrible things I ever said to her. How could I have? It bothered me that she was hurt. But it also bothered me that she wasn't leaving.

My mother did not react well to the breakup. She was diagnosed with what the doctors called anxiety neurosis. She needed electroshock treatment and barbiturates. These were costly things that we didn't have the money for. She encouraged me to quit school and go to work.

I stayed in school until I was sixteen, when I was legally old enough to quit. I was O.K. with it—I had never seen school as my place. At one point, P.A. had picked me to represent the student body in a photo accompanying an article in the New York *Herald Tribune*. At the last minute, I was replaced with another student, who was a dancer. She was tall and had red hair; I had my dark complexion and my Italian name. It crossed my mind that she represented a more mainstream version of beauty than I did; you didn't see people like me in detergent commercials or on soap operas. But I didn't think the school was being biased. Performing Arts was just trying to draw in more students, and this was the status quo at the time.

After I left, I went through various jobs, all short-lived. I spent a summer as a bicycle messenger. At seventeen, I had a successful stretch working for the American Jewish Committee and their magazine, *Commentary*. I said to the woman who interviewed me for the job, "I love sitting around offices. I love the sound of typewriters. I love switchboards." I'm sure she saw right through my bullshit, but she hired me anyway. The people who worked

there—people like Susan Sontag and Norman Podhoretz—were intellectual heavyweights, and, though they were very welcoming toward me, I never felt like I fit in. But, at an office party with a drink in my hand, I'd be able to talk to almost anyone.

At eighteen, I was nursing a fifteen-cent beer at Martin's Bar and Grill, on Twenty-third Street and Sixth Avenue in Manhattan. It was a place where I'd sometimes go and have ketchup sandwiches: two saltine crackers with ketchup in the middle. The bar had a big picture window that looked across Sixth Avenue, where I could see the Herbert Berghof Studio, an acting school I was trying to get into. A friend had told me about the school, and a great teacher there named Charlie Laughton. I said, "The actor Charles Laughton?" He said, "No, no, different guy—his name is Charlie Laughton. He teaches sensory work." I thought, I'm lost already.

I was pondering this when suddenly the bartender, who went by Cookie, got an angry look on his face. He got out from behind the bar and banged on the door of the men's room. The next thing you know, he had hold of two scruffy young women by the collars of their leather jackets, and he was throwing them out. Cookie returned to his post at the bar, where seven or eight working stiffs were lined up, and the two women stood in front of that big, wide window in broad daylight and began passionately kissing. They were doing it so that everybody in the bar could see them. There was a rift I was witnessing right there between two separate worlds: the brazen young women outside who were the very essence of liberation, and the guys at the bar who were shell-shocked by something they'd never seen in their lives. The sixties were coming.

I was introduced to Charlie Laughton at that same bar sometime later. The moment I set eyes on him, I thought, This guy is my kind of guy. He was about ten years older than me. He loved the poetry of William Carlos Williams, who came from Paterson, New Jersey, like he did. I enrolled at the Herbert Berghof Studio. I had no

money, so I cleaned the hallways and the rooms where they had dance classes, and they gave me a scholarship.

By then, my mother had moved up to 233rd Street to live with her parents, and I had our apartment to myself. The rent was still thirty-eight dollars and eighty cents a month. But I had lost the *Commentary* job and I was broke. Charlie, who was married to an actress named Penny Allen, was broke, too, so he and I worked together as moving men. We moved office furniture and a lot of books. Our friend Matt Clark, who was in Charlie's acting class, ran the moving operation. How does an actor prepare? He carries a refrigerator up the stairs.

In my free time, I became a voracious reader. Charlie turned me on to many novelists and poets I didn't know. He would suggest various writers to check out and places to go, like the Forty-second Street library for warmth and the Automat for sustenance. At the Automat, I could make a single cup of coffee last all morning, sitting there for five hours while I read my little books by the great authors. I would be reading "A Moveable Feast" and thinking, I don't want to finish the pages, I like it here too much.

If the hour was late and you heard someone in your alleyway with a bombastic voice shouting iambic pentameter into the night, that was probably me, training myself on the famous Shakespeare soliloquies. I would bellow out monologues as I rambled through the streets of Manhattan. I'd do it by the factories, at the edges of town, places where no one was around. On those side streets, I didn't need anyone's permission to play Prospero, Falstaff, Shylock, or Macbeth. I grew to love Hamlet's rogue-and-peasant-slave monologue so much that I started to use it at auditions. I would say to the director, "I know you have your pages that you want me to perform, but I have a little something that I've already prepared, if you don't mind." Usually they would give me a look that told me they were already finished with me.

Another young actor in Charlie's class was a guy by the name of Martin Sheen. In one session, Marty did a monologue from "The Iceman Cometh," and he blew the roof off. He was the next James Dean, as far as I was concerned. I got to be friends with him, and one day he said, "You know what my real name is, don't you? Estevez." He was half Spanish, and he came from Ohio, where he had a tough upbringing. He was one of ten kids in a working-class family that was always struggling for money. He had tenacity and grit, and I could tell he was one of the best people I'd ever know.

Marty moved in with me in the South Bronx so we could split the rent. We worked together at the Living Theatre in Greenwich Village, where we cleaned toilets and laid down rugs for sets. The Living Theatre had been founded by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, two actors who started it in their living room in the nineteen-forties and eventually moved it to Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue. They did the kind of shows that made you go home afterward and lock yourself in your room and cry for two days, staring at the ceiling. They helped forge Off Broadway theatre, whose success paved the way for Off Off Broadway, which made possible some of the shows I was doing Off Off Off Off Broadway. When I appeared in "Hello Out There," by William Saroyan, we would put on sixteen performances a week at Caffe Cino on Cornelia Street, and then we'd pass the hat to what little audience was there, hoping to come away with a few dollars for a meal. It was our Paris in the early nineteen-hundreds, our Berlin in the nineteen-twenties. That was the spirit of the scene.



The author, far right, with family in the South Bronx, including his grandfather, James Gerardi, far left, and his mother, Rose Gerardi Pacino, second from right.

Photograph courtesy the author / Mark Scarola

Sometimes one of Marty's brothers would stay over at the Bronx apartment, or this guy Sal Russo from acting class who was going with a woman named Sandra. Her best friend was a musician with long dark hair and piercing eyes named Joan Baez, who would occasionally drop in, sit cross-legged in a corner, and play her guitar. She hadn't linked up with Bob Dylan yet, but we knew Joan was going places. I don't believe she and I even exchanged hellos.

I heard that Cliffy was back in the neighborhood again. Both he and Bruce had enlisted in the Army. Bruce made it as far as his induction ceremony, when he got second thoughts and threatened to jump out a window, so they let him go. Cliffy, on the other hand, served for a few months, but of course he got in trouble and was thrown into the brig before being discharged. I knew there was no risk that I'd be drafted myself, because I was supporting my mother. Anyway, could you imagine me, that boy I was, going around saying, "Hup-two-three-four"? I can do it in a play.

Cliffy had come out of the Army in even worse shape than he went in. He was on the needle and doing and saying all kinds of crazy stuff. He said he had been in the same platoon as Elvis Presley, and

it turned out he actually had. He said he went to Canada, got a Catholic girl pregnant, and converted from Judaism so that he could marry her. Every time he stopped by my apartment, he would go into the bathroom to shoot up, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of other people he'd brought. Eventually I had to tell Cliffy he couldn't come around anymore.

It was no surprise to anyone when he overdosed and died. It made me think of a story that he had told me. When he was in the brig, Cliffy said, he was watched by a guard, a Southerner who carried a .45 pistol. The guard would hold his pistol up just so and start saying ominous things about "the Jews." In his Southern drawl, he would tell Cliffy, who was still Jewish at the time, "You know, I could just blow your head off and tell people you tried to escape. Would that be something to do?" He kept repeating it, day after day, until Cliffy finally turned to the guy and said, "Hey, man, you know what? You better kill me. Because if you don't, when I get out of here, I'm gonna come back and kill you." Cliffy may not have been the toughest guy I ever met, but he certainly was the most fearless.

It was Bruce who told me that my mother had overdosed. I came back to my apartment late one night to find a note on my door, saying that he had an urgent message for me. I went to his place; he lived with his parents in the building next door, and he took me into their kitchen and said, "Your mom's in a lot of trouble. She's really sick. You better go, man." I jumped in a cab to 233rd Street.

Arriving at the building, I looked up and saw the lights on in my grandparents' apartment. I went up the stairs, walked in the door, and there were my grandmother and grandfather, their eyes wet with tears. I was too late. My mother had died like Tennessee Williams would, choking while taking her own pills.

Some people thought that she had committed suicide, as she had tried to almost fifteen years earlier. But she left no note this time,

nothing. She was just gone. That's why I have always kept a question mark next to her death.

I'll never forget the image of my grandfather the next morning, sitting in a folding chair in the middle of the room, nothing around him, crouched over with his head in his hands, almost between his legs. He just kept banging a foot on the floor. I'd never seen him that way. He didn't speak, but I knew what he was saying. *No.*

I thought that maybe somehow I could have stopped it from happening. Therapy, financial security—these things could have helped my mother. I had known that one day I was going to be able to supply her with all that and more. It sounds like an Odets play, but it's true.

But I don't think I ever told her that. My mother once said to me that she had a dream about me: I was standing on some cliff, like in "Wuthering Heights," with the wind blowing my hair, my face pale and undernourished. That dream made her so sad. How do you go from hearing about that dream to saying, *Don't worry, I'm gonna make it?*

Then came a hard period of mourning. I wandered around, zombielike—I started missing my stops on the subway, bumping into things. It seemed impossible to accept that I had lost my mother.

I was working as an usher at the Rivoli Theatre, in Times Square. The theatre had a candy counter with a four-way mirror. I would stand in front of it and examine the angles of my face. I saw my profile. I saw myself in three-quarters view. I saw myself head on, and I thought, How could I be an actor with a face like this? The house manager eventually let me go for looking at myself in the mirror too much. He fired me in flight. It was a beautiful thing, like a ballet. He was all the way up in the balcony, and, as he descended the theatre's colossal winding staircase, he rounded past me on the

second floor, pointed at me, and bellowed, “Now you’re fired,” and then continued on to the lobby. He never broke stride. What a graceful way to get the axe. I almost applauded him.

I was also delivering copies of *Show Business* to the newsstands along Seventh Avenue. I had a little red wagon that I’d use to carry the papers, from Thirty-fourth up to Fifty-seventh Street. In the back of the wagon, I kept a bottle of Chianti. I’d be tanked by 9:30 or 10 in the morning. I made twelve dollars for one day of work, and I’d hit the bar afterward. I liked to roll my single dollar bills into a big ball and peel them off one by one, like a big shot.

I was adrift and alone, caught up in my feelings about my mother and a general malaise. Everything about my life was fading out. One night, I got on a pay phone in a bar and called my granddad, up in the Bronx, and started to cry. He just kept saying, “Come on. Come with us. Live with me. Come live with us.” I was really bawling. He was a warm man with a soft heart, though he came from a merciless world. When his family moved to East Harlem, where many Sicilians had settled, they lived among gangsters who had yet to become household names but were still notorious. Though he was poor, he told me that he had never wanted to go in that direction.

Now he just said, “Come here. Come with me.” I was stunned. But I didn’t go. I had moved out of the Bronx by that time and found a low-rent rooming house in Chelsea for eight bucks a week. Something was driving me. I had to make it, because that was the only way I would survive this world. ♦

This is drawn from “Sonny Boy: A Memoir.”

Al Pacino is an Academy Award-winning actor and the author of the memoir “*Sonny Boy*.”

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Shouts & Murmurs

• [A Guide to Brat Summer](#)

By Lena Dunham | What is Brat? It's the Cynthia doll from "Rugrats." It's praying to Janeane Garofalo to keep you free from harm.

Shouts & Murmurs

A Guide to Brat Summer

By [Lena Dunham](#)

August 26, 2024

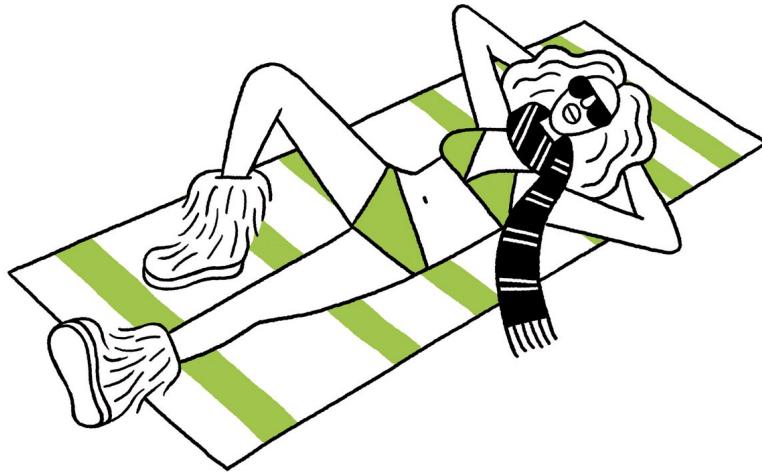


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

This summer, we've found ourselves in an unprecedented era of Brat. Perhaps your daughter is using it as an excuse to drop out of college and start a "choker empire," or your father is leaving his marriage because your mother doesn't "try it, bite it, lick it, spit it, pull it to the side and get all up in it." But how do you characterize a movement that is represented only by the color "pale slime" and now extends to the White House? Soon enough it will be Demure Autumn, but, in the meantime, this guide seeks to answer the question: What is Brat?

Brat is walking down the street with headphones on and eyes closed, knocking over passersby and refusing to say you're sorry.

Brat is being lazy until 10 P.M., at which point you construct a château using discarded scraps of pleather, finish it by morning,

and immediately win the Pritzker Architecture Prize.

It's the Cynthia doll from "Rugrats."

Brat is a fifteen-year-old writing a best-selling memoir about how she overcame her love-and-fantasy addiction.

It's hot pants on a cold night and snow pants on a hot night.

It's checking into a Motel 6 and not leaving until you run a Fortune 500 company.

It's a real-estate agent in a model condo flat-ironing her extensions until they light on fire, along with the entire building.

Brat is the feeling you get when you wrench open the train doors using a Hulk-like strength you didn't even know you possessed.

It's praying to Janeane Garofalo to keep you free from harm.

It's the way your partner looks at you when you tell them, "I'm not sure I'm capable of love."

It's the powerful high that overtakes you when you consume too much Vitamin B.

Brat is using denim as your carpet and carpet as your denim.

It's starting a rivalry with Angela Merkel—who has no idea who you are and never will—and, every time you see a photo of her, hissing, "Bitch just wants to be me."

It's modelling your sex face after Kramer from "Seinfeld."

It's moving into a tent in the Fox back lot and refusing to leave until you're cast in the Britney Spears bio-pic—as Christina Aguilera.

Brat is not going to work for a month and a half, then asking your boss why they seem kind of mad.

It's the divine awakening that comes with knowing that energy can be neither created nor destroyed.

It's sitting in traffic court for an unpaid speeding ticket and, when told to state your full name, asking the judge whether he's ever been in a "situationship."

Brat is what happens when you drop a necklace given to you by the cheating member of your throuple down the garbage disposal.

It's telling the salesgirl at Chanel, "I deserve this," before absconding with a single ballet flat that's not even your size.

Brat is a cat, and maybe a rat, but it is never a dog.

Brat is a toddler being served her dinner and responding, "I didn't ask to be born."

It's calling your brother to tell him about a family tragedy and starting the conversation with, "Look, I'm about to run out of battery, so don't be freaked out if my phone dies."

Brat is lying on your deathbed, at a hundred and eight, surrounded by grieving loved ones, and saying, "I'm too young to die."

Brat is getting to the gates of Heaven, looking around at the cherubs with harps lounging on puffy white clouds, scrunching up your nose, and saying, "It's giving Hilton Garden Inn, babes." ♦

Lena Dunham is the creator of the HBO series "Girls" and the author of the essay collection "Not That Kind of Girl."

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Fiction

• “The Particles of Order”

By Yiyun Li | If a person's imagination, kind or wicked, was boundless, sooner or later what was imagined could become a fact.

Fiction

The Particles of Order

By [Yiyun Li](#)

August 25, 2024



Illustration by Manshen Lo

The guest from America was to arrive in the late afternoon. Ursula, having arranged the welcome platter, waited until she heard a car slowing down in the driveway, its gravel rinsed all day by the rain, before drizzling some honey in broad strokes on the cheese and the nuts. From the kitchen window, she could see the cabdriver—

Timothy today—place a suitcase next to the door, heavy, as demonstrated by his eloquent grimace. Likely he had entertained his fare with one of his two America-related stories: the cousin who'd done life in Sing Sing or the great-granduncle escaping Alcatraz on a stormy night. Visitors from America were rare, or else Timothy would have invented more credible family legends.

The woman, Lilian Pang, smiled tiredly as she got out of the car and thanked Timothy. She was between forty-five and fifty-five, Ursula estimated, a time when some people's lives come into order while others' fall out of it. It was mid-January, not the best season for anyone to holiday in the Devon countryside, particularly alone. A reservation of two weeks was long; guests usually stayed for a few days at most. Ursula had not dwelled too much on this, but she had noticed the facts. And now, assessing the guest through the window, she did not think there were any red flags. People who have taken the trouble to travel seek something they cannot find at home. Ursula's job was to provide the possibility, not the certainty, of success.

By the time Timothy drove away, Ursula had cut the pear and arranged the slices in the small bowl, which sat just off the center of the plate. No two guests would see the same composition, but this was a minor achievement, known only to Ursula: a still-life that did not last.

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

How much still-life is too much still-life? Once, when she had told Edmund that the only kind of art works she would never tire of were still-life paintings, he had protested mildly, though before she said anything he had added that she could turn the question back to him. How many murders is too many murders? A prolific writer of murder mysteries, Edmund had been known to say that he had lost track of the body count by mid-career. A few times he had recycled the names of minor characters, but Ursula had made sure to change

them when she typed up the manuscript. Margot to Margurette, Mrs. Southward to Mrs. Southwood, Julian to Jude. Edmund never seemed to notice the subtle intervention. He had often stated that he did not feel attached to any of his characters, was interested only in their shared fate.

Ursula gave Lilian a tour of the house, asking about the flight from New York and expressing satisfaction that Lilian had caught the fastest direct train to Exeter, as Ursula had instructed in their correspondence. “Do you live in New York?” Ursula asked.

“Yes, New York,” Lilian said. After a pause, she laughed lightly, as though at a private joke between herself and someone not present. “Actually, New Jersey.”

“Is that the state next to New York?”

Lilian nodded. “It was pointed out to me that it was a bad habit to keep calling New Jersey New York,” she said.

By whom? Ursula noticed the passive voice.

“I’ve got to stop that,” Lilian said.

“Oh,” Ursula said, not asking why. She knew very little about New Jersey. She said so to Lilian.

“There’s not much to know about it.”

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Yiyun Li read “The Particles of Order.”](#)

“Oh, now I remember. One of Kierkegaard’s brothers died in New Jersey,” Ursula said. It was a stroke of luck. She had been reading a biography of Kierkegaard. She was not particularly familiar with his work, but a book she’d been looking for at the library, a biography of George Eliot, was checked out. On the librarian’s

suggestion, Ursula had taken the Kierkegaard biography, which was by the same author.

“Really? Where in New Jersey?”

Ursula shook her head. Wasn’t it enough that she had retained one interesting fact about New Jersey? Though, now that she thought about it, what could anyone do with a single fact, which, like a point, begins and ends in itself. You needed two points to make a line, more if you wanted to make a life.

Lilian said it didn’t matter. “It’s too late for me to read Kierkegaard in any case,” she said.

Again, Ursula had a sense that Lilian was talking to someone not present, or else voicing a thought meant for herself. A lone traveller sometimes carried an air of disturbance, but Ursula did not feel the need to fret. She herself was a lone woman. Besides, she did not mind odd people, having lived with—through—odder ones in Edmund’s books.

The collection of Mr. Thornton’s work, Ursula said, could be found in the library next to the solarium. “That is, if you want to reread them. Likely you already know them well.”

“Who’s Mr. Thornton?”

How on earth had an Asian woman from that faraway place called New Jersey decided to come to Beechwood Cottage if she’d never heard of Edmund Thornton? Most guests were avid readers of his work. They came because they wanted to stay for a few days in the place where he had spent his last forty years. They walked to the beech grove where a hidden body could be conjured up in their vivid yet harmless imaginations. They visited the village, which was fifteen minutes away by foot, to catch a glimpse of the context for Edmund Thornton’s work: an idyllic setting for the fine art of

murdering and the finer art of detecting. And, in the cottage, they studied a lopsided initial carved on the back of a cabinet door, a half-torn pad in a drawer, an unfinished sentence on a sheet dangling from an old typewriter, not realizing that these artifacts were not genuine traces of the author's life but vestiges left by other visitors. There was no way to stop the minor vandalisms: the house was not a museum. And any marks left by the visitors could only point to more stories. Edmund would've approved, a service done by his readers and for his readers.

Ursula gave a brief introduction to Edmund Thornton. "How did you find us"—she could not help but ask—"if you'd never heard of him?"

Lilian said that a friend's friend had recommended the house when she was looking for a quiet place in the English countryside.

There were many quiet places in the countryside, but only one of them had once been occupied by Edmund Thornton. Ursula, however, saw no reason to protest. She led Lilian to the kitchen, where she had left a few eggs, a bottle of milk, and some bread and butter. There were shops in the village, Ursula said, if Lilian wanted to prepare her own food. There were also a couple of gastropubs and a coffeehouse, in case that was easier. Lilian nodded, giving the briefest glance at the welcome platter, noticing nothing about the composition.

Before Ursula left, Lilian asked if the house was booked immediately after her stay. Ursula knew that it was not—early February was not yet prime season—but she said she would check and get back to Lilian.

Ursula had been Mrs. Burnett when she first began to work for Edmund, and nearer his death, beset by dementia, he returned to addressing her as Mrs. Burnett, so that once again she addressed

him as Mr. Thornton, putting an end to the period—decades—when they had been Edmund and Ursula to each other.

It was in 1982 that she had answered a handwritten note pinned to the co-op's bulletin board, seeking “a lady typist.” Ursula was twenty-nine that year, not quite a lady, but a young widow. The year before, her husband, Robert, had died when his vehicle slipped off a flooded road into a river, leaving her the farmhouse, which had been in his family for three generations, the land around it, which had dwindled over the years, and some loans, which she managed to repay by letting the last pocket of land go to the Hinshaws, who owned the neighboring farm. For a few months Ursula had thought of selling the farmhouse and returning to Nova Scotia, where her parents and two brothers still lived. They had all adored her as a doll-like child, the youngest in the family; they had adored her despite not knowing her at all. They would have welcomed her back, would even have pretended that her sojourn in England had never happened. There was some solace in imagining that—a tight lid put on three years of marriage, during which she had tried and failed to get pregnant.

Instead, Ursula saw the ad: typing she could do, easily. With that and a few bookkeeping jobs she had picked up during her marriage, she could sustain herself for the time being. Perhaps she would find another man to fall in love with, and they'd have some children if it was not too late.



"This is the perfect way to watch movies if you love mosquitoes and having a cold, wet butt."
Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers

In the end, she did not marry again. She became Edmund's typist, a situation that caused some raised eyebrows initially, but a friendship rather than a romance ensued. There had not been a scandal because Edmund had been looking for a typist, not love or companionship. Ursula was not an ambitious woman, just an adaptable one.

When Edmund died, in 2017, Ursula read the obituaries in various newspapers, all of which talked about his early life as a boarding-school master, his prime in London writing murder mysteries, his abrupt decision to withdraw to the countryside after his second divorce, and then his decades of living as a recluse while continuing to produce his popular novels—one series featuring a detective who was an aspiring watercolorist, the other, set in Victorian London, about a woman working as a medium, whose séances revealed an underworld where murder victims, like Old Hamlet, demanded justice and revenge. None of the obituaries

mentioned Edmund's working habits, so few people would know of his lady typist.

Ursula was a petite woman, still agile and youngish looking, as though her aging had stopped at the moment she entered widowhood—at least her pageboy haircut had not changed.

When Edmund's three sons from the two marriages converted the cottage into a rental, to serve curious readers on a literary pilgrimage or a murder-themed holiday, she was the natural choice for the role of caretaker.

It was not an onerous job. A young woman from the village came to help her clean, and Mark, the son of the old gardener, mowed the grassy slope and replenished the annuals in the pots. Ursula liked to study the guests and wonder who among them would've found a place in Edmund's next book, had he been alive. Most of them would do as a body neatly tucked away or haphazardly sawed apart. Few of them, despite their belief otherwise, looked the part of a murderer or a detective.

In the next three days Ursula did not see Lilian in the village, and casual exchanges in the shops confirmed that no, the guest staying in the cottage had not been spotted. Perhaps Lilian had stretched out the food left by Ursula, or she was on a special diet and her nourishment came from her suitcase. She would not starve, Ursula thought, but there were other possible scenarios that might justify checking on her: an accident in the shower, a heart attack, and, of course, a suicide. Ursula thought this last scenario improbable. If Lilian did mean to kill herself, a few days' stay might suffice. A reservation for two weeks would be a waste, no? But right away Ursula realized that she had made the same mistake many characters in Edmund's books did: much of life, contrary to what they believed, did not operate according to logic. Only a mystery writer relies on logic, to construct the puzzle of the crime and its resolution.

Ursula put a bottle of milk, a loaf of bread, some eggs, and a couple of apples in a basket. On second thought, she took out everything but the milk and placed her book-size calendar in the basket. She could easily say she was stopping by to show Lilian that there would be two and a half weeks of vacancy after her reservation ended.

It was a day of sun between days of rain, and Ursula had decided to try the solarium first. Her instinct was proved right. Lilian was hovering over some books, seemingly hard at work. She had not noticed Ursula outside or the shadow she cast before she tapped on the glass.

“Oh, hello,” Lilian said when she opened the French windows.

Ursula handed the milk to Lilian and asked if everything in the cottage was satisfactory. In the past, some guests had complained about the Wi-Fi connection, she said, and Lilian thanked Ursula, saying she hadn’t really been online, and everything else worked perfectly well.

Having little more to say, they smiled at each other, one waiting to be invited into the solarium, the other waiting for the intruder to take her leave. After a moment, Lilian gave in and asked Ursula to step inside. Ursula pulled a second chair close to the round table, so that Lilian would feel obliged to sit down again.

There had been a few knickknacks on the table—a bust of the Duke of Wellington, an ornamental inkstand, a set of miniature porcelain owls, and an antique butter stamp with a crudely carved bird holding a berry in its beak—but Lilian had cleared them off. She pointed to a box at the corner, where all the things were safe, she said. She promised that she would return every object to its original place before she left. She had taken a picture of their display on the table. “I suppose they belonged to Mr. Thornton?” she asked.

Ursula nodded. She recognized the desultoriness of small talk in Lilian's question. Of course she would not recognize the meanings of those objects. They, like many other things in the cottage, had entered Edmund's work, a trail of bread crumbs left behind . . . For whom, though? Ursula wouldn't allow the thought that they were for her. For himself, really.

"People in the shops said you haven't been in. I want to make sure you have enough food," Ursula said. *I want to make sure you're alive, unlike Ellie Boyle, a girl with hazel-green eyes, who never saw another day after checking into the Fox and Hounds.*

"Oh, food," Lilian said vaguely, as though she did not understand the real query in Ursula's words. "I suppose I'm doing fine."

There was a stack of books and an open notebook on the round table, but Ursula resisted the urge to scrutinize them. Instead, she looked around and said that the solarium was her favorite part of the cottage. Her favorite, too, Lilian agreed, and then praised the loveliness of the house. Flavorless words—Ursula thought that neither of them was good at putting on a performance beyond mere human courtesy. Any moment now she should stand up and take her leave. She wished she had entered via the kitchen and put the kettle on, so there would be the excuse of waiting for the water to boil and the tea to be made and drunk. There would also be the opportunity to have a quick glance around the cottage for signs that might or might not tell a story. Ursula did not remember another case when she'd had a solo guest in the cottage.

"Guess what? I found out where Kierkegaard's brother died," she said, when they seemed to have run out of small talk. "In a place called Paterson, in New Jersey."

"How fascinating," Lilian said, lacking enthusiasm.

“He died in a hotel,” Ursula said. She remembered thinking of the poor maid who must have discovered the body after having knocked on the door to no answer.

“Oh, how sad.”

“He died at twenty-four. Very young.”

“I suppose that could be called young.”

Robert had died at thirty-one, and at the funeral several people had repeated the same words: gone too soon. “Twenty-four *is* young,” Ursula said, and felt right away that her tone came across as argumentative. She softened it and asked Lilian if she had been to Paterson.

Lilian said she had never been to that part of New Jersey. She added that she made it sound as though New Jersey were a giant state, but it was really a tiny one. Ursula said she understood—there were still parts of Devon she had never been to, even though she’d lived here most of her adult life.

“But do you want to visit those parts?” Lilian asked.

Ursula was mildly taken aback. So far, they had abided by the rule that governs conversations between strangers, talking about neutral topics instead of themselves. It had taken her and Edmund nearly a year before they had ventured into personal conversation. Every Tuesday and Friday, she’d brought cleanly typed pages to him and received more handwritten pages, and sometimes typed pages that had been cut up and pasted on new sheets, with paragraphs and sentences rearranged. But one Tuesday he had asked her if she was fond of green. He had noticed, he said, that she often had some shades of green in her attire. Not surprised but touched that he had paid such attention, she confessed that her mother used to praise the color of her eyes—hazel—and often dressed her in ways to

accent the green, and she had retained the habit. A few weeks later, Ursula encountered Ellie Boyle in his manuscript, a young woman whose hazel-green eyes had caught the fancy of a man because his mother had the same eye color.

“What I mean,” Lilian said when Ursula did not speak right away, “is that the parts of New Jersey I haven’t been to, I have no desire to visit.”

Ursula smiled. “In fact, there’s one part of Devon I did want to visit. Thirty minutes by bike in that direction,” she said, and pointed beyond the garden. “You see, Mr. Thornton wasn’t the only writer in this part of the world. There was another writer who used to live not far from here. I always thought, Wouldn’t it be nice to bike down and take a look at his house?”

“But you didn’t? Why?”

Ursula could say that it was impolite to intrude, and she understood a writer’s need for privacy, but these were only convenient excuses. These explicable reasons would not have deterred her from going, had she wanted to. “Don’t you think sometimes it’s enough just to have imagined it?” she said. It was one of Edmund’s sentences, she knew, except that his characters never followed that line of thinking. Mere imagination was never sufficient for murderers or for detectives.

Lilian was silent for a moment, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.
“What was this other author’s name?”

“William Trevor.”

“Oh, I’ve read his books,” Lilian said. “I didn’t know he lived near here. Do you like his work, too?”

Ursula would never ask a visitor, Do you like Mr. Thornton’s work? Rather, she would ask, Do you reread Mr. Thornton’s work?

Or, Which of his books is your favorite? Even, Which of his books has upset you most? “ ‘Like’ may be the wrong word,” she said. “What I think—sometimes—is that my life is a William Trevor story.”

For the first time, Lilian studied Ursula, and there was no longer a vague, distracted look in her eyes. “Do you mean you see yourself as one of his characters? Or do you think your life follows his kind of . . . plot? But, of course, his work is not about plot, unlike Edmund Thornton’s.”

“Not all murders have a plot,” Ursula said.

“But a murder mystery has to have a plot, no?” Lilian asked.

Ursula understood right away that Lilian was not a reader of murder mysteries. “People often make that mistake,” she said. “Mr. Thornton would say that a good murder mystery is never really about the plot. Or even about the murder. He would say that a murder mystery is all about logic and intuition.”

Lilian pondered. “Whose logic and intuition? The detective’s or the murderer’s?”

“Neither,” Ursula said. “The writer’s. And, of course, the reader’s. Mr. Thornton would say if a writer offers a puzzle that’s beyond the reader’s ability, then it’s not a good book.”

“So it’s . . . like a game?”

Ursula did not like the word “game,” and she smiled without answering.

“And everything is in order by the end, for the writer and the reader?” Lilian asked.

“Yes,” Ursula said. “Mr. Thornton would say that the world fails to live up to the standard of a murder mystery in that aspect.”

Lilian thought for a moment. “But all good writing is about logic and intuition, don’t you think? Does this mean that the world fails to live up to the standard of good writing?”

It mattered little to Ursula if the rule applied to all good writing or to some good writing. Edmund’s writing was about logic and intuition—that fact alone was enough for her.

“For instance, you could say that William Trevor’s writing is also about logic and intuition,” Lilian said, a bit too adamantly.

Ursula could feel a strong disagreement arise within her, but she did not want to argue. She shrugged.

“Have you ever thought of yourself as a character in Edmund Thornton’s work?” Lilian asked.

“I don’t think I would be a good model for a murderer,” Ursula said, not entirely honestly. In one sense, she would’ve made a perfect murderer in Edmund’s work—a harmless-looking person, indispensable to nobody. Only, he had never modelled one on her.

“Why not?”

Ursula looked at Lilian, whose curiosity could be called impudent by now, although Edmund would’ve liked this turn of their conversation. Together, talking in their odd manner, they would have offered the possibility of a lead in the case, but, ultimately, they would simply be a pair of bystanders. Most characters in a murder mystery are just part of the backdrop of the drama. “I guess I’ve never felt the urge to kill someone,” Ursula said. She turned away from Lilian’s gaze and looked at the open notebook on the table. There were letters and numbers written across the page.

“But you don’t see yourself as a murder victim, either? He must have had all kinds of characters murdered in his books?”

What could she say to that? Sometimes Ursula wondered if all the victims in Edmund’s books—or those since she had begun to work for him—were the same person named Ursula Burnett, even though they went by other names in his pages. “I’ve never thought of that,” she said. Then she changed the subject, pointing to the notebook and asking Lilian if she was a mathematician.



“Oh, God, no, I have very little talent for mathematics,” Lilian said. She picked up the top book from the pile and showed the title to Ursula. It was Book I of Euclid’s “Elements.” “I figured I could take a couple of weeks off from work to do a bit of studying. I wanted to see if I could make some sense out of this.”

“Why?”

“Why geometry? Or why Euclid? I don’t honestly know why. It’s something to tackle on a holiday?” Lilian said, and laughed, again, as though she were sharing a joke with someone not present.

“That’s really not a good answer. I could’ve brought Proust’s work in French.”

“You know who liked to talk about geometry?”

They nearly replied at the same time—“Mr. Thornton” and “Edmund Thornton”—and both laughed.

“He once said a good grasp of geometry was all you needed to write a murder mystery,” Ursula added.

“That must be the logic-and-intuition part—I’ve heard geometry described that way. In fact, that’s why I brought the books on the trip,” Lilian said, looking at the pile of books with a tender suspicion. “I don’t know how feasible it is for me to finish these books in two weeks. It’s not easy reading.”

Ursula fetched her calendar from the basket. “I promised to bring you the answer. The house will be vacant until the sixteenth of February.”

“Which means it’s possible for me to stay till then?”

“Yes . . .” Ursula said.

“But?”

Ursula said there was no “but,” though she had noticed that Lilian hadn’t been to the village. “I didn’t leave a lot of food for you.”

“Oh, that,” Lilian said, as though she were surprised by the necessity. “I’ll try to go and get some provisions, if that makes you feel better.”

Ursula said she wouldn’t mind stopping by every now and then and bringing some supplies with her, and Lilian appeared relieved, accepting the offer.

Ursula looked at the sky outside, which during her visit had turned heavy with clouds again. “It isn’t really the best season to visit,” she said. “I don’t blame you if you don’t want to leave the house.”

Lilian nodded, waiting, Ursula suspected, for her to leave finally.

“What do you do?” Ursula asked. “You said you were taking some time off from work.”

“I teach at a university. And I write some books.”

“In what field?”

“Oh, I don’t have a field, really,” Lilian said. “I write fiction, but not the kind of work that’s as widely read as Edmund Thornton’s.”

Ursula did not point out that Lilian had never heard Edmund’s name before her arrival. “Do you write more like William Trevor?”

Lilian laughed. “I would have to suffer from delusions of grandeur to compare myself to him.”

They were no longer strangers. Ursula smiled, and stood up to leave. At the door she said to Lilian, “I’m afraid you’ve got one thing wrong about William Trevor. His work is about illogic.”

Lilian, surprised, said that she would have to think about it and they would discuss it when Ursula came back.

The next day, the sky was dark as lead, the rain icy cold. Ursula wondered if she should wait for the weather to ease up before going to the cottage, but the forecast did not look promising for the entire week, and Lilian, she thought, could do with some more food. Then Ursula wondered if she was doing what many ordinary people had done—in life as well as in fiction. Favoring logic over intuition, they’d dismissed their misgivings, as though they strove to present themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like Robert, refusing to believe in the possibility of a flood, because the last flood had been fifty years earlier, or Edmund’s murder victims, nearly all of them contributing in one way or another to their own demise.

Are you indulging your imagination? Ursula asked herself. Edmund used to scoff at people who praised his imagination, saying that it was like praising a master jeweller for the velvet on which he showcased his creations. Lilian was studying Euclid, not reading Edmund's books for murderous inspiration. A caretaker of a house once occupied by a writer of murder mysteries is found dead in that very house, killed in a manner that had been described in one of his books—Edmund would've considered such a scenario beyond the pale. Or did Ursula fear that she herself, a harmless old woman, might act uncharacteristically, committing a crime that would not present a technical challenge for any detective and yet would remain a puzzle for all concerned?

Perhaps there was a simpler explanation for her wish to see Lilian, Ursula thought. Odd women tended to exist in parallel. An encounter between two such specimens should not be avoided.

Lilian poured tea and neglected to offer milk. Today she did not have time for small talk. "When you said that William Trevor's work was about illogic, did you mean the characters' illogic or the author's?"

Again they were sitting at the round table in the solarium, the rain drumming on the glass roof. Ursula had to ask Lilian to repeat the question. They raised their voices, like two people hard of hearing.

Ursula thought about the question and said that she wasn't a writer, so she couldn't really say for sure. "Only, you see, the murderers in Mr. Thornton's work may surprise others, but they never surprise themselves. People in William Trevor's work are often strangers to themselves."

"But does that mean that Trevor's characters are lacking logic?"

"It looks to me as if they wouldn't have become his characters if they had a strong sense of logic. They would've known themselves,

and they wouldn't have ended up in his story.”

“Why not?”

“Because William Trevor doesn’t make puzzles that can be solved. Those characters simply live on,” Ursula said.

Lilian thought and then nodded. “I used to think I lived like a William Trevor character,” she said. “There’s something comforting about the idea of living in his fiction, don’t you agree?”

Comforting? Ursula thought of the years she’d spent as Edmund’s typist—nearly half her life. All that time, however, could easily be condensed into a single image in a William Trevor story, no more than two or three sentences. A woman walks alone by the sea. A man, whom she has not stopped loving, lives without returning her love and then dies without thinking of her. “I suppose very few people in William Trevor’s work get themselves murdered, if that’s what you mean by ‘comforting.’ ”

“Oh, I wasn’t thinking about that,” Lilian said. “What I mean is, in William Trevor’s work, life remains endurable.”

“But isn’t that because his characters are the kind who have set their hearts to endure?”

“You can set your heart to endure, but that doesn’t mean you get to live in his stories,” Lilian said with a mocking smile. “Sometimes I feel like I got evicted from Trevor-land.”

Ursula held Lilian’s eyes steady with her own, waiting with patience. A person exiting a William Trevor story—where would she go from there?

“Do you have children?” Lilian asked.

Ursula shook her head. There were many solitary and lonely women in William Trevor's stories, and not all of them were mothers.

"I had two," Lilian said. "Two boys, and they both chose suicide. No, you don't have to say anything. It's a fact, and there's nothing I can do about it."

Ursula nodded. A jarring fact could never be softened by words. "Did they die together?" she asked. Perhaps she was wicked, asking such an impertinent question, but then, she thought, she could be no more wicked or impertinent than life.

"No, some years apart," Lilian said.

"How old were they?"

"Young. Younger than Kierkegaard's brother."

That woman walking alone on the waterfront, with the sea breeze lifting her scarf and messing up her hair—those who knew her by sight might be moved to pity her, but their pity could come only from their conjecture about her life. They could look for clues, but they would not have the facts. No wonder Lilian had wanted to find a quiet place in the English countryside, where a cabdriver told fairy tales about criminal America. Very few deaths could remain private. In that sense, Ursula counted herself fortunate: Edmund's death, so public, nevertheless had left her safe in her bereavement. "I'm sorry," she said. "Did the second child . . . Did it happen recently?"

"Six weeks ago, and, before that, six years ago," Lilian said. "So you see, I can never return to a William Trevor story. It would be a comfort to endure only the endurable."

Where could Lilian go? Into a Greek drama or a Shakespeare play? Even Edmund would not make this mother a murderer or a murder

victim.

“But I just realized a slip in my logic,” Lilian said. “I can’t call my life unendurable. If it’s endured, it would become, by definition, endurable.”

“What about your . . . well, the father of the children?”

“My husband? He’s somewhere in Herefordshire, staying in an abbey,” Lilian said. “We thought it might do us good to have a change. He’s going to spend some time reading Wittgenstein there. I’m reading Euclid here.”

“And you both chose well. A quiet place is what you need.”



“Owing to unusually high call volume, here’s the same recording you’ve already heard dozens of times in the last forty-five minutes, each time hopeful that the pause in hold music signalled something more, only to have your hopes dashed yet again.”

Cartoon by Meredith Southard

Lilian nodded, looking up at the rain, which made a torrent on the glass ceiling. “A quiet place where the vultures cannot find me.”

“Vultures?”

“Untimely and unnatural deaths attract them. I suppose Mr. Thornton had plenty of those characters in his books?”

Ursula thought of the other guests, who came because here they could catch a few glimpses of a man who was gone from the world. Vultures of a kind they were, too, but they knew only his work, which was no more than the husk of a real person. It was for this reason that Ursula had resisted the urge to ride her bike past William Trevor’s house, both before his death and, particularly, afterward. “Yes,” Ursula said. “But Mr. Thornton spent very little time writing about what you call vultures. They didn’t interest him.”

“And that’s the luxury an author has when writing,” Lilian said. “In real life . . .”

“People wouldn’t leave you alone?”

“Some strangers could not,” Lilian said. “ ‘Dear Ms. Pang, I’m sorry for your loss. I decided to dedicate my next book to you. Can you help me find a publisher?’ Or, ‘Dear Lilian Pang, I have suffered a greater tragedy. Please call this number at your earliest convenience, so you can hear my story. Maybe you can write my life into your book.’ ”

“Oh, my. What do you do with these people?”

“Nothing. They can’t help themselves, and they can’t be helped,” Lilian said. “But they’re harmless.”

“Mr. Thornton used to say some people are like sixpence balls and you have to allow them to bounce just like sixpence balls.”

Lilian laughed. “He was absolutely right. The real problem is that there are plenty of sixpence balls who have taken it upon themselves to be crystal balls in life.”

“What do they do?”

“Tabloid journalists create a dramatic woman writer who suffered tragic losses as clickbait. YouTube psychologists give analyses on how I’ve failed as a mother. Armchair astrologers look into my birth data. Trolls. Conspiracy theorists. They’ve all made noise about this mother who killed her children.”

“Jesus.” Ursula shook her head, not fully grasping everything Lilian was saying, but she knew that these were people who would never be given a place in a William Trevor story. There was some solace in that. Grace, even.

“I must specify that many of these people are from China. I grew up there, and my life is too sensational for them not to revel in this. Some see the justice of a divine punishment, because I’ve long turned away from the mother country. Many simply cannot resist the temptation to make a statement.”

“Perhaps you shouldn’t pay them any attention.”

“I know, but what can they do to me when my life has done much more?” Lilian said. “People are predictable in their mean-spiritedness and wrongheadedness, but I always wonder if someone among them might surprise me. You see, I can’t be helped, either. That’s a vocational hazard for a writer.”

“Are there surprises?”

“Someone called for an investigation to see if I’m connected to some cult that specializes in putting suicidal thoughts into people’s minds, and to ascertain whether there’s an elevated rate of suicide among people who have read my books.”

“What?” Ursula said. “Why did you even look at this rubbish?”

“Because one always wants to know the world as it is,” Lilian said. “But, really, what makes that conspiracy theorist any different from Edmund Thornton? If a crime can be imagined, it can be committed, too, is that right? No, don’t you worry. I’m not in a cult.”

Ursula hesitated. Very few murderers would call themselves murderers.

“Of course, you have nothing to go by but my words,” Lilian said. “But, if you think about it, this person’s suicide-cult hypothesis could be a perfect subject for a murder mystery. A serial killer by words?”

“But Mr. Thornton did not take anything from real life,” Ursula said. “He wrote murder mysteries as an intellectual activity, not as an act to harm anyone in real life.”

“Are you sure he never took anything from real life?” Lilian asked. “That would be rather . . . extraordinary.”

Ursula looked away. If those victims could all bear her name, perhaps all the murderers, too, were but one person named Ursula Burnett. If she had been killed many times and if she had killed many times, all through Edmund’s pen, could it be that he was not entirely ignorant of her feelings? On her side, she had imagination only, but on his side he had intuition and logic. Those minor changes she had introduced while typing—the hair length of a character, another character’s favorite brand of wheat flakes, the plate number of a suspect’s vehicle, all of them bearing a shadowy resemblance to her life—perhaps Edmund had been aware of them? He might have deemed the changes harmless to his work; he might even have accepted that they were meaningful to her.

“Well, in any case, I got tired of the noise,” Lilian said. “That’s why I’m here, reading Euclid. He makes a better companion than

many people. Would you like some more tea?"

Ursula said yes, and Lilian went into the kitchen to boil more water. The rain had abated, but only for the time being.

If a person's imagination, kind or wicked, was boundless, sooner or later what was imagined could become a fact. If Ursula slipped something into Lilian's food, people might say she had been too heartbroken by her children's deaths to live on, and what a tragedy it was that she should have come all the way from New Jersey to Devon to die. If Lilian, on the other hand, slipped something into Ursula's tea, she, too, could die, the meagre history of her life forever sealed, just as she had always wished.

But the woman walking by the seaside in William Trevor's story would never throw herself into the water. And all things unendurable, in the end, become less so. For that reason, Ursula knew that she and Lilian were going to be all right. In a world of disorder, they would hold on to their positions as two particles of order—against logic, perhaps, but true to their intuitions. They met, they parted ways, but they would not make this cruel world more senseless for each other. ♦

Yiyun Li has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2003. Her books include the story collection "Wednesday's Child," which was a finalist for the 2024 Pulitzer Prize.

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Studying Stones Can Rock Your World

To think like a geologist is to contemplate timescales that stagger the imagination—and lay bare the planetary forces behind our earthly existence.

By [Kathryn Schulz](#)

August 26, 2024



The geologist Marcia Bjornerud believes that our most urgent identity is as creatures who evolved on and depend on this planet. On some deep psychological level, she writes, we need “a feeling for our place in its story.”

Illustration by Emily Hughes

Write about what you know, they say. All due respect, that's lousy advice, far too easily misinterpreted as "write about what you *already* know." No doubt you find your own knowledge valuable, your own experiences compelling, the plot twists of your own past gripping; so do we all, but the storehouse of a single life seldom equips us adequately for the task of writing. If you are, say, [Volodymyr Zelensky](#) or [Frederick Douglass](#) or Sally Ride, the category of "what you know" may in fact be sufficiently unusual and significant to belong in print. For the rest of us, the better, if less pithy, maxim would be: before you write, go out and learn something interesting.

Marcia Bjornerud is a follower of this maxim, which we know because, of her five published works, the first one is a textbook. Bjornerud is a professor of geosciences at Lawrence University, in Wisconsin; the interesting thing she has been learning about, for more than four decades, is our planet. Her first book for a popular audience was "[Reading the Rocks](#)," an admirably lucid account of the Earth's history as told via its geological record. Her second, "[Timefulness](#)," was an exploration of the planet's eons-long temporal cycles and an exhortation to incorporate them into our own far more fleeting sense of time as a safeguard against the hazards of short-term thinking. Her third, "[Geopedia](#)," was an alphabetical overview of her field, from Acasta gneiss (one of the Earth's oldest known rocks) to zircon (its oldest known mineral, at 4.4 billion years, a cosmological hair's breadth younger than the planet itself).

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The Earth still being the Earth, there's a certain amount of familiar ground, so to speak, in Bjornerud's newest book, "[Turning to Stone](#)" (Flatiron). But it is also a striking departure, because it is not just about the life of the planet but also about the life of the author. In its pages, what Bjornerud has learned serves to illuminate what she already knew: each of the book's ten chapters is structured around a variety of rock that provides the context for a particular era of her life, from childhood to the present day. The result is one of the more unusual memoirs of recent memory, combining personal history with a detailed account of the building blocks of the planet. What the two halves of this tale share is an interest in the evolution of existence—in the forces, both quotidian and cosmic, that shape us.

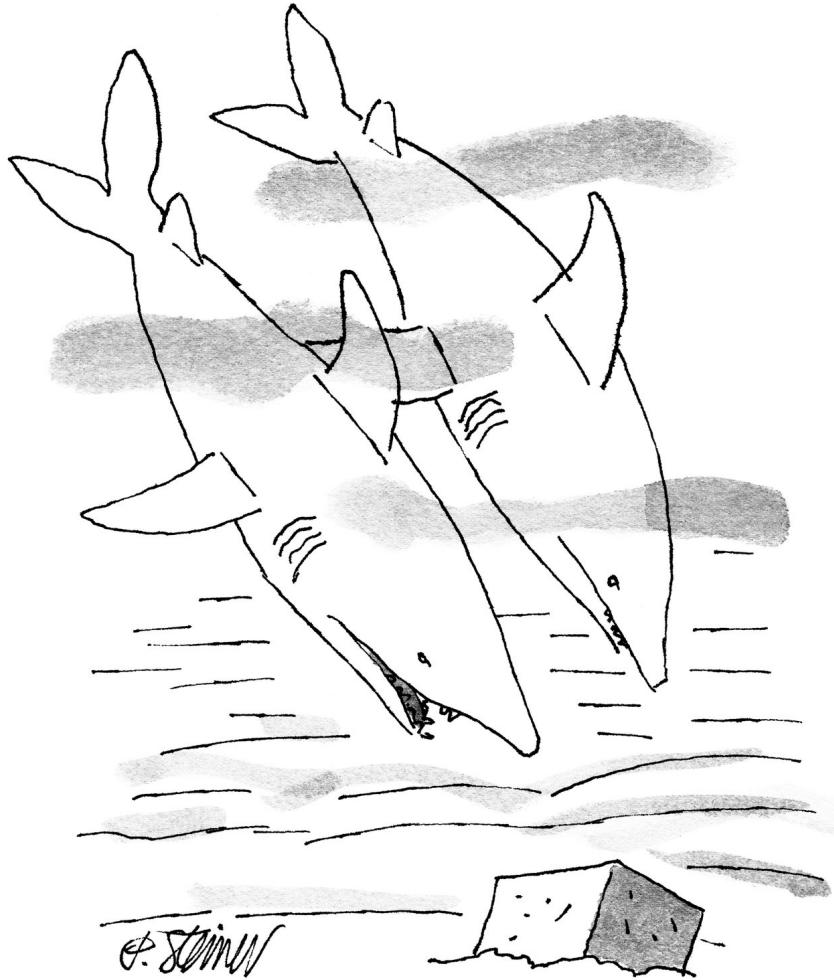
Bjornerud grew up in rural Wisconsin, forty miles north of where an earlier memoirist lived for a while in a little house in a big woods. By the early nineteen-sixties, when Bjornerud was born, the vast forest that [Laura Ingalls](#) knew had been felled by logging, leaving behind only pasture, scrubland, scattered patches of second-growth forest, and devastating erosion. What made the soil wash away so quickly once the trees were gone was that it was sandy—palpable evidence of the underlying bedrock, sandstone.

It says something about Bjornerud that we meet that sandstone before we meet her parents. She is not interested in autobiographical exhaustiveness; instead, she reconstructs her life in the way geologists reconstruct the past, using mere fragments to tell a larger story. When we encounter her in the opening chapter, she is a seven-year-old on her way to school, and the glimpses we get of her classmates as they board the bus are almost novelistic:

three Mennonite sisters in tidy braids and gingham dresses, emanating an aura of community that Bjornerud envies; a rosy-cheeked farm kid whose ambient smell of bacon likewise evokes a twinge of jealousy (“ours is not a hot-breakfast family”); a shuffling little boy whose chronic absences foretell the illness that will kill him in his twenties. The over-all effect is of small-town intimacy, that familiar inverse correlation between the number of people you know and the number of things you know about them—their siblings and parents and great-grandparents, their struggles and secrets and tragedies.

When it comes to personal matters such as these, Bjornerud shows but does not dwell. Her father appears chiefly as the builder of the family home and a scavenger of secondhand goods to fill it. Virtually all we learn about her mother is that she was abandoned in childhood by her own mother, which left her prone to gloom—“beyond the baseline Scandinavian level”—and intensely sensitive to the plight of orphaned children. Partly as a result, she and her husband adopted a nineteen-month-old Ojibwe girl in 1968, when Bjornerud was almost six. The two girls were close in childhood, but the socially awkward Bjornerud soon realized that her strategy for avoiding the derision of her peers, invisibility, was not an option for her sister, who was a constant object of scrutiny, and of both the casual and the vicious varieties of racism.

Bjornerud’s family of origin largely fades from these pages after the opening chapter, but we feel its influence—above all, in the sincere and knowledgeable way that Native history permeates her narrative. As does the rest of human history: despite her abiding passion for the deep past, Bjornerud remains attentive to the 0.007 per cent of the Earth’s life span during which it has been home to people. She is fond of calling us “earthlings,” to remind us that our most urgent identity is as creatures who evolved on and depend on this planet, and she argues that our lives are shaped in profound and ongoing ways by the ground under our feet.



"Why do they always do that with the concrete? The feet are the best part."
Cartoon by Peter Steiner

Consider that sandstone, which began, some two billion years ago, as quartz crystals buried deep inside mountains towering over what is now the Upper Midwest and southern Canada. Time took apart the mountains, and rain dissolved most of the minerals in them, but the quartz remained. It was later washed into Precambrian rivers and eventually carried to a beach, where its grains were worn smooth and spherical by the waves. That beach was tropical, partly because the contemporaneous climate was extremely warm, but also because Wisconsin, at the time, was near the equator. As the sea retreated and other rocks and minerals were deposited on top of the former strand, the grains of quartz hardened into sandstone, which was gradually sculpted by wind, water, and glacier until, aboveground, it formed the topography of Wisconsin as we know it today. Belowground, it formed an excellent aquifer, thanks to those

spherical grains, which—“like marbles in a jar,” as Bjornerud puts it—leave plenty of room for storing water in between them.

In Bjornerud’s home town, this sandstone was visible in the mansions once owned by logging barons and in the grand old public library. But it also made itself known, more subtly, in determining “where houses could be built and wells could be sunk, what crops could be grown, who got rich and who slid into debt.” It rendered the ground sandy, making it marginal for farming, and rendered it hilly, which meant it could not be worked efficiently enough to keep pace once Big Agriculture began to dominate the flatter lands elsewhere in the Midwest. To survive at all, farmers had to use more and more fertilizer, and, with every rainfall, some of the nitrogen from that fertilizer was carried into the porous sandstone. Before long, local well-water tests began showing high levels of nitrates, which limit the ability of hemoglobin to carry oxygen. The danger was not theoretical. “I remember the hushed whispers of horror among the neighbors,” Bjornerud writes, “when one of our former babysitters, who had married a hardworking young farmer the previous year, gave birth to a ‘blue baby’ who died within hours, poisoned in utero by nitrate-contaminated groundwater.” At the time, the field of hydrogeology—which includes the study of how water flows into and through aquifers—had barely begun, and Bjornerud herself was still a kid. But she’d just had her first inkling of an idea that would become the cornerstone of her future career: geology, like geography, can be destiny.

Virtually alone among scientific disciplines, geology suffers from a reputation as irredeemably stodgy, with all the tedious field work of paleontology and none of the velociraptors. Compared with the shinier if more sinister science-related concerns that consume us these days, from climate change to A.I., it seems not merely anodyne but almost irrelevant. Ask people to name a *STEM* field, and there is approximately zero chance they’ll spit out “geology.”

Given this lowly cultural status, very few students go off to college intending to become geologists, and Bjornerud was not one of them. Inclined toward the humanities, she enrolled in the University of Minnesota with the vague notion that she would study languages and become a translator; like countless students before and since, she signed up for an introductory geology course just to meet a graduation requirement. Soon enough, she found herself fascinated by rocks, both on their own merits and as “a portal into the hermetic inner life of Earth.” She was struck by the way they revealed “the strangeness of the planet—its self-renewing tectonic habits, its ceaseless repurposing of primordial ingredients, its literary impulse to record its own history.” She changed her plans, discovered her calling, and, in a sense, became a translator after all, of a language more ur than Ur.

Notwithstanding those Rocks for Jocks classes, that language is fiendishly difficult to master. The field of geology encompasses almost five billion years of history; to grasp it properly, you must understand everything from the distribution of minerals at the time our solar system was created to the physics of convection currents in the mantle of the Earth. To make matters worse, even when you limit your focus to the present day, almost all of your object of study is occluded from view. The crust of the Earth amounts to less than two per cent of the total volume of the planet, and much of it is invisible anyway—hidden by vegetation, submerged beneath oceans, buried under layers of rock that aren’t the rocks you’re looking for. As for everything below the crust: outside of the imagination of Jules Verne, it is entirely inaccessible. The deepest hole human beings have ever managed to dig—the Kola Superdeep Borehole, a pet project of the U.S.S.R. during the Cold War—goes down seven and a half miles, or about 0.2 per cent of the way to the center of the Earth. We have had better luck sending ourselves and our instruments to outer space.

Even when a stone is sitting there in plain sight, your problems are just beginning. Geology, despite what many people think, is not

chiefly about identifying and classifying rocks; still, you can't get very far in the field until you can recognize an enormous quantity of them. Bjornerud recounts the experience of going on a college field trip during which she presented her geology professor with four different stones that struck her as unusual. The first was smooth and matte green; the second rust-colored and full of little round holes like a sponge; the third gray with a smattering of orange starbursts; and the fourth a darker gray with short white lines running at odd angles, as if covered in fragments of kanji. The professor glanced at them and informed her that all four were basalt, one of the most common rocks on the planet. Bjornerud received this news with both embarrassment and perplexity. Not only did the rocks look nothing like one another; they looked nothing like the specimens the students had studied in the classroom.

Despite all this, you might think that rocks would still be easier to identify than, say, birds; at least they do not fly away while you're trying to get a good look at them. The problem is that, unlike sparrows and wrens—not to mention every other species on the planet—rocks are seldom found in the habitat in which they were formed. Imagine spotting a fallen tree in the woods and having no idea where it hailed from, when it lived, what features of its ecosystem enabled it to flourish, how it looked in its prime—or, for that matter, which end is up. Such is the routine experience of the field geologist. Did this hunk of rock in front of you get left behind by New Zealand when the last supercontinent split apart, or was it deposited here by a river that hasn't run in ninety million years? Was it ejected from the mantle of the Earth during a volcanic eruption, or is it the remnants of some other, larger structure that has long since worn away? In geology, questions like these abound. To understand a rock, you must know what forces formed it, and what other forces have been altering it, eroding it, and moving it around the planet ever since.

Those forces present their own set of difficulties, because they often cause rocks to behave in ways that defy our imagination—indeed, defy our idea of what it means to be a rock. To begin with, under the right conditions of temperature and pressure, every stone on Earth will flow like a liquid, so geologists like Bjørnerud sometimes use fluid mechanics to model rock behavior. Even more bizarrely, some rocks can flow like a liquid while remaining completely solid—like serpentinite, an attractive green stone that oozes cold out of the Earth’s crust in ultraslow motion. Other rocks attest in their current forms to drastic phase changes earlier in their life spans. Brimstone, that most morally fraught of rocks, is essentially made from thin air: it emerges as a superheated vapor from magmatic vents in the Earth and then, as it starts to cool down, bypasses the liquid stage entirely and turns straight to stone. Obsidian does almost the opposite: it forms when molten rock from a volcano cools so quickly (or “quenches,” as geologists say) that the atoms inside it don’t have time to organize themselves into crystals—meaning that, although the rock feels solid, it is structurally still a liquid. The holes you see in certain rocks near Lake Superior, not far from where Bjørnerud went to college, exist because the parent rock was vaporized by a comet strike some 1.8 billion years ago, then boiled as it cooled. The holes are all that remain of the bubbles popping in that blistering liquid, in the fiery aftermath of one of the largest explosions in the history of the planet.

Like brimstone and obsidian, the field of geology has undergone its own radical changes, many of which were fresh when Bjørnerud began her studies. One of these was the shift away from uniformitarianism: the idea that the same forces that exist today existed in the past, and therefore that the current conditions on Earth sufficed to explain every geological phenomenon. This idea was first articulated in 1785 by James Hutton, the man who discovered deep time, and came to dominate the field following the publication, in the eighteen-thirties, of the three-volume “*Principles*

[of Geology](#),” by Charles Lyell, a contemporary and champion of Charles Darwin (who, incidentally, thought of himself as a geologist, too). But uniformitarianism turned out to be a rigid and incomplete doctrine, one that blinded generations of geologists to the possibility that the planet was also shaped by exceptional and dramatic events, a counter-theory known as catastrophism. Only in the nineteen-sixties were the long-sidelined catastrophists vindicated, as evidence mounted for the crucial geological role played by such cataclysms as the eruption of mega-volcanoes, the collapse of ice dams, and the impact of enormous extraterrestrial objects like asteroids and comets.

During that same decade, the field saw an equally dramatic shift with the widespread acceptance of the theory of plate tectonics—the slow drift of separate chunks of the outermost layers of the planet atop the mantle. Plate tectonics account for everything from the growth of mountains to the rearrangement over time of oceans and continents, but they are also the reason our planet is habitable. When an oceanic plate bumps into a continental plate, it starts sliding beneath the continental one, carrying water and carbon dioxide in vast quantities into the interior of the planet. (Many scientists believe that there’s more water in the mantle than in all the oceans of the world combined.) These are then gradually released via volcanic eruptions, forming what Bjornerud calls “an ultraslow-motion, planetary-scale respiratory system,” without which we would have long since lost our atmosphere. Such was the fate of Mars, which has a single, rigid, planetwide plate that does not move relative to its mantle. Indeed, to the best of our knowledge, Earth is the only planet that has continents.

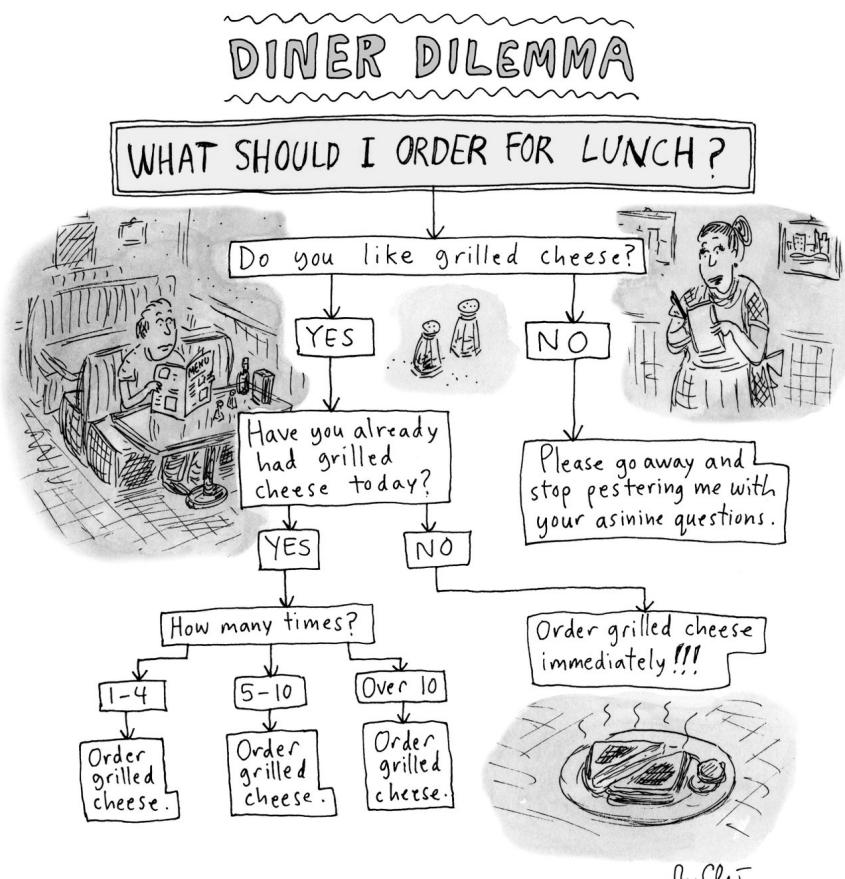
In other respects, too, the discipline of geology was changing during Bjornerud’s student days. For decades, she writes, it had been “a collection of non-intersecting subfields—mineralogy, petrology, sedimentology, paleontology, geomorphology—with limited views of the planet and research agendas driven mainly by the hunt for fossil fuels and mineral deposits.” Intellectually and

temperamentally averse to this Balkanized and monetized perspective on the planet, Bjørnerud found herself part of a cohort of geologists who were thinking about the Earth in new ways, conceiving of its operations as an integrated, planetwide system, and attending to how their field of study overlapped with other scientific disciplines, from atmospheric science to biology. These latter relations, especially, were long overlooked, largely owing to their association with the New Agey claim that the Earth itself was a living being. That's a stretch, but we do know today that nearly half of all minerals are biogenic—that is, their formation depends in one way or another on a living species.

Despite being part of this new era of geology, Bjørnerud did not really feel like part of anything at the time. She was just twenty years old when she graduated from college, and twenty-four when she got her Ph.D. “Small, female, and implausibly young,” she was not what most people thought of when they imagined a geologist. She was also not what most people thought of when they imagined a divorcée, but she was that, too. She met her first husband when they were both starting out as graduate students at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Constitutionally anxious and exceptionally hardworking, she was drawn to his happy-go-lucky nature, and mistook their incompatibilities for the prospect of balance. Matters came to a head when Bjørnerud earned her doctorate: she was ready to look for a job, while her husband wanted her to tread water in Wisconsin for however many years it took him to finish his Ph.D. “I felt trapped, and he felt wronged,” Bjørnerud writes. “We split, not so much with bitterness, as with embarrassment at our mutual misjudgment.”

Newly single and newly credentialled, Bjørnerud took a job at Miami University, in southwestern Ohio. From the beginning, it was rough going, not least because of her gender. As a graduate student in a male-dominated field, she had learned to ignore the grumbles of faculty members who thought she would drop out once she was married with children—and learned not to ignore the

words of caution, passed quietly among the small group of women in the department, about which professors to avoid, especially when alone. Still, it was dismaying to arrive at her new job and have a widely adored professor emeritus spot her in the office and ask her to come sit on his lap. Her colleagues were almost all male, her students were largely uninterested, and, although she was accustomed to the isolation that comes with field work in far-flung latitudes, “I felt lonelier and somehow farther from home than I’d ever felt in Ellesmere or Svalbard.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The antidote to that loneliness arrived in the form of her second husband. A scholarly fellow-geologist with a fondness for epistemology and a dislike of cocktail parties, he was a far better fit than the previous one—but he was also more than twice her age. Nonetheless, they got married within a year of meeting. A week after the birth of their first child, Bjørnerud’s husband broke his arm, making it impossible for him to change diapers; because he’d had polio as a child, he walked with a cane, so he couldn’t safely

carry their new son, either. Bjornerud shouldered most of the responsibility for the baby—and, not long after, for a second one, also a son. It was not a wholly happy home life, and not a particularly happy professional life. The nineteen-nineties were in full swing: academia was in the grips of deconstructionism, southern Ohio was in the grips of creationism, and Bjornerud, alienated by both, felt that she had no home. The family desperately needed a change, so Bjornerud’s husband retired and she accepted a job at Lawrence University, a small liberal-arts institution back in her home state.

When it comes to relationship ills, the geographic cure is seldom truly curative. Finding the age difference and other elements of discord in their married life just as insurmountable in Wisconsin as in Ohio, Bjornerud and her husband decided to separate, only to be derailed by two nearly simultaneous discoveries: she was pregnant; he had cancer. Soon, she was caring for her two older boys, a newborn son, and a semi-estranged, terminally ill husband. It was so consuming and exhausting that, when he died, “it was almost a shock to realize that I was still in my mid-thirties.”

Well: as they say, the world keeps turning. Bjornerud’s parents retired early and moved down the street from their daughter, to be near her and to help out with the children. Her exhaustion ebbed; her career advanced. By the end of the book, the tumult has subsided. Her sons, with whom she remains close, have grown up and are making their own way in the world. Her sister, now an enrolled member of an Ojibwe tribe in northern Wisconsin, has achieved a sense of stability and community. Bjornerud, widowed for nearly two decades and divorced for nearly three, has found a surprising, late-blooming love.

Bjornerud is a good enough writer to render all of this perfectly interesting. She has a feel for the evocative vocabulary of geology, with its driftless areas and great unconformities, and also for the virtues of plain old bedrock English. (“There is nothing to be done

in bad Arctic weather but wait for it to get less bad.”) Still, the balance she is trying to strike in this book is tricky; tonally, it veers from talky to technical, and one sometimes longs in the memoir parts to get back to the rocks, and in the geology parts to get back to the people.

Yet it is the juxtaposition of the two that is ultimately most arresting. To become a geologist is to accustom oneself to thinking in timescales that beggar the untrained imagination—“thinking like a planet,” Bjornerud calls it. Accordingly, much of “Turning to Stone” is set in deep time. We visit the continents before the emergence of plant life, when they were as bare as concrete, so that rivers ran “unchannelized in broad, braided floodplains across much of the land.” We visit the Cryogenian period, the so-called Snowball Earth, when the average temperature was forty degrees below zero, tropical latitudes were covered in ice, and just about the entire ocean was frozen over, an era that lasted eighty-five million years. Even passing glances take in whole epochs, as during a trip Bjornerud made to the Norwegian Arctic, when a suspected polar bear turned out to be nothing but a large boulder, which “had been sitting in the same spot while the whole of human history elapsed.”

Set against all of this, Bjornerud’s book implicitly asks, What is threescore years and ten? Given the whole sweep of time, the compass of what we can experience in a single life seems incalculably minuscule. Bjornerud’s strategy for dealing with this dizzying mismatch is to insist that the study of geology is at least as consoling as it is disconcerting. We are creatures of the Earth, and on some deep psychological level, she writes, we need “a feeling for our place in its story.” And we need, too, the lessons we can learn not by teaching a stone to talk, as the writer Annie Dillard described, but by teaching ourselves to listen. The rocks around us, Bjornerud says, tell us that change happens occasionally by violence but mostly by patience; that survival entails the power to endure and the wisdom to recognize that the world can alter in a

single day; that being thrown into even the harshest and most unfamiliar of environments can lead to beautiful transfigurations.

All of this is true as far as it goes. But the really astonishing thing about the relationship between us and our planet is not the mismatch but the match. The Earth is already fifty million times older than you or I are ever likely to be—and yet, given some sandstone and granite, some tektites and tuff, some fragments of flint and crystals of zircon, we can infer its entire 4.5-billion-year history. There is, so to speak, no earthly reason we should be able to do this. One of the many miracles of the human mind, though, is that it can represent scales of existence wildly different from its own—the inside of an atom, the dark side of the moon, the Pillars of Creation, the Paleozoic era.

This ability has countless practical implications, of course. But for the majority of us, in our everyday lives, its chief effect is to increase our access to awe. How astonishing to know that palm trees once shaded a sweltering Arctic; that the summit of Mt. Everest is studded with fragments of ancient aquatic creatures; that an inland sea filled with plesiosaurs and mosasaurs used to stretch from the Rockies to the Appalachian Mountains; that even now, although we cannot feel it, all around us the ground is shifting, folding, sinking, rising, rifting. No matter that our own little sliver of time on this planet is hopelessly narrow; the things we can learn about it are virtually limitless. Bjornerud has spent her life engaged in that project, and it has never lost its thrill. Of the Earth, she says, with plainspoken and convincing passion, “What a place to grow up.” ♦



Kathryn Schulz, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing. Her latest book is “*Lost & Found*.”

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[Books](#)

The Forgotten History of Sex in America

Today's battles over issues like gender nonconformity and reproductive rights have antecedents that have been lost or suppressed. What can we learn from them?

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

August 26, 2024



“Fierce Desires,” a new book by Rebecca L. Davis, is intent on showing how unstable the binaries of sex and gender have always been.

Illustration by Laura Peretti

In 1627, a professional lace-maker named Thomasine Hall boarded a ship in England and arrived at Jamestown, Virginia, to become a

maidservant in the household of a man named John Tyos. Women of English origin were scarce in that part of the New World, amid the recently established and extremely labor-intensive tobacco plantations. A count conducted in 1624 recorded only two hundred and thirty adult women among the twelve hundred and fifty Europeans living in Virginia. Women were urgently needed for marital fellowship and procreation, and male settlers paid the Virginia Company the considerable sum of a hundred and fifty pounds a head for the transportation of prospective wives across the Atlantic. Females were also in demand for their gender-specific domestic skills. This was Hall's value to Tyos. As an experienced seamstress, Hall, who was twenty-five or so, would have made clothing and other items. Additional duties would likely have included cooking, cleaning, candle-making, and other forms of women's work.

But was Hall really a woman? After Hall had been living in Tyos's household for a year or two, rumors started to spread that the supposed maidservant was—in the assessment of one male neighbor—“a man and woeman.” It fell to three local women to perform a physical examination of Hall's genitals and make their own determination. When their investigation convinced them that Hall was male, the matter came to the attention of Captain Nathaniel Basse, whose military rank and past service in colonial government made him the community's unofficial leader. Basse asked Hall, Are you a man or a woman? According to a partially surviving record of the exchange, from the Virginia General Court, in Jamestown, Hall “replied that hee was both.”

Hall had, to go by the court record, “a peece of fleshe . . . as bigg as the top of his little finger”—that is, a penislike appendage, though Hall could not achieve an erection with it. Hall also had “a peece of an hole.” (It's possible that Hall had a form of congenital adrenal hyperplasia, in which an individual with two X chromosomes produces an unusually large amount of androgen, resulting in an enlarged clitoris.) For Rebecca L. Davis, a professor of history and

of women's and gender studies at the University of Delaware, and the author of "Fierce Desires: A New History of Sex and Sexuality in America" (Norton), Hall's story is a potent parable, revealing how questions of sex, gender, orientation, and identity had the ability to disrupt communities from the nation's beginning, thereby laying bare the structures of power, property, and propriety by which those communities were governed.

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Whether Hall was a man or a woman mattered a great deal in early America. This helps explain why the maidservant was subjected to multiple inspections, with a succession of witnesses rooting around beneath Hall's skirts and petticoats for firm proof. A male indentured servant had the opportunity in the New World to work his way toward owning land—to become, Davis writes, "a patriarch of his own household, the governor of a miniature state who was expected to keep his dependents in line and maintain the family's reputation." Female servants had no such path to independence; the closest they could get was the status of wife, which itself was a condition of subservience. Imported workers were typically prohibited from marrying for the period of their indentured servitude, which could last from four to seven years, and were therefore barred from having legally sanctioned sex. A female servant's value to her employer could be drastically undermined if she got pregnant, and she would have a year added to her contract of service to make up for her lost labor. It was, in fact, a rumor that Hall had been sleeping with a female servant in

another household which forced questions about Hall's sex. If the apparent maidservant was actually a man committing fornication that might lead to another servant's falling pregnant, then Hall was a materially destabilizing influence in the community.

Hall, under examination, attested to a gender-switching backstory. Having been christened with the name Thomasine, Hall began living with an aunt in London at the age of twelve, and seems to have been trained in needlework. A decade later, dressed as a man and going by the name Thomas, Hall enlisted in the English Army, and spent a year in France in the service. Upon returning to England, Hall once again opted for women's clothes and women's labor, working as a lace-maker. "Hermaphrodites" and "androgynes" had been known of since ancient times, Davis writes. But, in Hall's era, society "typically insisted that a person choose one gender—and stick to it. In their refusal to align with a single gender, Hall was unusual." (Davis uses they/them pronouns for Hall.)

For Davis, what is most important about Hall's story—with which she opens her book—is what seems most modern about it: Hall's refusal to be defined within the limitations of a narrow gender binary. This fascinating bit of history is known only from two damaged pages of court documents; nonetheless, historians of sexuality and gender have in recent decades quested through them with no less vigor than Tyos and his neighbors once searched amid Hall's underthings. In Davis's own consideration of the case, she offers a heroic reading, in which Hall amounts to a below-stairs Orlando, asserting the right to move fluidly from one identity to another, and thereby subverting what would become the new nation before it even knew what it was.

"Fierce Desires" is billed as the first major history of sex and sexuality in America since John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman published "Intimate Matters," in 1988. (A third edition was published in 2012.) In their study, D'Emilio, a pioneering historian

of gay life, and Freedman, a much lauded feminist historian, wove together a wealth of research about the expression and policing of sexuality in American lives through three centuries, from the family-centered reproductive imperatives of the colonial period to the more romantic model that prevailed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which sexual relationships were taken as a source of personal identity and happiness. The authors made it clear that, for instance, the Puritans were not so pure. In one case of bestiality prosecuted in Plymouth, the perpetrator was required to identify in a lineup the specific sheep that he'd violated, before both the man and the animals were executed for the crime. In the nineteenth century, Western cowboy culture bred same-sex intimacy, along with bawdy doggerel about saddling up and riding. D'Emilio and Freedman sought to complicate the straitlaced fantasies about the past which religious and political conservatives were promoting in the nineteen-eighties, but reproductive heterosexuality was at the center of their narrative—understandably enough, since reproductive heterosexuality is the structure within which most Americans have lived.



"It's a paddle, not an oar. I keep hitting you in the head with the paddle."
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

Davis, on the other hand, centers marginal identities, whether those of nonconforming individuals or those of whole peoples whose sexualities were vilified and constrained by colonial conquest and exploitation. Davis has not written a history of queer America, or a queer history of America. But, determined to show how unstable the binaries of sex and gender always were, she refers us to the seventeenth-century category of “deputy husband”—a woman who might legitimately take over masculine responsibilities in the stead of a long-absent spouse—and to the tender exchanges of nineteenth-century male friends who addressed each other as “husband” and “wife” while also sharing hopes for future female spouses. When Davis does address reproductive heterosexuality, she’s particularly intent on exploring the long history of women’s efforts to exert control over their own bodies, whether through avoiding conception or inducing abortion. She wants to show how the battles of today—over issues like gender nonconformity and reproductive rights—have antecedents that have been forgotten or suppressed.

Like D’Emilio and Freedman, Davis arranges her book chronologically: it runs from colonial-era sex police to the contemporary moral panic over Drag Queen Story Hour. (Her title has an echo of drag terminology, in which “fierce” is a term of approbation.) Unlike her predecessors, however, whose work was a narrative synthesis of research enlivened by dramatic vignettes, Davis tells her history largely through a series of short biographical accounts of individuals, laying out her case studies with a sympathetic imagination that attempts to fill in the inevitable gaps. The figures include Abigail Abbot Bailey, an eighteenth-century New Englander whose efforts to leave her abusive husband, Asa, were hindered not just by strictures against divorce but also by the prevailing attitudes toward conjugal desire. Asa eventually agreed to a parting of ways, but only for fear of being charged with the capital crime of incest, having raped his and Abigail’s teen-age daughter Phebe. And this happened after the penniless Abigail was

obliged to take an almost three-hundred-mile solo horseback journey to be reunited with her younger children, from whom Asa had arranged to separate her. Such stories, Davis suggests, need not be typical to be illustrative of what was a common experience among disempowered groups: the experience of sexual coercion, or the threat thereof. At the same time, Abigail's story is hardly evidence of intergenerational female solidarity. When Asa first began to demand that Phebe accompany him when he was travelling, Abigail seems to have focussed less on the threat to her daughter than on her own neglected status in the role of wife. "My room was deserted," she complained. Davis notes that "reports of child abuse and incest in divorce cases from the eighteenth century rarely expressed outrage on the children's behalf."

The Baileys were white Protestants, but much of Davis's attention is devoted to individuals from subordinated groups, not least those whose lands European settlers colonized. Davis writes about how Zuni women, in the American Southwest, would pray that a newborn girl would have "large and fruitful sex organs." (Comparable prayers after the birth of a boy conveyed the hope that his sex organ would remain small.) The sexual habits of certain Indigenous peoples—like uninhibited engagement in premarital sex, or a woman's practical expectation that a sex partner might give her a blanket or another useful household item afterward—are deduced from the appalled records of confounded Europeans, who had as much difficulty as any of us do in perceiving difference from their own norms as being anything other than perplexing deviance. Certain tribal nations understood that people might have both masculine and feminine qualities—in what has become known as "two-spirit" identities—and sometimes valued such people for their spiritual elevation. A Jesuit priest remarked on boys from tribal nations near Lake Superior who, "while still young, assume the garb of women, and retain it throughout their lives." Davis notes that, for Native peoples, "gender transition among children

assigned female at birth occurred less often,” although she does not explore the cultural conditions of this disparity further.

Davis writes, too, of the sexual exploitation endemic to the institution of slavery. Black women were not only subject to sexual assault from those who enslaved them but were evaluated for their fertility, so that slaveholders could increase the head count of those who labored in their fields. James Marion Sims, the onetime president of the American Medical Association and the so-called father of modern gynecology, developed a technique for repairing fistulas—a complication of childbirth resulting in a hole in the tissue between the bladder and the vagina—by experimenting, without anesthesia, on enslaved women. (A statue of Sims that once stood in Central Park was defaced and then removed, in 2018, after anti-racist protests.) Given the horrendous commodification of the enslaved woman’s reproductive system, the use of folk-medicine abortifacients like sage tea and cotton root functioned as a form of collective defiance. “Resistance to and subversion of enslavement’s brutality occurred not only in slave rebellions but in these intimate acts,” Davis shrewdly observes.

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, Davis explains, sex and sexuality came to be understood not just as an enmeshment in a social order but also as the expression of individual desire. She gives an account of the origins of “free love,” a term used as early as the eighteen-twenties to characterize the behavior of those who rejected the notion that marriage was the only site for sexual activity. Primarily a pejorative wielded against bigamists, polygamists, and adulterers, the term could also be applied to, say, members of a community in Oneida, New York, established by the would-be theologian John Humphrey Noyes. Comparing marriage to slavery, Noyes insisted that both men and women have sex with multiple partners, and practice birth control, in a system that he called Complex Marriage. Davis does not exactly celebrate the gospel according to Noyes, who sounds like the kind of cult leader about whom Netflix would today make a lurid series. But she

nonetheless insists that women who participated in the Oneida experiment—or who followed Brigham Young’s recommendation of polygamy—had made valid choices among the limited alternatives available.

By the later chapters of the book, more of Davis’s biographical subjects are speaking for themselves. Through the story of Steve Kiyoshi Kuromiya, born in the nineteen-forties and raised in Monrovia, California, Davis gives an account of the gay-rights movement, from the postwar “homophile” groups, which sought acceptance for gay people through assimilation into heterosexual society, to the rise of the more radical Gay Liberation Front. This group, of which Kuromiya helped found the Philadelphia chapter, emerged in the wake of the Stonewall riots and partook in the late-sixties iteration of free love, which Davis defines as “a defiant celebration of nonmarital, commitment-free consensual sex.” In her sketch of Kuromiya’s life, she tells of one of his formative experiences—his arrest and three-day detention at the age of ten, after having been caught in a park meeting a sixteen-year-old male acquaintance for sex—drawing not on court documents alleging his delinquency but on Kuromiya’s understanding of it: as an element in an activist’s origin story. According to Kuromiya, it was when he first learned “that somehow I was criminal without knowing it.” Still, the grownup Kuromiya’s utopian conviction that almost all men might find within themselves some degree of same-sex desire if freed from cultural inhibition is an expression of the liberation movement of the sixties and seventies, and now appears as time-bound as any of the other historical verities that Davis skeptically analyzes. Davis does not answer a tricky question that Kuromiya’s account raises: in what contexts could a ten-year-old child be considered a self-directed sexual actor rather than a victim of predation.

In her final chapters, Davis writes of the ways in which a concern for children’s safety in the realm of sex and sexuality has been weaponized by conservative culture-war activists, who, squaring

off against Drag Queen Story Hours around the country, have a broader agenda in their sights—quashing advances in L.G.B.T.Q. rights and further restricting women’s access to birth control and abortion. It’s in light of such efforts that Davis offers the story of Thomasine Hall: not just as an early instance of gender nonconformity but as an admirable exemplar of resistance to oppressive systems. Davis explains that, after consideration of the case, the Jamestown court concluded that Hall should adopt men’s attire but also wear an apron and a hair covering appropriate to a woman. “The court effectively created a new gender category for Hall,” she writes.

Davis grants that the intention was to inflict humiliation, but she does not accept that as the only interpretation. Her discussion invites us to see a tacit acknowledgment of Hall’s identity as both male and female, and, therefore, a victory for Hall’s “inventiveness and defiance”—the characteristics that, above all others, this book seeks to uncover everywhere. Did Hall experience the ruling as a victory and a progressive liberation? That seems doubtful, but, in the absence of documentary evidence about Hall’s life after the verdict, Davis permits herself a fanciful speculation. Perhaps, she writes, Hall moved into new geographical terrain, and encountered Indigenous communities who appreciated the expression of a two-spirit identity. The wishfulness of this scenario—in which Hall sheds the constraints of seventeenth-century society and, in the parlance of a queer high schooler newly arrived at college, finds their people—reveals at least as much about our cultural moment as the tattered documents of the Chesapeake reveal about Hall’s. ♦



Rebecca Mead joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1997. Her books include “[Home/Land: A Memoir of Departure and Return](#).”

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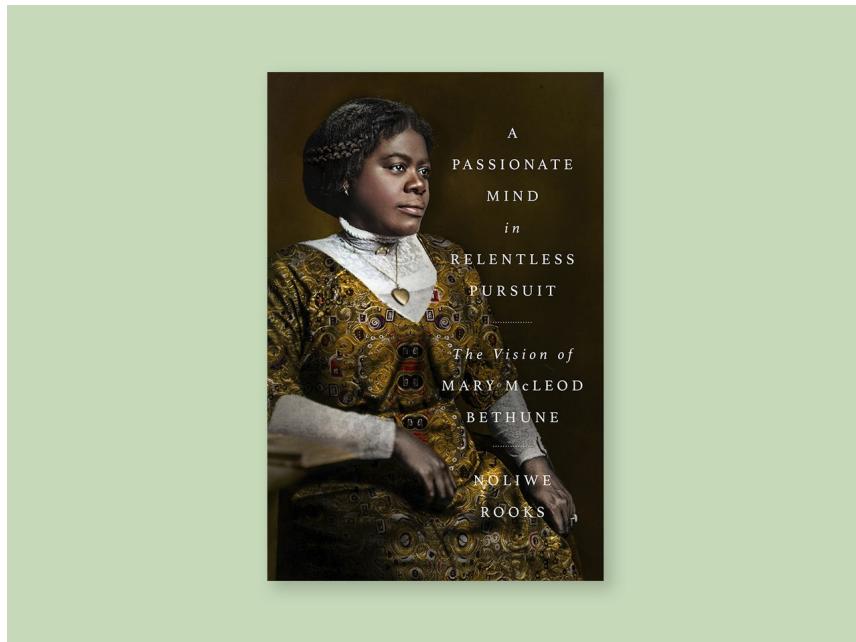
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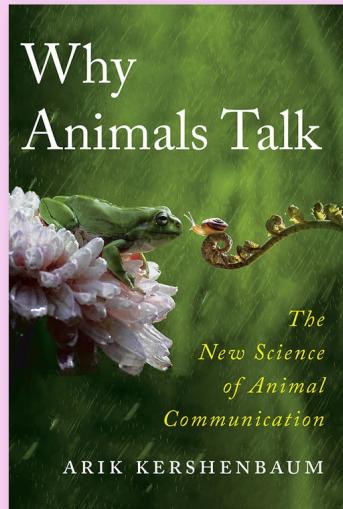
Briefly Noted

“*A Passionate Mind in Relentless Pursuit,*” “*Why Animals Talk,*” “*The Rich People Have Gone Away,*” and “*Grown Women.*”

August 26, 2024



A Passionate Mind in Relentless Pursuit, by *Noliwe Rooks* (*Penguin Press*). This slim, engaging work of history looks back on the life of Mary McLeod Bethune, a Black educator and activist who was born to former slaves in the Jim Crow South and rose to prominence as an adviser to several U.S. Presidents. Though not a household name today, Bethune was well known and admired during her lifetime. She was a mentor to the poet Langston Hughes and persuaded business owners in Florida to invest in a “beach for Black people.” Rooks, whose grandmother graduated from Bethune-Cookman University, one of the many institutions Bethune founded, excavates Bethune’s biography to reveal valuable lessons for the present.



Why Animals Talk, by Arik Kershbaum (*Penguin Press*). A wealth of information is contained in this account of animal cognition, which focusses on such vocal creatures as hyraxes, parrots, gibbons, and chimpanzees. Kershbaum, a zoologist at the University of Cambridge, relates tales from his field work—including a frigid expedition to northern Italy, where the wolves he listened for all day approach in darkest night—which demystify the howls, clicks, and whistles that could otherwise pass for noise. There are myriad examples of animals communicating: dolphins, for instance, seem to name themselves. Though animal utterances are different from our own, comparing animal expression to that of humans can illuminate the complex reasons behind the evolution of communication in each species.

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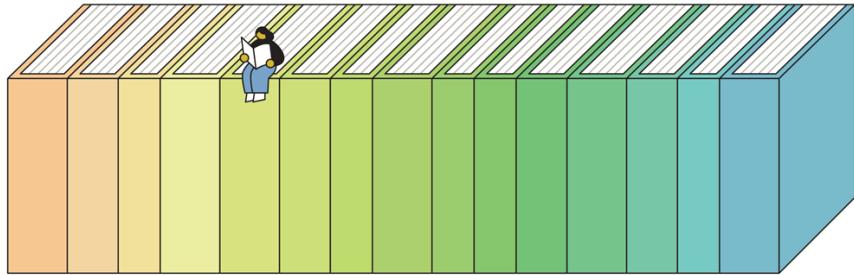


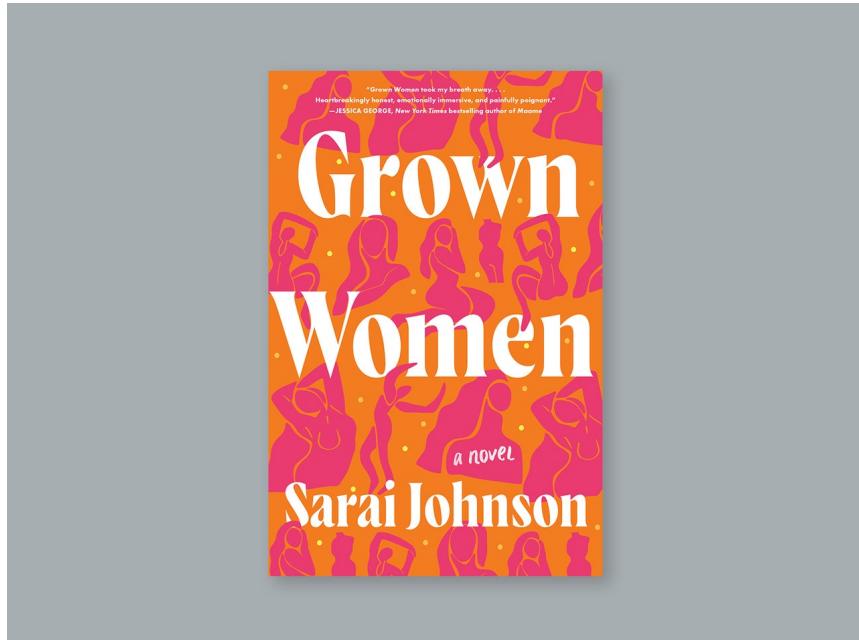
Illustration by Rose Wong

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The Rich People Have Gone Away, by *Regina Porter* (Hogarth). The precipitating event in this novel of *COVID* and comeuppance takes place on a hike, when a married couple—who have fled Brooklyn for a cottage upstate—have an argument. The wife, who is pregnant, throws hot tea at her husband; then, as he remembers it, he “let his wife dangle, if only momentarily,” over a cliff. After the wife runs away, the husband files a missing-persons report, and he becomes the prime suspect in her disappearance. Porter’s story has the signposts of a mystery and the economically stratified ensemble cast of a social novel. In chapters centered on characters whose lives are disrupted by the couple’s drama and by lockdown,

people sift through pasts whose cruelties match those of their pandemic present.



Grown Women, by Sarai Johnson (Harper). Four generations of Black women are at the heart of this tender and expansive novel, which begins in the nineteen-seventies. When Charlotte, eighteen years old and pregnant, flees her wealthy family's home, she is determined to do better by her unborn child than her mother, Evelyn, did by her. But Charlotte's choice leads to a life of poverty; eighteen years later, her daughter, Corinna, also gives birth to a girl. For Evelyn, Charlotte, and Corinna, the baby represents an opportunity “to move, if not *on*, then forward,” to break from patterns of physical and emotional violence carried out by the men in their lives, and by their own mothers. The three women endeavor to raise the girl together—a journey that leads them to discover the limits of forgiveness, and to reassess what it looks like to raise a “grown woman.”

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On and Off the Menu

Bonnie Slotnick, the Downtown Food-History Savant

In the forty-eight years that she's lived in the West Village, the owner of the iconic cookbook shop has never ordered delivery.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

August 26, 2024



Slotnick's eponymous store counts food luminaries such as Ruth Reichl among its devotees.
Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

On a humid afternoon not long ago, Bonnie Slotnick, the owner of an eponymous cookbook shop in the East Village, hiked up to the carpeted top floor of an elegant town house on West Twelfth Street.

Slotnick, who is seventy and slight, almost wispy, wore a sleeveless linen shirt pinned with a small enamel carrot. The house had belonged to the late food writer Mimi Sheraton—the first woman to hold the position of restaurant critic at the *Times*, who further distinguished herself by wearing disguises on the job—and was freshly on the market. In advance of its sale, Sheraton’s son had emptied its four stories of almost everything but his mother’s vast collection of books on food and cooking. In the house’s eaves, where Sheraton and her husband kept cozy twin offices, the books awaited Slotnick, who specializes in out-of-print and antiquarian titles, and who’d been given first dibs.

“There are about three boxes of books that are legitimately old and rare,” Slotnick said, as she began to peruse them with a practiced confidence. “There’s an eighteenth-century olive-oil treatise in Italian, with all kinds of ingredients.” The most valuable item was what Slotnick called a manuscript, an eighteenth-century handwritten British household cookbook, authored by “a very literate servant,” she guessed. Among recipes for “a very good pudding,” for mock turtle (made from veal), and for Turkish dolmas was one for “gay powders” (meant to treat epileptic fits), which included serving sizes: “as much as will lie upon a shilling,” for an adult; “as much as will lie upon a sixpence,” for a child. “Now, there’s a measurement for you!” Slotnick said.

In a copy of a nineteenth-century book called “The Encyclopædia of Practical Cookery”—“amazing because it purports to be a complete history of food before any research had actually been done,” Slotnick told me—Sheraton had written her name. “She didn’t do that so often,” Slotnick said. “And she didn’t have a lot of books that were inscribed to her. But she had a habit that made it easy for me to vouch for the provenance, which is that she often doodled with a pen. I just imagine how much time she probably spent on the phone interviewing people. And if I saw one of those books away from this house I would say, ‘Oh, that’s a Mimi Sheraton book.’ ”

Slotnick's relationship with Sheraton was "triangular," she told me. Their main point of connection was the late Sally Darr, a self-taught chef who co-owned, with her husband, the French restaurant La Tulipe, and who was a regular customer at Slotnick's bookshop. Sheraton, a friend of Darr's, would stop by once in a while, too, until what Slotnick referred to as "the Great Schism." One day in the early two-thousands, she recounted, "Mimi came in when I had just bought a whole collection of *Gourmet* magazines from the forties and fifties. I had a longtime customer who was looking for the first few issues. Mimi said, 'Oh, look at these!' And I said, 'Don't touch those. They're not for sale yet!' She never came again."

Before Sheraton died last year, there was a comic reconciliation of sorts, involving a cookbook slipped into the wrong mail slot. In addition to a passion for cookbooks, the two women shared an affinity for Greenwich Village, where Slotnick has lived in the same apartment for forty-eight years. Sheraton might have donated her papers to N.Y.U., Slotnick noted, if not for a long-standing grudge: she felt that the university had "destroyed the neighborhood." Slotnick tended to agree. From a card table piled with books, she picked up a copy of "Greenwich Village Cookbook: Approximately 400 Recipes from Greenwich Village's Leading Restaurants," by Vivian Kramer, who was married to one of the founders of the *Village Voice*. Of the dozens of restaurants in the book, including O. Henry's Steak House (Yankee pot roast; chopped chicken livers) and the Lichee Tree (paper-wrapped chicken; honey fried fruited rice), only a handful were still open.

Slotnick's fixation on cookbooks began with "The Settlement Cook Book," by Lizzie Black Kander, first published in 1901 by the Settlement House, an organization in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, that supported recent immigrants, many of them European Jews. Slotnick remembers lying under the dining-room table as a child in New Jersey, paging through her mother's copy, and eating cookies. She was fascinated, too, by a tiny pamphlet called "Butter-Nut

Bread's Interesting Collection of Good Ideas," filled with kitchen tips that read to her like magic: wrap leftover cheese in a cloth dampened with vinegar to preserve it longer; add a dash of nutmeg to lima beans to "amaze your friends."

When Slotnick was fourteen, her parents went on vacation to Israel, their first time away from her and her older sister since they were born. Her mother suffered a heart attack and died on the trip. Though she hadn't been a particularly passionate cook, the kitchen was her realm and its objects became talismans. "I have this little tomato-shaped salt shaker that's like the quintessence of my mother," Slotnick said. "It's all I need to remember her."

As a young adult, Slotnick began to collect cookbooks and, after graduating from Parsons with a degree in fashion illustration, got a job at a cookbook publisher. For years, she sourced used and out-of-print titles for Nach Waxman, the late founder of Kitchen Arts & Letters, the beloved cookbook store on the Upper East Side, before opening her own place, in 1997, in the West Village. After her landlord refused to renew her lease, in 2014, she moved her store to East Second Street, where I visited her a few weeks after we met at Sheraton's house. Shelves from floor to ceiling were crammed with books, every table piled with still more, plus some food-related antiques: plates, picnic baskets, a probe meant for trying a mystery piece of chocolate without putting it to your lips.

From a section behind the counter, where Slotnick keeps her most valuable merchandise, she pulled out another old British manuscript. Nearly an hour passed as we flipped through the small volume, guessing at words written in swooping, italicized cursive: "bay or laurel leaf," "vegetable marrow" (zucchini), "a fairly quick oven"—i.e., heated to a temperature a bare hand could withstand for only a few seconds. "Ovens didn't have thermostats in those days," Slotnick explained. "A slow oven meant you could hold your hand maybe to the count of ten."

“Cookbooks tell you so much about the time, without meaning to,” Ruth Reichl, the former *Gourmet* editor and a Slotnick devotee, told me. “Most people, when they’re writing history, they know that’s what they’re doing. But these are little unconscious time capsules.” Among Reichl’s own collection are many titles she’s bought from Slotnick over the years, including a 1957 spiral-bound community cookbook from Virginia, featuring a recipe for biscuits that requires beating the dough with an axe handle for half an hour.

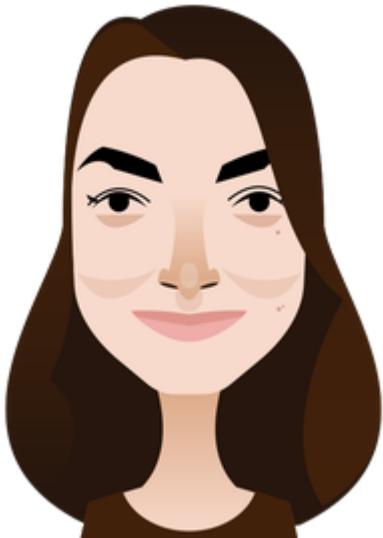
During the afternoon I spent in the shop, Slotnick had a steady flow of visitors, some of them food professionals—a cookbook editor visiting from Scotland, a food photographer buying a gift certificate for a food-stylist friend—but more who appeared delighted, and almost stunned, to have stumbled into the place, invited into the highly specific contents of a singular mind. When each person departed, Slotnick called out brightly, as though she hadn’t repeated the sentence dozens of times, “Would you like a list of all the bookstores in the neighborhood?,” gesturing at a stack of flyers.

On her desk, Slotnick keeps a record of customer requests, sometimes following up years later, when she finally finds an elusive title. During *COVID*, she invited customers to make appointments to browse completely alone for an hour. Hers is an approach that seems to have inspired a new generation of cookbook sellers, Reichl said, citing Seattle’s thirteen-year-old Book Larder and Kitchen Lingo, which opened in 2023, in Long Beach, California. “The idea was that everything was being killed by Barnes & Noble—you know, ‘You’ve Got Mail,’ ” she said. “But, when I do book tours now, I’m suddenly in independent bookstores again.”

When I asked Slotnick if reading and talking about food all day made her hungry, she said the opposite was true: it fuelled her. “When I used to drive around Vermont in the summer, going from bookstore to bookstore, I would always get a blinding headache,

probably from hunger,” she told me. “But I’d go into a bookstore, and if they had a big cookbook section it was, like, instant cure.” In her apartment, she prepares simple meals, rarely following recipes, and, when she eats out, she goes to the sorts of restaurants that appear intent on preserving an evaporating version of New York: Veselka, Lexington Candy Shop, Elephant & Castle, on Greenwich Avenue. (In her decades in the neighborhood, she has never once ordered delivery.) When I invited Slotnick for a meal at Elephant & Castle, she sounded thrilled. “I’ve always wanted someone to take me to lunch and then write about me, ‘She pushed her salad away . . . ,’” she said. “There’s a salad there that I would never push away without finishing.”

The day before our date, she called to tell me that the pain from a recent knee surgery was so severe that she couldn’t sit down for long enough to eat. I decided to go to the restaurant anyway. Open since 1973, it was a favorite of Sheraton’s, too; in a 1997 article in the *Times*, she described its omelettes as “imaginative,” and declared it to serve “the best cup of American coffee in the city.” In the back crook of the warm, L-shaped dining room, I ordered from a menu that felt, delightfully, decades out of date: fried calamari with a creamy, curry-flecked dipping sauce; lime-and-coriander grilled chicken on a bed of angel-hair pasta; and a wonderful salad—a heap of sliced cucumber, avocado, and Granny Smith apple, topped with shreds of smoked chicken and hazelnuts and a ginger-orange vinaigrette—that I surmised, incorrectly, was Slotnick’s usual. Later, she told me that she gets the crisp chicken with Bayley Hazen blue cheese and red-leaf lettuce. It’s served with chopsticks, she mentioned, and, although she wasn’t completely sure why, she had an educated guess: because the meat is velveted, or dredged in cornstarch, before it’s fried, in the Cantonese style. ♦



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

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[Pop Music](#)

How Post Malone Made Himself at Home in Country Music

Everyone's headed to Nashville these days, but no one is as comfortable there as he is.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)

August 21, 2024



*“F-1 Trillion” is not a great album, but it is good fun, and sometimes more than that.
Illustration by Tim McDonagh*

In 1994, the country singer Alan Jackson released a hit country song about country songs by non-country singers. Instead of criticizing these new arrivals, he just chuckled. “The whole world’s gone country,” Jackson sang, and in the video he flashed a sly smile, as if he were wondering what took ’em so long. Country music always seems to be swinging in and out of fashion, and thirty years later Jackson’s claim is truer than ever. [Taylor Swift](#), who was a country singer before she was a pop leviathan, remains perhaps the most beloved performer in the world. Beyoncé topped the album chart with “[Cowboy Carter](#),” which was both a tribute to

country music and a critique of it; she “redefined a genre and reclaimed country music’s Black roots,” according to one fan, who also happens to be the [Vice-President of the United States](#).

Shaboozey, a Nigerian American singer who appeared on “Cowboy Carter,” has been ubiquitous this summer with “A Bar Song (Tipsy),” a twangy update of a twenty-year-old hip-hop hit. [Lana Del Rey](#), one of the most beguiling voices in popular music, is promising to release her first country-inspired album, “Lasso,” next month. “The music business,” she said, earlier this year, is “going country.”

But this year no one has gone country more wholeheartedly, or more successfully, than Post Malone, a face-tattooed former hip-hop star who seems to make fans and friends everywhere. He appeared on both “Cowboy Carter” and the recent Taylor Swift album, [“The Tortured Poets Department”](#)—and, if you’re feeling brave, you could argue that on each album the Post Malone collaboration (respectively, “LEVII’S JEANS” and “Fortnight,” which topped the pop chart) is the highlight. Post Malone has built himself a place near the top of the pop hierarchy: his 2018 single “Sunflower” is the fifth most popular song in the history of Spotify. But his last album, “Austin,” met with a slightly more subdued reception: it was the first Post Malone album without a Top Ten hit. He arrived in country music not as a critic or a reformer but as an eager fan and student. This spring, he played covers of his favorite country songs at Stagecoach, the California country festival. And earlier this month he celebrated the release of his new album, “F-1 Trillion,” with a performance at the Grand Ole Opry, the long-running country showcase, where one of the hosts, Kelly Sutton, described him as the best kind of guest. “He’s making everybody feel so at home, because he feels so at home,” Sutton [said](#). The album hadn’t yet been released, but Post’s Nashville makeover already looked like a success: the lead single, a playful song called “I Had Some Help,” featuring [Morgan Wallen](#), this era’s definitive country singer, had already made it to the top of both the pop chart

and the country-radio chart—an important sign that country fans were not just willing to accept Post Malone but happy to listen to him, too.

Post Malone first emerged in 2015 with a single called “White Iverson,” a boastful hip-hop track (he was comparing himself to Allen Iverson, the legendarily self-assured basketball player) with a twist: when Post declared, in the opening verse, “I got me some braids, and I got me some hos,” he didn’t rap the lyrics so much as he moaned them. That moaning voice, often enhanced with a quaver that can sound like a digital effect, helped him realize his hip-hop fantasies, but success only increased his sheepishness, and vice versa. He carried himself like a walking question mark, shoulders hunched and eyebrows raised, as if he were apologizing for his own songs, or for the questionable decisions that often seem to inspire them. Even before “F-1 Trillion,” Post was drifting away from the sounds and attitudes of hip-hop; “Austin,” his most melancholy album, included a song titled “Green Thumb,” which evoked the sort of psychedelic folk music that briefly flourished about a quarter of a century before he was born, in 1995. When he introduced himself on the Opry stage, he used his given name, Austin Richard Post, and he dressed up a bit, in a snug blazer and a cream cowboy hat, although he sounded genuinely surprised when someone in the crowd told him he looked great. “Oh! Thank you very much,” he said. “I was kind of going for, like, a Kmart [George Strait](#).”

“F-1 Trillion” is long and shaggy, with eighteen songs, and nine more on the deluxe “Long Bed” edition; it is not a great album, but it is good fun, and sometimes more than that. The title comes from a rowdy, bluesy collaboration with Hank Williams, Jr., in which both men brag about being low-rent high rollers, driving the most extravagant Ford F-series imaginable: “My Lambo and my ammo’s all camo-green / Yeah, I got an F-1 Trillion limousine.” Fifteen of the original eighteen songs feature guest singers, and Post is a solicitous host, happy to be upstaged. “I Had Some Help,” the

album's hit single, is brisk and slick, carried along by Wallen's distinctive rhythmic phrasing. That song, like the rest of the album, was partly written and produced by Louis Bell, Post's main musical partner, and by Ryan Vojtesak, also known as Charlie Handsome, a hip-hop producer who worked with Post early on, and is now one of Wallen's key collaborators; while the whole world has been going country, country has been going hip-hop, at least a little bit. When people complain that country music isn't country music anymore, this is partly what they mean.

Post doesn't seem inclined to choose between the various definitions of "country": the album includes a jokey collaboration with the virtuoso bluegrass guitarist Billy Strings, a not-quite-love song with [Dolly Parton](#), and an earnest power ballad featuring Jelly Roll, who has proved in the past few years that a face-tattooed white guy from the world of hip-hop can become a major presence on country radio. (Perhaps Post was paying attention.) In "Nosedive," Lainey Wilson helps him turn the titular word into a musical analogy, hurtling down the scale and then pulling back up, away from trouble. It all works best when Post isn't laying it on too thick. He is less convincing when he tries to resurrect the sound of Western swing, and more convincing when he teams up with [HARDY](#) to wrap a love song around a halfway romantic question: "Would you hide my gun?" The biggest difference is the clarity: Post was formerly known for blurry songs that evoked blurry feelings, but country listeners typically expect intelligible lyrics, coherent narratives—and, often, deliciously corny concepts. In "Guy for That," Post and Luke Combs commiserate about how they can find someone to do just about anything ("I got a guy to sight in my rifle / My mama's new boyfriend re-binds Bibles"), except make things right with a woman who has left.

No genre can be endlessly inclusive. When the hosts at the Opry welcomed Post by noting that he grew up partly in Texas, and was "a true Southern gentleman," they were acknowledging that a different singer, from a different place, with a different attitude,

might not have been received so warmly. Country music is a style—or, rather, a whole constellation of styles—but it is also an attitude, a community, a way of working, and a business model. Some country-inspired performers find effective ways to kick against its conventions, but Post knows a good party when he sees one, and what he mainly wants to do is join in. One of the bonus tracks, “Ain’t How It Ends,” is written from the perspective of a lovelorn guy who knows that his life has become a country cliché: “Hank and Johnny, Strait and Ronnie Dunn made all the rules / The girl gets gone, guy ties one on like he’s supposed to do.” It’s a sad song, but Post sounds happy enough to waste another night going with the flow. ♦



Kelefa Sanneh has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2008. He is the author of “[Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres](#).”

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[On Television](#)

Mourning the End of “Evil,” a Show Like Nothing Else on Television

The Paramount+ procedural’s unusually serious treatment of faith—and delightfully absurdist take on almost everything else—made it a bright spot in an increasingly risk-averse TV landscape.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)

August 23, 2024



“Evil” has always stood out for its uncommonly open approach to faith.

Illustration by Xiao Hua Yang

The version of Catholicism favored by David Acosta, one of the two protagonists of the delightfully unhinged religious procedural “Evil,” likely doesn’t exist. David (Mike Colter), a Black man who starts the series as a priest-in-training, is often let down by the Church’s ossified white leadership. But his more progressive faith is accompanied by rather medieval forms of devotion. He battles against demons, participates in exorcisms, and chases the high of a formative vision of God, even if he can now only achieve moments of transcendence with the assistance of psychedelics. The temporal dislocation of his calling creates a sense of cognitive dissonance, but, in David’s view, dedicating himself to the Church, for all its imperfections, may be his best chance at insuring that the world doesn’t go to Hell in a handbasket.

Popular culture seldom explores spirituality with much depth. “Evil,” which wraps up its four-season run this month, on Paramount+, always stood out for its uncommonly open approach to faith. But the show feels just as distinctive for its particular tonal mixture—at once spooky, horny, satirical, larkish, and eschatological. The effect is that of a philosopher in an exorcist’s trenchcoat. The series, which has recently found a larger audience on Netflix, follows David and his two nonreligious partners—Kristen Bouchard (Katja Herbers), a criminal psychologist with experience evaluating the sanity of her interlocutors, and Ben Shakir (Aasif Mandvi), a self-taught generalist who moonlights as a debunker of the supernatural—as they look into potential cases of demonic possession around Queens, New York. It’s a brainchild of Robert and Michelle King, the married couple behind “The Good Wife” and “The Good Fight,” and it shares those shows’ gimlet-eyed tech pessimism and interest in lives lived online. “Evil” ’s primary villain, Leland Townsend (Michael Emerson), encourages a dweeb who’s experienced romantic rejection to embrace inceldom, and charges a subordinate with running a troll farm whose mission is to keep people doomscrolling. Implanting despair requires a deft touch, Leland explains. “Kill people, take their

children—you run the risk of them turning to God,” he says. Far better “to keep them nervous, unbound, focussing on all the bad things in the world.”

It’s to “Evil”’s advantage that its plots veer between the serious and the seriously goofy. An episode about a nine-year-old boy whose parents suspect he’s trying to kill his baby sister is an early triumph; a later installment about the urban legend of an elevator that sends teen-agers to Hell is just as satisfying. The series regularly interrogates how people are incentivized to sin, especially when it gets them attention. But it also considers how we might expand our notion of spiritual evil to include, say, a priest’s earthly grief cutting him off from God, or the perpetuation of racism in its manifold forms. In one harrowing episode, David lands at a hospital and at the mercy of a nurse prone to drugging Black patients. During another case, when a white cop fatally shoots a Black woman, all three assessors scoff at the officer’s suggestion that a demon made him see a gun in her hand.

The Kings are perhaps the only TV creators working today who are able to make their procedurals feel authorial, and fans of their previous series will recognize their thematic preoccupations and deep bench of character actors, many of whom are from the theatre world. (Christine Lahti, who plays Kristen’s sexy, ethically flexible mother, Sheryl, can always be relied on to steal scenes.) But “Evil” is more than an intellectual exercise for its showrunners; its pursuit of questions of faith, in particular, seems decidedly personal. Ben, who grew up in a Muslim family but adheres to a strictly scientific world view, finds himself increasingly unmoored by the loss of tradition. An empiricist existence can’t provide answers to life’s greater mysteries—or closure with the deceased. Kristen, a lapsed Catholic, bristles at the ingrained bias against women within the Church and points out more than once that their caseload of persons acting unacceptably strange skews heavily female. She’s baffled that someone like David’s mentor, Sister Andrea (Andrea Martin), would spend her days cleaning up after priests—men who

are her spiritual inferiors—or choose to serve an institution so hostile to the idea of gender equality.

Inevitably, the cases take a toll on each character's sense of self. Ben grows depressed as he encounters phenomena he can't explain away. David's patience with the Church frays as it becomes clear that its reluctance to combat evil on a larger scale is a matter of will rather than resources. And Kristen reacts as many of us likely would after being confronted with atrocities on a routine basis: she's consumed by righteous anger. A protective mother with four lively girls and a frequently absent husband (Patrick Brammall), she occasionally uses the language of female empowerment to justify her own acts of violence. It's not always necessary to sign a pact with the Devil, like Leland did, to discover how powerful you can become by indulging in your worst impulses.

The “Evil” universe gradually broadens to encompass shadowy figures from the Vatican and an end-times prophetess who becomes imprisoned in a Chinese work camp. But the show’s complex mythology is most compelling when it’s grafted onto the domestic realm, roping in Kristen’s cacophonous daughters, whose shared bedroom is a frequent site of girlish chaos. In a larger arc, Kristen discovers that the I.V.F. clinic she used for one of her pregnancies may be a locus for demonic spawning. It’s a wacky, contemporary spin on “Rosemary’s Baby”—why inseminate one woman with the Devil’s seed when you could inseminate hundreds?—but it’s also an implicit commentary on the ever-present threats to women’s reproductive autonomy, from the satanists running the clinic to God Almighty himself.

For all its existential queries and dark truths about human nature, “Evil” is also *fun*. It revels in supernatural absurdism, cheerfully mashing up the occult and the mundane: at one point, a succubus visits Ben and has to remove her dental retainer before engaging in . . . succubus activities. (The sex scenes are in line with a series about moral abandon—Leland’s bed literally catches fire when he

seduces Sheryl—but the show gets a lot more emotional traction from the long-simmering, vow-threatening heat between David and Kristen.) There are clever reimaginings of archetypes and genre conventions, as well as a willingness to laugh at malefactors. During the investigation into the I.V.F. clinic, Kristen learns that one of her own eggs has been stolen and inseminated by Leland to create what he believes will be the Antichrist. It's a gross violation—but she simply envisions her nemesis rousing himself out of bed at four in the morning to change the Antichrist's diapers, then cracks up. “Good job,” she tells him. “You just fucked yourself.”

The new season wasn't intended to be the last, and admittedly feels rushed as a result; major characters undergo life-altering events with little breathing room for viewers to take it all in. But the larger reason to mourn the end of “Evil” is that it portends the demise of other small, quirky, introspective shows like it, as the TV industry contracts and executives become even more risk-averse. After producing some truly bonkers series, “Evil” and “The Good Fight” among them, the Kings have moved on to “Elsbeth,” an appealing but comparatively generic “Good Wife” spinoff, on CBS. The duo seem to tip their hats to the tyranny of cost-saving in one of “Evil”’s final episodes, in which the archdiocese decides to sell off the church that David and Andrea have called home. Nothing's so holy that it can't be sacrificed at the altar of Mammon. ♦



Inkoo Kang is a television critic at *The New Yorker*.

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[The Current Cinema](#)

“Between the Temples” Is a Songful, Scathing Jewish American Love Story

Jason Schwartzman and Carol Kane bring imagination and energy to Nathan Silver’s high-strung comedy about a grieving cantor and an elder bat-mitzvah student.

By [Richard Brody](#)

August 23, 2024



Schwartzman plays a grieving cantor in Silver’s film.

Illustration by Raj Dhunna

Most of the founding fathers of the Hollywood studios were Jewish, but very few of the movies they produced depicted Jewish American life. Since then, the most significant films that have done so have been independent productions, whether from decades ago (“The Plot Against Harry,” “Hester Street”) or more recently (“A Serious Man,” “Armageddon Time”). Now there’s a new entry in the field, “Between the Temples,” whose sardonically punning title, though suggesting something of the movie’s bitter comedy, barely hints at its bracing extremes of melancholy, derision, and tenderness. The film is the first high-profile project by Nathan Silver, who has been assiduously at work for the past fifteen years

directing distinctive indie films on stressfully tiny budgets, often featuring his mother, Cindy Silver, a nonprofessional actress. His previous work has sometimes brought Jewish customs to the fore; “Soft in the Head” (2013) dramatized a pair of Shabbat dinners. In the new film, Silver, working with a bigger budget and a cast of notable actors—headed by Jason Schwartzman, Carol Kane, and Dolly De Leon—expands his emotional range and his scope of action while delving into secular Jewish life and its interface with organized religion. (The movie was shot in early 2023, before the October 7th attacks on Israel and the massacres in Gaza, thus turning it, in effect, into a historical drama of American Jewry.)

Schwartzman plays Benjamin Gottlieb, a forty-year-old cantor at a small synagogue in upstate New York. He has taken an extended sabbatical from his liturgical duties: his wife, Ruth, a novelist, died a year before, and grief has deprived him of the ability to sing. He lives with his “moms”—his actual mother, Meira (Catherine Aaron), an artist, and her wife, Judith (De Leon), a real-estate broker—in their basement. When Ben attempts a comeback at the pulpit and fails, he lies down in the middle of a road, hoping for a quick end. Instead, he is taken to a bar, where he has the novel experience of getting into a bar fight, after which his bruised cheek and bruised ego are tended to by another patron, Carla O’Connor (Kane), who is there doing karaoke. They discover that she was his music teacher in elementary school, and she soon drops in on his Hebrew-school class, declaring that she wants a bat mitzvah and insisting that he give her the requisite lessons.

Ben is skeptical—O’Connor doesn’t sound like a Jewish name—but she explains that she was born Carla Kessler to communist parents who raised her without religion. It emerges that she, too, is unmoored: she was pushed out of her teaching job after forty-two years but is unwilling to go gently, despite three mini-strokes, into a life of card games and book clubs. In a turn of events that is unsurprising but nonetheless unfolds in startling ways, the bat-

mitzvah lessons give rise to a friendship defined by an unorthodox approach to religious practice.

While learning the liturgy, Carla helps Ben get his voice back, both literally and metaphorically. She has him do “belly breathing” exercises, which involve nonerotic but intimate physical contact. He invites himself to her home so that they can watch a VHS recording of his own bar mitzvah, from 1994. He soon becomes a regular (nonsexual) overnight guest there, borrowing pajamas belonging to her grown son, Nat (Matthew Shear), a psychiatrist who, upon seeing Ben in them, gets clinically weirded out. But “Between the Temples” isn’t “Harold and Maude.” Though a love story of sorts, it’s neither a tale of eccentrics finding each other nor a tale of absurdism appearing sane in a mad world. Rather, it’s a scathing vision of the routines of Jewish life, from its formalities and rules to its institutions and social habits—and a gentle look at those who find comfort in its verities. Schwartzman played a Jewish writer in an earlier independent film, Alex Ross Perry’s “Listen Up Philip,” from 2014, which I then considered the most Rothian film I’d ever seen. But “Between the Temples” matches it as an extension of the novelist’s legacy. Where Perry’s film reflects the mature, autofictional Philip Roth of the Zuckerman novels, Silver’s movie advances the satirical and critical sensibility of Roth’s early years, as in the collection “Goodbye, Columbus.”

Ben’s life is a punch line to a joke: he has two Jewish mothers, and, now that he’s single again, they’re setting him up with eligible Jewish women. The movie starts with Ben at home, enduring the noogy company of Rachel Plotnick (Annie Hamilton), a cosmetic surgeon summoned by his moms. Before realizing that she’s “unattached,” he frets, “Do you think I need work done?” A few days later, outside the synagogue, he’s ambushed by another woman, Leah (Pauline Chalamet), who, unbeknownst to him, connected with him on JDate. (Judith set up a profile for him.) Ben’s moms aren’t alone in trying to play matchmaker. In his office, his boss, Rabbi Bruce Koenig (Robert Smigel),

acknowledging Ben's miseries, talks of his daughter, Gabby (Madeline Weinstein), who's also been going through "a very rough time."

It's partly because of Roth's pathbreaking boldness and his many successors in the Jewish American arts—and because of the more firmly established place of Jews in American society—that the critique in Silver's film is essentially uncontroversial. It's also because Silver is inclined to look lovingly even at characters whose behavior he lampoons, whether mining comedy from Ben's kosher diet, from his fantasy of converting to Catholicism in order to win Ruth an afterlife, or from Judith's fervent efforts at the synagogue to raise funds for a Holocaust Torah restoration. (At a bake sale, Judith, ever the saleswoman, awkwardly posits a traditional connection between the Holocaust and baking.) Still, religious laws and long-standing customs involve far more than comedy. Rigid adherence to them risks jeopardizing Carla's bat mitzvah, which looms ever larger to her and Ben as a vital milestone.

"Between the Temples," written by Silver and C. Mason Wells, is tightly plotted but feels ready to lurch into chaos at any moment; the screenplay blends refined whimsy with painful confession and uninhibited pugnacity. Just about every scene has an inspired twist, an off-kilter bit of action or dialogue, that transforms exurban tranquillity into a minefield of emotional shocks and stifled desires, seething disappointments and frantic struggles. The images, in turn, don't merely depict the drama but become integral to it, thanks to the cinematography of Sean Price Williams, one of Silver's frequent collaborators. Williams is among the most important artists in modern independent filmmaking. His handheld-camera work, which borrows from the methods of *cinéma-vérité* documentaries, turns the camera into a participant, a virtual character in the proceedings. Here, his roving, darting images are as confrontational and impassioned as the events that they capture.

In “Soft in the Head” and other films directed by Silver, like “Uncertain Terms” (2014) and “Stinking Heaven” (2015), he makes use of the forms and tones of melodrama, a genre that often skirts the edge of comic exaggeration. Silver takes advantage of that proximity to lend raucous humor to harrowing stories. One needn’t know that “Uncertain Terms,” set in a home for pregnant teen-agers, was inspired by Cindy Silver’s experience as a teen mother, or that her latter-day bat mitzvah provided the spark for “Between the Temples,” to sense that these films are personal. Silver treads well-worn paths in ways so original that he makes them his own. He experiences venerable cinematic forms from the inside, with an ingenuous spontaneity and an emotional responsiveness that dispel all irony and foreclose any archness. He makes classic-infused cinema without quotation.

On the other hand, Schwartzman and Kane, two of the most gifted and original actors of our time, are also walking quotations. Schwartzman carries the world of Wes Anderson with him, and his pain-streaked, impulsive interpretation of Ben suggests that the character’s regulating mechanism—an Andersonian mix of precision and control—has come undone. Usually compact and angular, Schwartzman, as Ben, is a bit schlubby, wearing baggy outfits of inexpressive neutrality. But as he’s forced to make his own rules, he also begins to find his own style. As for Kane, her Oscar-nominated performance in Joan Micklin Silver’s “Hester Street,” a 1975 drama set on the Lower East Side in the eighteen-nineties, in which she plays a newcomer from Eastern Europe, made her an icon of Jewish American history. Carla, in “Between the Temples,” is given a terse but powerful backstory, and Kane conveys the character’s historically infused idealism, fierce purpose, and caustic humor with tremulous vulnerability and life-rich lucidity. She and Schwartzman expand Silver’s intimate cinematic universe beyond its frames and map it onto the world at large. ♦



Richard Brody began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He writes about movies in his column, *The Front Row*. He is the author of “*Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*.”

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- **[“Poem Never to Be Read Aloud”](#)**

By Dobby Gibson | “No words can tell us how to live, but to live is to reach / for them anyway.”

[Poems](#)

“Sugar”

By [Andrea Cohen](#)

August 26, 2024

What was the name of that
bar was it really the Sugar
Club is it still there who were
we with running in from the cold
and wind and you could still
smoke in bars then you could
still go home with six cartons
of smoke in your hair we all
had hair for days then our
hands got lost in it and our faces
and how crowded the bar was
and hot too and I liked running and
being useful and you and ran back
to the blue Chevy Nova to stash
our coats in the trunk and ran
back and “Lush Life” was playing
and Bowie and yelling to be
heard and the lights in the bar
flashing because that part
of the night was ending and out
we went to the street it was Hoboken
it was 1983 right before Christmas
and I turned left and everybody
else went in the other direction and
this way you said and I said no

no I ought to know I'm the one
who ran back to the car with all
our coats and the key and who
could have guessed what are
the odds that it was somebody
else's car our key unlocked and
that blue Nova was long gone
to Teaneck or Long Branch or
Secaucus and we looked and
looked in the empty dark of our
car's trunk it was like looking
for gold at the 7-Eleven and
someone said how stupid could
you be and it wasn't a question and
one of us couldn't stop crying knowing
someone had her yellow coat and
maybe her whole life to come and
what are the odds forty summers
later here we are on a hilltop in Italy
and you tell the story but in this
version it's you and your pals
from high school in Maplewood
Joey and Emma and Gabe and
what's-his-name and as it happens it
happened before I ever knew you
you say so I was never there
and the name of the place
was Sugar Reef on Second Avenue
in the city not in Hoboken and
down there in the dusk of the valley
lights are coming on and above
us swallows and clouds like
threads from a jacket unravelling
and from some hidden speaker
Lady Day is singing *Sugar*

*I never maybe my sugar—
maybe as an action item—
imagine—and if I never was
here please please don't tell me*

Andrea Cohen is the author of poetry collections including “*The Sorrow Apartments*,” which was published in March, 2024.

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Poem Never to Be Read Aloud

By [Dobby Gibson](#)

August 26, 2024

No words can tell us how to live, but to live is to reach
for them anyway, the thought on the other hand,
the brass nameplate screwed into a closed door.
Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. Make trouble,
not sense: some things should never be made into art.
The problem is we've been inscribing the violence
into lines all along: banks redlining neighborhoods,
city planners' interstate slates, the racial covenants
etched into deeds. If only what we need to say
to one another would land so softly on our tongues
we could taste it. If only we had screamed
and incinerated the other four precincts while we had
the chance. *Imbroglio* is a beautiful word for trap.
The problem isn't only what happened, it's how much
remains the same. *There are no words* are still words.

This is drawn from “[Hold Everything.](#)”

Dobby Gibson is the author of poetry collections including “[Little Glass Planet](#)” and “[Hold Everything.](#)”

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Puzzles & Games

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Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, August 26, 2024

A challenging puzzle.



By [Will Nediger](#)

August 26, 2024



[Will Nediger](#) is a crossword constructor from London, Ontario, who publishes puzzles independently under the name Bewilderingly.

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