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[Jan 20]

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  Also: Jodie Foster’s new movie, New York City Ballet’s winter season, music inspired by the poetry of the Black Arts Movement, and more.
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The Mental Pratfalls of Anne Gridley, in “Watch Me Walk”

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***By** Hilton Als, Sheldon Pearce, Emily Nussbaum, Marina Harss, Cressida Leyshon, Richard Brody, Jane Bua, Rachel Syme, **and** Katy Waldman*

January 16, 2026

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 inbox.***

Can it be that I first saw **Anne Gridley** in the extraordinary Nature Theatre of Oklahoma’s work more than fifteen years ago? It seems not possible, given how much I remember her as Juliet in the company’s brilliant “Romeo and Juliet,” against the wonderful Robert M. Johanson’s Romeo. But it’s true. Gridley’s performance was a standout in 2009, and it remains so in my mind. As conceived by Pavol Liška and Kelly Copper, the co-founders and co-directors behind this brilliant company, the adaptation, developed from conversations with friends, family, and company members, told the story based on what was remembered of the play, and how what was remembered was spoken—“So this guy likes a girl named Juliet, and she gets upset”—that kind of thing. I remember laughing so hard, largely because of how Gridley, so relaxed in her comedy, played Juliet as someone who made sense to herself, if no one else, and what did she care? Gridley’s comedic stance—part purveyor of nonsense, part paragon of common sense—put her squarely in the tradition of amazing women like Imogene Coca, and “Mad TV” ’s Debra Wilson, comedians who made mental pratfalls a thing. Later, in 2013, I saw the company’s epic multi-part work “Life and Times,” and I fell in love with Gridley all over again. She didn’t need to concede ground to any other performer, let alone the immensity of Liška

and Copper’s vision: she took whatever brilliance was thrown her way and made it her own.

Illustration by Celia Jacobs

Now Gridley appears in a piece she’s written, **“Watch Me Walk”** (presented by Soho Rep, at Playwrights Horizons, through Feb. 8). It’s a show about her hereditary spastic paraplegia, a condition she shares with her grandmother and her mother. Directed by the talented Eric Ting, “Watch Me Walk” is about many things, including what happens to the performer’s primary asset, her body, when it is no longer the body that wanted to perform in the first place. Is she just a living memory? Another statistic in our mess of a health-care system, if you could call it “care”? Despite it all or because of it, Gridley’s script, and the incredible performer who means to tell us her story without sentiment, remains a prime example of what we get when autobiographical theatre works: intelligence, and the ability to laugh at oneself, with one’s heart, as always, in both the wrong and the right place.—*Hilton Als*

About Town

Electronic

In recent years, the London d.j. and multi-instrumentalist **Fred again..** has quickly become one of the most buzzed-about stars in electronic music. The youngest artist to win Producer of the Year at the Brit Awards, he has steadily evolved from Boiler Room darling and producer for such artists as Ed Sheeran, BTS, Ellie Goulding, and Stormzy to solo artist in his own right. His long-running "USB" compilation, an ever-growing album of tracks he's been adding to since 2022, feels like a microcosm of this growth: collaborations with cult electronic figures and touted rappers build out an arc of the rare M.P.C. wizard so charismatic he can't be relegated to behind the boards.—*Sheldon Pearce (East End Studios; Jan. 16-31.)*

Off Broadway

In Erica Schmidt's **"The Disappear,"** a Noël Cowardly farce about a Hollywood power couple on the fritz, an art-monster film director, his fed-up novelist wife, and two seductive actors spar, flirt, and struggle to make a movie. Hamish Linklater is nastily funny as the doofus auteur Ben, all horndog self-pity and air-dancer slapstick; Miriam Silverman, as his wife, Mira, is so likable that the audience loudly rooted for her to kiss a movie star (Kelvin Harrison, Jr., a sly standout). Both the marriage and the play fall apart in Act II, but, along the way, the cast scores laughs with rude zingers about two-artist pairings, a topic that Schmidt, who is married to the actor Peter Dinklage, likely knows well. "What's a better achievement than a long, mutually rewarding marriage?" Mira begs. "Everything! Literally *anything* else!" Ben groans.—*Emily Nussbaum (Minetta Lane Theatre; through Feb. 22.)*

Dance

New York City Ballet performs Jerome Robbins's "Antique Epigraphs."

Photograph by Erin Baiano

New York City Ballet's especially packed season includes two intriguing premières. In "The Wind-Up," Justin Peck takes on the first movement of Beethoven's grandiose and propulsive "Eroica" Symphony, which the composer originally dedicated to Napoleon—a suitably "heroic" figure. Alexei Ratmansky's "The Naked King," a revival of a 1936 story ballet based on the Hans Christian Andersen tale "The Emperor's New Clothes," is a rarity, originally choreographed by the Ukrainian-born Serge Lifar to music by the neoclassicist Jean Françaix. Lifar's choreography has been lost, so all the choreography is new. Among the interesting revivals are Jerome Robbins's "Antique Epigraphs," a work for eight women, inspired by Roman statues of dancers found at Herculaneum, and the courtly "Le Tombeau de Couperin," by George Balanchine, a ballet with no soloists, only ensemble dancing.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; Jan. 20-March 1.)*

Art and Letters

The exhibition **"And That's True Too"** explores the life and work of the Viennese-born writer Lore Segal, whose autobiographically inflected fiction appeared often in *The New Yorker* from 1961 until 2024, when her final piece, "Stories About Us," ran shortly before her death. In 1938, at the age of ten, Segal escaped Austria on a Kindertransport, and she spent the Second World War in Britain before moving to the Dominican Republic and then to the United States. The show, curated by Karin Hanta for the Leo Baeck Institute, including photographs, manuscripts, and archival materials, illuminates the way that this forced exile underpinned much of Segal's writing. At an opening event, on Jan. 22, the actress Toni Kalem reads from Segal's 1964 novel, "Other People's Houses."—*Cressida Leyshon (Center for Jewish History; through April 15.)*

Movies

Jodie Foster in “A Private Life.”

Photograph by Jérôme Prébois / Courtesy Sony Pictures Classics

Jodie Foster’s starring role in **“A Private Life,”** directed by Rebecca Zlotowski, makes the movie an automatic event. Foster, acting mainly in French, plays Lilian Steiner, a chilly and disciplined Paris-based psychotherapist whose life and practice are thrown into disorder when a patient, Paula Cohen-Solal (Virginie Efira), dies by suicide. Lilian suspects foul play and, recklessly investigating Paula’s widower (Mathieu Amalric) and her daughter (Luàna Bajrami), seeks the help of her own ex-husband (Daniel Auteuil). Their wry scenes together, which have the warmth of a rekindled flame, are the movie’s raison d’être. Foster gives a taut performance despite the unstrung absurdities of the plot. The story is anchored in Paris’s Jewish community, but the context remains anecdotal and unexplored.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*

Classical

Dudley Randall’s poem “A Poet Is Not a Jukebox,” written in the late twentieth century, underscores that a Black artist should create based on how *they* feel, not by abiding by the expectations of others. Indeed, the poet is not a jukebox, but the poet, in his lush lyricism, does inspire music. For **“American Mavericks project VI. 1: Quest,”** Randall’s grand-niece, the musician Chelsea Randall, premières six piano compositions—by Carolyn Yarnell, Jeremiah Evans, and others—all based on poems by such Black Arts Movement writers as Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and Randall himself. The paired poems will be read aloud by Randall’s nephew Jon

Randall, and the current poet laureate of Michigan, Melba Joyce Boyd. Let us embark.—*Jane Bua (Brooklyn Public Library; Jan. 25.)*

On and Off the Avenue

Rachel Syme on best-paid plans.

Illustration by Riikka Laakso

It is a strange irony whenever digital culture gives rise to a boom in tangible objects, but such is the case when it comes to planners—or, as the more ancient among us might call them, datebooks—which have exploded in popularity in recent years, due primarily to an extreme online fervor around the theories and practices of maintaining a handwritten agenda. A casual survey of the TikTok hashtag #plannertok reveals thousands of videos by organizational influencers, all offering up their own tips and tricks for how to keep a tidy Filofax. The "bullet journaling" trend, with its aesthetic intensity and singular devotion to dot-grid notebooks, shows no sign of abating, even after a decade of popularity. But there are also newer, much-hyped methods of cataloguing one's life on paper. The clear current front-runner is the Japanese company **Hobonichi**, whose coveted **Techo** planners have spawned a bustling Reddit forum that gets upward of seventy thousand visitors per week, many of whom are eager to share pictures of their weekly

planning “spreads.” Also surging are products from the stationer **Traveler’s Company,** whose leather-bound notebooks with thin elastic straps are endlessly customizable—you can mix and match dozens of inserts, including watercolor paper and a card file. For those who need a bit more guidance, **Laurel Denise** planners each come with one of eight dedicated systems that help train the user in the skills of “time blocking” and “goal setting.” The company’s website features a quiz that helps to determine one’s ideal planning style, and it feels virtuous to take it, even if you never end up writing down a single appointment. Sometimes just the idea of a planner—that one little book could solve all your executive-function issues—can be more intoxicating than the thing itself.

This Week with: Katy Waldman

Our writers on their current obsessions.

This week, I’m stuck on: “Getting Lost,” by Annie Ernaux, which is a diary that the author kept of an affair she had, in the late eighties, with a married Russian apparatchik she calls “S.” At first, the book struck me as frustrating and repetitive: she longs to hear from S., she’s maddened by suspicions that he’s lost interest, he calls, she’s overjoyed, then back to obsession and anguish. For a guy who has approximately three modes—“he fucks, he drinks vodka, he talks about Stalin”—two hundred pages of yearning felt like a lot. But, by the end, I found myself swept up—stuck—in the cycle, disarmed by Ernaux’s total commitment to honesty about her inner life.

This week, I cringed at: practically every quote in this mordant Amanda Hess joint about the Silicon Valley philosophes who want to gamify love. Phrases such as “general mate value factor,” and “If the woman is about half a standard deviation more agreeable than the man, that’s the optimal point for relationship durability.” Yuck!

This week, I loved: realizing that I actually do respond to visual art. For a long time, I’ve held onto a private narrative about not really “getting” it. (I have several painters in my family; do with that information what you will.)

But I recently went to the Peggy Guggenheim museum in Venice, which was—news that will astonish no one—extraordinary. A favorite sighting was Clyfford Still's painting "Jamais," which has been said to depict the goddess Demeter mourning her daughter Persephone but also reflects Still's horror at the landscapes of his Dust Bowl childhood. I'm still haunted by his matte-red sun, dark and sullen, squatting in the bottom left corner of the canvas like a toad.

Alfred Walker and Brittany Renee in the Met Opera's "Porgy and Bess."

Photograph by Richard Termine / Met Opera

This week, I'm looking forward to: "Porgy and Bess" at the Met! I remember watching scenes from the 1959 film for sixth-grade music class, and I'm sure I've heard the song "Summertime" performed a zillion times, but I've never experienced the show live. (Also, did you see that the Washington National Opera is severing ties with the Kennedy Center? Good for them!)

This week, I'm consuming: This question reminds me that I've long wanted to read a Grub Street Diet written from the perspective of the Very Hungry Caterpillar, where the titular character is trying to prove that he has a lot of cool friends who meet him at offbeat restaurants and that readers should buy his forthcoming novel. Anyway, in Venice, I ate a tartufo.

An earlier version of this article misstated the country where Traveler's Company is based.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- Connor Storrie being cute
- Birds on the radio
- The Central Park coyotes, Romeo and Juliet

Hilton Als, a staff writer at The New Yorker, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of "God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin."
Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker's Goings On newsletter.
Emily Nussbaum, a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2011, is the magazine's theatre critic. Her books include "Cue The Sun!: The Invention of Reality TV."
Marina Harss has been contributing dance coverage to The New Yorker since 2004. She is the author of "The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet."
Cressida Leyshon is The New Yorker's deputy fiction editor.
Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."
Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.
Rachel Syme is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She has covered Hollywood, style, literature, music, and other cultural subjects since 2012.
Katy Waldman, a staff writer, has written about books and culture for The New Yorker since 2018.

The Food Scene

Flynn McGarry’s Artful, Ambitious Next Act

With Cove, his fourth restaurant, in Hudson Square, the twenty-seven-year-old wunderkind chef cooks with a new expansiveness.

***By** Helen Rosner*

January 11, 2026

In dishes such as Cove’s mackerel crudo with Asian pear and horseradish, McGarry layers ingredients like washes of watercolor.Photographs by Yael Malka 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 inbox.***

The chef Flynn McGarry was only thirteen years old when he débuted a tasting-menu pop-up in his home town of Los Angeles, in 2012. He was nineteen when the doors opened at Gem, his real-deal restaurant on the Lower East Side, and he was only a couple of years past legal drinking age when he expanded with a wine bar, Gem Wine, which eventually pivoted to become a café-cum-shoppy-shop, Gem Home. Those of us who enjoy the retrospective clarity of adulthood understand that it’s a curse to become famous as a child, to have your still malleable identity and interests forced through the fiery kiln of the public gaze. If McGarry had reached his twenties and decided to abandon the kitchen and never touch a knife again, I don’t think anyone would have blamed him. But he’s twenty-seven now,

and still a chef, and with the opening of Cove, his fourth restaurant, this past fall, he's undertaken his most ambitious project yet.

Flynn McGarry, at twenty-seven, is running his fourth restaurant.

Cove, on West Houston Street, does not mark an especially obvious step into maturity or anything narratively pat like that, because McGarry's cooking and his businesses have never really had so much as a hint of childishness to begin with. What was both unique and fascinating about his time as a wunderkind was that, even in the earliest days, when he was doing tween-age stages at Alinea and Eleven Madison Park, or being written about in breathless profiles and skeptically snarky blog posts (not to mention a vignette in this magazine), he was never a kid speaking to other kids. There was no aw-shucks mugging, no twee riffs on lunchbox junk food: his cooking was precise, focussed, with a near-reverential attention to detail, and a high-end sensibility. At the various Gems, he cultivated a nimble and intimate sort of flavor maximalism that played perfectly in those tiny establishments. Cove is much larger, with a more formal service style, but the exactitude is still there, the sense of stylishness, the obsession and the delight. The walls are sheathed modishly in wood, and hung with

dramatic botanical paintings. The tables, also sleek wood, orbit an open kitchen in which a phalanx of cooks move around their stations in quiet deliberation, with McGarry a strawberry-blond, white-jacketed flare at the center.

The dishes are simply beautiful. I nearly didn't order a salad of golden beets with smoked yogurt, struggling to muster enthusiasm for yet another beet-and-dairy salad, but my dining companion insisted. It turned out to be amazing, a parade of roots in every shade of yellow, with bursts of brightness from what seemed like a whole bouquet of nasturtiums, orange and vermillion and gloaming purple. For all the complexity of McGarry's creations, they remain tight and streamlined: every element is load-bearing, and the final appearance isn't always showy. Take, for example, a bowl of artichoke purée poured around a hillock of tender Jonah crab. The smooth liquid is briny and delicate, with a subtle vegetality that harmonizes with the crustacean's sweetness; an accompanying hunk of freshly baked bread provides a sour-edged counterpoint, enlivening things even more. For all the evident care in this dish, its plating is boldly plain—beige on beige. McGarry could easily have zhuzhed things up with a little color: a sprinkle of sumac, or a chiffonade of fresh mint, but adding any other element would have changed the flavor. He trusts, wisely, in the carefully calibrated balance of each bite.

Elsewhere, he does equally remarkable things. An oyster is poached in chamomile oil and served with wisps of creamy chestnut. A carrot is roasted to marshmallow sweetness, tempura-fried, and wrapped in charred sweet leaves of caraflex cabbage, then draped in uni and drizzled with spiced quince syrup. Like much of what's on McGarry's menu, it has a lot going on, but it doesn't feel busy or chaotic; McGarry layers ingredients and flavors like washes of watercolor. On one of my visits, as the chef himself presented the grilled half lobster that is the climax of the tasting menu, he explained how the chefs "take the brains" and purée them with black trumpet mushrooms and a little bit of fennel. The resulting mixture, funky and unctuous, is piped back into the exoskeletal noggin and tiled over with caramelized slivers of the same mushroom, a glossy crown for the hunks of tender flesh filling the body below. The lobster's claws and knuckles arrive from the kitchen a few minutes later, flashes of red in a brothy bowl of rice,

with bits of mushroom carrying a note from the previous course, and meaty morsels of walnut and a crispy tuile made from dehydrated chicken stock carrying the symphony of umami onward. Desserts, too, are both adventurous and delicious. A fluffy square of cake is made with celery root and passion fruit; a huckleberry semifreddo is capped with snappy, twisting shards of chocolate and an undulating wave of preserved cherry blossoms.

Cove is nominally a West-meets-East proposition, channelling a California ethos through East Coast ingredients, but I don't really see it that way. To me, it's more evocative of New Nordic cuisine, the fiddly, forage-y fine-dining philosophy that dominated the late two-thousands and has more recently fallen out of fashion. And yet McGarry, quite miraculously, makes that Scandi aesthetic seem thrilling again. His multifaceted dishes are intentional, and highly composed, but still exploratory: the uncommon vegetables, the edible flowers, the house-made juices and herbal elixirs. I scoffed, a little, at the inedible landscape of pine branches and polished stones that decorates Winter in the Northeast, an assortment of small bites (including that lovely oyster) that kicked off a late-December tasting menu, but then again it made me happy. I came of age as a restaurant-goer in the New Nordic era, under the Noma hegemon; despite our nearly two-decade age difference, so did McGarry, but in his hands the approach feels unencumbered by what became, at a certain point, a somewhat formulaic pursuit of a "sense of place."

Helen, Help Me! E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

Still, I was surprised not to detect any sense of place at Cove. The servers take care to note that most of the menu's ingredients are sourced from the Northeast, but that's not a terribly specific palette, and McGarry's cooking seems to eschew riffs or recognizable references (even if the combination of Asian pear and fresh horseradish garnishing a mackerel crudo did, for me, vividly evoke the Hillel sandwich at a Passover Seder). This is my biggest criticism of Cove, and maybe it's a little unfair: McGarry wants to make a grand statement with this new restaurant, but I cannot figure out what on earth it is. After each of my visits, I left feeling elated, animatedly recapping the meals with my fellow-diners as we wandered across Varick

Street toward the train, but I wasn’t sure what to do with all my enthusiasm besides wave my hands around. McGarry’s dishes speak with such grace; they have all the subtlety and verve of an artistic thesis being mounted, and yet my meals left me without a sense of anything actually being argued for. Certainly, a restaurant doesn’t need to try to say anything—it is enough, actually, to serve dazzling food in a beautiful room—but McGarry gets oh-so-exhilaratingly close to doing something beyond just feeding people. Maybe it will come to him with time. I can almost taste it. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, has received multiple James Beard Awards, including one in 2025 for her Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi.

The Talk of the Town

- **Why Trump Supports Protesters in Tehran but Not in Minneapolis**
  During the President's second Administration, universal principles such as self-determination and due process are wielded only opportunistically.
- **For This Palisades Toymaker, Fire Safety Is No Game**
  Jeremy Padawer, whose company owns Squishmallows, is one of thousands devastated by last year's fire. At a rally for the anniversary, he's more passionate than ever about reform.
- **Mark Strong, on the Clock**
  On a break from playing Oedipus in the new Broadway production, the British actor stops by Federal Hall to chat politics, family dynamics, and being mistaken for Stanley Tucci.
- **Faulty Gas Valve? Call the Famous Stove Lady!**
  Carlita Belgrove is the go-to stove whisperer, restoring the appliances of N.Y.C. élites and Hollywood actors. On a trip to the Hamptons, can she save her client's Magic Chef?
- **Small-Talk Road Map**
  Enter through Pleasantries and take a right at A.I. Watch out for the Gaps in Your Knowledge!

Comment

Why Trump Supports Protesters in Tehran but Not in Minneapolis

During the President's second Administration, universal principles such as self-determination and due process are wielded only opportunistically.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

January 17, 2026

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

On January 8th, the twelfth day of mass protests in Iran, which began when shopkeepers, responding to runaway inflation, closed Tehran's Grand Bazaar, the Iranian government shut down public access to the internet, further shrouding an already largely closed society. Nevertheless, isolated images and details have been smuggled out, giving a hint of how brutal and monumental these events are.

Video clips have circulated of people outside a morgue, unzipping body bags as they search for their loved ones. In the western city of Ilam, near the

Iraqi border, security officials stormed a hospital to try to seize wounded protesters, while medical staff resisted. An ophthalmologist at a hospital in Tehran reported that it has been overwhelmed by casualties, including many people who were shot in the eye. In the conservative city of Mashhad, a journalist said that the streets were “full of blood.” The Iranian government has acknowledged the deaths of two thousand people, though international observers fear that the total may be much higher. The Chancellor of Germany, Friedrich Merz, insisted on Tuesday that the regime was in “its last days or weeks.” If he proves to be correct, it will be because of hundreds of thousands of brave acts by Iranian citizens—acts of discontent but also of idealism.

The portfolio of this crisis landed across classified Washington, on the desks both of career staff in the intelligence and diplomatic services and of Donald Trump’s recent appointees, among whom idealism is an increasingly shunned philosophy. The norm in American foreign policy has been that all interventions, including blatantly self-serving ones, are pitched in elevated humanitarian terms. During Trump’s second Administration, universal principles such as self-determination and due process are wielded only opportunistically. In Venezuela, Trump followed his ouster of Nicolás Maduro not by supporting the democratic opposition but by sanctioning the ascent of the dictator’s second-in-command, Delcy Rodríguez, seemingly in exchange for oil revenues. (The opposition leader, María Corina Machado, could only offer her Nobel Peace Prize medal.) Just after the New Year, in a conversation that also touched on annexing Greenland, against the will of its people, the White House adviser Stephen Miller gave CNN’s Jake Tapper the emerging party line: “We live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power.”

This is an encompassing vision, one that is now playing out in the *ICE* campaign in Minnesota against undocumented migrants and, more and more, against protesters and ordinary citizens. It also makes plain the hypocrisy in Trump’s embrace of the Iranian opposition. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s government has denounced the protesters it has killed, calling them terrorists; the Trump Administration has said that Renee Good, the woman shot dead by an *ICE* officer in Minneapolis, was engaging in an act

of “domestic terrorism.” If the scenes in the Twin Cities look like those from an overseas occupation, the historian Nikhil Pal Singh suggested in the magazine *Equator* this week, that is because, under this Administration, the foreign and the domestic realms have bled together, as Trump threatens war-time powers “to arrest and remove unauthorised immigrants—and discretionary police powers abroad, to arrest foreign leaders (and seize foreign assets) under US law.” The Administration is asserting, too, an almost colonial kind of impunity: last week, Vice-President J. D. Vance baldly asserted that *ICE* agents have “absolute immunity” from local prosecution for their activities in Minnesota.

Even so, although the President’s intrinsic sympathies are with strongmen —Putin, Orbán, Kim—his strategic interests in Iran are with the protesters. (As it happens, the Administration’s old allies in Israel and its newer ones in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states all want the Iranian theocrats gone.) On social media, the President made some gestures of solidarity. “*keep protesting*,” he urged. “*help is on the way*.”

Exactly what kind of help remains unclear. Trump’s adviser Steve Witkoff met with Reza Pahlavi, once the crown prince of Iran, but the White House found the deposed royal unconvincing. “He seems very nice, but I don’t know how he’d play within his own country,” Trump told reporters. In posts and appearances, the President returned to more familiar themes: he mused about possible military strikes on strategic sites in Iran, threatened tariffs against countries that trade with it, and announced a little bit of progress—the Iranian government had apparently reversed a plan to execute Erfan Soltani, a twenty-six-year-old shop owner who was arrested in connection with the protests. “We’ve been told the killing is stopping,” Trump said on Wednesday afternoon, and then, somewhat tellingly, struggled with his verb tenses. “It has stopped. It is stopping.”

In Iran, the despotic regime is fragile and desperate, and, as Merz suggests, it may soon fall. But it may also survive, by means of violent repression, and by Thursday the news from Tehran had quieted. Sounds of gunfire had faded; there were no new bonfires. Since the end of the Second World War, the United States and its allies had maintained a system of humanitarian interventionism, until the President so delightedly detonated it. “In the first

year of his administration," the *Times* noted last week, Trump "dismantled the instruments of soft power—such as Voice of America and the State Department unit that dropped internet capability into Iran—that were key to democracy promotion." What he is left with are his threats and a hollow sort of exhortation that borrows from the same program of humanitarian interventionism that he has so explicitly disavowed. "Iran is looking at *freedom*," Trump wrote on Truth Social, "perhaps like never before."

Perhaps. The President's statements of allegiance—and, potentially, the internet that Elon Musk has offered to make available for free via Starlink—may well strengthen the resolve of the Iranian opposition. But Trump's domestic acts, in a countervailing way, may embolden the regime. Cynicism travels, too. Right now, he is faced with a mass protest in Minneapolis against a government show of power that is growing increasingly unpopular, and his reaction has been to double down: on Thursday, he threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act and send federal troops to the upper Midwest.

What supplies all these events with a sense of approaching a precipice is the open contestation between pro- and anti-democratic forces, happening both here and abroad, in view of each other. Through the partial curtain between the two societies, we are watching what is happening in Iran. And Iran, surely, is watching us. ♦

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

L.A. Postcard

For This Palisades Toymaker, Fire Safety Is No Game

Jeremy Padawer, whose company owns Squishmallows, is one of thousands devastated by last year's fire. At a rally for the anniversary, he's more passionate than ever about reform.

By Dana Goodyear

January 19, 2026

Illustration by João Fazenda

In the past few weeks, among the yard signs for contractors, remediators, and litigators that fell like a plague on Pacific Palisades after some seven

thousand structures were destroyed in last year's fire, a new sign has popped up, with a pointed accusation: "They Let Us Burn."

The sign is the work of Jeremy Padawer, a fifty-two-year-old toymaker and toy collector, whose company owns Squishmallows, among other plushie juggernauts. On the anniversary of the Palisades Fire, which killed twelve people, Padawer stood in his basement, a vast concrete space that opens onto a drained swimming pool with underwater windows. Recent heavy rains had flooded the basement floor, and a deep puddle reflected back a clear blue sky. Like most of his neighbors, Padawer had no roof.

The Palisades Fire, which started in the Santa Monica Mountains, was the reignition of an earlier blaze allegedly set by an arsonist, which had not been fully extinguished. Left to smolder unattended for nearly a week, it flared up on a gusty day, when firefighters were ill-prepared to battle it and hydrants ran dry. "It's hard to imagine that a city like Los Angeles would have the ineptitude or gross negligence that would lead to a fire starting at 10:30 *A.M.* that would then destroy the entire town," Padawer said. He added that the evacuation plan was also woefully inadequate. "If this had occurred twelve hours earlier, we'd be talking about many more than twelve deaths."

Padawer, who is small in stature, with dark, glossy hair styled like textured buttercream, grew up in a modest household in the South, moving frequently (Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee). He made his first fortune while still in law school, establishing trading sites like AAbsolute Beanie Babies and AAbsolute Furby. (His insight, from studying the Yellow Pages, was that alphabetical primacy is one way to hack eyeballs.) Over time, he amassed an impressive collection of pop-culture memorabilia, much of which was stored in his basement: Charles Schulz cartoons, first-edition Pokémon cards, prototypes of action figures he had helped design.

“And how do <u>you</u> know Jesus?”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

On the day of the fire, Padawer didn’t take much with him: a stack of LeBron James rookie cards and a book of letters he had received as a kid, when he wrote to people like Mother Teresa, Fred Rogers, Colin Powell, and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, asking their definition of success. His older daughter, then a senior at Palisades Charter High School, grabbed a childhood lovey; his younger daughter left with nothing. Padawer’s prized possession, a rare hardcover of “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone,” which he estimates is worth a million dollars, was in the vault of a bank that burned down. It was not insured, but, after a few agonizing months waiting for news, he discovered that it was undamaged.

In his career, Padawer has also done a brisk trade in domain names. In 1997, jumping on a tip from a Yahoo message board, he acquired act.com for a thousand dollars, and sold it two years later for half a million. He also bought jeremy.com, which he retains. When he and his family moved to the Palisades, in 2009, he snapped up pacificpalisades.com. Since the fire, it’s become a clearing house for his disillusionment about what he calls the “unnatural disaster” that authorities quickly suggested was due to climate change, inappropriate building materials, and plants being too close to homes: in other words, blame Mother Nature and her victims—not leaders, policymakers, or officials.

In town, or what is left of it, a large crowd gathered for a rally Padawer had funded. As 10:30 *A.M.* approached—the official start time of the fire, exactly one year earlier—he made his way to the disemboweled Business

Block Building, a Palisades icon built in 1924. Magritte-like blue sky looked back through its paneless windows. Attendees held signs that read “Not Wild. Not Natural,” “State Policy Fucked Us,” “LAFD Where Were You?,” and “Today Pacific Palisades. Tomorrow your zip code.” Padawer got up on a stage. “They burned us down, and this is our origin story,” he said. The dolphin, the unofficial mascot of the Palisades, was no longer peaceful blue, he said, but red and gold—flame-hardened and enraged.

Among Padawer’s demands for the rebuilding of the Palisades—a police substation, regular brush clearance, better evacuation planning, the undergrounding of electricity—is a call for statewide insurance reform. (Many in the Palisades had been dropped by traditional carriers and relied instead on the state’s plan, which capped out far below their property values. Others had no insurance at all.) As it happens, one of Padawer’s early domain-name gets was for uninsured.com. “I sold that twenty-eight years ago,” he said, regretfully. But a quick Google search turned up a surprising bit of news: the site was for sale. “I’m going to send them an offer and see what happens,” Padawer said. “I would love to have that one back.” ♦

Dana Goodyear is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the host of the podcast “Lost Hills.”

The Boards

Mark Strong, on the Clock

On a break from playing Oedipus in the new Broadway production, the British actor stops by Federal Hall to chat politics, family dynamics, and being mistaken for Stanley Tucci.

By Zach Helfand

January 19, 2026

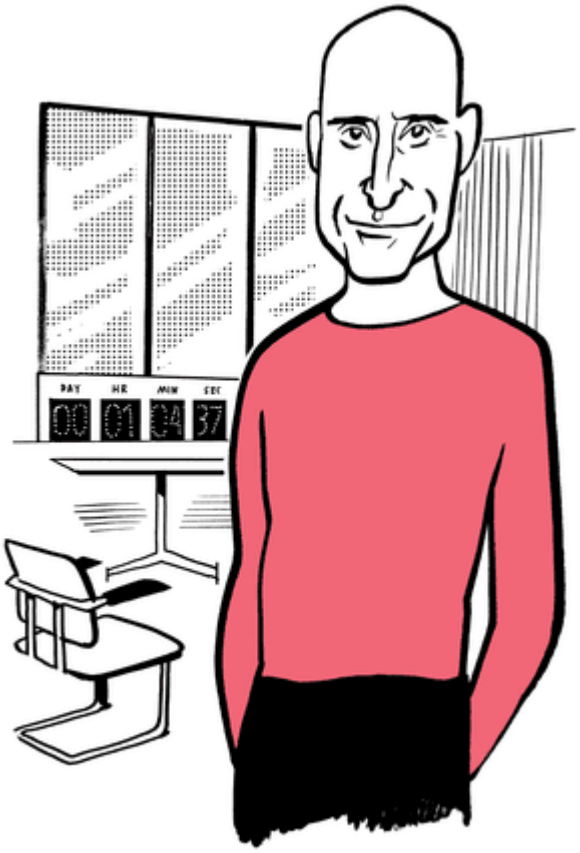


Illustration by João Fazenda

Assuming you paid attention in English class or have a glancing familiarity with Freud, you probably know how “Oedipus Rex” ends. This poses a problem for modern restagings—the big twist is pretty much spoiled. A new version on Broadway, “Oedipus,” starring Mark Strong and Lesley

Manville and directed by Robert Icke, has devised a solution: throughout the play, a big clock onstage teasingly counts down to the moment of unsavory revelation.

On a recent morning, Strong, whose Oedipus is a politician waiting out Election Night, was visiting Federal Hall, on Wall Street where the original U.S. Capitol Building once stood, to ponder political power, the ancient Greeks, and time, which was short—he had a performance that evening. To keep on schedule and, perhaps, to inspire his own revelation, Strong himself was on a countdown clock. Time: sixty minutes. After some settling in, the ticking began.

Strong's character has an Obama-like idealism, some Newsom-esque ambition, and a Trumpian narcissism, but he didn't model him on any real politician. "You look at all these people who are running the world, it's a bunch of fucking weirdos," he said outside the building. "What is that about? I wanted to play Oedipus as close to me as possible."

Strong grew up in England. His mother was Austrian. His father was Italian and left when Strong was a baby. When Strong was eleven, his mother moved to Germany for work, and he went to a Norfolk boarding school, where he discovered punk rock. (In his band, he was the vocalist and played bass.) "We had various bad names," he said: the Destroyers, Toxoid, Private Party. "We thought it was hilarious that you'd have posters outside your gig saying 'Private Party.' We hadn't really factored in the idea that people then might not come."

Strong headed into Federal Hall, which is run by the National Park Service. Two youthful rangers approached. Strong asked for some historical background. "How much time do you have?" one of the rangers asked.

"Forty-seven minutes," he said.

The rangers began talking about George Washington's Inauguration, but they seemed a little distracted. Strong has had a long career in film ("Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy," "Kingsman," "1917") and on the stage ("Twelfth Night," "A View from the Bridge"), and the rangers appeared to be trying to

place him. Strong finally explained that he was an actor. “I’m doing a play at the moment called ‘Oedipus,’ ” he said.

“I thought you looked familiar!” one ranger replied. Strong said that people usually mistake him for Stanley Tucci. “I met him once at an awards ceremony,” he said. “He said the same thing happens to him. Which is really bizarre, because we’re different heights, he’s American and I’m not, he wears glasses and I don’t. It’s literally because we’re two bald Italian guys.” They’ve since become friends.

Strong wandered around for a little, the rangers trailing eagerly behind, reciting Colonial facts. Then he found a room with a television playing an educational video. (Time remaining: thirty-five minutes.) He took a seat on a bench; he was nursing a calf injury—soccer casualty. He’s been playing on the Lower East Side on Wednesdays, an American offshoot of his usual game in London, which runs twice a week during the workday. “I always say it’s for people who haven’t got a proper job,” he said. “We’re all actors, writers, journalists, producers. I’ve been doing it for twenty-five years, same bunch of guys. Damian Lewis plays in that game. James McAvoy plays in that game. They’re actually both pretty good.”

He sat for a while. The seconds, as they do, kept ticking by. “To be honest, during the play, we never look at the clock,” Strong said. “Pretty much every time, the show runs either an hour fifty-nine or two hours. I don’t want to give away the trade secrets, but, if somebody misses a great chunk or whatever, they can adjust it.”

He went on, “Greek tragedies are all about the relation of knowledge to time.” The history of Sophocles’ work is also a time-borne tragedy: he wrote over a hundred plays, but only seven survive in full. “There are only thirty-two Greek tragedies that we have,” Strong said. “There used to be more than a thousand. They were written for festivals. In the year that ‘Oedipus’ was entered, it came second.” What won? “Fuck knows!” he said. “Imagine what the hell was that story.”

He sat back. (Time remaining: ninety seconds.) “What happens now?” he asked. He searched for a revelation and came up blank. The timer dinged, and he shrugged. The only thing the personal clock reminded him of was

the screen-time monitor on his phone. “Oh, that’s it,” he said. “This makes you think how you’ve only got this amount of time left here, and then you realize how much time you spend looking at your fucking screen.” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Hearth Dept.

Faulty Gas Valve? Call the Famous Stove Lady!

Carlita Belgrove is the go-to stove whisperer, restoring the appliances of N.Y.C. élites and Hollywood actors. On a trip to the Hamptons, can she save her client’s Magic Chef?

By Julian Lucas

January 19, 2026

Illustration by João Fazenda

The Famous Stove Lady is sometimes disappointed in her customers. “I have two with this flame-failure system,” she said one morning at her workshop, in the New York suburb of Mount Vernon. “Neither one keeps the stove clean.” She was sanding down an L-shaped knob for a client in the Hamptons, who’d hired her to modernize his nineteen-thirties Magic Chef. Behind her was an Aladdin’s cave of more than a hundred and fifty

venerable gas ranges, some with polished chrome fixtures and others nearly rusted through. There were Chambers, Garlands, Crowns, and a hulking, buttercup-yellow Roper that resembled a muscle car. In a world going electric, the Stove Lady keeps their flames alive: “Nobody—not nobody, anywhere—does what I do.”

Her name is Carlita Belgrove. A full-figured woman with a winsome tooth gap, she goes about her work with the punctilious hauteur of a cardiac surgeon. “Curtis, do you have the J-B Kwik?” she called out in the workshop; a tattooed employee in a blue beanie materialized with a tube of epoxy. Replacing antique parts is a constant challenge, and she jealously guards her network of suppliers. “Not even Curtis knows them,” she said. Once, when a fellow stove whisperer died, she offered to buy his inventory but was rebuffed by the man’s daughter, who wanted to shop it around. “She called all over the country,” Belgrove said. “Everyone said to come to me.”

Belgrove, who is fifty-five, has worked on stoves for Park Avenue élites, Hollywood stars—including Stockard Channing, who played Rizzo in “Grease”—and at least one government official, who required security clearances. She also repaired the century-old Vulcan at Barney Greengrass. But most of her clients are ordinary people with ailing heirloom hearths. In her promotional TikToks, they appear overcome with gratitude, shouting—in joyous, if hostage-like, unison—“The Stove Lady saved our stove!”

Stagecraft is key. When restoring, “I don’t let the client stay in the kitchen with us,” Belgrove said. “It’s like going to the hairdresser. You can’t see it till I’m done!”

Having finished the knob, Belgrove set off for Long Island, reflecting on her life as Curtis drove. She was, in a sense, to the burner born. Her father, a Trinidadian immigrant, ran an appliance-repair shop in Mount Vernon. Yet he forbade her from pursuing his trade: “He didn’t want me to get my hands dirty.”

Belgrove earned an accounting degree and worked in finance. When her father died, in 1999, she let her brother take over the family business—until their late paterfamilias appeared to her in a dream, yelling at her brother to

“get out!” She staged a coup and refocussed the business on antique stoves, whose ins and outs she mastered with help from vintage-appliance “gurus” across the country. “Miracles were happening for me,” Belgrove recalled. “I was fixing things that I didn’t know how to fix.” She overheard a client calling her “the stove lady,” and added the aspirational “famous.”

Curtis turned through a gate just off the Montauk Highway. A gravel driveway wound past a pool to a converted carriage house, whose owner, a graying Englishman, greeted Belgrove like an old friend. She swanned inside and set down her tools beside the Magic Chef, a six-burner with an extra side oven shaped like a rolltop desk. “Not bad!” she conceded. “When I first came out here and saw that stove, I said, ‘I’m going to put you over my knee!’ ” She mimed a swat, laughing merrily.

Hamptons Man looked sheepish. “I felt like I was back in school,” he said.

Submission is prudent when it comes to Belgrove, who, at least in the tri-state area, is unrivalled. A lawsuit once landed her on “The People’s Court,” whose Judge Marilyn Milian was so taken with Belgrove that she fairly broiled the skinflint defendant. “When you turn knobs, it is not the same as when the Stove Lady turns knobs!” the judge said. “And that’s why lawyers and doctors and stove ladies can charge obscene amounts.”

Hamptons Man was more philosophical about Belgrove’s fees. “It’s like having an old-timey Jaguar,” he said of his stove, whose renovation cost thirty-five thousand dollars. (Simpler jobs are only a few hundred.) But Belgrove affixed the new knob and repaired the flickering pilot lights; there was a ground fault in the custom safety system she’d previously installed. Then it emerged that the side oven seemed to be stuck at its maximum temperature, possibly because someone had over-turned the dial and broken its inner spring.

“The cleaning lady?” Belgrove asked.

“I am the cleaning lady,” Hamptons Man replied.

She pursed her lips: “One of your alter egos touched it.”

He grew anxious; soon, the house would be going on the rental market, and the stove had to function. But Belgrove needed time to find another part. On the drive home, as the sun winked out over the Long Island Expressway, she considered her next chapter: What about a streaming series? Or her own line of Belgrove Stoves? For now, she turned to a more pressing matter—bidding on an upgrade for a holiday cruise in the Caribbean. ♦

Julian Lucas, a staff writer, began contributing to The New Yorker in 2018.

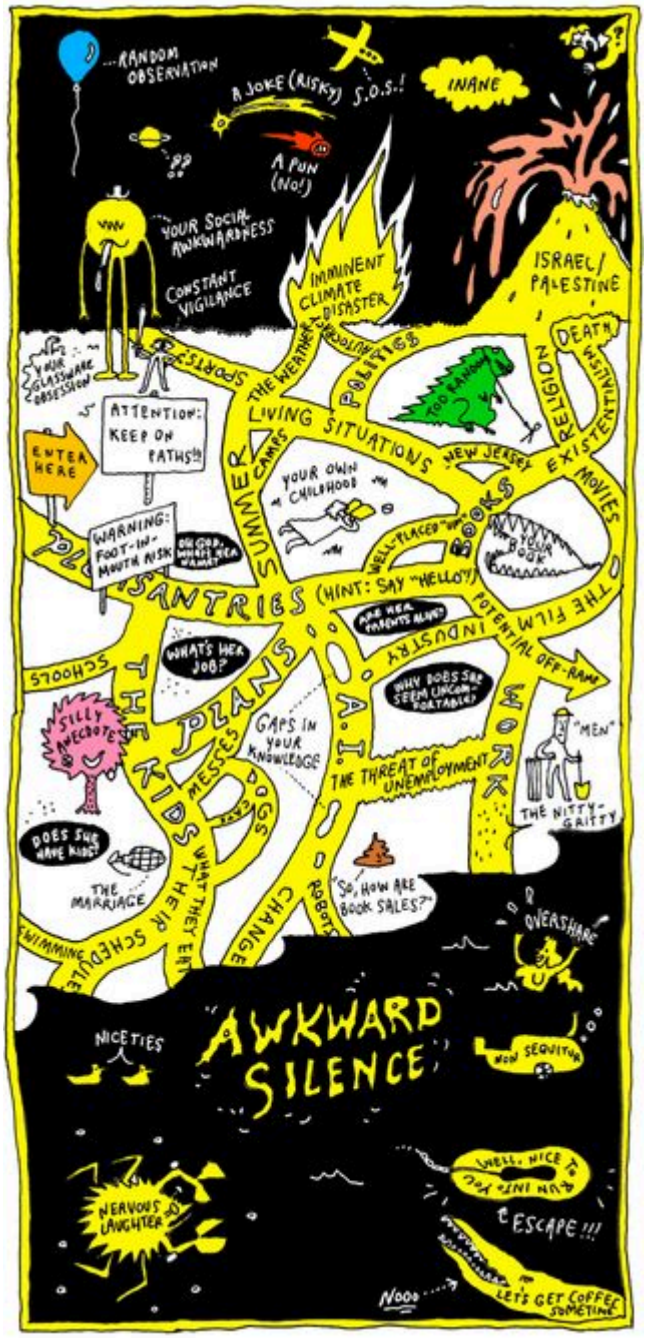
Sketchpad

Small-Talk Road Map

Enter through Pleasantries and take a right at A.I. Watch out for the Gaps in Your Knowledge!

***By** Liana Finck*

January 19, 2026



[Liana Finck](#) is a cartoonist and an illustrator who has contributed to The New Yorker since 2015. She was a 2023 Guggenheim Fellow and is the author of "[How to Baby](#)" and "[Mixed Feelings](#)."

Reporting & Essays

- **The Lights Are Still On in Venezuela**
  After the ouster of President Nicolás Maduro, some residents fear that one unelected despot has been swapped for another.
- **The Ice Curtain**
  Since Putin invaded Ukraine, the short distance between Nome, Alaska, and Russia seems wider than ever.
- **Inside Bari Weiss's Hostile Takeover of CBS News**
  The network's new editor-in-chief has championed a press free from élite bias, while aligning herself with a billionaire class more willing than ever to indulge Donald Trump.
- **The Congresswoman Criminalized for Visiting ICE Detainees**
  LaMonica McIver went to tour an immigration jail in her New Jersey district. Now she faces seventeen years in prison.

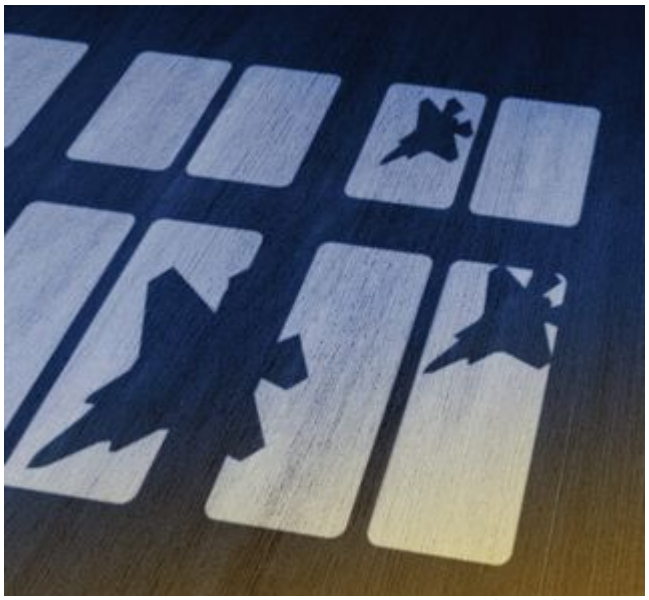
Letter from Caracas

The Lights Are Still On in Venezuela

After the ouster of President Nicolás Maduro, some residents fear that one unelected despot has been swapped for another.

By **Armando Ledezma**

January 14, 2026



The city's holiday season was darkened by the imminent threat of conflict.Illustration by Diego Mallo

Months before Christmas, Caracas was adorned with a surreal amount of festive decorations. Millions of lights were strung around the trunks of palm trees; public squares were ornamented with L.E.D. stars and satin ribbons. Back in September, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro had announced that Christmas would come early: an attempt to raise spirits amid threats from the world's greatest military superpower, and to boost the economy in a country with the highest rate of annual inflation globally. Ironically, this meant that by the time the holidays actually came around, the Christmas trees and fixtures looked depressingly weathered, exposed to the elements for far too long.

On the morning of Christmas Eve, my maternal grandparents and I put up our own decorations, bedecking our apartment, in the north of the capital, with vintage baubles, tinsel, and seasonal cushions. The holiday aesthetics had long lost their allure. Still, we each grabbed a corner of a festive red tablecloth and draped it over the table where we eat breakfast together every morning, cutting fruit and drinking coffee as the sun begins to rise through the wrought-iron windows, birdsong emanating from the tropical forest that separates Caracas from the Caribbean Sea.

In late November, when U.S. President Donald Trump had announced that he was closing Venezuela's airspace—tantamount to an act of war, given that Venezuela is a sovereign nation—many of us had worried about Christmas. The country has a diaspora of nearly eight million; more than a quarter of the population has left in the past ten years alone, primarily owing to economic hardship. Inflation is so severe that, in the past two decades, the nation's currency has been declared void and substituted with a new tender three times. The streets of Caracas glitter with discarded, obsolete money, not worth the time it would take to bend over and pick it up.

There is a long-standing custom of Venezuelans who live abroad coming home for the holidays, and, in many cases, bringing much-needed cash to their loved ones in a country where the minimum wage is less than a dollar per month, but everyday life remains expensive. (Because of the unreliability of Venezuelan currency, U.S. dollars and cryptocurrency are used for most meaningful transactions, which has raised the cost of living significantly.) With almost no international flights entering or leaving Venezuela, many families had to make alternate arrangements for Christmas this year, living rooms and bellies much emptier than anticipated. On top of this, the country's dwindling but nevertheless extensive tourism and hospitality industries were sent into deeper financial distress, as December is typically the busiest period of the year.

This Christmas, it was just my grandparents and me. They have both lived through more than ninety Decembers, but this was the first one we'd shared in a long time. In 2002, after an attempted coup against then President Hugo Chávez, leading to a period of unrest, my parents had decided that we

couldn’t live in Caracas, and we settled in London. We visited Venezuela occasionally, but the situation in the country became so extreme that, eventually, we couldn’t do even that. In my early twenties, I moved back to Caracas, though I would leave again to complete my postgraduate studies in the U.K. I returned to the city roughly six months ago and moved in with my grandparents.

We spent Christmas Eve driving around Caracas, revisiting familiar places, such as San Agustín del Norte, the neighborhood where my grandfather grew up, and Bellas Artes, the picturesque museum district. My grandfather, despite nearing his centenary year, insisted on driving—his way of retaining a sense of control among the local and geopolitical chaos. During the crisis years, in the second half of the twenty-tens, when poverty, violent crime, and civil unrest reached a fever pitch, my grandparents had purchased an armored Toyota Camry, the only bulletproof vehicle they could afford. But the car—small, low to the ground, and exceedingly heavy, owing to the ballistic steel and glass—is not suited to a city like Caracas, which is rife with steep inclines and deep potholes, and is best travelled in a four-by-four. The car was surely designed for a foreign diplomat to drive down one straight road between an embassy and a hotel; instead, it suffers greatly at the twists and turns of this city, and at the hands of my grandfather, who drives boldly.

When my grandparents felt that Caracas was at its most dangerous, around 2019, they rarely left their neighborhood at all. In recent years, as violent crime has declined, they’ve become more willing to venture out, eager to reconnect with a place that, for years, they felt they could not explore. On Christmas Eve, we looked through the car windows with awe at a city that my grandparents had almost forgotten, and that I had never got to know in the first place—a mosaic of colorfully painted houses and narrow favela streets, loud with the sound of motorbikes and music, interspersed with walkways wrapped in Christmas lights.

There was something slightly comical about the aesthetics of Christmas, shaped as they are by the colder global North, being superimposed on this tropical landscape. But the humor quickly turns dark when you cross the Río Guaire into San Agustín del Sur, the hillside favela near my

grandfather's old quarter, and arrive at a pyramidal building called El Helicoide. A wildly ambitious brutalist project, the structure was intended as a luxury shopping mall, complete with a four-kilometre ramp that loops around it, allowing vehicles to drive right in and park inside. It is now one of the most notorious political prisons in South America. For the past three months, it has also been a Christmas tree. An L.E.D. star sits atop the pyramid, and strands of colorful lights encircle the structure, like tinsel.

Inmates have reported cruel and inhumane treatment: electrocution, beatings, and simulated executions, among other horrors. Many were arrested for protesting Maduro's regime, after he stole the Presidential election, in 2024. Some were detained for simply sending texts questioning the government's legitimacy—messages that were uncovered during the phone searches that have become a routine part of law enforcement in Caracas.

Trump's aggressive actions toward Venezuela only worsened the Maduro regime's paranoia, and, in turn, its authoritarian grip on power. A common slogan, written on the armored personnel carriers that could be seen coming and going from El Helicoide at all hours of the day, translates to the declaration "To Doubt Is Treason." The city's most ubiquitous image, painted all over Caracas by government-commissioned muralists, is of the eyes of Hugo Chávez, Maduro's predecessor, watching us.

In September, after the Trump Administration had begun striking boats off the coast of Venezuela, I was out photographing the local flora, a few streets down from where my grandparents and I live. After taking a picture of an unusually overgrown kapok tree—which, my neighbors later told me, was near a property owned by a high-ranking government official's daughter—plainclothes officers approached me. They asked fairly banal questions about my employment and my reasons for taking photographs, and they looked through my phone, where they discovered that I had some text messages in English, further arousing their suspicion.

After roughly half an hour of sitting with the officers in the shadow of the kapok, being interrogated about my thoughts on the government, a four-by-four pulled up. Officers from *SEBIN*, the country's intelligence service, dressed in black balaclavas and combat gear, with semi-automatic rifles

slung over their shoulders, emerged from the vehicle and said that they were going to take me somewhere for questioning. They explained that, for my own safety, they were going to have to restrain me, and, in a gesture painfully symptomatic of the fact that I have spent far too much of my life in England, I made sure to shake the officers' hands before they zip-tied my wrists.

I was guided into the middle back seat of the car, the *SEBIN* agents sitting on either side of me, and a plainclothes officer up front. My eyes were covered with a blindfold. I could feel a cold pressure just below my ribs, and, looking down out of a small gap in the eye covering, I saw that both of the agents beside me had drawn handguns and were pointing them at my waist. They took me to El Helicoide for interrogation, on suspicion of being a spy who was using the pretext of photography to document what they called "a street where important people live"—all of this for a photo of a beautiful tree, and a language shared with a potential oppressor. After grilling me for hours, the officers decided that my intentions were more artistic than political. But they insisted on driving me back to my apartment so they could check the validity of my story about living with family near the site of my arrest. When we arrived on my block, an uncle who could vouch for me was thankfully present and smoking on the porch, and I narrowly avoided introducing my grandparents to the masked men with rifles. It wasn't too long after this encounter that El Helicoide became a Christmas tree.

All throughout December, fireworks punctuated the tropical nights, set off by families and delinquents alike, who took advantage of the pyrotechnics sold by street venders around town. Many times during the holiday season, I flinched at the sound of a celebratory rocket or a confetti cannon, mistakenly thinking that the U.S. had begun its ballistic campaign. The most extensive American-military buildup in the region in decades, featuring missile destroyers and the world's largest warship, along with a reported fifteen thousand troops, was less than twelve kilometres off our coast—and yet the fireworks persisted. It is a testament to the Venezuelan people's resilience that, even in the face of a possible war, they were celebrating loudly with pyrotechnics; it is also horribly annoying if, like me, you have an anxious disposition and spend too much time reading the news.

It wouldn’t be until the day after Christmas that Trump announced the first air strike on Venezuelan soil, targeting a port facility that he claimed was used for drug trafficking. Though the strike itself was a dramatic escalation, few people here were surprised. If anything, the most unexpected aspect of the attack was that it had come so late in the year: the naval fleet had already been present, in the Caribbean and in the public imagination, for more than four months.

On the evening of January 2nd, my grandparents and I drove out to El Paseo Los Próceres, the site of Caracas’s most elaborate holiday display, to see the Christmas lights before they were taken down. It’s a long boulevard flanked with statues, which connects monuments to the country’s independence heroes with a sprawling military complex, Fuerte Tiuna. The Paseo was commissioned by the mid-century dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez, whose modernizing campaign saw the construction of El Helicoide. We spent a quiet evening watching the twinkle, and my grandparents told me stories about dances and parties they’d attended in venues nearby. My grandfather said that, at the invitation of a friend who was in the military and had access to the private venues reserved for the armed forces, he had once attended a party there with Pérez Jiménez himself.

I went to bed early that night. At roughly 2 *A.M.*, I woke to a loud humming noise, which I realized was coming from fighter jets overhead. This was followed by the sound of bombs dropping, rattling the padlocks on our windows, which my grandmother had bought, during the crisis years, to prevent break-ins. After the first rush of terror subsided, I realized how foolish I’d been to think that the fireworks that went off in December were a possible bombardment. This current noise was unlike anything I’d ever heard, so utterly and unequivocally an instrument of death. The best way I can describe it is as vividly three-dimensional: in the same way that hearing an echo can sometimes allow you to visualize the shape of the room it is coming from, each blast seemed to occupy space solidly, leading me to imagine a thick sphere of fire. I felt the sound in my chest, like the negative impression of a heartbeat.

I woke up my grandparents, who, being slightly deaf, had not yet realized that anything was happening. Throughout the night, more than a hundred and fifty aircraft would fly over Caracas and nearby cities. At the time, none of us knew how discerning the troops would be in their campaign, or how long it would go on for. Ultimately, the bombardment would last a little more than two hours, with the noise from the aircraft continuing almost until dawn. Fuerte Tiuna, the military complex near the beautifully illuminated boulevard where my grandfather had partied with Pérez Jiménez, had been partially reduced to rubble. It is where Maduro and his wife had been staying when they were captured by U.S. forces.

Later that morning, after news of Maduro's capture had circulated, the mass panic-buying began. People across the city scraped together the little money they had, sometimes draining their bank accounts entirely, to buy food and other necessities. Queues for gas stations and grocery stores, where shelves were increasingly empty, grew to be several blocks long. Prices, meanwhile, began to skyrocket: a single plantain now costs three dollars—six times what it used to.

"I always wear a sports jacket so whenever anyone calls me 'sir' I can attribute it to my jacket and not my age."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Outside the overpopulated supermarkets, Caracas, which is normally a mad bustle of people and motorbikes, was eerily deserted. The city's colorful outdoor food markets lay abandoned—the usual smell of ripe papaya replaced by the stench of yesterday's scraps, rotting in the heat. Even the police and military presence was strangely understated. Caracas feels like a war zone at the best of times, with uniformed men on so many streets, but now that we were actually at war, they were nowhere to be seen. The only body that has come out in force in the wake of the bombardment are the *colectivos*—paramilitary groups that monitor the roads on motorcycles. These ad-hoc patrols, who defend the regime, make up for their lack of official authority with sheer intensity. Though superficially less intimidating than the National Guard and intelligence agents, who wear expensive gear and are evidently trained, it is the *colectivos* who inspire true fear, partly owing to one crucial detail: they, unlike official law-enforcement officers, tend to keep their fingers on their triggers.

Maduro's ouster initially led to a sense of relief in Venezuela, for people across the political spectrum: those who supported U.S. intervention celebrated Maduro's capture as a sign that regime change was imminent, whereas those who feared American military force hoped that the capture would at least mark an end to the imminent threat of violence. That relief quickly faded, however, as we realized how much uncertainty lies ahead. We in Venezuela are well aware of the Trump Administration's mistreatment of Latin American immigrants in the United States, including the two hundred and fifty-two Venezuelan men who were sent to *CECOT*, the maximum-security prison in El Salvador, where their heads were shaved upon entry and some were severely beaten. Hundreds more Venezuelan immigrants have been sent to Alligator Alcatraz, where the Miami *Herald* reported that two-thirds of the more than eighteen hundred migrants detained last July had essentially disappeared from public records. Many Venezuelans fear that Trump's brutal treatment of the Latino population on U.S. soil is indicative of how he will proceed in terms of his foreign policy, even with Maduro, one of the main targets of his ire, gone. Trump's rhetoric has decidedly shifted away from the prevention of drug trafficking toward obtaining control and resources, underscoring that this operation was never about democracy or the Venezuelan people's right to self-determination. After Trump stated in a recent *Times* interview that the U.S. is going to be

running Venezuela, apparently for years, and shared an image on Truth Social of a doctored Wikipedia page calling him the “Acting President of Venezuela,” some of us fear that we have swapped one unelected despot for another, and that we might even join the ranks of Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Or, based on the recent chaos, that we might return to something like the crisis years.

The morning after Maduro was captured, as the sun rose over the mountains at the edge of the city, people had stepped out of their homes in a daze. This city, with its long history of civil disobedience and violence, where so many people distrust their neighbors, was suddenly buzzing with conversations between strangers, as everyone tried to figure out what had happened the night before, together. But that brief moment of connection was something of an isolated incident. The country is becoming more and more polarized, as the many Venezuelans who are simultaneously angry at Maduro’s dictatorial regime and distrusting of the U.S. feel that they must pick a side, despite there being no good options. The extremists on either end of the spectrum—ardent supporters of the Bolivarian regime, and the disenfranchised ruling class who hated the revolution from its more democratic beginnings, long before it spiralled into a dictatorship—are both disproportionately loud and paint a picture of the country and its people that is far more ideological than the reality. The members of the diaspora, too, with their safety from the mechanisms of state repression and their distance from the bombardment and the mortal fear it spurred, cast a skewed image. “Don’t try and explain Venezuela to Venezuelans” has rapidly become a popular slogan of the diaspora, especially in right-wing cities like Miami, where it is often used to shut down criticisms of Trump’s actions. I would retort with, Don’t try to speak on behalf of Venezuela if you are not here. If you heard the bombs on the news instead of feeling them in your chest, you’re bound to have a different reaction to the situation. There is neither celebration nor lamentation in the capital right now, only immense uncertainty as we try to make sense of what comes next. With the city in such a state of suspension, no one has bothered to take down all the Christmas lights. ♦

Armando Ledezma is a Venezuelan-British essayist and poet living in Caracas.

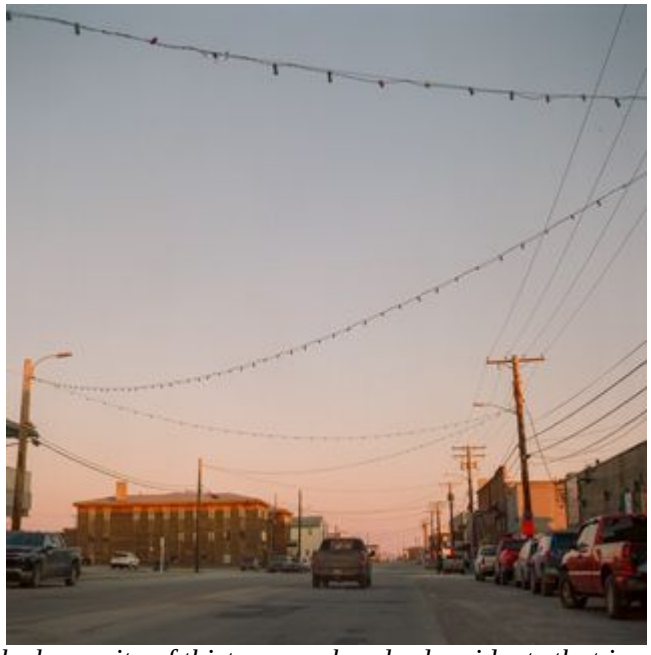
Our Far-Flung Correspondents

The Ice Curtain

Since Putin invaded Ukraine, the short distance between Nome, Alaska, and Russia seems wider than ever.

By Ian Frazier

January 19, 2026



Front Street in Nome, Alaska, a city of thirty-seven hundred residents that is almost as far west as you can go in North America.Photographs by Ash Adams for The New Yorker

Fifth Avenue in midtown Manhattan is about twenty paces wide, curb to curb. Front Street, the main business street in Nome, Alaska, about four thousand air miles to the northwest, is two paces narrower but feels just as wide. Usually, there aren't a lot of cars or pedestrians on Front Street, and the buildings that line it, none of them tall, seem to lean back from it. More dust and sand and rain and snow blow down Front Street than vehicles drive on it. Standing in line in the cheery post office on West Front, Nome-ites talk and laugh and exchange news. On days when the sand is blowing, some have goggles hanging from their necks or pushed up on their foreheads.

Nome’s sand contains gold, and other minerals. The iron in it will turn white cars a dingy yellow over time. During drier periods, small sand ripples form in corners along the streets, like sand on the bottom of a lake. Since the discovery of gold here, in 1898, billions of dollars have been taken out of Nome’s beach and from the bottom of the Bering Sea, just offshore. With gold at more than four thousand dollars an ounce, the gold dredges move constantly back and forth on the water on calm days in early fall. Ungainly with their beams and pipes, the dredges look like tufts of Rust Belt infrastructure that have blown loose and drifted westward and finally tumbled onto this distant sea. Rainy days turn the sand and dust on Nome’s streets into a thin grayish silt. This is what a place looks like when its streets are paved with gold.

The city of thirty-seven hundred residents is almost as far west as you can go in North America. Front Street parallels the sea, whose storms and giant blocks of ice have sometimes beaten the business district flat. Gold’s current valuation is just one of many international factors to keep in mind here. The Russia-U.S. border, which follows the International Date Line, is less than a hundred and fifty miles away. Provideniya, a Russian town with a formerly large military base, is two hundred and thirty miles from Nome. Cruise ships from Europe that have travelled the Northeast Passage route over the top of the planet stop in Nome, as do ships that have followed the Northwest Passage across northernmost North America.

Jim Stimpfle, Nome's most famous citizen, dreamed up the 1988 "Friendship Flight" that opened the border between Alaska and Russia's Far East.

Along the Alaskan coastline, it's about a hundred and ten miles from Nome to Wales, the continent's westernmost point. From Wales, it's twenty-five miles to the Russian island of Big Diomede, and fifty-two miles to the coast of Chukotka, as that easternmost district of Russia is called.

Starting in 1999, I used to come to Nome to do research on a book I was writing about Siberia. I wanted to go from Nome to Russia, a goal that involved complications and extra trips on this side. One morning, in a Nome café called Fat Freddie's, I met Jim Stimpfle, Nome's most famous citizen, a man of grand ideas. The card he gave me listed him as a director of the Interhemispheric Bering Strait Tunnel & Railroad Group, whose intention was to dig a tunnel from near Wales to the "Chukotka Nose," the very tip of Russia and of Asia, and to build a railroad that would go up the coast of North America, pass through the tunnel ("Just forty-one miles longer than the Chunnel!" Stimpfle said), and connect to another yet-to-be-constructed railroad, in Russia.

Stimpfle became famous in this way: His father was a dentist in Washington, D.C., with patients and friends in the diplomatic corps. Stimpfle wanted to be a diplomat himself, but after he graduated from George Mason University, in 1970, he ended up in Alaska, where eventually

he married a Native woman, Yaayuk Bernadette Alvanna, whose family came from King Island, which is off the coast north of Nome. He became a real-estate agent; he says he has been inside almost every building in Nome. Through his wife, he learned that Natives on this side—the Yupik and the Inupiat—remembered relatives on the Russian side whom they hadn't seen since J. Edgar Hoover and the Soviet government shut down cross-border travel and communication, in 1948, creating what became known as the Ice Curtain.

In the nineteen-eighties, Stimpfle decided to devote his spare time and energies to breaching that curtain, reëstablishing Russian-American connections, and reuniting Native relatives. By September, 1987, his efforts to restart travel back and forth had got the attention of Alaska Airlines and Exploration Cruise Lines. The *Wall Street Journal* did a front-page article about this lesser-known border, and quoted Stimpfle. After that piece, more reporters wrote about him. They said that Jim Stimpfle, a local real-estate agent and a private citizen in Nome, was working to end the Cold War.

At the Alaska Aviation Museum, near the airport in Anchorage, a Boeing 737 with the logo of Alaska Airlines on its sides and the company's emblem of a smiling, parka-wearing Native man on its tail sits with other mothballed airplanes outside a hangar. A plaque beside it reads "Historic Flights to Russian Far East: Friendship Flight, Nome-Provideniya; June 13, 1988." On that day, Stimpfle and seventy-nine other officials, reporters, and ordinary Alaskans, including thirty Native people, flew in this plane for an inaugural visit.

Photos of the delegation show Stimpfle on board among other smiling folks leaning over the seat backs and talking and standing in the aisle. He had coined the term "Friendship Flight," and as the president of the Nome Chamber of Commerce had been agitating for the idea tirelessly. Mead Treadwell, at the time a young Yale graduate who had already been involved in Alaskan politics for a decade, remembers Frank Murkowski, then a U.S. senator, saying to him, "Mead, I've been getting Stimpfle's faxes every day for a year and a half." Murkowski was just one of dozens of officials whom Stimpfle besieged.

During the nineteen-eighties and nineties, residents of Nome and Russian citizens engaged in a period of trans-strait friendship and exchange.

After the Friendship Flight took off from Nome, it flew for about forty-five minutes and landed on the gravel runway at Provideniya's airport. The cabin door opened, uniformed Russian officialdom entered, and a pattern began that would be repeated many times—the checking of documents, the standing in line, the triple-thump of passport stamping, the boarding onto not-new buses, the arrival at a dim official hall, the salty snacks, the sit-down banquets, the *ryumki* (shot glasses) standing in rows, the toasts being raised *bezkonechno* (without end), the mutual incomprehension, the unmoored good cheer.

I went up the boarding stairs to the plane and stepped into its open door. The passenger seats had been removed and benches installed along the walls. When you're an airline passenger, knee to spine with your neighbors, you forget that what you're in is just a big tube. The almost empty piece of aluminum echoed and creaked.

Stimpfle still lives in Nome and is still its most famous citizen. I went there in September, and he was the first person I called. Fat Freddie's has closed, and Stimpfle now patronizes the Polar Cub Café, where he sits with friends at the same table almost every morning. Just beyond the café's broad windows, the waves of the Bering Sea batter the granite riprap frontage.

One morning, Stimpfle joined me at a corner table. I'd last seen him twenty-four years ago, an interval that has slowed us both. He wore a brown knit cap with a bill, a zippered jacket, loose knee-length blue shorts over gray sweatpants, and black running shoes. He is tall and strong-looking, and his blue eyes, which used to spark behind his spectacles and sharp nose, have grown mellow.

"The chef from the restaurant we ate at last night wants to make sure you're not foolish enough to try to re-create any of his recipes at home."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Looking across the expanse of sea, he talked about his first attempts to contact somebody—anybody—on the Russian side. He began by filling balloons with air or with exhaust from his car and writing messages on the balloons themselves. Then, on a strong east wind one day, he released a weather balloon that he had filled with helium. Attached was a capsule containing small gifts—tobacco, sugar, tea, and sewing supplies—and a message of friendship which a schoolteacher in Nome had translated into Russian. Stimpfle watched the balloon rise and move offshore. Then the balloon began to descend, landed on the sea, and bounced along the surface. A seal hunter who happened to be passing by saw it and took it into his boat. He opened the capsule, saw the notes in Cyrillic, and thought the balloon must have come from Russia.

By following the boat along the coast, Stimpfle tracked down the hunter, Tim Gologergen, and explained about the balloon. Soon afterward, a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (*NOAA*) research ship, the Surveyor, docked in Nome. Its captain had received an invitation from

the mayor of Provideniya, Oleg Kulinkin, to bring his ship to its harbor for a brief visit—something that had not happened in sixty years. Stimpfle gave the Surveyor's captain a message to pass to Kulinkin. The captain did, and when the ship returned to Nome he brought a message from Kulinkin to Stimpfle. That was the first success Stimpfle had in reaching someone across the strait. When the Friendship Flight went to Provideniya, a year later, he met the mayor in person. Tim Gologergen was on the flight, too, and found relatives in town, to whom he spoke in Yupik.

Stimpfle added, "I heard that Kulinkin was later murdered by the Russian mafia in the Russian Far East city of Magadan, in a hotel where I had stayed myself."

In 1991, Alaska Airlines began regular service to Magadan and Khabarovsk, a city well into Russia, on the Amur River. For a while, the Russian Far East seemed like an extension of North America's West Coast. Aeroflot began to fly into Seattle and Anchorage. Once, in the mid-nineties, in the Seattle airport, when I was on my way from Montana to Los Angeles, I talked to a man from Orlando, Florida, who said he worked for a Saudi-owned oil company at a site on Sakhalin Island where he oversaw an operation involving supertankers and pipelines and underwater infrastructure maintained by teams of scuba divers, who also brought up delicious crabs that he ate. He said the fishing there was excellent, even right offshore. He then got in line for his Aeroflot flight to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, boarding on the same concourse as my flight to L.A.

Trans-strait connections multiplied. In the fall of 1988, a pod of gray whales became stranded in an iced-in pocket of the Beaufort Sea, off the city of Barrow, on Alaska's North Slope, and a Soviet icebreaker arrived and opened the obstructed water and apparently freed them—they were seen no more. Between March and May, 1989, a combined expedition of Russian and U.S. sled-dog teams trekked from the city of Anadyr, in Chukotka, to the city of Kotzebue, on the Baldwin Peninsula, with an airlift from Nome for the last stretch. An Inuit Quaker evangelist named Robert Sheldon led a five-man Native expedition going in the other direction, from Alaska to Chukotka, by snowmobile. They needed a helicopter lift over the strait, which by then was no longer freezing all the way.

Provideniya and Nome agreed to declare themselves each other's sister city. Bering Air, a prop-plane airline started in Nome by a couple from Michigan, began flights to Provideniya and Anadyr. Direct phone service was established; previously, calls from one side to the other had to go all the way around the world, via Moscow. A group of Soviet Young Pioneers visited the Nome Boy Scouts. Stores in Nome put up signs in Cyrillic and began to accept rubles from Russian tourists, who had started to come. Later, the stores were stuck with the rubles when the Russian government would not exchange them for dollars or let them be brought back into the country. The stores made gift packets of rubles and sold them as souvenirs.

A charitable group flew a Russian burn victim across the border for care in the U.S. Dancers from Provideniya performed in Nome, and there was a game between the cities' youth basketball teams. The local paper, the Nome *Nugget*, reported that, with the border open, three Nome-ites had found spouses from Provideniya. The story said that the Alaskan men liked how the Russian women dressed, in skirts and high heels at ten below zero.

In former times, Natives could cross back and forth without having to get visas, but that had ended with the establishment of the Ice Curtain. Now the visa-free program resumed, and thousands of Natives took advantage of it. There were stories of Russian visitors walking into the biggest supermarket in Nome, the Alaska Commercial Company, known as the A.C., and weeping at the abundance they saw there. A Russian Eskimo who moved to Alaska in 2004 told me that the first time she went into the A.C. she had twenty-five cents in her pocket. "I was leaving the store just behind this couple with a lot of groceries, and the automatic doors opened for them but then closed for me. I thought these smart doors knew I hadn't bought anything, so I went back in the store and found a piece of candy for twenty-five cents. I paid for it and went to the doors and held my piece of candy up to the doors, and they opened and let me out."

Hundreds of Russian students came to the University of Alaska campuses in Anchorage and Fairbanks, and exchange programs took Alaskan students to Russia. Sylvia Matson, whose ancestors were mostly Finns, had recently moved up from Sandstone, Minnesota, to join her husband, who had found a job as a mechanic at Bering Air. Not only is her husband also a Finn, but

his name is also Matson—just by coincidence, because both families, when they arrived in the U.S., replaced their complicated Finnish last names with Matson, after a transoceanic shipping company. When she heard about the exchange program with Russia, she pushed to be accepted for it, even though she was a part-time student and not really qualified to apply. An exception was made, and in 1990 she and four other Alaskan students began the fall semester at the State Pedagogical Institute of Magadan, the public university in that city about twelve hundred miles west of Provideniya.

Magadan had a deadly reputation in the Stalin era, as a hub for Gulag mines where political prisoners slaved sometimes to death and produced gold and other minerals in the process. Matson arrived in September and moved in with a host family in which the father was a doctor and the mother an engineer. The entire district was rationing food, and people did not have a lot to eat. She thinks the family got extra food because she was staying with them. She ended up spending more of her time teaching than learning. Russians who speak English tend to have British accents, but as relations with the U.S. improved there was a vogue for speaking with an American accent. The students and teachers with whom Matson practiced English for many hours a day could not get enough of talking to her, and almost wore her out. They may have been surprised to learn afterward that other Americans they spoke to assumed they had learned their English in Minnesota.

With other students, she went on excursions into the forest, or taiga, saw abandoned and crumbling Gulag camps, rarely ate in the dining hall at the Pedagogical Institute (whose food was “really challenging”), and joined in the parade in early November honoring the glorious October Revolution. The school made clear that the American students were required to be a part of the event, which turned out to involve not marching but just kind of walking down Lenin Avenue to Lenin Square and buying stuff from street venders. She got the impression that the Russians who attended did not really want to be there.

In general, Matson and the other exchange students didn’t have much to do but be American. People invited them to dinner in their apartments. “There were families that asked me to come just because they wanted an American

in their home," Matson said. "It was humbling. To be treated to a lavish meal, and to have their children put on a special performance for you. And the little girls would give you their favorite doll—it was heartbreaking, and you couldn't say no. Or they would just gaze at you and want to sit beside you on the couch. They dearly wanted to give to you because you had gifted them with your presence in their home. It was hard for me to know how to navigate that, at age twenty-four.

"When I left, in mid-December, my host family presented me with a lot of gifts, and a fur hat, and I knew there was an expectation that I invite them to visit me in Nome. But I couldn't do that, for private reasons. I disappointed them, I know, and we did not keep in touch. Now my husband is retiring from Bering Air at the end of this year, and we're moving back to Minnesota. We just sold our house and sent a container of our belongings on the container barge down to the Lower Forty-eight. As I was packing up and throwing out, I put aside the gifts the kids and grownups had given me in Magadan, and I've donated them to the historical museum here. The Russian women always said I didn't dress up enough or use enough makeup. I still had the tin of pancake makeup they gave me. Now the museum has it, along with my students' notes of appreciation, and the kids' drawings, and a Russian Soviet Republic flag, and the dolls from the little girls. The museum says that at some point it will do a display about the years when Nome was in friendly contact with the Russians, and I'm glad these things will be in it."

My own trip from Nome across the border happened in August, 1999. I flew Bering Air in a tour group consisting of two couples and me. Vladimir Bychkov, our guide, who met us in Provideniya, is a Russian Army kid from Chukotka, born when his father was stationed there. A mild and competent man, he would later become Provideniya's mayor, occupying the same office once held by Jim Stimpfle's first Russian contact, the apparently ill-fated Oleg Kulinkin. I had travelled a bit in western Russia by then, and Provideniya looked like other post-Soviet towns, except that large parts of it were ruins. After the Soviet Union ended, in 1991, remote places like this had been left on their own. The city's population dropped drastically, and many of the high-rises were empty, with their windows smashed out and small waterfalls flowing down their front steps. After a

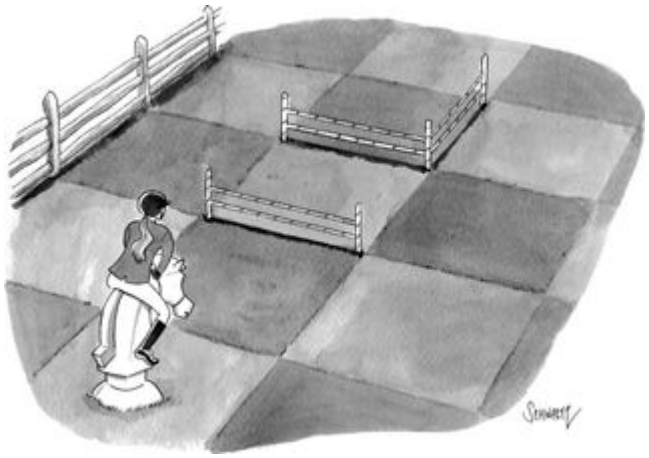
few days in the town, we travelled by Army vehicle and boat to visit Native villages and stayed in fishing shacks or tents.

About a year later, the mood in the region had changed. People were talking about Roman Abramovich, the oil-and-aluminum billionaire, who was running for governor of Chukotka, mystifying everybody. Why would one of the world's richest men want to be the governor of this abandoned, farthest-flung part of Russia? But he soon began to campaign throughout Chukotka and give money to local charities, and in December, 2000, he won the election, replacing the almost comically corrupt previous governor, Aleksandr Nazarov. Abramovich then opened new businesses in Anadyr and set about spending more of his own money on bettering the lives of local residents. He and his team rehabbed housing, repaired roads, reimbursed residents who had gone for years without receiving their salaries, brought in ships carrying food and supplies, and paid for talented kids from the region to study in Alaska. Chukotka residents hung portraits of Abramovich in their apartments the way Soviet citizens once hung portraits of Lenin.

The Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum in Nome displays mementos and gifts that Russian citizens gave to visiting Americans, back when travel between the two countries was more open.

I became friends with Ken and Tandy Wallack, whose company, Circumpolar Expeditions, had arranged my visit. They live in Anchorage, where many of Abramovich's projects took him. The Wallacks have worked

on all kinds of journeys on the other side of the strait. When an American adventurer with time and money wanted to go up the coast of Chukotka and across to the U.S. in a Native *umiak*, or walrus-skin boat, to show that humans could have come to North America by boat rather than on land—a kind of sub-Arctic Kon-Tiki—the Wallacks found Native people to make his boat for him and guide him. The Wallacks also helped Fiat, the Italian car company, negotiate the Russia-to-Alaska leg of a publicity trip around the world in special heavy-duty Iveco trucks, and handled logistical problems for Philippe Croizon, the French quadruple amputee and distance swimmer, when he swam between the Russian and American islands that Lynne Cox had linked in her famous cross-border swim in 1987. The Wallacks speak only English, but they have a gift for understanding the heavily accented English that different kinds of people speak, and then repeating it in English that interpreters can understand.



Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

At the request of Abramovich, who had hired them, and whom they remember as pleasant and unassuming, they found places to stay for the hundred and fifty Chukotka high-school students he brought to Anchorage in groups of fifty at a time. The Wallacks set up visits to public schools, trips to McDonald’s, and other American activities. “For some reason, Abramovich wanted them all to go bowling,” Tandy Wallack said. “So we found a bowling alley for them and got them started—none of them had ever bowled—and they bowled.” The oligarch came and went in his private jet and kept a spare jet in Anchorage in case another might be needed at short notice.

In 2008, for reasons as opaque as his intentions in taking on the role, Abramovich resigned his governorship and went elsewhere in his extremely complicated and tiring-to-think-about billionaire's world. The charities he set up for the people of Chukotka continued to exist, supposedly, but the interlude of benign mega-capitalist visitation in this part of the world was over.

"It all just kind of petered out," Jim Stimpfle told me, in the Polar Cub Café. "The time of *druzhba* [friendship] across the border just ended. I went back to real estate full time. My wife had got tired of my spending so much effort with all this Russia business. And there was all the corruption, and the shakedowns, especially the landing fees that the Russian airports kept jacking up for Alaska Airlines and Bering Air, who both finally had to stop flying over there." Alaska Airlines ended all its flights to the Russian Far East in 1998. Bering Air continued to operate an occasional charter flight until service to Russia entirely stopped with the war.

Part of the problem was that most people in the Russian Far East remained too poor to come to the U.S. or trade across the border in any meaningful way. Russia also began to be perceived as too dangerous. There were stories of American sailors beaten and robbed in Anadyr, of Japanese nature-documentary crews arrested and then released only after all their equipment had been confiscated. On one of the Wallacks' trips to Chukotka, in the twenty-tens, when they were helping to make a documentary about an Alaska Native's search for her relatives, authorities in the village of Lavrentiya detained them and their crew for having forgotten some paperwork. One by one, the Americans had to appear before a judge, plead guilty, and pay a fine. Some of the Native people of Chukotka, for their part, had grown tired of the stream of evangelists from North America. A Canadian preacher made a video of Natives screaming and crying and throwing themselves on the floor during a come-to-Jesus moment that he had brought about. Other Natives found the video demeaning when it was circulated. A few neighborly gestures still occurred—in the winter of 2012, Nome almost ran out of heating oil, and a Russian tanker arrived in mid-January to resupply the city. But after Russia's seizure of Crimea, in 2014, remaining civilian communication across the strait began to shut down, and it dwindled to nothing in 2022 after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Nome's geographic internationality helped inspire Jim Stimpfle to work for Russian-American understanding and peace. Since February, 2022, it has motivated other Nome-ites to go to war.

Mark Hayward, a military veteran and a former Special Forces medic who moved to Nome in 2018 with his wife, was in the predominantly Native community of Savoonga, on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, on February 24, 2022, the day of the invasion. He had gone there as an employee of the Norton Sound Health Corporation to teach residents how to be their own first responders and save lives until victims could be air-transported to better medical care in Anchorage or Seattle. You can't see Russia from Wasilla, Alaska, but, if you go up on a hill on a clear day, you can see it from St. Lawrence Island. "I'm ashamed to admit, I had checked out of the world," Hayward told me, by phone. "But, when that invasion happened, I was so freakin' mad. There's the Russian coast, less than a hundred miles from Savoonga. If Putin can roll tanks into his neighbor, why wouldn't he send a sub up here to sink a tanker carrying the oil that keeps my family alive in the winter? When I got home, I knew what I had to do, and so did my wife. She said, 'You've read the news. Get your ass on a plane and get over there.' " He left soon afterward, intending to join the foreign-volunteer legion defending Ukraine.

I first learned about Hayward from an article in the Washington *Post* by Zachariah Hughes, a reporter for the Anchorage *Daily News*. (He is a college friend of my daughter's; she put the two of us in touch.) Hughes had gone to Nome last winter and met Hayward in person, but by the time I went, in September, readers of the *Post* article had sent Hayward money to support his war efforts; one had even funded his return to Ukraine. While walking around Nome, I came upon and tried to make sense of the city's former hospital building, which sprawls in an indeterminate shape and contains the offices of the Department of Motor Vehicles, a car-repair garage, a pawnshop, the Nome courthouse, and the labyrinthine workshops of Rolland Trowbridge, an enterprising man who bought the building and damaged his knee crawling around in its crannies as he rehabbed it for its present uses. Trowbridge is a collaborator of Hayward's, and has assembled military matériel in his workshop for Hayward to send to Ukraine via the

international courier Meest, which specializes in transporting packages between Ukraine and North America.

I found Trowbridge by asking at the pawnshop. He's a tall and big man with a well-trimmed beard and mustache, thick, dark eyebrows, and no hair at all north of that. For everyday life, he wears work boots and button-downs. He showed me what he was working on: shrapnel-deterring body armor made of Kevlar fabric sewn with Kevlar thread on his extra-large sail-making sewing machine. (Trowbridge is a sailor who first came to Nome in his own sailboat, amazingly, from Michigan.) In other nooks sat a one-person motorized paraglider that has a range of a hundred and fifty miles and resembles something that Wile E. Coyote might use, and several intricate multifaceted handheld devices for jamming the radio signals that guide drones.

Rolland Trowbridge is a Nome-ite who assembles military matériel for colleagues to take to the front lines in Ukraine, in an effort to beat back the invading Russians.

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, Nome residents had joined Jim Stimpfle in his projects of trans-strait *druzhba;* now dozens of them, by Trowbridge's estimation, are helping Trowbridge and Hayward help Ukraine. Nome-ites have donated supplies, labor, and money raised at benefit events. He showed me slides of two used yellow-and-green Mercedes-Benz ambulances that he and Hayward bought with the money

they raised, and drove from the U.K. to Ukraine in the summer of 2024. His and Hayward's main achievement so far, he said, has been generating power for a Ukrainian arsenal of Javelin missiles that lacked functioning ignition and guidance systems. He said that by tinkering they put together twelve-volt motorbike batteries with improvised wiring that got the Javelins' circuitry to work. Then the Ukrainians took these high-tech armor-piercing weapons to the front and "started poppin' tanks" with them, Trowbridge said, forcing the Russians to turn back their advance on the city of Mykolaiv, a maneuver that could have led to the encirclement of the entire Black Sea region.

He showed me shelves and tables heaped with black, shiny Chinese electronics that he was testing and adapting. "I happen to know a lot about which Chinese equipment is good and which is junk, and how to order the best, which the Ukrainians generally can't. And you always need to keep buying more of it because drone warfare is changing every day."

Later, when I talked to Hayward in Mykolaiv from my hotel in Anchorage, he texted me a photograph of a sea-mammal-harpoon point made of shiny steel that he had brought to Ukraine from Savoonga. He also has a motorized paraglider with him. He said he planned to attach the point to a spear and take it up with him in the paraglider so he can harpoon an Orlan-10, one of the sophisticated drones that are killing Ukrainians. "I'm in this war all the way," Hayward said. "I've spent down my I.R.A. and run through my savings. If Putin isn't stopped here, he will keep on going, and we will all end up living in his gangster world. I'll give everything I've got to stop him, and if I spend all my kids' inheritance and more helping to create a world where aggression like this cannot stand, that's an inheritance I'm proud to leave."

In Nome, Trowbridge told me that he is worried about Hayward. He said, "I'm afraid Mark won't be satisfied until he gets himself killed there."

Gay Sheffield, the Bering Strait agent for the University of Alaska's marine-advisory program in Nome, responds to concerns about sea mammals, subsistence-food sourcing, and environmental change in the region. She also serves as the commissioner of the Port of Nome. The scientific papers she has written or contributed to get down to the real details of life in the

area. As someone who has spent a lot of my free time removing debris from trees in the five boroughs of New York City, I was drawn to a 2021 paper, of which she was the principal author, about a “marine debris event” in the Bering Strait in 2020. The study reported that, over the past two decades, five hundred metric tons of seaborne garbage had been collected from the shorelines in and near fifteen coastal communities. Much of it was “industrial fisheries debris”—floats and nets, pallets, deck boots, and various other items “with Russian, Korean, or other Asian lettering.”

Kitchen trash, vegetables, roach-spray cans, air fresheners, bathroom cleaners, a Russian Navy sailor’s cap, disposable gloves, water jugs, food packaging, juice bottles, men’s body-wash bottles—all had sloshed around in the strait and washed up on Alaskan shores. The absence of tampons or diapers in the debris suggested predominantly all-male groups of litterers, such as tanker or fishing-boat crews. The study said the debris could have come from a foreign ship that sank—given the lack of information from the Russian side, who could say? It stated and restated that without meaningful international communication the debris problem cannot be solved.

Other papers that Sheffield wrote or contributed to considered a huge toxic algae bloom in the strait and in the Chukchi Sea north of it, the ongoing disappearance of sea ice, and a recent increase in maritime industrial traffic. I hoped to meet Sheffield, so I stopped by the University of Alaska campus when I was in Nome, but she was on a research trip. When I spoke to her later, she told me that the federal government is not focussed on what is going on in the region. “Only two federal agencies are still in Nome,” she said. “The F.A.A. and the post office. The Parks Service office is closed because of the shutdown. *NOAA* has reduced its presence. So that means that, basically, the citizens of Nome and the coastal villages are trying to keep track of what’s going on in the region by themselves.

“The toxic algal bloom that happened in 2022 was by far the largest event of its kind ever seen in the U.S.,” she went on. “It stretched for more than six hundred kilometres in the strait and the Chukchi Sea, and certainly must have extended into the Russian side. Ultimately, we have no idea how much harm it caused, since much of it was carried out into the open sea, and onto the Russian coast. A lot of marine animals died, but we can’t be sure

whether it was the algae that caused it. Consuming toxic marine life would have caused serious health problems in the region. The warming of the water and the continuing absence of sea ice have consequences. A big one has been the increase in industrial maritime traffic. More and more Russian tankers are bringing liquefied natural gas from the Gulf of Ob through the Russian Arctic, through the strait, and down to China. The federal managers for our maritime resources may have stopped paying very much attention to the region, but the Russians and the Chinese and those of us who live here have not."

At the Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic, in St. Petersburg, Russia, there is a model of the Earth about fifteen feet across that you can walk around and study from above. What makes it different from other big globes is that it represents only the top part of the planet, no more than a quarter of the total sphere—that is, the entire Arctic and a few degrees latitude below it. Mead Treadwell, who moved to Alaska forty-seven years ago to work on Wally Hickel's campaign for governor, has prospered there in the pipeline and telecommunications businesses, held political office (lieutenant governor), and served on many Arctic commissions, forums, and institutes. He knows that top part of the planet as well as anybody. I missed him in Anchorage, but met up with him a week later in New York, at another place of convergences, the Explorers Club, on East Seventieth Street. His conversation centered on Alaska but swooped all over that top-view, Arctic-focussed globe—from the Bering Strait to Prudhoe Bay to Russia's Taymyr Peninsula to Greenland to Iceland to Finland to Wrangel Island, that island beyond the beyond, north of Chukotka, where Treadwell made two expeditions in 1990 that qualified him to become a member of this club.

He agreed with Gay Sheffield that we don't pay enough attention to our Arctic. "The Barents countries, like Norway, Sweden, and Finland—and also the Laplanders who inhabit them—know much more about their end of the Arctic than we do about ours," he said. He talked about the natural-gas fields of the far north, and described a fleet of Korean-built, Finnish-designed liquefied-natural-gas (L.N.G.) icebreaker tankers that have spoon-shaped bows and pointed sterns so they can go bow first or stern first, depending on the nature of the ice, and transport L.N.G. to China from western Russia via the Arctic route efficiently and economically. (He

believes we should copy them in moving our own North Slope L.N.G. from Prudhoe Bay by sea, rather than relying on pipelines.) Communication between the U.S. and Russia across the strait still exists, he said. On issues of marine safety, search and rescue, and environmental emergency, the U.S. Coast Guard in Juneau still talks to the Russian border-security agents in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky, and vice versa.

The ending of good relations across the strait in the Putin era is a subject he often returns to. Russia is just a difficult country. Even before Putin, Treadwell had his own experiences with Russian racketeers, such as the time a bagman told Treadwell's Russian ecotourism-business partner that they had to pay the bagman's boss fifty per cent if they wanted to continue in Chukotka. (A friend of Treadwell's, who happened to be the bagman's boss's attorney in Anchorage, got him to back down.) And at a meeting with Far East regional Russian governors in Anchorage, Treadwell talked to Magadan's governor, Valentin Tsvetkov, who said he was going to Moscow soon to negotiate a better deal for his region on fishing quotas in the Okhotsk Sea. Not long afterward, Tsvetkov was murdered on a Moscow street. Treadwell blames some shadowy criminal subcategory—"the Russian Far East fishing mafia, maybe?"

On the question of what is to be done today, he doesn't know. "I always say that citizen-to-citizen diplomacy opened the border in the nineteen-eighties," Treadwell said. "And failures of big-country diplomacy contributed to its closing, which started with Putin in 2000. First, Putin discouraged regional governors from doing international relations. Then he told the regions that he would be appointing the governors, and the citizens would no longer be voting on them. Those changes took power away from this neighborhood of the globe. His rise is a lot of the reason the border shut down. I think we could've done more with other Arctic-facing countries to counter that shift in power and keep our neighborhoods healthy.

"But there's always change," he continued. "A delegation of businessmen accompanied Putin on his recent Alaskan summit with Trump. I don't know what subjects were discussed. But a lot can be done internationally with mining, shipping, fisheries, energy extraction, and tourism in our shared

Arctic. Just because our Russian border appears to be mostly closed, don't think people aren't thinking about and planning for a different future."

In September, 2022, two men who lived in the town of Egvekinot, in Chukotka, decided to escape from military recruiters who had been knocking on their doors. The men filled a sixteen-foot outboard motorboat with supplies and containers of gasoline and set out across the bay next to their village, then braved the open Bering Sea. After several days' journey, they reached St. Lawrence Island—U.S. soil. Somehow, they had avoided swamping, sinking, drowning, exposure, hypothermia, or capture by the Russian border patrol. Soon after they arrived, U.S. immigration officers flew over from the mainland, arrested them, and brought them to a detention center in Tacoma, Washington.

The office of the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project, in Tacoma, took their case, and by January, 2023, it had won their release. According to Nicolas McKee, the staff attorney who represents both men, one of them has received asylum and lives in Washington State. The other is waiting for a decision in Alaska, where he has a fishing job in a Russian-speaking community.

Some thirty-five thousand Russians travelled by various routes to the southern border of the U.S. and asked for asylum there in the war's first year alone; many have suffered in long confinement and with uncertain prospects. As far as anyone knows, the two men from Egvekinot are the only recent Russian asylum seekers to have come from the part of Russia where the United States is so close that under the right circumstances you can see it. McKee thinks that anyone else who succeeds in crossing the Russian-Alaskan border, as his clients did, will also have a good chance of receiving asylum. ♦

Ian Frazier, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of "Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York's Greatest Borough."

Profiles

Inside Bari Weiss's Hostile Takeover of CBS News

The network's new editor-in-chief has championed a press free from élite bias, while aligning herself with a billionaire class more willing than ever to indulge Donald Trump.

***By** Clare Malone*

January 19, 2026

Weiss, who has faced criticism for the network's recent coverage of the Trump Administration, told one person that she is pursuing a "de-Baathification of CBS."Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker

On Halloween, a production team from "60 Minutes," CBS's flagship news program, went to Mar-a-Lago for an interview that the correspondent Norah O'Donnell was conducting with Donald Trump. It was the President's first appearance on the network since filing a lawsuit against it, claiming that, in the run-up to the 2024 election, "60 Minutes" had unfairly edited an interview with his opponent Kamala Harris. Most observers agreed that the suit had little merit, but CBS's parent company, Paramount, which was owned by the Redstone family, had agreed to pay Trump sixteen million dollars to settle the matter. At the time, the media mogul David Ellison was in the process of acquiring Paramount, an eight-billion-dollar deal that required the Administration's approval. "I see good things happening in the

news," Trump now told O'Donnell. "I think one of the best things to happen is this show and new ownership—CBS and new ownership. I think it's the greatest thing that's happened in a long time to a free and open and good press."

Bari Weiss, the editor-in-chief of CBS News, was watching the interview off camera. Just a few years earlier, she had resigned from her position as an opinion writer and editor at the New York *Times*, condemning the paper as doctrinally liberal and out of touch. She went on to start a Substack that would eventually become *The Free Press*, an anti-woke rejoinder to a mainstream media that, Weiss argued, pandered to an audience of élites who were "turning against America." Fox News and MSNBC were feeding their audiences "political heroin," she said. Elsewhere, she added, "I think there's a lot of people in this country who are politically homeless, who feel like the old labels—Republican, Democrat, conservative, liberal—no longer fit them or no longer mean what they used to."

Ellison had handpicked Weiss as the new head of CBS News in early October, after buying *The Free Press* for a hundred and fifty million dollars. Many in the industry viewed the move as an attempt to further appease the President. "They just wanted to hire Bari as a symbolic gesture to Donald Trump to make sure they got that deal through," one longtime media executive told me. "Don't think about it as David Ellison paying a hundred and fifty million dollars for *The Free Press*. Think about it as a hundred and fifty million dollars on top of the price they paid for Paramount. It was basically the cost to get it to go through."

But Weiss's arrival at the network also coincided with a long-simmering crisis in broadcast news, in which its programming is increasingly distrusted by a rapidly dwindling audience. For Weiss, the job seemed to offer a chance to give viewers what she believed they really wanted: news coverage that was more heterodox and politically interesting. The size of CBS News was daunting—the newsroom had twelve hundred employees, compared to around sixty at *The Free Press*—but its potential audience was also beyond anything she could have hoped to build with a Substack. Early on, she circulated a list of ten principles that would guide the network's coverage under her leadership, laying out a brand of journalism that, she

said, “holds both American political parties to equal scrutiny” and “embraces a wide spectrum of views and voices so that the audience can contend with the best arguments on all sides of a debate.”

Weiss, who is forty-one, had started *The Free Press* out of her home. Now she was ferried around in an S.U.V., and the company required her to be accompanied by bodyguards—including, for a time, inside CBS’s offices—something Weiss has described as an annoying but necessary aspect of her new gig. (“Some would say it’s offensive,” one producer told me. “The implication was that we’re going to try to kill her.”) At the same time, it was apparent to many inside the network that Weiss, a digital-media native, was an uneasy fit in the more buttoned-up world of television news. She had donned a CBS baseball cap for her first editorial meeting, and ended the session by telling the room, “Let’s do the fucking news!” At another meeting, Weiss urged staff to up their coverage of the protests unfolding in Iran, mentioning videos she’d seen online that “almost look like a movie scene.” One senior reporter with experience covering the country cautioned that some of what Weiss was citing were videos from protests three years earlier.

“Oh, sure, <u>now</u> she sleeps.”
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Weiss also seemed unconcerned about the norms surrounding talent recruitment, reaching out to the Fox News anchor Bret Baier, who was then still under contract at his own network. Four days into the job, she arranged a joint interview with the former Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and Condoleezza Rice, which aired on CBS's streaming platform. Some applauded the move as evidence of Weiss's clout; others thought it revealed her inexperience. "Why are you booking those people for a show that eleven people are going to watch?" the longtime media executive said. "That's not understanding where you should be prioritizing your time."

That same day, Weiss sent a message to the entire CBS staff. "By the end of the day Tuesday, I'd like a memo from each person across our news organization," she wrote. "I want to understand how you spend your working hours—and, ideally, what you've made (or are making) that you're most proud of." Many noted the similarities to an e-mail that the Tesla founder Elon Musk had sent to federal employees when he was leading the Department of Government Efficiency, requesting that they respond with a list of five things that they accomplished each week. Weiss also asked the staff of "60 Minutes," the most-watched news program in the U.S., why the country thought its coverage was biased. Another person told me that Weiss had said she was pursuing a "de-Baathification of CBS."

Weiss's embrace of a press free from élite bias—what she might call woke politics—has taken her to the top of the media establishment. It has also aligned her with a tech-billionaire class more willing than ever to indulge Trump to protect the sanctity of shareholder value. "Bari is incredibly moral," her longtime friend Ariel Beery told me. "She is incredibly values-driven." But many of her past associates also emphasized her deep commitment to her own advancement. Andy Mills, a former colleague of Weiss's at the *Times* and *The Free Press*, told me, "Even those of us who know her, who love her, and who saw how hard she was working, we underestimated the success that she was going to have."

Trump, for his part, was effusive in his praise of Weiss. "I think you have a great new leader, frankly, who's the young woman that's leading your whole enterprise," he said during his sit-down with O'Donnell. "I don't know her, but I hear she's a great person." After the recording concluded,

Weiss stepped forward to introduce herself to the President. It was the first time that she'd met the man whose presence now loomed over her installation at the network. They greeted each other warmly, exchanging a kiss on the cheek.

Weiss grew up in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood of Pittsburgh, "raised in what can be accurately described as an urban shtetl," she wrote in her 2019 book, "How to Fight Anti-Semitism." Her great-grandfather Philip (Chappy) Goldstein was a successful flyweight boxer who sometimes sported a Star of David on his boxing silks. Her parents worked in the family's furniture store, where Weiss's father, Lou, had a flair for marketing, doling out a line of candies called Weiss Krispie Treats to customers. Weiss attended a Jewish day school—which one of her three sisters now heads—and the family spent a couple of summers in Jerusalem, where her parents learned Hebrew. "I grew up in a family where we belonged to three synagogues," Weiss told an interviewer in 2019. "It was not unusual for me to read Torah at shul and then go, say, to a Chabad family for lunch before heading to basketball practice."

The Weisses' Shabbat dinners featured a rotating cast of guests and were often contentious. "I remember vividly, like, constant debate," Weiss's sister Casey told the Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* last year. "Sometimes it got really heated." Lou, who grew up in a "McGovern liberal" household, had become a conservative at Kenyon College. He kept copies of *Commentary* magazine and the *Financial Times* around the house, and frequently contributed op-eds to local Pittsburgh papers. His politics were centered around free markets and support for Israel. "They hate gays, and they subject women to horrible second-class treatment—not every single person, but as a group," he told the Pittsburgh *Jewish Chronicle* in 2017, for an article about Syrian refugees. "If you bring them here, ultimately, they will vote. If you think they'll vote to support Israeli interests, you're sadly mistaken." Weiss's mother, Amy, has described herself as a "very moderate liberal Democrat"; she threatened a Lysistrata-esque sex strike in 2016 if Lou voted for Trump. (He ended up writing in Amy's name.)

Weiss's bat-mitzvah ceremony was held at Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue, which, in 2018, became the site of the deadliest antisemitic

attack in U.S. history, a mass shooting that left eleven congregants dead. Weiss covered the massacre for the *Times*, writing a moving report about the aftermath. “When an anti-Semitic murderer mows down Jews in the synagogue where you became a bat mitzvah, you might find yourself in the sanctuary again,” she wrote. “But instead of family and friends, the sanctuary is host to a crew of volunteers—the chevra kadisha—who will spend the week cleaning up every drop of blood because, according to Jewish tradition, each part of the body must be sanctified in death and so buried.”

One of Weiss’s elementary-school teachers told the *Post-Gazette* that Weiss was “a power to reckon with, even in second grade.” At Shady Side Academy, a secular private high school, Weiss led pro-Israel events and organized student groups for interdenominational understanding. Students followed a dress code, inspiring a lifelong practice. “If you’re really getting down to work and you’re Bari Weiss,” her youngest sister, Suzy, told me, “you’re putting on a collared shirt.”

“Mr. Karamazov is my father’s name. You can call me Dmitri, Mitka, Mitya, Dima, Mityok, D-Man, D. Doggy-Dogg . . .”
Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers

After graduation, in 2002, Weiss worked on a kibbutz near the Gaza border and studied at a yeshiva in Jerusalem before entering Columbia the following fall. During her sophomore year, she took an introductory course

with Joseph Massad, an assistant professor in the Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures department. Massad, a Jordan-born Palestinian academic, had recently become the subject of student accusations that the department's faculty trafficked in antisemitism. In 2004, the Boston-based advocacy group the David Project helped produce a short film, "Columbia Unbecoming," which featured interviews with Jewish students accusing certain professors of harassing them because of their support for Israel. A student who had served in the Israeli Army said that, during a public lecture, Massad asked him, "How many Palestinians have you killed?"

The film created an uproar that extended far beyond campus. Massad told the *Times* that "it is inconceivable that I would ever respond to a member of the audience in the manner and context that he describes." A Columbia committee eventually cleared the professors of charges that they'd made antisemitic statements, though Massad, who received tenure in 2009, has remained a controversial figure. On October 8, 2023, he wrote a piece in the *Electronic Intifada* praising the previous day's Hamas attack, in which nearly twelve hundred Israelis were killed, as the act of "an innovative Palestinian resistance" that was "astounding" and "awesome." A petition calling for his immediate removal received more than forty-seven thousand signatures in three days. Weiss tweeted, "I have been criticizing him since I was an undergrad and was accused of being a hysteric and worse for doing so."

Ariel Beery, then a Columbia student-body president, had helped organize the "Columbia Unbecoming" project and appeared in the film. He and Weiss met at a screening. "At first, she sat there and she laughed about the film because she didn't believe it," Beery said. "Then, at the end, she came up to us and said, 'This is serious. I really would love to help.' " She began writing op-eds in the *Columbia Spectator* and helped co-found Columbians for Academic Freedom with Beery, whom she briefly dated. During her junior year, she started the *Current*, "a journal concerned with Jewish affairs," with funding from the Shalem Center, a conservative research institute founded by Yoram Hazony, who had worked as an adviser to Benjamin Netanyahu before he became Israel's Prime Minister. "I'm an activist at heart," she told *Jewish Week* for a story about the publication's

launch. “But I think that a journal of ideas may have a longer lasting impact than protests and rallies.”

Weiss, as a sophomore at Columbia, speaking at a press conference organized by Columbians for Academic Freedom.Photograph by Tina Fineberg / AP

By then, Weiss had become a prominent figure on campus. “She was intoxicating, superficially conversant in a number of different directions, and she would name-drop adults of heft,” a former classmate who worked closely with Weiss said. Her networking skills were already well developed. “Hello powerhouse friends,” she began an e-mail to promote an event co-hosted by the Anti-Defamation League. In another message, she advertised a talk featuring Bret Stephens, who was then a conservative columnist at the *Wall Street Journal*. More than a decade later, an invite to a live taping of her podcast, which she sent to a list of billionaires and media luminaries—including Shari Redstone, who was then the chair of Paramount; Mathias Döpfner, the C.E.O. of Axel Springer; and the hedge-fund manager Bill Ackman—was tonally identical to her college promotional blasts. “She is, as everyone says, really charming,” David Klion, a columnist for *The Nation* who knew Weiss in college and who has since written critically of her, said. “She has a bubbly, vivacious personality, that kind of Bill Clinton effect, where she makes you feel like you’re the only person who matters in a room.”

A student magazine ran a short profile of Weiss; its author, Josie Swindler, seemed a little surprised by her subject’s charm. “What’s most striking about Bari is that she’s nice, doesn’t speak in soundbites and she doesn’t seem like a nut,” Swindler wrote, noting that Weiss had strayed from her “leftist causes” and been termed “a turncoat, a far-right extremist.” Weiss’s

social life, for the most part, didn't suffer. For a time, she dated Kate McKinnon, the future "Saturday Night Live" star. "Her whole thing in college was 'I'm gay and I'm pro-Israel—good luck classifying me,' " the former classmate who worked with her said. " 'If you've got an issue with me, take your shot. You've never seen the likes of me. I'm so unpredictable, so heterodox.' "

In 2013, Weiss got a job editing books pieces at the *Wall Street Journal*. It was her third stint at the paper, having previously left to do a Dorot Fellowship in Israel and then to work at *Tablet*, an online magazine of Jewish culture. Stephens became a mentor. Her father began contributing op-eds, in which he hoped his Honduran handyman would someday vote Republican and explained why he wore the label "privileged" as a badge of honor. Weiss's sister Suzy, meanwhile, attempted a humor piece about not getting into an Ivy League college—"Had I known two years ago what I know now, I would have gladly worn a headdress to school"—which went viral, but mostly not in a good way.

Shortly after joining the *Journal*, Weiss married a man she'd met on the Jewish dating site JDate. The marriage ended three years later. By the time Trump won the 2016 election, Weiss, who cried when she heard the result, was in something of a rut. She was recently divorced, editing book reviews, and occasionally doing video hits—in 2015, she'd travelled to Vermont for NY1 to do a segment on knishes. But after the election she turned her attention to politics. That November, she published a piece in *Tablet* warning about Steve Bannon's antisemitic associations. "We will never know what's in Steve Bannon's heart," she wrote. "What we know is that he is proud to have provided the bullhorn for a movement that unabashedly promotes white nationalism, racism, misogyny, and the relentless identification of Jews as the champions of the country's most nefarious forces." Shortly after Trump's first Inauguration, Weiss published a column in the *Journal* about an anti-Trump protest in New York: "The thousands of men, women and children weren't, by and large, professional protesters. They were Americans who showed up because they felt the fundamental values of the nation they love were being violated."

Later, in a 2025 interview on Fox News, Weiss would say that she "was a sufferer of what conservatives at the time would have called T.D.S."—Trump Derangement Syndrome—though she added that her concerns that Trump "would coarsen our public discourse" had been correct. "I'm someone that believes, call me old-fashioned, that everything is sort of downstream of character," Weiss said. But she had also been alarmed by what she called the "overzealous, out-of-touch hysterical reaction to him and the kind of illiberalism that was born out of the reaction to him that calls itself democratic, that calls itself progressive, but is actually extraordinarily authoritarian and totalitarian in its impulses." Weiss said that she liked Trump's policies in the Middle East, along with the booming economy. "Am I still worried about his character?" she asked. "Am I worried about things like January 6th? Yes, but I would say the sign of an open mind and the sign of a thinking person is a person that's able to take on new information and adjust your priors."

In early 2017, James Bennet, the editor of the *Times'* Opinion section, hired Stephens as a columnist. There was a sense that the *Times* had been caught flat-footed by Trump's victory; the Opinion editors wanted to expand their offerings of conservative voices. Stephens suggested that the paper hire Weiss as an editor; she came on that spring, and was soon writing for the section as well. Her pieces reflected a deep skepticism of the progressive politics and concepts that were then swirling in the online discourse. "In practice, intersectionality functions as a kind of caste system, in which people are judged according to how much their particular caste has suffered throughout history," Weiss wrote that June. "Victimhood, in the intersectional way of seeing the world, is akin to sainthood; power and privilege are profane." In a column about popular outrage over cultural appropriation, Weiss wrote, "Our mongrel culture is at risk of being erased by an increasingly strident left, which is careering us toward a wan existence in which we are all forced to remain in the ethnic and racial lanes assigned to us by accident of our birth. Hoop earrings are verboten, as are certain kinds of button-down shirts."

Weiss became a favorite target of left-wing critics on Twitter. In 2017 and 2018, she wrote a series of columns countering what she viewed as the excesses of the #MeToo movement. "The huntresses' war cry—'believe all

women'—has felt like a bracing corrective to a historic injustice," Weiss wrote in one. "I believe that the 'believe all women' vision of feminism unintentionally fetishizes women. Women are no longer human and flawed. They are Truth personified. They are above reproach." *Jezebel* was among the publications to note that the movement's slogan was actually "Believe women." Weiss later said on "Morning Joe," "A lot of the reaction was 'Thank you for breathing some sanity into this debate,' but the other reaction I saw from a lot of feminists my age is 'You are promoting rape culture, you are facilitating the backlash against this moment.' And, frankly, I just don't agree with that."

"My plans for the future? To uncross my legs and grab a couple of those barbecue potato chips." Cartoon by David Sipress

By then, Weiss had successfully branded herself as the *Times*' in-house heretic. She became a frequent guest on "Real Time with Bill Maher" and eventually co-hosted four episodes of "The View." Inside the Opinion section, staff chafed at what they saw as her growing influence at the paper. "Most of us found her conniving," one of her former Opinion colleagues said. "A lot of things she was saying we were at least open to. It was the way she was saying it, and the way that she was trampling on the rest of us, that I think ate at us."

In February, 2018, Weiss faced a wave of criticism for tweeting a video of the U.S. figure skater Mirai Nagasu landing a triple axel at the Winter Olympics along with the comment "Immigrants: They get the job done." Twitter users pointed out that Nagasu, whose parents had immigrated to the U.S. from Japan, was born in California. "Yes, yes, I realize," Weiss responded. "Felt the poetic license was kosher." After deleting the tweet,

she wrote, “Do you need another sign of civilization’s end? For this tweet I am being told I am a racist, a ghoul and that I deserve to die.”

Later, *HuffPost* published a Slack chat in which other *Times* staffers criticized Weiss. “i guess it’s too much to even expect a ‘we’re sorry you’re offended’ apology since asians don’t matter,” one person posted. Another alluded to the paper’s strict social-media policy, which prevented reporters from responding to Weiss publicly: “i guess you get full twitter privileges at the nyt when you are consistently factually wrong.” Bennet sent out a lengthy staff-wide memo in response. The job meant “listening to voices that we may object to and even sometimes find obnoxious,” he wrote, “provided they meet the same tests of intellectual honesty, respect for others and openness.” Despite the controversy, Weiss maintained friends and supporters at the paper; last December, Michael Barbaro, a host of the *Times*’ popular podcast “The Daily,” was a guest at The Free Press’s holiday party.

When Weiss was hired at the *Times*, Nellie Bowles, a tech and internet-culture reporter in the paper’s San Francisco bureau, wrote a note to Bennet expressing her dismay. But, when Weiss e-mailed her with a story idea about conservatives being deplatformed, Bowles agreed to meet for coffee in the *Times* cafeteria during a visit to New York. “I was smitten,” Bowles said in a 2023 joint interview with Weiss. Weiss took slightly more convincing. “She was, like, the golden girl, and politically very much—at least the way I perceived her at the time—in the slipstream of, let’s just say broadly, conventional wisdom at the New York *Times*,” she said of Bowles. “I was already sort of under siege and frankly just happy that anyone wanted to have coffee with me and be friends with me.” The pair, who are now married, with two kids, began dating.

After the attack on the Tree of Life synagogue, Weiss and Bowles rented a cottage in Berkeley, where Weiss wrote much of what became “How to Fight Anti-Semitism.” “I remember I went and visited them and it was just very evident that Nellie saw the specialness in Bari,” Suzy said. Others were taking notice, too. The release party for the book, held at the Lambs Club, a restaurant in midtown Manhattan, was attended by Shari Redstone;

A. G. Sulzberger, the *Times'* publisher; Matthew Weiner, the "Mad Men" creator; and the MSNBC anchor Stephanie Ruhle.

"How to Fight Anti-Semitism," which Weiss had written in less than a year, received mixed reviews. The feminist philosopher Judith Butler, who grew up in a Midwestern Jewish community similar to Weiss's, called it "passionate and disappointing," an "ahistorical text" that refused to confront the "particular anguish" that "often tears at the heart of individual Jews overcome by a strong sense of the need for justice." Yehudah Mirsky, a Judaic-studies professor at Brandeis, was more sympathetic to Weiss's politics, though also critical of what he saw as the book's shallow view of history. Her exhortations to "lean into Judaism" and "nurture your Jewish identity," Mirsky wrote in the *Guardian*, were "undercut by a total absence of references, source notes or bibliography."

Weiss and Bowles spent much of the pandemic at Weiss's family home on Cape Cod and in Los Angeles. They married in 2020, at a strip mall in Encino. (Bowles, a former débutante whose great-great-great grandfather Henry Miller was one of the country's largest landowners, eventually converted to Judaism, writing about the experience in a Substack newsletter called "Chosen by Choice.") Kate Conger, one of Bowles's former colleagues at the *Times*, said that Bowles seemed to undergo a change during the pandemic. In the summer of 2020, at the height of nationwide demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd, Bowles reported on the struggles of small businesses during the anti-police protests in Seattle and on the aggressive tactics of protesters in Portland. "I think in *COVID* some of that same sensitivity and feeling beset upon that Bari experienced became Nellie's way of thinking," Conger said. "Feeling like people were out to get her."

Weiss and Bowles at the Allen & Company Sun Valley Conference, in 2022.Photograph by Andrew H. Walker / Shutterstock

In “Morning After the Revolution,” Bowles’s 2024 book about her turn away from progressivism, she connects her disenchantment with the *Times* to the start of her relationship with Weiss, writing about an editor who tells her that Weiss is “a fucking Nazi” and learning of “newsroom leaders passing around pictures of me as a teen at a party (fine, I was a debutante).”

That June, Tom Cotton, a Republican senator from Arkansas, argued in a *Times* op-ed that the military should be sent in to subdue “rioters” who “have plunged many American cities into anarchy.” Adam Rubenstein, who now serves as CBS News’ deputy editor under Weiss, had edited the piece. *Times* employees staged a Twitter campaign to protest the op-ed, with many posting, “Running this puts Black @nytimes staff in danger.” Bennet was ultimately pressured to resign. Weiss made her displeasure with the staff’s behavior known. “I’ve been mocked by many people over the past few years for writing about the campus culture wars,” she tweeted during an editorial meeting, which she described as the site of a generational civil war between young “wokes” and older liberals. “They told me it was a sideshow. But this was always why it mattered: The people who graduated from those campuses would rise to power inside key institutions and transform them.” Some of her colleagues publicly pushed back. “I am in the same meeting that Bari appears to be livetweeting,” Max Strasser, another editor on the Opinion section, tweeted. “It’s not a civil war, it’s an editorial conversation; and it’s not breaking down along generational lines.”

Kathleen Kingsbury, who took over for Bennet, encouraged Weiss to continue writing for the section. A month later, Weiss submitted her

resignation. “Twitter is not on the masthead of The New York Times. But Twitter has become its ultimate editor,” she wrote to Sulzberger in a letter that quickly made its way to Twitter. “My own forays into Wrongthink have made me the subject of constant bullying by colleagues who disagree with my views.” The act would become the defining moment of her career. Weiss, who had entered her job at the Opinion section as a relatively unknown commodity, was leaving as a one-woman Rorschach test for the woke era: an object of abject derision to some, a Joan of Arc figure to others.

A few days after the January 6th riots at the U.S. Capitol, Bowles started a Substack account for Weiss while they were on a flight from Los Angeles to Miami. Weiss was still planning her next move. “She was thinking about what the world needed in terms of a media project,” Suzy Weiss, who later became a co-founder of *The Free Press*, said. “Is that a production studio? Is it a blog?”

Weiss’s first Substack post, “The Great Unraveling,” was a sort of meditation on what she saw as the disintegration of “the old political consensus.” “Communities can grow quite strong around hatred of difference, and that’s exactly what’s happened to the American left and the right,” she wrote. “So part of my hesitation about what comes next is that I have been unsure about who will have the strength to stand apart from the various tribes that can give their members such pleasure of belonging.” She lamented the privatization of the internet, that “all the real town squares have been shuttered and that the only one left is pixelated and controlled by a few oligarchs in Silicon Valley.” At the same time, she approvingly name-checked the tech venture capitalist David Sacks and recalled a recent conversation she’d had with “a bigwig in Silicon Valley.” “I have some ideas for what the future holds for me,” she wrote in conclusion. Within a week, Weiss had earned eighty thousand dollars from subscriptions; within a year, her newsletter, which she dubbed “Common Sense,” brought in eight hundred thousand dollars. It was “meant to be the newspaper for the twenty-first century,” she told CNN.

Bowles left the *Times* soon after the launch of “Common Sense.” “There was a lot more fun in the new world,” she later said in an interview with

Megyn Kelly. “So I quit and I joined. Trying to explain to my parents why I was quitting the New York *Times* to join bariweiss.substack.com was a little bit crazy.” In April, 2021, Andy Mills, a co-creator of “The Daily,” signed on to help Weiss launch a podcast division. Their first offering was Weiss’s interview show, “Honestly,” which featured guests such as the billionaire Mark Cuban, a fellow Pittsburgh native; Kim Kardashian; and Benjamin Netanyahu.

Weiss, who was then thirty-eight years old, was also making inroads in the business world. In the summer of 2022, she received her first invitation to the Sun Valley Conference, an event hosted by the boutique investment bank Allen & Company which draws some of the wealthiest people on the planet. For a few days, tech moguls and titans of finance wander the grounds of an Idaho resort, dining, hiking, and taking meetings to broker business deals. Photographers and journalists are confined to penned-off areas. “I’m going!” Weiss texted a reporter from *Vanity Fair*. “And I’m excited!”

Weiss was looking to turn “Common Sense” into a digital magazine, with a newsroom and a full-time staff. Her rejection of liberal dogma had tapped into resentments that were quietly simmering among business leaders. “There were lots and lots of underground peer-to-peer discussions from 2018 through to 2021 saying, ‘OK, things are off the rails,’ ” the billionaire venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, who was an early investor in *The Free Press*, later told the *Times*’ Ross Douthat. Soon Weiss and Bowles, whose first child was just a few months old, were working with ten full-time employees out of their California home. “I can’t wait to watch you grow up and decide whether you’ll cancel us from the right or from the left,” Bowles wrote to their daughter in her book. “The world is your oyster, my love.”

In late 2022, Elon Musk, who had recently purchased Twitter, asked Weiss to participate in a public airing of the so-called Twitter Files, a trove of the social-media company’s internal communications which Musk promised would reveal years of censorship. Andreessen had recommended Weiss to Musk, and they had met briefly in Sun Valley. Weiss and Bowles flew with their daughter to San Francisco, where Weiss and a group of handpicked reporters, including Matt Taibbi, combed through records in what Weiss

later described as a “windowless, fluorescent-lit room at Twitter headquarters.”

Weiss wrote about the company’s practice of shadow banning—limiting the virality of accounts that spread misinformation or hate—singling out the suppression of the *COVID* skeptic Jay Bhattacharya, who is now the director of the National Institutes of Health; the right-wing podcast host Dan Bongino, who until recently was the deputy director of the F.B.I.; and the conservative activist Charlie Kirk, who was assassinated this past summer. But Weiss also clashed with Musk. In Walter Isaacson’s biography of the Tesla founder, Weiss is depicted forcefully questioning Musk about whether his car company’s dependence on Chinese manufacturing would influence the way he handled Twitter discourse about subjects such as China’s mistreatment of its Uyghur population. Musk was upset; Bowles “stepped in to defuse the issue with a few jokes,” Isaacson wrote. Publicly, Weiss also criticized Musk for his decision to ban the Twitter accounts of journalists who had published stories about a user who tracked his private jet.

After working on the Twitter Files, Weiss officially rebranded her Substack as *The Free Press*. The site leaned into the idea that the excellence of American institutions had been corroded by wokeism, publishing columns and first-person accounts about parents’ disaffection with progressive private-school education and Hollywood’s discrimination against conservatives. Vinay Prasad, now the F.D.A.’s top vaccine regulator, wrote a piece on why *COVID* vaccines shouldn’t be routine for children; Casey Means, Trump’s nominee for Surgeon General, urged readers to question their doctors’ approaches to chronic disease. The outlet was also skeptical of gender-affirming care for minors, publishing an article by a former caseworker who had become disillusioned with the field. One former *Free Press* employee described the site as a place for “political misfits, mostly Democrats who were feeling icky” about the Biden era. “It was anti-‘Pod Save America’ Democrats.”

Weiss liked to say that her ambition was to “eat the world.” “She thought of *The Free Press* as one day being as big as Fox News—but of the center—and herself as a Rupert Murdoch figure,” one person who worked closely

with her said. Weiss also said that she was starting a news organization that would rival the *Times*. “Bari had no idea how newsrooms worked, but she knew that she needed to call our operation a newsroom,” the person told me. “I don’t think if you sat her down and said, ‘Can you explain the difference between a news story, an investigative story, and an enterprise story?,’ she could tell you what it means—and she wasn’t going to let that slow her down.”

People were pulled into *The Free Press* by the force of Weiss’s charm, but they could later feel burned by her. “She was so brilliant and charismatic, and if she started a church we all would have joined,” another person who worked with Weiss said. “And within a couple of months we all wanted to jump out a window. She was completely stubborn and couldn’t take guidance.” Several premier hires eventually departed, including Mills and the former *Vice* journalists Michael Moynihan and Alex Chitty. Another former *Free Press* employee said, “She’s really good at a honeymoon and really bad at a marriage.”

In the hours after Hamas’s October 7th attack, Weiss wrote a post on *The Free Press*, telling readers, “You are about to withstand a barrage of lies about the war that broke out today in Israel.” She was bereft and rattled, but also full of resolve; for her, the moment represented a convergence of all the forces that she’d spent years writing about—most notably, a liberal permissiveness toward antisemitism. “Some of those lies will be explicit,” she wrote. “Some of them will be lies of omission. Others will be lies of obfuscation. Or lies of minimization. Lies told by people who are simply too afraid to look at such an ugly, barbarous reality. And lies told by people whose true beliefs are too ugly to quite say aloud.”

Throughout the conflict, *The Free Press* wrote from an unambiguously pro-Israeli point of view, deriding both pro-Palestinian protests on college campuses and the coverage of the war in mainstream outlets, including this magazine. Bill Ackman wrote in *The Free Press* that Harvard, his alma mater, had become a promulgator of “an oppressor/oppressed framework” that had helped to generate “anti-Israel and anti-Jewish hate speech and harassment.” Later, two staff members attempted to call into question a series of stories about the famine in Gaza by investigating the underlying

medical conditions of children who had been prominently featured in the reports.

In 2024, Weiss published leaked audio from a CBS editorial meeting in which network executives discussed an interview that Tony Dokoupil, then a co-anchor on “CBS Mornings,” had conducted with the author Ta-Nehisi Coates. Coates had written a book partly about visiting the West Bank, in which he described the living conditions of Palestinians who were treated as second-class citizens. The book did not mention October 7th or Hamas. Dokoupil—who has two children living in Israel—told Coates that some of his material “would not be out of place in the backpack of an extremist.” Some CBS employees had complained about the interview. In the recorded meeting, CBS executives said that it hadn’t met the network’s editorial standards.

Weiss expressed outrage during a *Free Press* live stream. “You would expect CBS to do its job, which is to challenge that person,” she said, defending Dokoupil’s actions. “Why, in this case, was it unacceptable?” Weiss went on, “I have to say, every moment like this is a recruiting opportunity for *The Free Press*.”

Cartoon by Sam Gross

Later that year, Weiss and Bowles moved back to New York. *The Free Press* had more than a hundred and thirty thousand paid subscribers and, following a funding round, was valued at a hundred million dollars. The outlet hired a publisher, Dennis Berman, formerly of the *Wall Street Journal*, and Weiss met with News Corp to discuss a collaboration. During Trump’s second Inauguration weekend, *The Free Press* co-hosted a party in

Washington, D.C., with Uber and X, which was attended by Peter Thiel, the M.M.A. fighter Conor McGregor, and the podcaster Lex Fridman. Weiss and Bowles were photographed grinning in sleek black suits.

Bowles remained a Trump skeptic, writing a campy weekly newsletter, "TGIF," that offered a roundup of the news. (The Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett owns a pair of "TGIF"-branded socks.) But much of *The Free Press's* coverage was sympathetic to the aims of the second Trump Administration. "Before you reach for the Valium, it's worth considering that this is by no means the first time twentysomethings have helped lead a revolution inside the nation's capital," the conservative columnist Eli Lake wrote of Musk's early efforts at DOGE. A piece by "the editors" took a similarly positive view: "This White House, in the course of six weeks, has done the seemingly impossible: They have found the waste, the fraud, and the abuse. And they are promising to get rid of it."

By the summer of 2025, Weiss was looking to sell *The Free Press*, reportedly for as much as two hundred and fifty million dollars, about what Jeff Bezos had paid for the Washington *Post* in 2013. The German media company Axel Springer, which had acquired *Politico* for around a billion dollars in 2021, was one potential buyer. But even some of Weiss's supporters thought she was asking too much. "I would not buy it, and the reason why is I don't see it growing," a media-industry veteran said. "I just think its moment culturally may have passed."

Soon after Weiss moved back to New York, she and David Ellison had met for lunch. Ellison, who is forty-three, shared Weiss's deep connection to Israel. His production company, Skydance Media, had committed a million dollars to relief efforts in the country in the wake of the October 7th attacks. His father, Larry, one of the five richest men in the world, had previously given twenty-six million dollars to Friends of the Israel Defense Forces. At the time of their meeting, David had been finalizing his deal to acquire Paramount from the Redstone family, and he was thinking through what to do with the company's broadcast network, CBS, whose morning and evening news shows have long trailed NBC's and ABC's in the ratings.

In July, after Paramount announced its sixteen-million-dollar payment to Trump, the "Late Show" host Stephen Colbert joked in his opening

monologue, “I believe that this kind of complicated financial settlement with a sitting government official has a technical name in legal circles: it’s ‘big fat bribe.’ ” Three days later, Colbert announced that his show was being cancelled. Trump was pleased. “I hear (ABC’s) Jimmy Kimmel is next,” the President wrote on Truth Social. Two months later, Kimmel made a comment about *MAGA*’s reaction to the murder of Charlie Kirk in his opening monologue; in response, Trump’s F.C.C. chairman, Brendan Carr, seemed to threaten to pull the broadcast licenses of ABC’s affiliate stations. Kimmel was briefly taken off the air.

A week after “The Late Show” ’s cancellation, the F.C.C. approved the merger of Paramount and Skydance Media. Larry Ellison, the primary source of his son’s funding, has long been a Trump ally. In late 2020, he reportedly joined a phone call in which participants discussed how to contest the results of the election. Two days before the F.C.C. approved the merger, Trump wrote in a post on Truth Social that, in addition to the sixteen million dollars from Paramount, “we also anticipate receiving $20 Million Dollars more from the new Owners, in Advertising, PSAs, or similar Programming.” David Ellison has not denied the veracity of Trump’s statement, and he has continued to court the President’s favor; the Ultimate Fighting Championship, whose U.S. broadcasting rights are owned by Paramount Skydance, is reportedly planning to hold a match at the White House on Trump’s birthday, in June.

Carr had told Ellison that, for the merger to be approved, CBS would have to hire an ombudsman to insure “a diversity of viewpoints from across the political and ideological spectrum.” Last fall, Paramount Skydance appointed Kenneth Weinstein, the former president and C.E.O. of the Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank, to serve in the role. A few weeks later, on October 6th, Ellison announced that his company had bought *The Free Press* and hired Weiss to run CBS News.

A few days before Christmas, “60 Minutes” was set to air a report on *CECOT*, the prison in El Salvador where the Trump Administration had sent more than two hundred deportees in March. The men, most of whom were from Venezuela, had been spirited out of the U.S. on a series of late-night flights, in violation of a federal judge’s court order. Sharyn Alfonsi, a

“60 Minutes” correspondent, had interviewed two of them. The stories were harrowing. “There was blood everywhere, screams, people crying, people who couldn’t take it and were urinating and vomiting on themselves,” one of the men told her. She had reached out to the Trump Administration for comment but received only a cursory, two-sentence response.

Like all “60 Minutes” stories, the *CECOT* segment had been fact-checked and vetted by the network’s legal department. Five separate screenings were held for various editorial stakeholders. Weiss was supposed to attend the final screening, on Thursday afternoon, but she had missed it. She didn’t see the segment until late that night, e-mailing suggestions for a few changes that were incorporated into the piece. The network promoted the segment as the lead story for that Sunday’s episode. Alfonsi flew home to Texas.

The *CECOT* story was being finalized almost exactly as Ellison was pursuing another major expansion of his growing media empire. Earlier that month, he had launched a hostile takeover bid to purchase Warner Bros. Discovery, the film-and-television conglomerate that had already announced a deal to be acquired by Netflix. In many ways, the outcome depended on Trump, since regulatory approval would be required for either sale to go through. “I’ll be involved in that decision,” Trump had told reporters.

For Ellison, this was suddenly a problem. “60 Minutes” had recently aired an interview with Marjorie Taylor Greene, a former Trump ally who had fallen out with the President over his resistance to releasing the F.B.I.’s files on the convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. “*THEY ARE NO BETTER THAN THE OLD OWNERSHIP*,” Trump posted on Truth Social after the interview aired. “Since they bought it, 60 minutes has actually gotten *WORSE*.”

On Saturday morning, Weiss, who reports directly to Ellison, told “60 Minutes” producers she was concerned that no officials from the Trump Administration had been interviewed on camera for the piece. Specifically, she wanted to include the Administration’s argument for its use of the Alien Enemies Act, an eighteenth-century law that Trump officials claimed allowed them to deport Venezuelan migrants to El Salvador without due

process. “We should explain this, with a voice arguing that Trump is exceeding his authority under the relevant statute, and another arguing that he’s operating within the bounds of his authority,” Weiss wrote in a note to the producers. “There’s a genuine debate here.” She had “tracked down” numbers for Tom Homan, the border czar, and Stephen Miller, Trump’s chief immigration adviser, which she sent to the “60 Minutes” team.

On Sunday, three hours before broadcast, the *CECOT* piece was officially pulled from the lineup. “My job is to make sure that all stories we publish are the best they can be,” Weiss said in a statement. “Holding stories that aren’t ready for whatever reason—that they lack sufficient context, say, or that they are missing critical voices—happens every day in every newsroom.” Alfonsi felt betrayed. “In my view, pulling it now, after every rigorous internal check has been met, is not an editorial decision, it is a political one,” she wrote in a note to her colleagues. “Government silence is a statement, not a *VETO*. Their refusal to be interviewed is a tactical maneuver designed to kill the story.”

The next day, the Ellisons announced a significant sweetening of their bid for Warner Bros.: Larry would personally guarantee $40.4 billion of the funding. Weiss didn’t come to the CBS offices that day. She joined the morning’s daily editorial meeting via Zoom, beginning with what seemed like a rebuke of Alfonsi. “The only newsroom that I’m interested in running is one where we are able to have contentious disagreements about the thorniest editorial matters and do so with respect, and, crucially, where we assume the best intent of our colleagues,” Weiss said. “And anything else is absolutely unacceptable to me and should be unacceptable to you.”

That afternoon, during a “60 Minutes” staff meeting, Scott Pelley, a longtime correspondent, expressed frustration that Weiss hadn’t attended any of the screenings of the segment or communicated directly with Alfonsi. “She needs to take her job a little bit more seriously,” he said. A former CBS staffer was soon circulating an open letter to Ellison, expressing alarm at “a breakdown in editorial oversight” that risked “setting a dangerous precedent in a country that has traditionally valued press freedom.” A former CBS executive told me that, even if Weiss’s concerns had been valid, her decision to cut the segment at such a late hour had

opened her up to charges of corporate interference: “It makes you wonder, Did someone call once they saw the promo on the air and then she spent more time on it because there was some big complaint?” Sources close to Weiss and Ellison said that Skydance leadership had zero involvement in the story and did not screen the piece.

These sources also told me that Weiss “readily realizes and admits that she was not as knowledgeable as she should have been about the timing of the marketing and promo process at ‘60 Minutes.’ She brings the sometimes chaotic energy and work ethic of a startup, but she also realizes she needs to work on having more executive discipline.” Weiss also seemed to be struggling with the fact that, at a time when the Trump Administration is routinely lying to the public and straining to justify blatant abuses of executive power, often with violent or deadly consequences, she was still wedded to the idea of news coverage as a contest of ideas, in which both sides of the debate are equally valid. Privately, she has expressed alarm at many of the Administration’s actions, a person close to Weiss told me. But, in her role as the editor-in-chief of CBS News, her main concern is being able to book its main players on her network’s shows.

Bowles was quick to defend Weiss. In her newsletter, she dismissed the controversy as liberal hysteria, writing, “My lovely wife asked some *60 Minutes* producers to report out a story a little more, literally *Hey guys make a couple more phone calls and then we’ll run the piece in a week or two.* No! the media collectively shrieked. We shan’t!” When I reached out to Bowles to get a deeper sense of her life and work with Weiss, she agreed to provide only a single on-the-record statement. “All I know is I went to bed with this adorable opinion writer and woke up next to Les Moonves,” Bowles told me. “I’m as shocked as you are.”

In the past decade, CBS has dealt with a string of leadership overhauls. In 2018, Moonves, the network’s former chairman and C.E.O., was forced to step down in the wake of a #MeToo scandal. That same year, Jeff Fager, the longtime executive producer of “60 Minutes,” was fired over allegations of sexual harassment. Fager had successfully enforced the show’s independence from the rest of CBS, allowing his staff to make editorial decisions free of corporate influence. But some felt that the lack of

oversight also fed a toxic work culture. One former “60 Minutes” producer said that, even after Fager left CBS, the show continued to be “seriously dysfunctional, with powerful men being protected and women facing continued abuse and discrimination,” a dynamic that “has devastated the quality of the journalism.” The Kamala Harris interview, for example, while perhaps not ground for a lawsuit, was viewed internally as containing poor editing choices.

In many ways, Weiss was eager to overhaul what she saw as CBS’s sclerotic culture. When she started at the network, she tapped Substack’s head of talent acquisition to come to CBS. Her vision for the network’s future involves not just breaking news but also explanatory journalism, investigations, and collaborations with personalities who have grown their own audiences online. She has tried to expand the political leanings of CBS’s audience, an aim that many in the industry are skeptical of. “The likelihood that you’re going to gain anyone who is more to the right, who is more *MAGA*, is a fool’s errand,” one senior television executive told me. “Those people are spoken for. What you’re more likely to do is offend the people that do watch you.” But Weiss believes that whatever pushback she’s faced inside CBS has more to do with how she’s reimagining its approach to journalism than with any changes she’s making to its politics. “You know that phrase ‘generational talent?’ ” a prominent media investor said. “She’s really that good. I think she’s more ambitious than the great Tina Brown, if that’s even possible.”

At the end of October, the network announced a round of layoffs, the first under its new ownership. Eight on-air personalities were let go, all of them women. Debora Patta, who had been publicly accused by Mike Huckabee, the U.S. Ambassador to Israel, of improperly editing an interview he’d given her, was laid off despite having recently re-signed her contract. (Patta denied any improper editing.) Another round of layoffs is expected in the coming months.

In December, Weiss herself hosted an hour-long special—a town hall with Erika Kirk, the widow of Charlie Kirk. The audience members who asked questions included the father of a woman who was murdered, last May, in an antisemitic hate crime in Washington, D.C.; the Utah student who was

asking Kirk a question when he was shot and killed; and a twenty-six-year-old woman who wanted to know if dating in New York as a Christian was worthwhile. Ratings for the special were poor. The network has since announced that it would air more town halls, with guests such as Vice-President J. D. Vance and OpenAI's C.E.O., Sam Altman, but Weiss has no plans to host another special.

Dokoupil, meanwhile, had been promoted to anchor "CBS Evening News." "On too many stories, the press has missed the story because we've taken into account the perspective of advocates and not the average American," he said in a promotional video for the show. "Or we put too much weight in the analysis of academics or élites and not enough on you." In comments on Instagram, he added that he would be "more accountable and more transparent than Cronkite or any one else of his era."

Four days later, Dokoupil's first official broadcast was marred by technical issues. As he began to introduce a segment about Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota, footage from a story about the Arizona senator Mark Kelly started to roll onscreen. "First day," Dokoupil said. "First day, big problems here." Weiss has been heavily involved in writing and editing Dokoupil's scripts. She and the producing team had been making last-minute changes to the broadcast, leading to the hiccup.

"CBS Evening News," Weiss's most visible experiment with form to date, has not yet proved to be more successful or journalistically sound than what came before. On January 6th, Dokoupil only mentioned the fifth anniversary of the riot at the Capitol very briefly, near the end of the program. "President Trump today accused Democrats of failing to prevent the attack on the Capitol," Dokoupil said, "while House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries accused the President of 'whitewashing it.' " He closed the show with a lighthearted segment about Marco Rubio memes.

On "ABC World News Tonight," which has about twice as many viewers as "CBS Evening News," David Muir devoted an entire segment to pro-Trump marches marking the anniversary in Washington and the White House's début of a website celebrating Trump's blanket pardons of rioters. A few nights later, at the Golden Globes, the comedian Nikki Glaser mocked CBS in her monologue. "And the award for Most Editing goes to CBS News,"

she said. “Yes, CBS News, America’s newest place to see B.S. news.” Ellison was seated in the audience.

With Weiss’s help, Dokoupil has booked interviews with powerful figures in Trump’s orbit, including Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and the Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado. Last week, in Dearborn, Michigan, he did a twelve-minute standup with Trump on a Ford factory floor. Dokoupil asked about the potential for U.S. intervention in Iran; the criminal probe of Jerome Powell, the Federal Reserve chair; and the killing of Renee Nicole Good by an *ICE* agent in Minneapolis. (When Dokoupil mentioned that Good’s father was a Trump supporter, the President said, “And I think that’s great.”)

At one point, when the conversation turned to rising grocery prices, Trump told Dokoupil that, if Kamala Harris had won the last election, “your boss”—referring to Ellison—“who’s an amazing guy, might be bust.” Trump added, “You wouldn’t have this job, certainly whatever the hell they’re paying you.” Dokoupil, whose wife, the *MS NOW* anchor Katy Tur, has also been a target of Trump’s jabs, pushed back at the close of the interview. “For the record, I do think I’d have this job even if the other guys won,” Dokoupil said.

“Yeah,” Trump shot back, “but at a lesser salary.” ♦

This article has been updated to better reflect the contents of a book by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

Clare Malone is a contributing writer at The New Yorker covering the media business, journalism, and politics. She received the 2025 Mirror Award for commentary.

A Reporter at Large

The Congresswoman Criminalized for Visiting ICE Detainees

LaMonica McIver went to tour an immigration jail in her New Jersey district. Now she faces seventeen years in prison.

By Jonathan Blitzer

January 19, 2026

“No one else is facing what she’s facing,” a fellow-congressperson said, of McIver.Photograph by Lila Barth for The New Yorker

On the Friday before Mother’s Day, LaMonica McIver, a first-term Democratic congresswoman from New Jersey, spent the morning handing out roses in the maternity ward of a hospital in Newark. Her next stop, a visit to Delaney Hall, a federal immigration jail in her district, promised to

be a more sombre affair, but she was “on a high note,” McIver told me. “We thought it would be a smooth day.”

McIver arrived at Delaney Hall just before one o’clock. She was joining two other New Jersey Democrats—Bonnie Watson Coleman and Robert Menendez, Jr.—to tour the facility. Members of Congress are allowed by law to make unannounced visits to detention centers as part of their oversight responsibilities; the three lawmakers planned to look around inside, then hold a press conference. As they were waiting to enter, McIver needled Menendez about his plans for Mother’s Day. “What did you get your wife?” she asked him, and acted scandalized when he said he hadn’t yet bought anything. “Oh, my God,” McIver said. “You have less than forty-eight hours!”

The members knew the rules of touring immigration facilities: their staff couldn’t join them, and cellphones weren’t allowed inside. A few months earlier, when they had visited another New Jersey immigration jail, in Elizabeth, a guard wouldn’t admit them. Watson Coleman, who is eighty and in her sixth term, produced a copy of the federal statute that authorized their visit. Twenty minutes later, the warden and a representative from Immigration and Customs Enforcement showed them around. At Delaney Hall, McIver recalled, “I just thought we would go in and have a little delay.”

Delaney Hall, which is run by a private prison company called the GEO Group, was the first immigrant-detention center to open during Donald Trump’s second term. Newark’s mayor, Ras Baraka, a Democrat, claimed that the company had bypassed routine municipal permits and certifications in its rush to secure the federal contract, which was worth roughly a billion dollars over fifteen years. An Essex County court was adjudicating the dispute; the local news surrounding the case had prompted the representatives to make inquiries. “The Administration didn’t tell us this place was open and operating, so we didn’t have any information,” McIver said. “The only thing we could really do is show up and go there and see what was going on.” She had told Baraka to meet them afterward for the press conference, which would be held outside the facility’s perimeter fence.

What happened during the next two hours is the subject of a pending criminal case. A group of *ICE* agents came out through the front gate and began arresting Baraka for trespassing. McIver and Watson Coleman tried to stand between Baraka and the agents. “You’re touching a federal official,” McIver warned them. “Don’t touch us.” The agents ignored her and pressed in. There was shoving and jostling. The government later claimed that McIver, in trying to shield Baraka, “grabbed” and “slammed” one of the agents.

Baraka was eventually driven off in handcuffs and held for five hours before being released. Ten days later, Alina Habba, the acting U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, announced on X that the charges against him were being dropped. But, she wrote, “the dismissal against the mayor is not the end of this matter.” The second half of her statement addressed McIver. She was being charged with three felony counts of assaulting federal agents. If convicted, she faces seventeen years in prison.

Earlier in the year, as part of a new directive to increase immigration-related arrests, “special agents in charge” at F.B.I. offices across the country were encouraged to investigate and charge citizens and public officials if they “obstructed” immigration agents. According to an official in the Department of Justice, the order extended to judges and immigration lawyers whose rulings or legal advocacy, including on behalf of clients, ran counter to the Administration’s goals. “You’d never seen that before, because it was so extreme,” the official said. By the end of the year, the department had filed more than five hundred assault charges against people accused of interfering with federal law enforcement.

The prosecution of McIver was the first in a pattern of escalating attacks by the Trump Administration against Democratic officeholders. Nine days after she was charged, federal agents handcuffed a Democratic staffer in the office of the New York representative Jerrold Nadler, partially on the grounds that, after her colleagues documented their activity, she’d been “confrontational.” Two weeks later, Alex Padilla, a senator from California, was thrown to the ground by federal agents after walking into a Department of Homeland Security press conference in Los Angeles. “It’s all been very intentional,” Padilla told me. “Donald Trump came in with a list of political

enemies that he wanted to punish. The list keeps growing.” Brad Lander, then the New York City comptroller, was arrested in June for obstructing immigration agents while accompanying an immigrant to court in lower Manhattan. In October, six people, including a Democratic candidate for a House seat in Illinois, were indicted for “hindering and impeding” *ICE* officers during a protest outside Chicago. At the start of December, *ICE* agents fired pepper spray at Adelita Grijalva, a newly sworn-in Democratic congresswoman, who was protesting an immigration raid in Tucson.

Many House Democrats have taken out personal-liability insurance to hedge against the prospect of being targeted by the President. “We’re freaking out,” one Democrat told me. “You do not know what’s coming around the next corner.” The Administration has claimed that McIver is “aligned” with Antifa. She was “out of control” at Delaney Hall, Trump said. “The days of woke are over.” Press releases issued by D.H.S. stated that she’d “stormed” the facility and “broken in”; on television, a department spokesperson accused McIver of “body-slamming” an agent. “No one else in Congress is facing what she’s facing,” Lateefah Simon, a Democratic representative from Oakland, California, said. “Typically, we would say, ‘Oh, they’re just trying to scare her.’ They’re actively litigating this case.” At one point, a federal judge ordered Justice Department lawyers to instruct Administration officials to stop lying publicly about the incident. “It’s not local *ICE*. It’s from headquarters in D.C.,” the government attorney replied. “We don’t have the authority.”

“I live a stone’s throw away from that big house on the corner with all the broken windows.”
Cartoon by Matthew Diffee

McIver’s case is expected to go to trial this year. By December, she had already racked up close to a million dollars in legal fees. Owing to House rules, the expenses have come out of her campaign funds, meaning that, in the months before her 2026 reëlection campaign, the money she’s raising will go almost exclusively toward her defense. “About five per cent of me regrets going that day,” she said. “Do I want to be hemmed up like this? My mom is worried to death. My husband’s stressed out. My nine-year-old is, like, ‘What the hell?’ ” But the government’s case, she went on, was meant “to slow me down and drain me of joy, and that’s why I’m so bent on it.”

On a blustery evening in October, I met McIver at her district office, in Newark. The government had shut down a week earlier, but a hum of activity remained. Staffers worked the phones from cubicles festooned with Halloween decorations. McIver, who is thirty-nine, with long dark hair and a ready smile, is personable and unguarded. She led me to a sparsely furnished conference room and offered me coffee and a snack. “I’m a mom,” she said. “Need to make sure everyone is fed.”

In May, during the week and a half between McIver’s visit to Delaney Hall and the D.O.J.’s indictment, Habba had proposed giving McIver probation in exchange for an apology. “I’m, like, ‘No, no, no, no,’ ” she told me. “I

didn’t do anything wrong.” Habba, who was in sporadic contact with McIver’s lawyers, then seemed to suggest that she might have McIver arrested—to choreograph a perp walk in front of news cameras. “They were not giving us any communication,” McIver said. “My husband was, like, ‘Don’t go anywhere by yourself.’ ”

When Habba announced the charges, McIver’s lawyers searched federal court records to examine the legal filing, but they couldn’t find one; it came later that night. “First Twitter, then the court filing,” McIver said. In the months since, the President’s taunts on social media have brought Fox News coverage, death threats, and a motion by House Republicans to censure McIver on the chamber floor. “It’s just honestly been super stressful,” she told me. One Republican representative told her that he found the crusade against her “crazy,” but she couldn’t share his name. “That would be the end of it for him,” she said.

McIver, the oldest of four children, grew up in public housing in the Central Ward of Newark. “We didn’t necessarily live in the projects, but we did see things that could be kind of disturbing,” she said. When she was a child, her mother struggled with substance abuse, and McIver lost several friends to shootings. Politics became an unlikely lifeline, for which she credits her fifth-grade teacher, Ras Baraka. For two decades, Baraka, the son of the poet Amiri Baraka, was a teacher and a high-school principal who moonlighted as a candidate for elective office. When McIver was in elementary school, Baraka ran for a seat on the Newark city council. His students passed out flyers and helped register voters. For McIver, the campaign’s atmosphere of resolve and sociability was intoxicating. It was also an unintended lesson in perseverance. “He probably went about fifteen or sixteen years of losing,” she told me.

McIver, who holds a master’s degree in education, was the first member of her family to attend college. She planned to be a teacher, until she learned that certification would require sixteen weeks of unpaid student teaching. “My mom was in rehab,” she said. “As a working student, that was not a situation for me.” By the time Baraka started rising through the ranks of city government, McIver was working in human resources for Newark’s

public-school district. In 2012, she and a friend from one of Baraka's city-council campaigns founded a small nonprofit to mentor girls in Newark.

McIver was thirty-two, and the mother of a toddler, when she decided to run for a council seat, in 2018. What immediately struck her was how old everyone in city government seemed. She made it something of a personal mission to, as she put it, "attract younger people—and when I say 'young people' I mean, like, under forty." Within four years, she'd been chosen as the council president. By then, Baraka was starting his third term as mayor. He and McIver were now colleagues, sometimes with competing interests. "You don't have to figure out where she stands on a position," Baraka told me. "People knew that you can't just say anything or treat her any kind of way. She's going to respond."

In 2024, Donald Payne, Jr., a U.S. congressman from New Jersey's Tenth District, died suddenly, of a heart attack, at the age of sixty-five. He had been in the seat since 2012; his father had occupied it for twenty-three years before him. McIver beat ten other Democrats in the primary, then ran in a special election that was held in September, 2024, less than two months before the regularly scheduled election, in which she would have to run again. "I originally was, like, 'Why are we having a special? Let's just wait until November,' " she told me. But Democrats were trying to narrow the Republicans' House majority. "They needed bodies," she said.

McIver calls the four months she served in Congress that year her "orientation." She inherited Payne's role on the Homeland Security Committee, where she received an education in the chamber's intractability: constant partisan warfare and zero possibility of legislating, especially during an all-consuming Presidential race. "It's kind of shocking that it's that bad," she said. "Can't we just do one good thing for the people we represent? Can we just have a conversation?"

McIver, outside Delaney Hall and flanked by fellow Congress members Bonnie Watson Coleman and Robert Menendez, Jr., demands the release of Ras Baraka, the mayor of Newark.Photograph by Dakota Santiago

McIver had sought a seat on the transportation committee—it was one of the least politicized, and her district included both a major train station and an international airport—but, since she held a reliably Democratic seat, Party leaders gave the slot to a "frontline" member facing a tighter race. Immigration, meanwhile, was at the center of Trump's campaign, and within weeks of McIver's swearing in one of her new colleagues on the Homeland Security Committee, Clay Higgins, a Louisiana Republican, caused a scandal by tweeting that Haitian migrants were "wild" and "slapstick gangsters" known for "eating pets." McIver told me that Higgins, who would later lead the effort to censure her, was "really, really crazy. This man opens his mouth and I'm literally taken back to Jim Crow days."

When Trump won, McIver told me, "I didn't predict it would be this bad. I just didn't think it would be so unhinged and rogue." Trump had been in office for less than a week when *ICE* raided Ocean Seafood Depot, a wholesale fish market in Newark, arresting three people. The scale of the operation paled in comparison with the sweeping actions to come in cities including Chicago and Los Angeles, but it underscored for McIver, whose top priority as a campaigner had been the cost of living in Newark, that there'd be no outrunning Trump's signature issue. "I didn't come to Congress with a strong background on immigration," she told me. "I came to Congress literally to do the job and work for people and protect them. It just so happens that, at the moment of me doing that, it happens to be around immigration."

Delaney Hall is situated in a desolate corner of Newark, wedged between I-95 and the Passaic River. When I visited the site in October, accompanied by Nedia Morsy, the state director of Make the Road New Jersey, an immigrant-advocacy organization, the street out front, which is on a popular trucking route through the city, was thick with traffic. A half-dozen semis were parked on the shoulder, their drivers sleeping between shifts. In a small parking lot outside the perimeter fence, a dozen people sat on concrete slabs, waiting to visit detainees. The odor of burning garbage wafted from a nearby incineration plant. I could see the Essex County Correctional Facility, a much larger prison down the block. “It’s all here,” Morsy told me. “Environmental racism and immigration jails.”

When *ICE* announced its contract with the GEO Group, last February, the facility, which in the past had served as a halfway house, had been unoccupied for months. On March 28th, according to the city’s subsequent lawsuit, local officials began to notice that, though an occupancy permit had not been filed, the interior parking lot was full of vehicles. Three days later, city inspectors asked to come inside to confirm that the building was in compliance with fire and plumbing codes, and they were denied entry.

The GEO Group later claimed that the building’s new function as an immigration facility was roughly equivalent to its previous one, obviating any need for further inspection. The Trump Administration was rapidly expanding its detention capacity in anticipation of what the President was calling “the largest deportation operation in the history of our country.” The stock prices of private-prison companies were soaring. The GEO Group’s resistance to state inspectors was perhaps unsurprising, given the potential revenue at stake and the fact that the company could expect to receive the full backing of the federal government. New Jersey was also traditionally hostile territory. In 2021, the state had passed a law, which was later blocked in federal court, banning privately run immigration jails.

In April, Baraka, who had recently entered the Democratic primary for governor, learned at a staff meeting that inspectors were being turned away from Delaney Hall. “I said at the meeting, ‘Look, we all are going over there,’ ” he told me. “Nobody would let us in.” Later that month, as city lawyers sought an injunction to halt operations at Delaney Hall, Baraka

started going to the facility every day. “We would stick a piece of paper on the gate, showing the violations,” he said. “Every morning, they would take them off.”

Morsy and a small group of activists held daily protest vigils outside the facility. “It was quiet as hell,” she told me. Baraka came “like clockwork.” Once relatives of detained immigrants began to show up at the gate, looking for their loved ones, she assumed that the facility had become operational. “We wanted our congressional delegation to conduct oversight,” Morsy said. “The Mayor could try to use codes and zoning ordinances. But that wasn’t really working.”

At the start of May, the number of armed guards at Delaney Hall began to increase. “It was getting bad,” Morsy said. She no longer felt comfortable encouraging her group’s members to go to the vigils. On May 7th, two days before the congressional visit, Morsy realized that most of the guards were wearing masks. Many of them also carried zip ties. She began to worry for the Mayor’s safety. “It was totally isolated,” she said, of the facility’s location. “I knew something was going to happen.”

None of the representatives were surprised when, on May 9th, the GEO contractor manning the front gate at Delaney Hall refused, at first, to let them in. The GEO Group employees, Representative Menendez told me, were “less clued in” to the protocol for congressional tours than D.H.S. officials were; the members knew that they’d need to speak with someone from the government to start the process. Eventually, a car drove up to the entrance. When the guard opened the gate, Watson Coleman, wearing a beige trenchcoat, rushed in behind it. McIver and Menendez followed.

A man in a suit, who worked for the GEO Group, came over with an *ICE* official. They all shook hands. McIver already knew the official from *ICE*. In March, she and Menendez had met with him and another agency staffer at *ICE*’s New Jersey field office, in Newark, to discuss their plans for touring facilities under the new Administration. The official had been cordial and suggested that the agency would coöperate with congressional oversight. “Good to see you again,” McIver told him.

Around one-thirty, the three representatives were led into a waiting area in a security checkpoint with chairs and a metal detector. A third man, in a checkered blazer and a fedora, introduced himself as the warden. He was cheerful but evasive, telling the members that he'd have to call his "client"—*ICE*—for authorization. An *ICE* agent with a body camera stood across from them, recording everything and occasionally fielding questions. "We knew we were getting stalled," Watson Coleman later told me.

At one point, the official whom McIver knew took the agent aside, out of earshot of the representatives, and asked, "So they forced themselves in, right?" The agent replied, "They moved the GEO guard aside. They pushed him." This was plainly inaccurate, according to security-camera footage. But a D.H.S. statement published later that day alleged that "a group of protestors, including two members of the U.S. House of Representatives, stormed the gate and broke into the detention facility."

Cartoon by Mick Stevens

In the waiting room, meanwhile, McIver was growing frustrated. After about fifteen minutes, when the *ICE* official stepped outside, she followed him to the door. "We're not just going to be sitting here all day while they play games," she said. "I'm not in the mood for that." A few minutes later, McIver and the official returned; she was in the middle of berating him. "Don't tell me to relax," she said. "Trust me, Trump is not going to be the President forever. Remember that."

Just after two-thirty, a group of *ICE* officers entered the waiting area. One of them, a woman in a windbreaker emblazoned with "HSI," for Homeland Security Investigations, was an *ICE* supervisor from the agency's offices in downtown Newark. She asked the representatives how they were doing. "I was better about an hour ago," Watson Coleman said. McIver added, "We had a rough time, but it's getting better." Another *ICE* officer, Ricky Patel, a broad-shouldered bald man in bluejeans, was speaking on a cellphone. He was the top-ranking agent at the facility, in charge of *ICE*'s field office in New Jersey. His attention was not on the representatives but on the parking lot.

Ras Baraka had already been to Delaney Hall that morning. He had left to take his kids to school and to go to the gym. "I actually almost forgot about" the press conference that afternoon, he told me. He arrived at Delaney Hall shortly before two, on the assumption that the representatives would be finishing their tour. A group of protesters were chanting out front, and, when he walked up to the gate, the GEO contractor said something about calming the crowd and let him in. Two armed bodyguards—the Mayor's usual security detail—were with him. "I was waiting for them to come out," Baraka said, of the representatives. "I had no intention of going inside."

Now Patel and the other agents came over to confront him. "This is private property," Patel told him. "There's a sign that says 'No Trespassing.' " Baraka replied, "We got invited in," adding that he planned to leave with the representatives when they finished their tour. "You're not a congressman," Patel told him. A moment later, McIver, Menendez, and Watson Coleman joined the group. In a calm but firm voice, Patel told Baraka that he'd be arrested if he didn't leave.

When the representatives realized what was happening, they were furious. "You are creating a problem that doesn't exist," Watson Coleman told Patel. She and Menendez were raising their voices. "This is an act of intimidation and you know it," Menendez said. A demonstrator on the other side of the gate shouted, "You let him in, you piece of shit!"

Patel took out handcuffs and stepped toward Baraka. "You must be out your damn minds," McIver shouted. "Hell no! Hell no!" She and Watson

Coleman gathered around Baraka, putting themselves between him and the agents. Baraka finally relented and started toward the gate. Watson Coleman held his arm. “The Mayor is ready to go out,” she said.

Several *ICE* agents were wearing body cameras that afternoon. Multiple videos released as part of McIver’s legal case show a scene of palpable relief once Baraka went through the gate. McIver and the other members walked back to the waiting room. Two agents, who had begun loading pepper balls into rifles, put their weapons into the trunk of a black Ford S.U.V. “It got tense there for a second,” one of them said.

Patel and a half-dozen other agents remained by the front gate. He was on the phone—it wasn’t yet clear with whom. “No problem,” he said. “I’m going to take him right now.” He hung up and turned to the other agents, telling them that he had just received an order from the Deputy Attorney General of the United States, Todd Blanche. “We’re going to walk out of the gates,” he said. “I’m going to place the Mayor in handcuffs.”

The agents took a minute to prepare themselves. McIver, who was dressed in jeans, a white T-shirt, and a red blazer, which she’d worn to the maternity ward that morning, was near the building’s entrance. “Next thing we know, we see these people running back to the gate,” she told me. “We’re, like, ‘What’s going on now?’ ”

The three representatives reached the gate just before Patel and the agents exited. They all converged on Baraka at the same time. The decision to arrest him in the facility’s front parking lot, which is public property, meant that there was now a large crowd to contend with—protesters, press, congressional staff members. Two agents threw a protester at the edge of the scrum to the ground.

Baraka had told his bodyguards to step aside when the agents came to make the arrest. “I can handle myself,” he said. The bodyguards stood back and demanded to speak with the person in charge. The only thing that Baraka could hear, he told me later, was staffers shouting at the agents not to touch the congresspeople. The agents, he said, “were very, very rough.” In his periphery, he saw them with their guns drawn, “grabbing and pulling” some of the protesters. “My mind was all over the place,” he said. “I heard

somebody”—an agent—“say, ‘Take them to the ground, take them to ground.’ ”

McIver and Menendez were trying both to keep the agents from swarming Baraka and to make sure that Watson Coleman didn’t fall. The younger representatives told me later that they felt an almost filial impulse to protect her from injury. “People were shoving and pushing us, and it was becoming very dangerous,” McIver told me. “I was screaming out repeatedly, ‘Please get your hands off of us. Do not touch us.’ ” She went on, “It wasn’t clear if these folks knew who we were. There was a man with a gun. I mean, it was crazy.”

When the government announced the charges against McIver, it zeroed in on four frames from one agent’s body-cam footage which show her making contact with Patel, who is identified as Victim 1, or V-1. The images are, at best, ambiguous. According to the indictment, McIver was trying to “thwart the arrest,” and, in the process, “slammed her forearm into the body of V-1” and “also reached out and tried to restrain V-1 by forcibly grabbing him.” McIver was trying to keep Baraka from being arrested, but the agents were initiating much of the contact. One of her staffers noted that her red blazer, which stood out in the blur of dark uniforms, may have made it easier for them to isolate images of her in the skirmish.

Two of the agents, including Patel, led Baraka inside the gate to a waiting car, while the other agents shoved away bystanders. McIver tried to get back inside, but an agent in fatigues and a mask blocked her path. He pushed her hard in the stomach. McIver pushed him back. Menendez wrapped his arms around McIver and pulled her inside the gate. The agent walked briskly to the back of the black Ford S.U.V. and took out a gun filled with pepper balls. “He just assaulted me,” McIver shouted. “I’m filing a complaint.” When he emerged from behind the vehicle, McIver confronted him. The recording didn’t capture their entire exchange. In her account, he told her, “Fuck you. I don’t give a fuck.”

In the indictment, he is called Victim 2. A still image shows McIver’s left forearm on his back and his elbow in her stomach. “If they’re saying LaMonica pushed a federal officer, then, without a doubt, those same charges can be brought against federal officers for pushing a member of

Congress," Menendez told me. McIver was visibly shaking, but almost three hours after arriving the three representatives finally went on the tour.

Before Alina Habba became the acting U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, this past March, she worked in private practice in the township of Bedminster. Her career was distinguished by her loyalty to her most prominent client, the then former President, whom she began representing in 2021 and whose golf club in Bedminster she was a member of. One case, which led to an ethics complaint against Habba, involved a club employee who alleged being sexually harassed at work. In another, Habba, who is forty-one, defended Trump against a lawsuit filed by a former contestant on "The Apprentice," who alleged that Trump had sexually assaulted her. As a member of the defense team in the writer E. Jean Carroll's defamation case against Trump, in 2023, Habba was frequently chastised by the judge for her apparent confusion in matters of routine courtroom procedure. "We are going to take a break here," the judge told her at one point. "You're going to refresh your memory about how you get a document into evidence."

Even as a federal prosecutor, Habba was clear about her partisan commitments. "We could turn New Jersey red," she told Jack Posobiec, a far-right influencer, during an interview in March. "I can help that cause." One of her first public acts was to join a team of U.S. Marshals as they arrested fugitives, which she later posted about on social media. "She basically made herself into a witness in that case," a lawyer in the office at the time told me. "People were concerned about being asked to do cases with her." According to three current and former Justice Department lawyers, Habba had a list of state Democrats she aimed to investigate, including Phil Murphy, the former governor; Cory Booker, a senator; and Baraka.

Twenty minutes after Baraka was arrested, Habba made an announcement on X that said the Mayor had "willingly chosen to disregard the law." She later gave an interview to Fox News in which she claimed, inaccurately, that he "was put under arrest inside the facility." Baraka would go on to sue Habba for defamation, but by then she'd already seemed to realize that the government's case against him was too weak to prosecute.

At a hearing two days after the government dropped its charges against Baraka, the judge upbraided Stephen Demanovich, a federal prosecutor who had been assigned the case. “An arrest, particularly of a public figure, is not a preliminary investigative tool,” the judge said. “Let this incident serve as an inflection point.” The admonition proved persuasive. Demanovich, who arrived in the office shortly after Habba took over, had been commuting to New Jersey each week from his home in Florida. He was a mystery to his colleagues, who referred to him as “Florida man.” After the hearing, “he left the office without a whisper,” one of them told me. “We never heard from him again.”

For half a century, the Justice Department had strict instructions, laid out in a manual, for how its staff investigated members of Congress. The main requirement was for prosecutors to seek “prior approval” from an office called the Public Integrity Section, which came into existence after Watergate, to insure that charges weren’t politically motivated. A week before McIver was charged, the Justice Department suspended the rule. The move came amid a welter of changes to the section, according to an investigation by Reuters. By June, the number of lawyers in it had been reduced from more than thirty to five. The department official told me, “Public-corruption prosecutors at U.S. Attorneys’ offices across the country, along with their F.B.I. partners, are now spending more of their time working on violent crime and immigration cases.”

The case against McIver was more promising for the government than the one against Baraka. Habba’s office had spent hours reviewing the footage to build an argument. Of the three representatives, McIver was visibly the most upset, and she didn’t hesitate to join the fray. Even some House Democrats—already skittish when it came to the politics of immigration—were uneasy about the optics. “The Newark case is messy,” one of them told me. “If you give the Administration something, they’ll take it.” In June, a federal grand jury indicted McIver on three counts of “assaulting, resisting, impeding and interfering” with government agents.

I recently asked a lawyer who had worked at the Public Integrity Section whether the indictment seemed solid. “I don’t see there being a viable case at all,” the lawyer said. McIver had been at Delaney Hall for an official

legislative function, and the officers themselves had seemed to cause “chaos and mass confusion.” Ultimately, the lawyer said, “it matters that she’s a congressperson. These cases get a lot more attention, and they have much broader implications when you’re dragging a congressperson into court for hearings. We never would have pursued this.”

In the summer, Habba faced a reckoning of her own. Nominated by Trump but unconfirmed by the Senate, she had been serving for an interim period of a hundred and twenty days when federal district-court judges in the state determined that she could no longer legally remain in the post. The ruling was widely expected. On July 17th, a few days before it was issued, Habba convened a meeting on the seventh floor of the Newark office. At a podium in front of an American flag, she tearfully told her staff that she’d enjoyed working in public service. “It was a bunch of bromides and puffery,” one of the attendees told me. “No one took her at face value. We knew she was staying.”

On July 22nd, the morning of the ruling, the chief judge of the U.S. District Court of New Jersey called Habba with the news that the panel had chosen her deputy, Desiree Grace, as her replacement. Habba, who spoke on a regular basis to Pam Bondi, the U.S. Attorney General, and Blanche, the Deputy Attorney General, closed the door to her office and made a series of phone calls. People working on the floor heard her screaming into the receiver. At five o’clock that evening, Grace’s work phone went dead. She’d been fired. “It was assumed that Alina did that,” the attendee said.

Habba remained in the post, but in August another federal judge ruled that she was “not lawfully holding the office.” The decision had immediate implications for a number of cases. One judge on the verge of issuing a criminal sentence postponed her ruling indefinitely, on the basis that Habba now lacked the legal authority to represent the government. The Trump Administration had tried a convoluted strategy so that Habba could continue to bring cases: it withdrew her nomination, named her as a “special attorney,” appointed her to Grace’s previous position as deputy, and then elevated her to acting U.S. Attorney to fill the new vacancy. But, on December 8th, a week after an appeals court once again ruled against her, Habba resigned. She announced that she was leaving the office to serve as

an adviser to Bondi. “Do not mistake compliance for surrender,” Habba wrote on X.

For McIver, the news didn’t change much. Habba had secured the indictment before her provisional term expired. To hedge against any lingering questions about Habba’s authority, the government had, for months, added a second name next to Habba’s on the signature block of its court filings. It was that of Todd Blanche, who had ordered the arrest that set McIver’s prosecution in motion.

At the start of Trump’s second term, Blanche, a fifty-year-old former prosecutor in the Southern District of New York, was thought to have the potential to be a moderating influence inside the Justice Department. His personal background was atypical of the élite legal circles in which he rose. As a young father of two children, he commuted from Long Island to New York City to be a paralegal in the U.S. Attorney’s office and went to law school at night. “We called him Wonder Boy,” one of his former colleagues told me. “He was never the smartest guy in the room or the best writer. But people wanted to work with him.”

Blanche eventually entered private practice and became a partner at Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft, the oldest white-shoe firm in the city. His clients included Paul Manafort, Trump’s former campaign manager, who was convicted of fraud and faced additional charges, and Boris Epshteyn, one of the President’s top advisers, who was accused of interfering with the 2020 election. “He would sit in the dining room at Mar-a-Lago and pick up clients,” a former colleague at the firm told me. Other Cadwalader lawyers may have personally disliked some of the figures on Blanche’s client list, but they considered him a “good firm citizen,” someone who was collegial, approachable, and generous with his time.

That changed in 2023, when Blanche told the firm’s other partners that he wanted to defend Trump, who had been indicted in Manhattan for falsifying business records. “He genuinely believed that the prosecution of Trump was politically motivated,” a source with knowledge of the firm told me. The partners felt that, after the riot at the Capitol on January 6th, representing Trump would hurt the firm’s reputation. They were also concerned that Trump, who was notorious for mistreating his lawyers, wouldn’t pay his

legal fees. The partners wouldn't allow Blanche to retain Trump as a Cadwalader client, and Blanche said he would leave the firm. "Todd was, like, 'I'm doing this,' " the source with knowledge of the firm told me. "It was a difficult decision. They liked the guy. The firm was reluctant to let him go."

During Trump's trial, Blanche seemed to undergo a conversion. He moved to Florida and adopted a bellicose persona in court and in the media. "I don't recognize him," the former colleague at the firm told me. "Todd's only hope after that trial was to go into government." Many assumed that he was angling for an appointment as the U.S. Attorney in the Southern District of New York. Instead, when Trump returned to office, Blanche secured a higher perch—the No. 2 post at the Justice Department.

Last winter, Trump issued a series of executive orders and memorandums that punished prominent law firms with ties to people or causes that the President felt were opposed to him. Rather than fight the action in court, the managing partners at Paul, Weiss, a marquee New York law firm, decided to strike a deal with the White House. The firm agreed to devote forty million dollars' worth of pro-bono services to causes approved by the President. This set off a cascade of similar deals, with the Administration raising the price in each subsequent negotiation. The next firm to settle, Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, agreed to a figure of a hundred million dollars. The third, Willkie Farr & Gallagher, was initially told that the demand would be a hundred and twenty-five million dollars.

“If you’re watching this tape, it can mean only one thing—you need to upgrade your home-entertainment system.”
Cartoon by Brendan Loper

In the spring, the partners at Cadwalader heard a rumor that they were next in the Administration’s crosshairs—a shock, given the firm’s past ties to people in Trump’s inner circle. Douglas Gansler, a senior lawyer, called Epshteyn, who was the President’s de-facto representative in negotiations with the law firms. Paul, Weiss has an annual budget of roughly a hundred and seventy-five million dollars for pro-bono work; Cadwalader’s, by contrast, was between five and seven million dollars. Epshteyn told Gansler that to avoid punishment the firm would have to agree to the going rate—a hundred million dollars to litigate causes aligned with the President’s agenda. The impression at Cadwalader had been that the split with Blanche was amicable. “This was how we learned that Todd felt bitter about the decision,” the source with knowledge of the firm told me. “It was a slap in the face from Todd.”

As Deputy Attorney General, Blanche has gone to special lengths to defend the President. In July, he met with the convicted sex trafficker Ghislaine Maxwell, reportedly in an effort to blunt the political fallout from Trump’s reluctance to release the government’s files on Maxwell’s benefactor, Jeffrey Epstein. But Blanche has more frequently gone on the offensive to advance the President’s principal obsessions: enforcing immigration laws

and pursuing his political opponents. On March 6th, D.O.J. employees received a memo from Blanche with the subject “Operation Take Back America.” The goal, he wrote, was to “surge existing resources” to fulfill Trump’s agenda of “stopping illegal immigration,” “eliminating Cartels,” and “ending illegal trafficking of dangerous drugs and human beings.” In practice, this meant “responding and investigating instances of obstruction in sanctuary jurisdictions.”

That same week, the Administration began transferring Venezuelan migrants accused of belonging to the gang Tren de Aragua to *ICE* detention centers in Texas, in preparation for their eventual rendition to El Salvador under the Alien Enemies Act. According to a subsequent court declaration by Emil Bove, who at the time worked directly under Blanche (before Trump appointed him to an appellate-court judgeship), Blanche was involved in privileged discussions “regarding the transfer of custody of aliens who had been detained pursuant to the Alien Enemies Act and removed from the United States.” The government deported more than a hundred of the migrants in clear violation of a federal judge’s injunction. With some of them on a plane was Kilmar Abrego García, a Salvadoran who was deported as a result of an administrative error. When a veteran department attorney presenting the case to a judge admitted that the deportation was a mistake, Blanche suspended him for “engaging in conduct prejudicial to your client.”

Blanche has seemed most comfortable vilifying Trump’s critics. Last September, he told CNN that a group of women who protested Trump while he dined at a Washington restaurant could be charged under the *RICO* Act, a law typically used against gangs and organized crime. The following month, Blanche published a letter threatening to prosecute California officials who advocated the idea of arresting immigration agents who broke state laws during raids. (Agents, he wrote, could not be charged with state crimes if they were performing their federal duties.) At an event for the Federalist Society, in November, he lashed out at judges who ruled against the Administration, saying that the country was “at war.”

On the afternoon of June 12th, a protest erupted inside Delaney Hall. The detainees had been complaining about conditions at the facility for days.

Because of overcrowding, some of them were sleeping on the ground. Their meals, which came intermittently, sometimes consisted of just a few slices of bread. On the upper floor of the facility, several dozen men started covering up security cameras and breaking windows. A Salvadoran woman told the *Times* that, just before 6 *P.M.*, she received a panicked call from her brother, who was being detained at Delaney Hall: “He told me he was scared and didn’t know what would happen to him.” An emergency immigration hotline took a call from Delaney Hall in which the operator heard screams in the background. Four men escaped the facility by tearing down one of the building’s walls.

McIver was on a train from Washington to Newark when she got the news. She’d been indicted two days earlier and had just appeared on MSNBC to discuss her case. “I expect bad news all the time from these places,” McIver told me, in reference to *ICE* detention centers. “But I knew something would happen at Delaney.” When she and the other representatives had toured the facility, they noticed certain irregularities. The phones weren’t working, and they got stuck in an elevator. It was lunchtime, but the kitchen was empty. “You didn’t even have a sniff of food,” McIver told me. At the Elizabeth detention center, the representatives had been given hairnets when they walked through the kitchen, where cooks were preparing meals. “We didn’t have any of that at Delaney,” she told me. “No one was there.”

By the summer, with the White House pressuring *ICE* to arrest some three thousand people a day, the population in detention nationwide was growing. There were some fifty-six thousand people in more than a hundred and thirty facilities that, together, were designed to hold forty-one thousand people. Conditions at many of the detention centers were rapidly deteriorating.

In Miami, underfed detainees described being denied medical treatment. One morning in June, a group of them gathered in the yard to spell out a human sign that said “SOS.” Twenty-seven women were forced into a small holding cell after spending hours cuffed and chained on a bus where guards refused to give them food, water, or access to a toilet, according to *USA Today;* they were told to urinate on the floor. Immigrants who’d been arrested at routine *ICE* check-ins in Los Angeles were kept overnight in the

basement of a federal building. In New York, a Peruvian immigrant filed a lawsuit over mistreatment at 26 Federal Plaza, where *ICE* has held about half of the two thousand people it's detained in the city since January. Dozens of men were crammed into a two-hundred-and-fifteen-square-foot cell; one of them lost twenty-four pounds while in custody. A common concern, reported by detainees held across the country, was that they were not allowed to speak to lawyers or family members, rendering them almost completely cut off from the outside world.

The experience of McIver, Watson Coleman, and Menendez in May was the harbinger of a policy shift at *ICE*. In the summer, twelve Democratic representatives from six other states were blocked when they showed up at detention centers for unannounced visits. The agency offered a range of explanations. In mid-June, on its website, *ICE* said that, though members could visit detention centers where immigrants were held for prolonged periods of time, they couldn't tour field offices that weren't designed for long-term confinement. Yet in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, *ICE* was using field offices as de-facto jails. The agency then stipulated that members of Congress were required to inform the government a week before attempting a visit. On July 30th, a group of Democrats sued the Administration, seeking to get the policy overturned.

One of the plaintiffs in that case is Jason Crow, a forty-six-year-old combat veteran from Colorado who's currently in his fourth term in the House. The Denver Contract Detention Facility, a jail run by the GEO Group, is in his district, which spans parts of Denver and the neighboring city of Aurora. On July 20th, he showed up for a tour and, after waiting an hour, was turned away. Several weeks later, when one of Crow's staffers went to the facility, following a different but related set of protocols, two conservative members of the Aurora City Council accosted him. One of them recorded a video of the interaction on his phone, while the other yelled that the staffer was "here to meet with criminals."

The treatment was especially striking to Crow because he had helped make unannounced visits a legally protected part of the congressional appropriations process. Like McIver, he didn't have a background in immigration policy. "I'm not a likely ally for this issue," he told me. "I'm a

working-class military veteran from the Upper Midwest." He was struck, however, by the degree to which immigration jails were unregulated compared with facilities that held U.S. citizens. In 2019, as a freshman House member, he created an inspection checklist based on national detention standards. That February, Congress added a provision to its annual appropriation bill which codified the members' right to make in-person visits to facilities where children were being held by the government; at the end of the year, Congress inserted a rider into the funding bill which allowed them to visit any facilities detaining immigrants.

The language of the bill was unequivocal on one point: representatives would never be required to provide "prior notice" of their visits. That year, members of the Homeland Security Committee published a report describing how *ICE* officials had "used the advanced warning to improve the conditions." They observed fresh paint, cleaning supplies, the assignment of new guards, and the transfer of detainees from solitary confinement to the general population. Crow himself went on to make ten oversight visits; his staff conducted close to ninety. The incident at the Aurora facility in July, according to the lawsuit, represented "the first time since he began conducting oversight visits in February 2019" that he "was denied in his attempt to visit" the detention center in his district. "They know right now under this Administration that they're untouchable," Crow said of *ICE*. "There's nothing they can do that's going to get them in trouble with Trump and his minions . . . but they can't hide behind their masks forever."

On December 5th, McIver and I met for lunch at Swahili Village, a restaurant in Newark. It was late on a Friday afternoon and there were no other diners. McIver, dressed in jeans and a green sweater with matching glasses, seemed tired but relaxed. Constituents often expressed their appreciation to her for standing up to the Administration, but she regretted that, in the images most had seen of her, she was frozen in a moment of anger. "I want to be presentable all the time," she told me. "I don't want people to see me in the light of having to be like that."

In October, during oral arguments, McIver's legal team had tried to get the judge to dismiss the charges, on the grounds that the Justice Department

had engaged in “selective” and “vindictive” prosecution and that she had legislative immunity. “It is all about politics and partisanship,” McIver’s lawyers had written in their brief. During the hearing, McIver, who had never been to court before, looked slightly stunned; afterward, on the courtroom steps, she addressed a crowd of supporters, while her mother, her husband, and two of her sisters stood nearby. “I want to be clear to everyone,” she said. “This process has not stopped me from doing my job.” Three weeks later, the judge rejected her legal team’s arguments, allowing the case to go to trial.

Knowing what she knows now, McIver said, she would still have gone to Delaney Hall in May. But she allowed that “maybe I should not have been so vocal there. Maybe I should have, you know, shut my ass up, not been yelling and telling them how they were wrong.” She noted that Watson Coleman, who’d stood next to her during the altercation, hadn’t been charged with impeding the agents. One explanation was that Watson Coleman, at eighty, wasn’t as imposing. But she’d also been more measured than McIver. “Is it because she wasn’t as loud as me?” McIver said. “Like, she didn’t use as many curse words?” McIver told me that, when such doubts creep in, she tells herself, “You were supposed to be there. You were supposed to go there.”

McIver and her legal team are appealing the judge’s ruling, arguing that her case for legislative immunity should carry more weight. There are compelling legal arguments for this. Josh Chafetz, a professor at Georgetown Law, told me, “Oversight of *ICE* would include monitoring their conduct outside the gates of Delaney Hall when they tried to arrest the Mayor.” McIver noted that the agent who pushed her on May 9th “knew who we were. We were just in there.” She went on, “The only reason we were outside the fucking gate is because they would not give us a tour.”

As a Black woman, she felt that the suggestion that she hadn’t been doing her job in May was like being told she didn’t deserve the job. “It brought me back to a different time, a time before the civil-rights movement,” she said. “It was racism. It was lack of respect.” (The morning of the incident, the agent who shoved McIver “used a racial slur to refer to African Americans” in a text message sent to the other agents at the facility,

according to a recent court filing by McIver's lawyers, who've seen the messages; for now the texts are under seal by the district court.)

Legislative immunity was also important to her because, without it, the Administration could punish her even in the absence of a trial. Her campaign was running out of money; the government's prosecutorial resources were infinite. "It's all about tearing down a Democratic member of Congress," she said. "It's about embarrassing, bullying, intimidating so that everyone can watch." McIver began to tear up. "They probably thought, No one's gonna fucking pay attention to her. This is great. Let's use her as an example."

Two weeks later, *ICE* announced that Jean Wilson Brutus, a forty-one-year-old Haitian detained at Delaney Hall, had died while in custody. In a press release, the government called his cause of death "a medical emergency." He was one of thirty-two people who died in *ICE* custody in 2025, making it the deadliest year in more than two decades for immigrants in detention.

McIver called me a few nights later, sounding both outraged and resolved. The next morning, she told me, she was planning on returning to Delaney Hall, joined by Menendez and Yvette Clarke, the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus. This time, McIver had alerted *ICE* in advance, though she was not required to do so; in mid-December, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., ruled in favor of the congressional Democrats who had sued the agency, finding that *ICE* couldn't block unannounced visits. (On January 8th, the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, disregarding the ruling, banned such visits once again.) "My thing is not to hate these people," McIver said. "I want to have a working relationship."

The morning of December 23rd was cold and raw. An early snow had turned to rain and sleet by nine o'clock, when McIver arrived at Delaney Hall, in a black Suburban. A small group of protesters and journalists stood out front, but none of them seemed to notice her. The Suburban rolled up to the gate, where a GEO employee waved her inside. She emerged, three hours later, with Menendez and Clarke, for a press conference—an uncanny parallel to the visit in May.

Afterward, I rode with her back to her office in Newark. The officials at the jail wouldn't address Brutus's death, but McIver and the others had been able to interview about twenty detainees. "When we told them about the man who died, they didn't even know," she said. One of them started to cry. A Venezuelan woman told McIver that, weeks before, out of desperation to leave U.S. custody, she'd signed a so-called voluntary-departure order. Inexplicably, she'd been transferred to another facility, in Louisiana, then returned to Delaney Hall.

McIver's fiery, sometimes combative public persona was gone; in its place was the heavy-lidded look of someone overwhelmed by what she'd just witnessed. "The one thing, in addition to sadness and depression and disappointment, was the whole idea that all of these people were Black and brown," she said. "I didn't go talk to anybody from Europe." She met a family from Toms River, New Jersey—a mother, son, and daughter who'd been living in the U.S. for twelve years when they were arrested by *ICE*. The daughter, who'd recently turned eighteen, was a senior in high school. A Nigerian man inside was married to a member of the U.S. Navy. Many of the detainees she spoke with had valid work authorizations, but they'd been apprehended anyway, after showing up for seemingly routine appointments at immigration court.

When I asked McIver about her *ICE* chaperon inside the jail, her usual sharpness returned. He had chided her and the other lawmakers for showing up late. "We're members of Congress," she told me. "We're approving a budget for you to be employed. But you're talking to us like we work for you." She sighed. "That was the behavior we got. But, once again, I was expecting that, so I told the man, 'Have a Merry Christmas.' " ♦

Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," received the Hillman Prize and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award in 2025.

Takes

- **Vinson Cunningham on Barry Blitt's Obama "Fist Bump" Cover**
  Here's one big risk a public satirist of racism takes: by displaying tropes and crude imagery, he reveals just how well he knows and can deploy them himself.

Takes

Vinson Cunningham on Barry Blitt's Obama "Fist Bump" Cover

***By** Vinson Cunningham*

January 18, 2026

"The Politics of Fear," July 21, 2008

***New Takes on the classics.** Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.*

I was in a yellow cab in high summer when I saw it. Twenty-three at the time, I sometimes skimmed articles about politics on my clunky BlackBerry while cruising through Central Park to my first real job, fund-raising for Barack Obama's 2008 Presidential campaign. Usually, the ride was placid. This time, I opened a link to an article in *Politico* (still an upstart outlet at the time) about a quickly growing controversy. Apparently, the latest cover of *The New Yorker* was a doozy.

Barry Blitt's already infamous illustration, which graced the July 21st issue, shows Barack and Michelle Obama in the Oval Office. The rug in the room, flat and ornate as a coin, looks proper to its setting. So does an insouciantly

drawn old chair. But look at the Obamas! Instead of their customary J. Crew-ish Presidential attire—thin lapels, a sleeveless dress—the charismatic couple are outfitted in clothes that look like the loose parts of one big racist joke. The presumptive Democratic nominee wears a white thawb and sandals, and the future First Lady appears in the clichéd garb of an outdated Black radical: black shirt, camo pants, a rifle slung across her back. He wears a turban shaped like the Guggenheim; she's got a scribbled-in Afro. Her face looks cruelly joyful while his is impossible to read. In the fireplace, an American flag is being eaten by flames. Osama bin Laden's face sneers from a portrait on the wall. The couple bump their knuckles together, a reference to a recent bout of hysteria over an identical real-life gesture, sparked by a Fox News host who referred to it as a "terrorist fist jab." It's an image tightly packed with complex meanings, to say the least.

Nearly two decades later, it can be hard to remember just how flagrantly racist the rhetoric against the Obamas often was. During the primaries, Hillary Clinton's aide Mark Penn spent a whole TV interview testing how many times he could smoosh the words "cocaine" and "Obama" together. Right-wingers insisted not only that Obama had been born outside the United States but that he'd been educated at a Muslim "madrassa." Michelle Obama's throwaway comment about not having felt fully "proud" of her country until recently was pilloried as if she had cried, "Kill Whitey!" Speaking of "Whitey," someone started a spurious rumor that she'd been recorded using the word.

Blitt's cover was, at heart, a work of media criticism, aimed at this latticework of horseshit. Here's one big risk a public satirist of racism takes: by displaying a panoply of tropes and crude imagery, he reveals just how well he knows and can deploy them himself. It's a generous act: assuring the rest of us—just as fixated on and poisoned by this stuff, whether we acknowledge it or not—that someone else is weighed down by this, too.

Once I got to the office, I found out a lot of people were furious. Or at least they acted that way. One strain of the uproar had a touch of blithe condescension: there were people out there who wouldn't get the joke, and who would take the cover as a straightforward assertion by *The New Yorker* —of all the joints in the world—regarding the attitudes and ideologies of

the Obamas. Another strain, somewhat more reasonable, still rang of a prudish fear of images to which I have never been able to relate: to reproduce this imagery, for any reason at all, some said, was to add to its total volume and, over time, to augment its dark power.

I'll admit, I laughed in the cab. I still do when I see the cover now. I regard it as important evidence of the darker edges of a promising moment, a portrait of a nation that too often sees cartoons when confronted with flesh and blood. ♦

Vinson Cunningham is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His début novel is "Great Expectations."

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Ask Xander & Mariluisa**
  Relationship advice from the internet: on Friday Afternoon Sex Clubs, adoption, and synchronized waterskiing.

Shouts & Murmurs

Ask Xander & Mariluisa

By ***Michael J. Arlen***

January 19, 2026

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

(Still more advice from the internet.)

Dear Xander and Mariluisa,

Thanks to a recent promotion, my wife and I have moved from a completely ungated community where everyone was sad and angry because of the lack of gates to a fully gated community where the residents have been totally warmhearted and welcoming, inviting us to join in their many activities, including the Friday Afternoon Sex Club, an ironic title seeing that the club meets every afternoon except Friday. The trouble is that my wife suffers from Mandelbaum's condition, which causes her to throw up when having sex, which, in the normal course of things, we "work around," either by not having sex, or by having it but pretending that we're not, or by wearing those plastic rain ponchos from Costco. My wife, who tends to trust people perhaps too easily, thinks we should tell everyone, or at least Mr. Lesseps de Lesseps, the Friday Afternoon Sex Club's coördinator, about

her situation. I am not so sure. When I was a youngster, I had bad experiences with rich people chasing us with trained ferrets.

—*“Derek”*

Dear Derek, Big hi from Mariluisa. Just askin’, but were the ferrets trained only to chase, or to do other stuff? Balance things on their noses? Could be cute. But, seriously, Mandelbaum’s condition is very well known. President Harding’s second wife had it. So did Mrs. James Joyce(!). And Mozart’s acrobat brother. Yes, it afflicts both genders, and, of course, all the genders in between both genders. Serious condition, not to be taken lightly or to be laughed at, although of course everyone does both. Way of the world.

Hey, “Derek,” Xander here. Ever think about upgrading from Costco to Nordstrom? Could make all the difference. I’m wearing mine right now.

Dear Xander & Mariluisa,

J and I have been in a relationship for two months, well, almost three, and we agree on most things—Grubhub over DoorDash, Hector Pinata over MK4, no eating condiments during sex. Now J wants us to adopt a child, he says, to deepen the relationship. J read somewhere that adopted children work out better than the other kind, because, when you adopt a child, it comes with all sorts of documents, like a warranty. Especially a kid from a war zone. J says kids from a war zone are also bound to be grateful, so even if you’re not “perfect” as a parent, if you miss a few tricks—say, you go out for stir-fry and end up on a container ship bound for Singapore—the adopted kid is not going to give you a hard time. So my question is: Do we adopt one? Or go for a whole set, so they can take care of one another? Did I say that J can make frog noises that sound like a real frog, something kids are bound to get a kick out of?

—*Eulalie*

Hey, Eulalie. Xander here. I wish more young people had a desire to deepen their relationships, instead of going off half cocked to an all-night grouting party and coming home with someone they think is partner material but is actually the cleaning lady or a blood relative. But let me ask a question.

There are war zones, and there are war zones. I mean, there are places where bombs are still being dropped and flames being thrown. Horrible. But I keep hearing about drones and invisible robot warriors and computers fighting other computers, so I'm thinking that there must be plenty of war zones now where nothing much is going on, so a kid growing up there is maybe not going to be too grateful for being uprooted and sent to Cleveland. Know what I mean?

Dear Xander & Mariluisa,

My husband comes from a super-rich family. Big house on the lake. Speedboat. Every afternoon, all the other wives go waterskiing, sometimes on one ski, all in a row, with their other legs raised high like Rockettes, except on water. My parents came from Bosnia, where waterskiing was a punishable offense. Somebody would water-ski and never be heard from again. So naturally I don't know how to do it and have to sit on the veranda in the afternoon with all the old aunties, watching the wives sweep up and down the lake, all in a row, smiling to beat the band. "Oh, so cute," one of the aunties will exclaim. "Like in the newsreels." "What's a newsreel?" one of the younger aunties will ask. And so it goes. I have asked my husband, Tim, either to teach me how to water-ski or to take us somewhere else for vacation. "Like Bosnia?" he will say. Tim says we need to take our vacations in the big house, so Popsy can receive the love that keeps him young in spirit, though Popsy hasn't talked in two years. How can I get Tim to make some changes? In Bosnia, they have a saying: "Where the tree grows, the magpies fly." Maybe that's where to begin?

—*Larissa*

Mariluisa writing: Hi, Larissa, I am bowled over by your free spirit, and also by your love of synchronous waterskiing, which looks a lot easier to do than it actually is. And try holding that smile over two miles of choppy water in Galveston Bay. "Where the tree grows, the magpies fly." Seems to say it all. ♦

Michael J. Arlen was on staff at The New Yorker from 1957 to 1990, and a television critic at the magazine for twenty years. His books include "Exiles," a finalist for the National Book Award, and "Passage to Ararat," which won the National Book Award. Both books were first published in the magazine.

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Fiction

- **“Light Secrets”**
  Everyone’s done something good that’s hidden—the opposite of a dark secret.

Fiction

Light Secrets

By **Joseph O’Neill**

January 18, 2026

Photograph by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

My friend P. and I agree to have lunch at a restaurant equidistant from our respective homes. A nasty rumor about P. has reached my ears. I'm not going to mention it to P., of course. That would be hurtful. But the rumor prompted me to instigate the lunch, out of a solidarity that cannot be revealed.

P. turns up in what looks like a safari suit.

Everyone's deep into their forties these days and getting touchier by the minute. I must choose my words carefully. "Looking sharp," I say.

"Pants, jacket, the whole thing—twelve bucks," P. says.

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

A thrift store has recently opened in his neighborhood. Everything there fits him. He's an XL and everything in the store is XL. "I realized something," P. says. "Everyone dies when they're XL. It's the size of death. And now it's my size."

We laugh.

The food, when it comes, is excellent.

P. says, "I ran into your friend Simon Morgan."

"I don't know any Simon Morgan."

"Well, he knows you. He sends his regards."

"Mysterious," I say, although it's not really a mystery: Simon Morgan is almost certainly some kind of friendly acquaintance. The problem is my very poor memory, which is worsened by stress, which I have recently felt under a lot of. I'm dating again—dating, as in eating meals with and being interrogated by women I don't know—and at the same time I'm going through a job-application process that involves a background check, which itself involves giving my fingerprints and listing every address I've ever had and, most strange and sinister of all, stating every name and alias I've ever used. I ask P., "What do these people think they're going to find out?"

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Joseph O'Neill read "Light Secrets."

P. says, "Everybody's got something to hide. Everybody." He wears his usual gloomy face. With no lessening of the gloom, he says, "But you know what else is true? Everybody's done something good that's hidden—the opposite of a dark secret."

"A light secret," I suggest.

"Precisely," P. says.

"Like an anonymous donation?"

P. shrugs. "It could be a lot more interesting than that."

"Can you give me an example? One of yours?"

"You want me to tell you a light secret? I can't do that. It's a secret."

I would laugh except that P. isn't joking. I say, "I'd tell you one of mine, but I can't think of any." I'm not joking, either.

"Everybody's got a light secret. Everybody."

This is a wonderful thought, and I believe that it reveals P.'s benign essence. Having lunch with him is exactly the kind of thing I've decided to do more of. It is a matter of self-care in dark times. I want to socialize more intentionally and discriminately. I want to surround myself with only the wisest and most admirable friends, people whose kindness and good sense are not in question, people with a strong awareness of their lucky stars, witty people, people who like being alive. I know a good number of such people—fine souls. New York is a dirty, untranquil city, but it has a large population of fine souls. What is a fine soul? That is a nice question. It certainly doesn't mean someone who has never entertained a black thought or someone who has never erred as P. is rumored to have erred.

We split the chocolate ice cream fifty-fifty, then decide to walk it off. But walk it off in which direction? I live uptown, P. lives downtown.

“Why don’t we head downtown,” I suggest.

With a little nod, P. agrees. We set off.

Tenth Avenue is hot, hot, hot, hot. With his epaulets and breast pockets and jacket belt, P. could be a colonial police inspector. Of course I don’t give voice to this thought. Nor do I say out loud that, with his ruminative air and portly gait, he gives the impression of someone chewing over the contents of a second stomach. Don’t make personal remarks, my father once cautioned me, and I have done my best to comply with that instruction. When (last year) P. told me that he was suffering from “burnout,” it was on the tip of my tongue to ask him, without malice I hope, if “burnout” was a new, maybe more dignified way of saying “nervous breakdown.” But I remembered my father, and I confined myself to repeating after him, Burnout? Inexplicably, this simple echo upset P., who responded, Yes, *burnout*, is that a problem?

The point being that not giving offense isn’t easy, even with the best will in the world. Despite my failing memory, I suffer more and more often from excruciating flashbacks in which I relive moments when I said or did something foolish. The worst, most haunting kind of foolishness is unkindness.

(When I looked into it, I learned that “burnout” is not synonymous with “nervous breakdown,” a term that has fallen into disfavor. A nervous breakdown is a mental-health crisis with a variety of possible causes. Burnout, typically, is a state of dysfunctional exhaustion that results from overwork or from shouldering too many responsibilities for too long. P.’s burnout was presumably atypical.)

Tropical Clouseau P. suddenly stops. “I’m feeling sick,” he says. He puts a hand on his stomach.

We’re standing in front of a deli. “Let’s get you some water,” I say.

I buy P. a bottle of water. He takes a couple of sips.

The deli is filled with cool air and has a little window counter with barstools. P. and I take seats.

“Drink more,” I tell him. “Drink all of it.”

He does as I say. Then I buy him a second bottle and get one for myself, too.

Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

We sit next to each other, rehydrating. Since we’re in a deli and not in a restaurant, I permit myself a glance at my phone. There is no trace in my communications history of anyone named Simon Morgan.

One New Yorker after another walks past the window. I’ve lived in this city for a quarter century, and I fear that I am falling out of love with it. But this is a nice moment.

“See that?” P. says. I did see: in front of our noses, a car has quickly and perfectly reversed into a tight parking spot. “That’s a light secret.”

I say, “Parking skillfully?” The driver has gotten out of the car and is looking for something in her pocket. Now she disappears from view. Who is she? Where is she bound? “I thought it was about secretly doing good,” I

say. “You know—like a mitzvah, but on the down-low. Schindler. The Scarlet Pimpernel.”

P. shakes his head. “It’s anything that’s admirable,” he says. “Anything that would make people think better of you.”

He has finished his second bottle of water. “I’ll walk you home,” I say. When he protests that it’s out of my way, I insist.

We part company at the corner of his block. “You helped me out today,” P. says. “You’re a good friend.”

Am I, though? What P. doesn’t know, because I have kept it from him, is that a fingerprinting outfit is located a mere stroll away and I planned to go there even before I suggested lunch. In other words, even as I was apparently thoughtfully accommodating P. by walking him home, in secret fact I was not going out of my way for his benefit. It makes me feel bad. I have failed to act with the *uberrima fides* expected by good friends and insurance companies.

Superior Hand Analytics is an authorized fingerprint taker. Its premises are in Suite 914 of one of those beautiful midtown loft buildings filled with miscellaneous little enterprises and crazy people. I once had a financial adviser who worked in one of those buildings, about whom it was whispered that he had murdered his wife. When I arrive at Suite 914, I am met by a desk, two chairs, and a filing cabinet. It looks like a thoroughly temporary setup—one of those sublets granted for the duration of a lacuna in the lease. Then, from a partitioned area behind yonder photocopying machine, the hand analyst materializes.

She accepts my paperwork and bids me sit down. She takes hold of my left hand. Starting with the thumb, she seizes my fingers one by one and presses them, with a little side-to-side rocking motion, into the ink pad, repeating the process with the fingerprint sheet. She has a firm, kind, thrilling touch. Who is she? What is her story? What path has she taken, what seas has she sailed to be here with me, holding my hand?

“Can I ask how you got into this business?” I ask.

She presses my little finger onto the paper. “Army.”

Army? Interesting!

“Mm,” she says. She points at the paper. “See? You got no good prints there.”

“I don’t have fingerprints?”

“You got poorly defined prints. It happens. The ridges wear out. We see it with nurses—always scrubbing up. You a nurse?”

Either she’s mocking me or she’s curious. “A nurse? No, I’m not a nurse.” I tell her, very generally, about the work I do.

The hand analyst grips my hand some more, authoritatively. I’m sure she made sergeant. I’m sure she is a fine soul. She says, “That work make you wash your hands a lot?”

“No,” I confess. However—I decide not to tell her this—I am a diligent hand washer. I don’t hesitate to use a little wooden nail brush on my fingertips. Is that strange? Am I an outlier?

She tells me not to worry, it’s all going to be O.K., the F.B.I.’s going to have plenty to work with. My face must have expressed something, because now she’s saying, “That’s where the prints go—Federal Bureau of Investigation. You didn’t know that?” She rerolls one of my problematic fingers in the ink, blackening it even more intensely. “Yes, sir—eff, bee, eye.”

When she’s done making prints, she takes each darkened finger in turn and repeatedly yanks on it with a towelette. Very soon, my hands are clean and she must let go of them, and there is nothing to be done.

T hat night, I have a dinner date with my friends Fred and Sejal at their home, in Brooklyn. I drive across the Triborough Bridge in the bright early evening, and soon after I catch full sight of summery Manhattan Island, its newest, tallest towers rising as if from a meadow. It is beautiful to behold, even in dark times.

I arrive a little early. What's his name, the son, whom I have known since he was a baby, now transformed into a long-limbed high schooler, thunders downstairs to answer the door. Sejal is covering the table with a cotton sheet brightly patterned with orange-and-yellow circle segments. "It'll be cheerful," Sejal says. "Or is it too wrinkled?"

Fred says, "Too wrinkled? Nobody cares about wrinkles anymore."

He is cooking Norwegian halibut with green olives and calamondins. Calamondins, he teaches me, are a small, sour citrus fruit. They have recently appeared on the little calamondin tree that grows in the pot outside the front door. You remove the seeds, roast the orange globes atop the fish, then eat them, peel and all. Fred says, "I *hope* you guys will like it—but I'm not going to *stress* about it. That would be meaningless stress. I don't do meaningless stress. Not anymore."

"What," I ask, "would be meaningful stress?"

"Meaningful stress," Fred says, "is when you're digging children out of the rubble." He gives me a hug of welcome.

Boy, it feels good—the hug, the home, the hope. I want more of it. I want to see more of fortunate people—men and women with strong marriages and functional children and healthy parents and happy lives.

The sound of laughter reaches us. It's Werner and Nicky. "I'll get it," I say.

When I open the front door, the racket of a helicopter suddenly fills the air. It is at once terrifically loud and invisible, as if made by a god. The three of us stand on the stoop, looking skyward.

Sejal's voice says, "Come in, come in, I'm so sorry, just ignore it, it'll go away." Werner answers her with a hug so powerful that he fractionally lifts her off her feet.

"O.K.," Sejal says, and laughs, then double-locks the front door.

As Fred is serving drinks, a deep physical vibration passes through the house. “It must be right above us,” he says, going to the rear window. He peers out. “Who knows what they’re looking for this time.” He locks the back door. “Now it’s moving away.”

It’s true: the chopper is less audible.

It is my duty, I feel, to lighten things up. “I almost fell in love today,” I declare. Naturally, everyone is curious. I describe my visit to the hand analyst and tell of how she carefully held my hand.

“That’s such a lonely story,” Sejal says.

“You gave your fingerprints to the F.B.I.? Are you out of your mind?”

The person saying this is Werner. He and I are acquainted, sure, but I wouldn’t say we’re friends. We’ve met only at dinners hosted by Sejal and Fred, who got to know Nicky and Werner because they and their children were in a *COVID* pod together in Montauk. I, who was getting divorced at the time, was in a heavenly pod of one.

“It’s just routine,” I tell Werner. “You know—criminal record, identity history . . .”

Werner says, “Identity history? Who has an identity history? What does that even mean? What are we doing here?”

The chopper is back, louder than ever.

“Hey, guys.” It’s Fred, who has been peering out of the front window. “Get over here. There’s something you need to see.”

We all inspect the street for something untoward.

“I don’t get it,” Nicky says.

“Our cars!” Fred shouts. “Look at them! All parked in a row! Right in front of the house!”

We laugh. “Oh, Fred, you’re so funny,” Nicky says. Fred notoriously claims that his block, on which cars are parked diagonally to the curb, like police cars outside a police station, is the best block for parking in New York.

Of course, all this puts me in mind of P. and his crazy theory of the unacknowledged parallel parker. When we are seated and eating Fred’s (delicious) halibut, I make a second announcement: “I had lunch with P. today.”

“How is poor P.?” Sejal asks.

“Why ‘poor’ P.?” Fred asks Sejal.

Werner says, “Is this the P. who . . . ?”

Fred says, “Yup.”

“And you had *lunch* with him?” Nicky says.

I look around the table. “We go way back,” I say.

“Did he say anything to you?” Nicky demands.

“If you mean—no, he didn’t. It didn’t come up. Why would it?”

“Because you ‘go way back,’ ” Nicky says, actually making quote signs.

The house is shaking. Red flashes and white flashes of electric light enter from the twilit street. “Now what?” Fred shouts.

Everyone follows him toward the lights and the noise. “Stay inside,” Fred sharply tells his son, who has joined us. And there, visible at last, is the glittering police helicopter, hovering above the street, then banking out of sight. While the others stay at the front window, discussing what they can and can’t see and what may or may not be afoot, I drift away. I want to keep my distance from Nicky. Why was she so rude to me? Is P. her foe? Am I her foe, too, on account of my lunch with P.? Is it possible that during our very occasional dealings I once hurt her feelings? Did the hand-analyst story bother her?

Who knows. Who cares. Human society suddenly feels overwhelmingly trivial and stupid and not worth the trouble.

There are two boys in the back yard. I see them clearly enough from my vantage point at the rear window. They are crouched under the metal staircase that leads down to the garden from the floor we're on, the parlor floor. The boys are in their mid-teens, I'd guess. They are trying to hide among the gardening equipment. The bigger one is holding the shoulders of the smaller one, whose hands cover his own ears. Both look terrified.

Fred approaches me. "See anything out there?"

I shake my head.

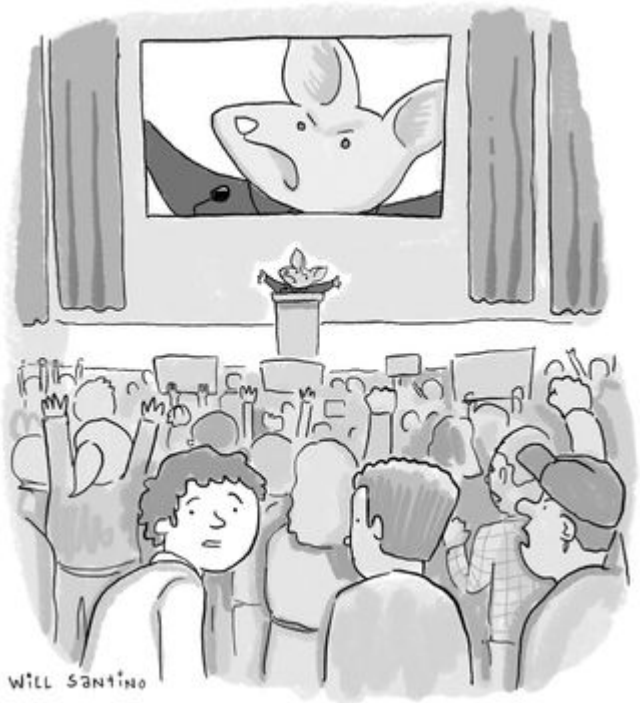
The helicopter roar subsides. Everyone returns to the halibut.

Werner speaks up. "You want to talk about parking? Here's something that really shook me." When he's satisfied he has our full attention, he goes on, "So I'm at this function thing, talking to these guys—reinsurance guys. You know what one of them says? On his block, which is in Brooklyn, on his block, people have started not moving their cars on street-cleaning days. They're just leaving the cars on the street."

"Why would they do that?" Sejal asks.

"Why? Because it's easier to pay the sixty-five-dollar parking ticket."

"Where is this block?" Fred asks. "I'm going with Cobble Hill."



“Do you think I shouldn’t have given him that cookie?”
Cartoon by Will Santino

“Carroll Gardens,” I say.

Werner says, “That’s not relevant. The block is not relevant.” He seems upset. “Do we not get that? I’m not talking about parking. I’m not talking about street cleaning. I’m talking about the implications. Do I have to spell out the implications?” He is looking squarely at me, as if I’m the one whose grasp of the implications is in doubt.

The table is quiet, and then Sejal laughs and says gently, “I think we get the implications, Werner.”

Werner says, “I’m sorry, I get worked up much too easily, this country is driving me out of my mind, I didn’t mean to raise my voice, poor Nicky has to put up with it, it’s, it’s . . .” He seems to be choking.

“No need to apologize,” Fred says. “Are you crazy? We’re all in the same boat here.”

I am nodding in agreement—but Werner’s outburst, like his wife’s, was made in a spirit of hostility, with me as the object. Why me I don’t know

and don’t care. As far as I’m concerned, the final nail has been hammered into this dinner’s coffin. When the conversation moves on, I privately go my own way. I eat another portion of fish and I drink another glass of wine and I smile, but otherwise I keep my mouth shut. I have not driven across multiple boroughs to be harangued. I leave at the earliest opportunity that’s consistent with not giving offense to my hosts.

Night has fallen. When the dashboard welcomes me with its merry multicolored constellation, I feel halfway home. When I am really halfway home, I remember the two young fugitives. How could they have slipped my mind? They are out there somewhere, enjoying the cover of darkness. Good luck to them!

Three weeks later, I learn that P., who is forty-seven years old, has been dead for several days.

My mother once foretold that I would find happiness with a foreign woman. When I asked why, she replied that a foreign woman was more likely to appreciate my traits. My traits? I said. She didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t inquire further. Let sleeping dogs lie.

At any rate: this is my first-ever date with a foreigner. Sometimes I have trouble committing a person’s name to memory, but in this case I am helped by a rhyme. My date is named Martina, and she is from Argentina.

We meet at a tapas bar in Chelsea. She has long dark hair and flashing, kind eyes. We eat *croquetas* and *chorizo al vino* and *calamares fritos,* and we drink Rioja. It is hard to believe that this woman, so balanced and open-minded and uninjured by life, could be single. How interesting to learn about the discothèques of Buenos Aires! How pleasant to reminisce about my childhood in Sacramento! What a happy respite from the dark times! Things go so well that I confide in my companion. The confidence is as follows: I believe that she, Martina, is a fine soul. Martina smiles—whether out of amusement or gratification or embarrassment, I cannot tell. What is a fine soul? she asks. Can you give me an example? By way of an answer, to my own surprise, I talk about P., beginning by explaining that his name was Paolo, but he liked to be called ‘P.’ And suddenly I’m turning my head away

from her and drying my eyes with a cocktail napkin and laughing apologetically.

Am I dreaming, or did Martina place her hand on my hand, fleetingly?

I share with her that my old friend P. died alone in his apartment, from natural causes, according to an announcement his family made on P.'s Instagram page, never offering more particulars, which for some reason I found painful; that last Friday I went to his funeral service, organized by P.'s aunt, at a funeral home in New Jersey; that it was a strange and sad affair from my point of view, because the family, which was totally unprepared for the whole business and still in shock, had let it be known that all of P.'s friends were welcome to attend the service, but in the end, other than myself, only two nonfamily people turned up, neither of whom I recognized, not even the guy who shook my hand and said, with a mysterious air of significance, Long time, no see; and that moreover P.'s family, which hails from Maine, was represented at the service only by the aunt and her four daughters and various plus-ones, out of all of whom the aunt seemingly was the only one with any personal knowledge of P., and even then, as her brief eulogy revealed, she recalled him only as an only child in Maine, splashing around on the sand beach in a little yellow sun hat, on Fortunes Rocks Beach, to be exact, and not as an adult in New York, which was why she, the aunt, invited those present, "who I'm sure got to know Paolo much better than I ever did," to offer their memories of P., whereupon none of us spoke up, in my case because I simply could not recall in anecdotal detail the numerous what-ought-to-have-been rememberable times that P. and I had shared from college days onward, all of it was a fog, I tell Martina, except in one important regard, namely, my heart was not a fog, my heart clearly and truly contained my affection and I guess love for P., but of course this fact about my heart was too solipsistic to mention at P.'s funeral, at which the only truly specific thing about my deceased friend that came to my mind was that he and I had blissfully smoked thousands of cigarettes together as young men, which was another inappropriate fact, in the circumstances, needless to say.

Martina says, "Why so few friends came?"

P., I explain, was funny and thoughtful, always noticing this and that, always good company, a cultured person, always going to movies and art galleries and restaurants, always popular—until the last months of his life, when an ugly rumor cast a shadow over him, a rumor that I would not repeat to Martina, not only out of respect for P.'s memory but also out of my general distaste for ugly rumors, a rumor that naturally caused P. to suffer what must have been a very painful loss of reputation and undoubtedly turned people against him, even in death.

"That is a sad story," Martina says.

"It is." I'm tempted to add, *The good that men do is oft interred with their bones*, but I think that would be stretching it, bearing in mind this is a first date, and in any case I'm not sure I've got the quote right. "But to go back to your question," I say, cheerfully, "let me give you an example of why P. was a fine soul." This is when I mention P.'s concept of the secret that is the antithesis of the shameful hidden fact, the secret that nobody looks for, the secret whose existence is itself a secret: the light secret. Martina listens and smiles.

Soon it is time to leave. While my date briefly absents herself, I take care of the check—for once, I feel flush, I've started my new job—and then she and I step out into the brilliance and kinesis of a timeless, darkless New York night. New York! I suddenly feel very fortunate, and I would like my hand to hold Martina's. Instead, at her request, I use it—my hand, that is, not Martina's—to hail her a cab.

She doesn't answer my follow-up text. Or the text after that. My traits have not travelled.

My practice is to direct unidentified calls to voice mail and to listen to voice messages once a week. Days can pass, in other words, between the receipt of an unidentified call and the moment I listen to the message left by the caller.

This is what happens in the case of a caller with a New York area code who phones twice and, after the second call, leaves a message. Four days go by before I listen to it:

> Hey there—it's Simon, Simon Morgan. It was good to see you at P.'s funeral. You know, it was P. who gave me your number. Anyway. Um, there's something I'd like to discuss with you, if I could. A personal thing. Sounds a little weird, I know. But there's something I'd like to straighten out. If that's O.K. with you. Maybe we could grab a coffee or something? Let me know. Thanks.

I call Sejal. She says, "Yes, that is weird."

"He wants to straighten things out? What things? What does he mean, 'straighten out?' "

"Mm," Sejal says.

"I'm telling you, I don't know the guy. And there's zero trace of him online. Is Simon Morgan even a real person?"

"Look, just ignore him. If he starts harassing you, then it's a different story. But for now do nothing. Don't even answer him."

"It's stressful," I say.

"It must be," Sejal says. "Are you O.K.?"

I don't have to say anything about my ongoing financial difficulties. She knows the score. "Honestly," I say, "I might be close to burnout."

About a month later, a handwritten letter arrives in the mail. It's from Simon Morgan. How did he get my address? I'm frightened, as if a ghost has written me.

The letter begins,

> I hope you'll forgive this intrusion. But there is something I feel I must say to you.

The rest I scan quickly.

It boils down to this: Simon Morgan is a self-described “addict.” As part of his recovery program, he has vowed to make amends for the harm he has caused others. To this end, he wants to remind me of the help I gave him back in the day, help that I offered with a pure heart, help that, until now, he has never acknowledged or thanked me for. Enclosed is a check for two hundred dollars, which is the amount I loaned him all those years ago and never requested repayment for.

I don’t cash the check. How could I? I don’t remember him. When Sejal asks me whatever happened to Simon Morgan, I represent to her that I never heard from him again and that Simon Morgan, if that’s his name, must have got me mixed up with someone else. ♦

Joseph O’Neill is the author of “Godwin,” a finalist for the 2024 National Book Critics Circle Award.

The Critics

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A Critic at Large

When Bernie Sanders Headed for the Hills

Early in his life, Sanders left the streets of Brooklyn for the woodlands of Vermont. What did the man bring to the state—and what did the state bring to the man?

By Jill Lepore

January 19, 2026

Sanders arrived in Vermont before the New Leftists did in the sixties, and he stayed after they left. He found his strongest support not with the draft dodgers and the hippies but with the working poor.Illustration by Shepard Fairey; Source photograph by Hal Yeager / Stringer / Getty

Bernie Sanders was just a skinny, gap-toothed kid from Brooklyn in the autumn of 1953, when Vermont opened an information bureau at 1268 Avenue of the Americas, next door to Radio City Music Hall. The Green Mountains beckoned! Under a shop sign that read "*VERMONT*," a wide storefront window exhibited seasonal dioramas that trapped pedestrians like chipmunks in a sap bucket. Inside, you could find out about snow

conditions and fishing holes, inspect a woodstove, get advice about the best time to go leaf-peeping, pick up a train schedule, and buy a jug of maple syrup. A year after the center opened, Alfred Hitchcock went to Craftsbury, Vermont, to shoot “The Trouble with Harry.” People in that little town, population seven hundred and nine, brought the crew blueberry muffins and found a 1913 Buick for the production to use, on the condition that no one drive it more than forty miles an hour, which is about as fast as anyone could drive on those roads, anyway. The trouble with Harry is that he’s dead, flat on his back on a hill outside town, on a patch of grass carpeted with red-edged golden oak leaves, near a fallen log on a spot with a sweeping view of mountains blue and green and purple and glorious. In an interview with *Vermont Life*, Hitchcock said, “If one has to die, can you think of a more beautiful place to do so than in Vermont in autumn?”

It was in the autumn of the “Trouble with Harry” shoot that Bernie’s brother, Larry, nineteen, brought the thirteen-year-old future mayor of Burlington and two-time Presidential candidate on a subway ride from their three-and-a-half-room, rent-controlled apartment, at 1525 East Twenty-sixth Street, Brooklyn, where they took turns sleeping on a bed in the hallway (versus the couch), to Rockefeller Center. Wandering around, they stopped at Vermont, the bureau, and returned home with a brochure titled “Vermont Farms and Summer Homes for Sale.” Somehow, miraculously, Bernie Sanders would eventually own one such property, a stretch of woods in the tiny town of Middlesex, population seven hundred and seventy. “This brook is my brook!” he said, and “This tree is my tree!,” even if he didn’t altogether believe in private ownership. (“I am not a capitalist,” he once told the talk-show host Phil Donahue.)

Sanders, now eighty-four, was Vermont's sole representative in the U.S. House from 1991 to 2007, and he has served in the Senate as an Independent from Vermont ever since. He has been a notoriously ineffective legislator, having introduced only three bills between 1991 and 2020 that became law, two of which concerned the names of post offices. Yet he has wielded nearly unrivalled influence over American politics of a quite particular and distinctively local character: in his career as the country's leading progressive populist and the second most successful socialist ever to run for President—beaten only by Eugene Victor Debs, the railman of Terre Haute, Indiana—Sanders has brought to the political stage the view not from the streets of Brooklyn but from the mountains of Vermont, and especially from its biggest city, Burlington, which in 1981, when Sanders was elected mayor by a margin of ten votes, had a population, whopping for Vermont but by any other measure minuscule, of a little under thirty-eight thousand. (It's barely bigger this winter, at forty-five thousand shivering souls.) This past summer, Sanders more or less said that he has no plans to run for President again in 2028. ("Oh, God," he told CNN. "Let's not worry about that.") He has, however, filed papers to run for reëlection to the Senate in 2030, when he'll be eighty-nine, even though there doesn't seem much chance he'll really do that. In short, if it's not quite time to assess the Vermonter's legacy, it's getting close.

Aside from Sanders and Calvin Coolidge—born in Plymouth Notch, in 1872—Vermont hasn't left much of a stamp on American politics, at least nationally. Notionally, well, that's another question. Vermont is for many Americans something of a mythical place, a land out of time, and there's a reason for that: a storybook America, all red barns and covered bridges, black-and-white mottled cows grazing in rolling green pastures, and dried-

apple-faced farmers leaning on pitchforks, is how the place sold itself, beginning not long before those two teen-agers from Brooklyn got off the train in midtown. *Vermont Life*, launched in 1946 to promote tourism in the heady days after the end of the war, when Americans had money in their wallets and gas in their tanks, regularly ran as a full-page ad a photograph of a sugarhouse, steam billowing from its cupola, above a few lines of text:

> Something of the ruggedness of the granite and marble has entered into the veins of the people of Vermont. They do their own thinking; they make their own decisions; they stand by their own convictions with the unyielding tenacity of their eternal hills.
>
> *—Bruce Barton.*

This endorsement appears to have been specifically aimed at New Yorkers, since Barton, a Republican, had represented Manhattan in the U.S. House. Barton helped invent Vermont, even though, as far as I can tell, he never lived there. He wasn't only a politician; he was also, and mainly, an adman, the longtime president of B.B.D.O., the agency that served as a chief inspiration for "Mad Men." His contributions to a Rockwellian vision of America included creating the fictional all-American home cook Betty Crocker. Was Vermont ever really Bruce Barton's Vermont? Rugged and flinty and possessing an unyielding tenacity may be how a lot of Americans would like to see themselves, but in Vermont, a place Coolidge called a "brave little state," what began as an adman's pitch to tourists became something of an official state attitude that, among other things, transformed the landscape, or, rather, it committed the state to preserving the landscape for tourists. Inevitably, the people who have paid the price for that preservation have been the poor and especially poor farmers. Today, you can board Amtrak's Vermonter at Penn Station, heading north, and I promise you'll know when you've crossed the border into that brave and beautiful and hard-luck little state.

Bernie Sanders crossed that border line just about as soon as he was able. His father, Eli, a Polish immigrant, was a travelling paint salesman; his mother, Dorothy Glassberg, born on the Lower East Side, suffered from congenital heart disease. She died in 1960, at the age of forty-seven. Young Bernard Sanders, who had been a high-school track star, watched her die in

a charity hospital of a condition from which she might well have survived if the family had had more money. Two years later, Eli died of an apparent heart attack, having crashed his car outside a hospital emergency room to which he'd tried to drive himself. Sanders vowed to escape New York. He transferred from Brooklyn College to the University of Chicago, where he became a civil-rights activist and a devotee of the somewhat mystical and entirely sex-obsessed Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. After graduating, in 1964, mop-headed, bespectacled, and already famously slovenly, Sanders married, travelled in Europe and Israel, spent time on a kibbutz outside Haifa, and then went to Vermont with his wife. "We had never been to Vermont in our lives," he later said. "We just drove up." For twenty-five hundred dollars, they bought eighty-five mostly wooded acres, where they spent summers cooking on an improvised Sterno rig—old T-shirts stuck into coffee cans—that Sanders's friends called Berno.

Vermont was at a turning point. In 1945, there had been twenty-six thousand family farms in the state. Twenty years later, when Sanders bought that patch of land, fewer than nine thousand farms were left, many families having lost theirs because the price of wool and milk was falling, or because the state had seized their land under eminent domain, to make way for the interstate highway, but also because, with all those skiers and second-home owners, including flatlanders like Sanders, property taxes had gone up, and farmers couldn't afford to pay them. In other states, old farms became suburbs and strip malls, but not in Vermont, where most old farms reverted to forest. (Three-quarters of Vermont was farmland by the eighteen-fifties; three-quarters of the state is now forest.)

Sanders moved to Vermont, year-round and for good, in 1968, when droves of young people from all over the country headed for the hills. Much of the New Left, disillusioned with electoral politics after the fiasco of the Democratic Convention in Chicago, went back to the land. In Vermont, back-to-the-landers bought old hill farms for dirt cheap. By some estimates, a hundred thousand young people moved to Vermont between 1965 and 1975; by another, they set up more than a hundred communes. They kept the state rural, but they changed its politics. They started food co-ops and opened vegetarian restaurants and founded artists' coöperatives and hooked up shortwave radios and published papers like the *Vermont Freeman*, a

twenty-cent newspaper that was something of a radical, countercultural counterpart to *Vermont Life,* and whose editor distributed it out of the back of his VW. Year by year, under the influence of a movement sometimes known as Free Vermont, the stalwartly Republican state, which had voted for Richard Nixon by a wide margin in 1960, tilted further to the left.

Sanders doesn't much like to talk about his early life, or, for that matter, his later life, and he declined to be interviewed by Dan Chiasson for the writer's revelatory new book, "Bernie for Burlington: The Rise of the People's Politician and the Transformation of One American Place" (Knopf), but he left behind plenty of clues in Vermont. Between 1969 and 1974, Sanders contributed dozens of articles to the *Vermont Freeman*. In two pieces from 1969, for instance, he wrote about the wretchedness of city life ("the air is poisonous, the noise deafening, and the streets are dangerous to walk") and the hard lives of such "miserable people" as his father, taking the train from Brooklyn to Manhattan to do "moron work," packed into subway cars with a faceless mob, then taking the train back at night to "family, dinner, arguments, TV and sleep": "The years come and go, suicide, nervous breakdown, cancer, sexual deadness, heart attack, alcoholism, senility at 50. Slow death, fast death. *DEATH*." Like a miller whetting a stone, he readied his axe for grinding. A 1969 front-page teaser for one of Sanders's articles in the *Vermont Freeman* works just as well for all of them: "Bernard Sanders views the ills of our troubled and dying society." And that line could have served equally well as a slogan for his 2016 and 2020 Presidential campaigns.

Sanders, Chiasson argues, considered himself a chronicler of Vermont's transformation in the sixties, reporting that led him to a pained awareness of its economic costs. "I think Vermont has changed terrible since I was a kid," a farmer told Sanders, in an interview published in the *Vermont Freeman* in 1970, a year when one in six Vermonters lived below the poverty line. (Currently, that number is one in ten.) "Vermont was beautiful, beautiful back in them days. And every farmer always paid his bills. He had the money to pay his bills. . . . And now, today, in the State of Vermont, the taxes is driving people right out of the homes that they own."

Sanders had boned up on socialism during his freshman year at Brooklyn College. But it was in the hills of Vermont that he witnessed the ravages of a particular kind of capitalism, saw families suffering in the hills the way his own parents had in the tenements. In 1971, he moved to Burlington and made his first run for the U.S. Senate, representing the Liberty Union, something of a counterculture political party. “I have only one donor, and he drove me here,” he said at a campaign stop, pointing to a friend. He won 2.2 per cent of the vote. That same year—blocks away from Sanders’s Burlington apartment, which wasn’t really an apartment, just a couple of rooms in what had once been a workers’ cottage, behind an abandoned glass factory—Dan Chiasson was born.

“Your cowboy’s shirt is super cute.”
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Chiasson, a poet, a longtime contributor to this magazine, and the chair of the English department at Wellesley, had a front-row seat to Sanders’s rise, and his “Bernie for Burlington” is nearly as much a memoir of its author as it is a biography of its subject and, not least, a history of the Green Mountain State. “It is no small irony that hill farms marketed to well-heeled

city people piqued the interest of a thirteen-year-old Brooklyn Jew and future socialist who would arguably do more to impact Vermont's traditional culture than anyone in the state's history," Chiasson writes, about the day Larry and Bernie stopped at that Vermont bureau and picked up that brochure. It is also no small irony that a boy who grew up in Sanders's Burlington, only to leave it behind, would become its chronicler.

Chiasson's roots in Vermont go back to his great-grandparents, Wilfred and Laura Delorme, French Canadians who met as teen-agers, in 1915, while working in a woollen mill in Winooski, across the river from Burlington. Burlington is so little, and Chiasson's family history runs so deep, that his kin pop up all over the place. Wilfred fought in the First World War and then went back to the looms, but after the mills closed, in 1954, he began working for the state while also tending his farm in South Burlington. In the early sixties, one of Chiasson's grandfathers worked on a crew that blasted a route through the Winooski River Valley to bring Interstate 89 up to Burlington.

That highway, along with Interstate 91, made it easier for the skiers and the second-home owners to get to Vermont from New York and Massachusetts, but highways also risked ruining what had become, after the decline of both manufacturing and farming, the chief source of Vermont's wealth: its natural beauty. In 1968, the state legislature passed what became known as the Billboard Law, banning billboards so that the view from the highway would not be marred, and two years later it enacted Act 250, known as the Postcard Law, strictly regulating development to insure the preservation of the state's *Vermont Life* landscape. In 1978, the legislature passed the Use Value Appraisal Act, which lowered property taxes for owners who agreed to maintain their property for agricultural purposes or forestland. (About a third of all land in the state is now enrolled in the program.) Freezing the landscape in time is what the people of Vermont, and not merely tourists, want, but it's also left residents with a vexed regard for visitors. "Welcome to Vermont," one bumper sticker reads. "Now Go Home."

Vermont's struggle to stay the same—*Vermont Life*-worthy—even as its population and its politics were undergoing a transformation as big as any state experienced in the twentieth century, shaped Sanders's view of what

politics can do and what it can't, and what money can do and what it can't, or ought not to. In the early seventies, when his relationship with the *Vermont Freeman* began to sour, he briefly published his own alternative newsletter, *Movement*. It didn't last long—and published so irregularly that he told subscribers newsletters would appear "when you least expect it"—but it advanced the Liberty Union, which, in 1972, nominated Sanders as its candidate for governor and endorsed Benjamin Spock for President. (More Chiasson-family cameos: when Sanders took a visiting Dr. Spock out for steak, Chiasson's great-uncle Esau was tending the bar.) By 1973, Sanders had settled into campaign rhetoric that would hold him in good stead to the present day. "While Vermonters are paying outrageous prices for gas and heating oil, the oil billionaires are getting even richer," he wrote. More of Vermont's rural poor sold their land. In 1975, when developers were buying up failing farms and building retail shops and restaurants to support ski areas, Chiasson's great-grandfather Wilfred sold his small farm in South Burlington—"for pennies," Chiasson writes.

Sanders, by now a perennial candidate, perfected his craggy, scolding, mitten-waving style. He'd arrived in Vermont before the 1968 New Leftists did, and he stayed after they'd gone. He found his strongest support not with the draft dodgers and the hippies but with the working poor. In 1976, in a bid for the governorship during the U.S. Bicentennial, he complained about corporate ownership of the media: "We should not have a culture where the three major networks are controlled by the Chase Manhattan Bank." (The premise that CBS, NBC, and ABC lacked journalistic integrity in the seventies is unsupportable, but the charge that corporate ownership corrupts the integrity of news organizations is borne out daily.) Tourism, Sanders argued, was having a "devastating impact" on the state's economy. Men and women who'd lost their farms and their factory jobs were working as "chambermaids and burger flippers," while out-of-state developers were getting rich and the skiers at Stowe were driving Porsches and BMWs. Sanders lost in 1976, but he had found his groove.

Sanders soon left the Liberty Union and started the American People's Historical Society, a Howard Zinn-style educational outfit that made filmstrips and documentaries about everyone from Ethan Allen to Eugene V. Debs. The material was every bit as polemical and tendentious as Zinn's

“A People’s History of the United States,” and Sanders distributed it to Vermont public schools in his beat-up Volvo. He was also a bit strapped. In 1978, he was evicted. The next year, he made a documentary film, titled “Poverty in Vermont,” that featured penetrating and compassionate interviews with people who were displaced by Burlington’s ill-considered urban-renewal initiatives and living in a public-housing project called Franklin Square. By the fall of 1980, the Burlington *Free Press* was reporting that Sanders, “the historian and film maker,” was “testing whether he can build a coalition of poor people, blue collar workers and university students” in his race for mayor. It turned out he could. In 1981, he was elected mayor, if not quite the Zohran Mamdani of the Reagan revolution (Mamdani won by two hundred thousand votes, not ten), then at least a sty in the Gipper’s eye.

Dan Chiasson grew up as the son of a struggling single mother. He watched Sanders change Burlington, very much for the better, by supporting small businesses, redeveloping the deserted industrial waterfront into parkland and public space, balancing the budget, bringing minor-league baseball to the city, and expanding affordable housing through a municipal land trust. Sanders also established a new culture of citizen participation and engagement. He had a public-access TV show, “Bernie Speaks with the Community,” in which, mike in hand and dressed like a schlub, he interviewed Burlingtonians, especially kids and senior citizens and even the occasional cocker spaniel. It was a program with all the daffy affability of “This Is Spinal Tap.” Chiasson seems to know just about everyone in old clips from the show. He’s the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon of Burlington. When Michel Foucault came to give a lecture at the University of Vermont, where he was to be introduced by Sanders, the postmodern French philosopher sat on an orange sectional in a lounge where Chiasson’s mother had once recruited students to babysit her son. When Jesse Jackson appeared onstage at U.V.M. with Sanders during Jackson’s 1988 Presidential bid, Chiasson, a high schooler, tried, and failed, to get inside. The next year, Sanders’s last in the mayor’s office, Chiasson headed off to Amherst College. On Election Night in 1990, Chiasson climbed to an upper floor of the Amherst library to catch the radio signal from Brattleboro, where he was able to hear that, unbelievably, the socialist mayor from

Burlington would become Vermont's sole representative in Congress. He writes, with astonished and complicated pride, "My guy won."

Looking back over Sanders's career in Burlington from the middle of the sixties to the end of the eighties, Chiasson argues that "Bernie did, in important respects, change; and Vermont, in troubling ways, did not." I'm not so sure I agree with what's on either side of that semicolon. Sanders has sounded the same for more than half a century, while Vermont has, especially recently, changed a great deal.

The plot of "The Trouble with Harry" turns on the question of who killed the poor man, and, as nearly everyone in town tries to work that out, they bury him and dig him up and bury him and dig him up again and finally strip him naked and stow him in a bathtub. Key elements of the mystery include a dead rabbit, a live frog, a pair of loafers, a rifle, a milk bottle, and a millionaire who comes to town in a chauffeured limousine. You could very plausibly shoot a remake in Vermont today, and it would look just about the same. Still, it's a different place, and differenter every day. Given the housing shortage that's afflicted the whole country, the state, in 2024, revised the Postcard Law to allow for more construction, at least in certain areas. Dairy farming has all but vanished, down from more than four thousand farms in 1969 to fewer than six hundred. Fentanyl has devastated Burlington, and much of the rest of Vermont, too, and the prevailing harm-reduction approach has largely, and often spectacularly, failed. The state, which has seen more deaths than births for years, faces a fast-unfolding demographic crisis. In the past few years, it's suffered disastrous floods owing to climate change; Montpelier, the capital, has been flooded in two of the past three summers.

But Vermont has been buried before, and dug up again, and even brought back to life. Property taxes have risen by an average of forty per cent since 2020, when fugitives made their hopeful escapes from New York and New England, worsening the cycle of rising land values, rising taxes, and bigger bills for longtime locals. Despite the risk of flooding on lower ground, hilly, chilly Vermont is a destination for climate refugees. Other types of farming are replacing dairies. A lot of farmers are growing hops, hoping to make Vermont for beer what the Napa Valley is for wine. The state has about the

best rural broadband program in the country, opening doors for small businesses and digital nomads alike. (Even my own scruffy little hill got hooked up last year.) Back-to-the-land movements seem to come in thirty-year cycles: the United States is due for one, and, who knows, maybe a hundred thousand Gen Z-ers, fleeing Brooklyn, will turn up in the next ten years, wearing canvas Carhartt pants and carrying iPads and knitting needles and glossy seed catalogues. More people, in short, are likely to move to Vermont. What they'll bring, and what they'll take, is harder to say.

After Bernie Sanders left Burlington for Washington, D.C., he mostly said the same things he'd been saying since the seventies, except louder. "Never before in American history have so few media conglomerates, all owned by the billionaire class, had so much influence over the public," he declared in 2024. "Today, we have a government of the billionaire class, by the billionaire class, for the billionaire class." It can sound like cant, but it is, unfortunately, true in much of America, if, thank God, a bit less true in Vermont, brave little snowy muddy fierce little mountain state. ♦

Jill Lepore is a staff writer at The New Yorker and a professor at Harvard. Her books include "The Deadline," which received a PEN America award for the art of the essay.

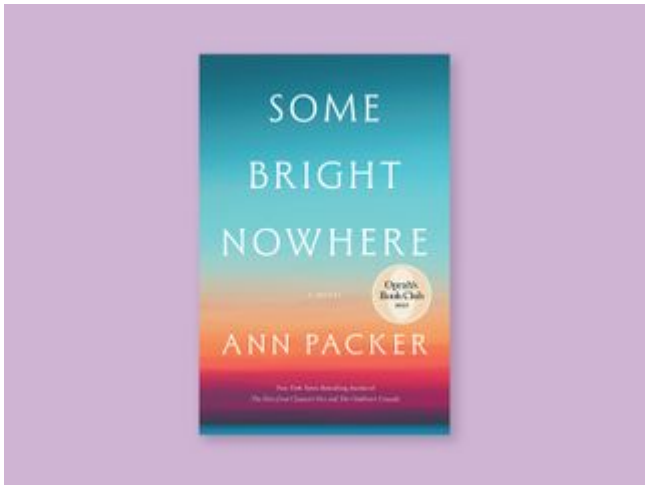
Books

Briefly Noted

“Scavengers,” “Some Bright Nowhere,” “Atlas’s Bones,” and “Everything Is Photograph.”

January 19, 2026

Scavengers, *by Kathleen Boland (Viking)*. In this riveting novel of madcap adventure, a woman named Bea leaves New York City for Utah, where her mother lives. Bea has recently been fired from her finance job and is recovering from the end of a romance—upheavals that, she feels, she can’t tell her mother about. When she arrives, she learns that her mother has also been keeping something to herself: she has become a devotee of the Conversation, an online forum about finding a treasure allegedly worth a million dollars. Soon enough, Bea and her mother decide to go on the hunt. What ensues is a journey that involves questionable characters, inclement weather, break-ins, a broken nose, and death—and that ultimately evolves, for each woman, into a search for the self.



Some Bright Nowhere, *by Ann Packer (Harper)*. When Claire, the protagonist of this tender portrait of terminal illness, decides to stop cancer treatment and spend her remaining time in hospice, her husband, Eliot, assumes that he will be the one to care for her—just as he has since her diagnosis, eight years earlier. He is shocked when she tells him that she would rather be looked after by two of her best friends, in an environment "full of female energy, chatter, tears, laughter." As Packer examines Claire's motivations, she explores the impact of the character's decision on her family, including her two adult children. Most moving is Packer's evocation of the choice's effect on Eliot, who is forced to confront his inadequacies—both real and perceived—as a caregiver and a husband.

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

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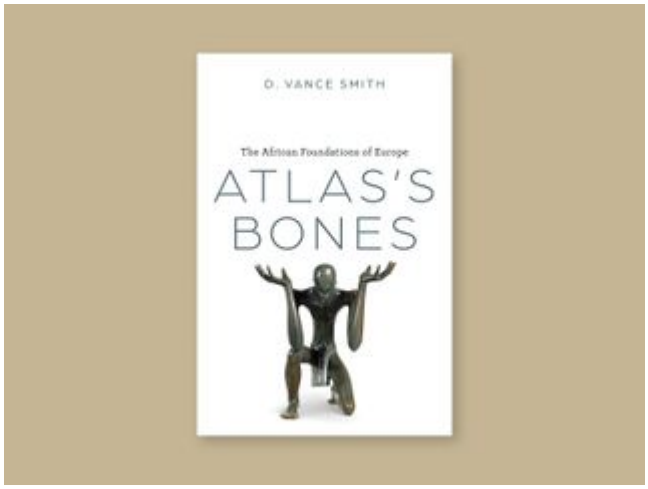

Atlas's Bones, *by D. Vance Smith (Chicago)*. Encompassing Africana studies, medieval scholarship, historiography, and philosophy, this book surveys centuries of literature, history, and theology to argue for Africa's influence on Europe's self-conception. Hegel's fantasy that Africa "is no historical place in the world" guides Smith as he leaps from ancient civilizations, such as those of Alexandria and Carthage, to close readings of Virgil, Frantz Fanon, and Erich Auerbach. Smith's synthesis of a wide range of sources, from antiquity to the modern era, strengthens his central claim: that "Africa was not only known to Europeans but played a profound role in how Europeans imagined both the world and themselves."

Everything Is Photograph, *by Patricia Albers (Other Press)*. This biography tracks the triumphs and the travails of the twentieth-century Hungarian photographer André Kertész. Kertész's compositions are notably strange—often off center and taken from high angles, they appear like

nervous half glances at scenes of pedestrian shuffle—and many are reproduced here, enriched by thorough commentary by Albers. Her exploration of Kertész's time as an infantryman in the First World War is especially illuminating, as she documents the curiously "flirtatious tender touch" with which he photographed his surroundings. This kind of artistic contradiction becomes a theme, as Albers unfurls details about Kertész's romantic life, his move to America, and his later fame.

Books

What Makes a Good Mother?

We keep revising the maternal ideal—and keep falling short of it.

By **Rebecca Mead**

January 19, 2026

In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, we had the so-called supermom. Then came the Pinterest mom and the trad wife. Recently, many have depicted motherhood as a harrowing ordeal of failure and self-reproach.Illustration by Cristina Spanò

Donald Winnicott, a British pediatrician and child psychoanalyst who wrote extensively and compassionately about the relationships between mothers and their infants, is best known among a general readership for coining the expression “the good-enough mother.” Winnicott started using the term to distinguish his observations from the theories of Melanie Klein, whose work held great sway among analysts in the mid-century. Klein had conceptualized a distinction between the “good breast” and the “bad breast”

as a way of understanding the drama of an infant's early experiences of omnipotence and frustration. In a letter to a colleague, from 1952, Winnicott noted that Klein was describing objects within the infant's psyche; he himself, however, was concerned with real women and real babies. "I always talk about 'the good-enough mother' or 'the not-good-enough mother,' because in point of fact we are talking about the actual woman, we know that the best she can do is to be good enough," Winnicott explained.

Within Winnicott's framework, the good-enough mother is one who, initially acceding entirely to a newborn's demands, intuits how, over time, she might incrementally hold back from offering immediate gratification, thereby facilitating the necessary development of her child's sense of self as a separate individual. In his writing for nonspecialists, and for new mothers in particular, Winnicott emphasized that, in most instances, a mother's attunement to what her baby needs arises naturally, without the intervention or instruction of experts. "In the ordinary things you do you are quite naturally doing very important things, and the beauty of it is that you do not have to be clever, and you do not even have to think if you do not want to," Winnicott wrote in "The Child, the Family, and the Outside World," a book aimed at new mothers, first published in 1964. He added, "If you love your baby he or she is getting a good start."

The maternal landscape has changed substantially since Winnicott wrote those reassuring words. They were addressed to a mother about whom certain social assumptions were made: that there was a breadwinning partner to enable her absence from the workplace throughout the child's early years, and that her extra- maternal pursuits, if she had them, could be cheerfully put on hold for the duration. In the subsequent decades, the available maternal models have evolved, in often contradictory ways—partly as a result of women's revised ambitions for themselves, and partly as a result of economic changes that have put financially secure stay-at-home motherhood largely out of reach, even for those who might want it.

If you were born into the Winnicottian paradigm of maternal attunement, you grew up witnessing the fraught emergence of the so-called supermom, that creature of the nineteen-eighties and nineties, who transferred her professional skill set to the project of raising an infant, with controlled inputs (organic baby food, ambient classical music, a nanny who speaks a useful second language) offering the promise of desired outputs (high SAT scores leading to socioeconomic success). If you became a mother around the turn of the century, you had the internet in general—and UrbanBaby or Mumsnet in particular—as a bleak site of anonymous commiseration about new motherhood, with its sleepless nights, its clueless, hapless spouses, and its often divisive choices, in which moral and consumer judgment of the behavior of others went hand in hand. Breast or bottle? Maclaren or Bugaboo? The debates, and the vitriol, were endless.

With the ascent of social media in the past two decades, new mothers have been confronted by sleeker, shinier paradigms with which to compare themselves unfavorably. There is the Pinterest mom, forever crafting or beading amid a gaggle of contentedly analog kindergartners, or the more recent trad wife, whose performance of ostentatiously elective stay-at-home motherhood incites both reflexive disdain (How can she bear to do just that?) and aggrieved envy (How can she *afford* to do all that?). With the arrival of *COVID*-19, in 2020, the pressures of new motherhood grew more intense still: cooped up at home with needy children on their laps and demanding bosses on their laptops, pandemic moms discovered not only that they couldn’t have it all but also that they definitely couldn’t do it all. New motherhood is always a maelstrom, but the *new* new motherhood, it has lately been suggested, has become a tempest of a different, close-to-unbearable order. How to be a good mother, or a good-enough mother,

under contemporary conditions? If the mother loves her baby, the infant is getting a good start. But how the hell is the mother doing?

Until very recently in the history of humankind, there was one defining injunction that characterized good mothering: Don't die. Throughout "A Woman's Work: Reclaiming the Radical History of Mothering" (Dutton), the British historian Elinor Cleghorn offers a reminder of the hazards of childbirth and the postpartum period through the ages, easily forgotten in an era of prenatal monitoring and sanitary obstetric protocols. Her book begins with a consideration of birth practices among women from the Minoan civilization—Bronze Age inhabitants of the island of Crete, whose deities included a goddess of childbirth. Cleghorn writes speculatively and somewhat romantically of a culture in which women giving birth were sustained by ecstatic rites and practices conducted within the sacred protection of caves. "This was a time when the connection between mothering and the natural world was celebrated, when the openings of the earth offered spaces for maternal reverence, when ritual practices were devoted to mothers' experiences," she writes. The salvific intercessions of a goddess would have been needed. Cleghorn notes that many Minoan women died between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, indicating that childbearing was most likely the cause of death.

For millennia, giving birth was the way in which a lot of women died. A Roman funerary epitaph of a new mother graphically explained her demise: "The unstoppable Fury of the newborn infant took me, bitter, from my happy life with a fatal hemorrhage." And though male physicians and natural scientists, along with other writers and thinkers, may have been the ones with the authority to lay down practices pertaining to childbirth, they did so with information gleaned from anonymous midwives. (A few female practitioners' names emerge from the historical murk, among them Phaenarete, the mother of Socrates.) Cleghorn reads the masculine literature with a feminist eye. When she cites the ancient authority of Pliny and his assertion, in describing the expertise of midwives and others who attend to pregnant and nursing women, that there is "no limit" to women's power, she adds, "He meant this as a warning rather than a compliment."

It is only in the modern era that women's own experience of pregnancy, childbirth, and mothering begins to be widely recorded, and here, too, there is an omnipresent sense of the contingency of maternal life. In seventeenth-century England, there was a vogue for books by pregnant women addressed to their unborn offspring, offering preëmptive guidance and moral instruction to stand in for the mother's own wisdom, should she be untimely carried off. As recently as a century ago, the activist Sylvia Pankhurst, daughter of the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, bemoaned the high incidence of maternal mortality among the working poor in the mill towns of the North of England, where, Cleghorn notes, "many lying-in mothers washed their feet before the midwife visited, so she wouldn't know they had left their beds to see to their homes and children." For women like these, questions of how to be a good mother were beside the point. Being a mother was good enough.

As Alex Bollen, another British author, reminds us in her irascible, informative volume "Motherdom: Breaking Free from Bad Science and Good Mother Myths" (Verso), what it takes to be considered a good mother changes throughout history, so as to remain always just out of reach. The good mother is self-sacrificial; she is energetically proactive; she is free from ambivalence. "Good Mother myths find mothers at fault however they raise their children," Bollen writes. The author is particularly impatient with the popular dissemination of the often limited findings of neuroscience, and with the way that vulnerable new mothers are bullied by headlines that seem contrived to prompt a sense of inadequacy in those who are most likely already overwhelmed. One example, from the *Daily Mail*, runs, "Why a mother's love really does matter: Nurturing helps children's brains grow at *TWICE* the rate of those who are 'neglected.' " Bollen's own professional background is in market research, and, being well versed in the ways in which popular credulity is leveraged, she is also equipped to cast skepticism upon research findings whose standards fall short. Claims for the benefits of co-sleeping, she writes, are in one instance based primarily upon the observation of rodent behavior rather than of human. Her grim summation: "There are always rat studies as I quickly came to learn when I started looking under the bonnet of neuroscience narratives."

What of being a mom while also participating in the rat race of professional life? In February, 2021, almost a year into the *COVID* pandemic, Amil Niazi, a Canadian writer living in Toronto, wrote a spiky piece for *The Cut* about what it was like to work from home while also taking care of her two small children. The piece took the form of a typical daily timeline, beginning with a squalling baby, an action-figure-toting toddler, and a husband who has departed for what, not so long ago, was also Niazi's office, "a place I once loathed, that now represents a kind of mystical, holy land free of pointy, plastic superheroes and sticky, screaming faces."

Now Niazi has turned that cry for help into a book-length plaint, "Life After Ambition" (Atria/One Signal). Its argument is that millennial women like her were sold a bill of goods when it came to marrying work and motherhood, and that the pandemic exposed hidden fault lines—notably, the inadequate provision of early-childhood care and the structural inequities of even supposedly liberal workplaces. Readers who got their small-child parenting out of the way before that particular global crisis can sympathize with the exceptional stresses of pandemic mothering while also recalling that being home with a wailing, incomprehensible newborn was hardly a walk in the park, even when a walk in the park wasn't fraught with social-distancing advisories. They may also wonder whether Niazi, with her account of periodically working from home in the pre-pandemic era, really intended to supply ammunition for H.R. departments that want their workers back in the office. "On days I had little work, it was lovely," she notes. "When I had to take care of a toddler and answer emails and take calls from my boss, it was like my brain was on fire."

Niazi's book is subtitled "A 'Good Enough' Memoir"—apparently a nod, if an unacknowledged one, to Winnicott's theories of motherhood. In her reframing, however, "good enough" is synonymous with "mediocre," which is the achievement level to which she claims to aspire: neither excelling at work, as her generation was told that it must, nor winning at being a mother, at least within the paradigm of intensive, intentional parenting that surrounds her. "I have embraced the idea of mediocrity and let go of a compulsion for exceptionalism," she writes. If the supermom thought she could have it all, and the Pinterest mom prided herself on doing it all, and

the performative trad wife believed that she could be it all, Niazi offers a depleted maternal alternative: fuck it all.

When being a good mother represents a structurally unattainable standard, it's no wonder there has been a countervailing embrace of the opposite identity, that of the self-declared "bad mother." The novelist Ayelet Waldman was this territory's pioneer, publishing an essay collection by that name in 2009. She offered confessions of small, even cute, parental ineptitudes, like unwittingly criticizing another mother in a reply-all to the recipients of a mommy-and-me e-mail chain. But she also broached more significant maternal taboos, including the recognition that there might be limits to the kind of mothering a woman is prepared to commit to, and to the kinds of sacrifices—both of her own freedom and of the integrity of her existing family—she might be willing to make. Waldman acknowledged aborting a pregnancy after a prenatal test revealed a genetic abnormality in what would have been her third baby, admitting to "being so inadequate a mother that I could not accept an imperfect child." Waldman portrayed herself as a bad mom other mothers could relate to (who hasn't screwed up on a reply-all?), and also one from whom other mothers could stake out a relieved sense of distance: Would you abort a possibly compromised fetus, and, if so, would you then *write* about it?

In the years since, we have seen variations on the bad-mother figure, filtered through memes and graphic tees—not least the wine mom, who sustains herself through the repetitive boredom of child care with a cheeky glass of Pinot Noir around bath time, and her cooler sister, the weed mom, who takes the edge off with half an edible. The sloppy-mom identity is invariably ironic; nobody wearing a "This Mom Runs on Coffee and Wine" T-shirt means to advertise what her friends and neighbors might take to be a deleterious dependency. As Ej Dickson writes in the opening pages of "One Bad Mother" (Simon & Schuster), the freedom to make transgressive admissions of maternal failure bespeaks a cultural privilege. "For middle-class white women like me, there are few long-term material consequences for calling yourself a 'bad mom,' other than possibly being yelled at by other middle-class white women on the internet," she writes. Not so for poorer women and women of color; Black children are disproportionately

likely to be reported to child-protective services, sometimes for minor maternal lapses.

Still, Dickson counts herself among those deemed bad mothers, listing the credentials that earn her the badge of dishonor. “I text my friends Patti LuPone TikToks while Marco is on the floor playing with his toys,” she writes. “I don’t enjoy pretend play or cooking or cleaning or birthday parties. There are times when I don’t particularly like being a mom. There are times, though they are far fewer, when I don’t particularly like my kids.” Dickson, who is a senior writer at *The Cut*, satirizes the good mom she fails to be, whose kids “eat gluten-free pea-and-mango-infused organic gummy snacks and never, ever do things like hit or push or yell ‘Slayyyyyy, bitch!’ to a friend as a message of encouragement at the playground.”

Rather than linger on the Nap-Dressed good mom, in all her familiar brownstone smugness, Dickson offers a brisk tour of the bad-mother trope as it now circulates in popular culture, and an analysis of how it works. She ranges across terrain that has been fertile since second-wave feminism—most persistently, the question of how mothers are meant to combine parenthood with paid work—and draws on “The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel,” the TV series in which a nineteen-fifties housewife abandons her domestic role to enter the ultimate boys’ club and become a standup comic. Dickson points out that Midge Maisel’s pre-kindergarten-aged children are rarely seen: “She is either the spunky self-starter climbing the ladder to pursue her desires, or she is a mother; she can never be perceived to be both.” At the same time, Dickson ventures into more arcane expressions of bad mothering, and if you were unaware of an apparently popular subgenre of porn called “fauxcest,” featuring fictional scenarios between, say, busty stepmoms and horny stepsons, here is your opportunity to learn.

Dickson writes with a refreshing absence of personal woebegoneness, and with empathy even for mothers whose practices and preferences differ vastly from her own. In her chapter on *MAHA* moms, with their eschewal of vaccines and their protect-the-children belligerence, she notes that, for all the ways in which external factors in the culture make being a good mother a timeless imperative—one that’s endlessly demanded yet impossible to achieve—there is also in motherhood an irreducible fear: that something

terrible may happen to our children. Of the anti-vax, anti-mask, anti-trans, self-described mama bears, she writes, “We can judge them. We can think of them as stupid or even evil. But how can we blame them for being afraid? We all are.” Children are born into vulnerability and mothers into vigilance; and even then our best may not be good enough. Winnicott insisted that love, imperfectly given, was enough to get a child started. What he could not promise was that it would suffice to keep disaster at bay, because it can’t. An awareness of this truth, more fundamental than witching-hour misery or child-hostile workplaces, is the very worst of being a mother. ♦

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

On and Off the Menu

How to Kill a Fish

The Japanese chef Junya Yamasaki mastered a butchery technique that results in tastier seafood—and he's taught some Southern California fishermen how to do it, too.

By Hannah Goldfield

January 19, 2026

In Japan, you can assume that the fish at any good restaurant met its end by way of ike and shinkei jime.Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

The ray-finned saltwater fish known as the bonito is also called, by some fishermen I know, the tiger tuna—a nickname that refers to its taxonomy (bonito and tuna are in the same family) and to its iridescent blue-green stripes. Early one morning in late December, the sky was overcast on the waters off the coast of Dana Point, in Southern California's Orange County, and still the scales of a thrashing six-pound bonito, reeled in by the chef Junya Yamasaki, shimmered brilliantly. Yamasaki, who is fifty years old, tall, and slender, with long black hair that he wears in a bun, detached the fish from the line. Then, with practiced ease, he used one hand to hold it by its gills and the other to drive a small metal stake between its eyes and directly into its brain—a technique known in Japan as *ike jime*. The bonito's body twitched until Yamasaki slid a thin metal wire down the column of its spinal cord, a second step called *shinkei jime*, which arrests its nervous system.

The method is considered significantly more humane than the standard alternatives for killing a fish (thwacking it on the head, letting it suffocate), and is analogous to halal and kosher butchery, which both require that animals be slaughtered with a swift, decisive cut to the throat. It also results in fish that tastes better and stays fresh significantly longer. “The process brings out the best characteristic of every species,” Yamasaki told me—a firm silkiness for white fish, a clean acidity for tuna. It works in part by stemming the flood of stress hormones and other chemicals that a fish’s body begins to release upon capture, staving off rigor mortis and the stink of decay. Conner Mitchell, a restaurateur and a commercial fisherman, and the captain of the Jamaica Day—the small pilothouse boat we were fishing on—was impressed the first time he saw Yamasaki do it. “I’m looking at a fish that would have been stiff, now as flexible as tissue paper,” Mitchell said.

In Japan, you can assume that the fish at any good restaurant met its end by way of *ike* and *shinkei jime*; in the U.S., the same is true at restaurants offering catch imported from Tokyo’s famed Toyosu Market. Among the fishermen of Southern California, the practice can largely be traced to Yamasaki, whose evangelism has quietly transformed the local seafood supply. On the deck of the Jamaica Day, Mitchell and an array of other energetic restaurant-industry dudes in their thirties—all of whom learned the technique under Yamasaki’s tutelage—set up rods, checked the boat’s radar, and gleefully spotted clusters of birds diving in the distance, which signalled that schools of bonito swam beneath them. Whenever a line began to jerk, the group exploded in a joyful chorus. Then the men took turns reeling the fish in, and putting them out of their misery.

Twice, I reeled in a bonito myself—a process that I found surprisingly intimate, just me and an invisible squirming weight at the other end of the line. Both times, I struggled as I turned the crank, heart pounding, almost certain that I wouldn’t succeed, until I caught sight of a silver flash at the water’s surface. Then Danny Miller or Cole Moser—a chef and a bartender, respectively—would pull it on board. As Miller gutted one particularly beautiful specimen, tossing its organs into the spray before slipping it into a slurry of ice and salt water, he pointed out that, because of the ike and

shinkei jime, the fish had retained its vibrant color. If it had died slowly, it would have already gone dull and gray.

A full week later, when I unwrapped the bonito fillets that Yamasaki had sent me home with, I was amazed to find the skin undiminished, the flesh a rosy pink. I'd grown used to being disappointed by fish from the supermarket, its flavor so often muddy or bitter, with the occasional bracing whiff of ammonia. The bonito smelled barely of the ocean, clean and faintly salty. Following Yamasaki's instructions, I seasoned each fillet generously before flash-searing it on a ferociously hot cast-iron pan, then sliced it into thick chunks to dip into soy sauce. The flesh was sweet, a little tart, and supple, like a piece of ripe fruit.

Several times in the past few months, when I've called Yamasaki on the phone—we met last year, at the Hollywood Farmers' Market—I've reached him in the middle of a long drive. About once a week, he hops into his crimson 1997 Jeep and travels several hours from Los Angeles to forage for mushrooms or to dive for shellfish, at locations that he prefers not to disclose, accompanied by his dogs, Artichoke and Chanterelle. Chanterelle, a large and spirited three-year-old Belgian Malinois mix, has a challenging temperament; on the boat, Yamasaki pulled up a pant leg to reveal a big, gnarly scab where she'd bitten his calf. "I think one of the reasons she's crazy is because, during the tuna season, I give her all the trimmings," he joked—at least one of his fishing buddies has gotten mercury poisoning. "I'm a zero-waste chef, you know?"

As a kid, Yamasaki, who grew up near Osaka, went fishing with his father. It was only when he became a chef—a career he stumbled into while putting himself through art school, in Paris—that he taught himself *ike* and *shinkei jime*, which are associated with the Akashi Strait, a famous fishery not far from his home town. As the executive chef at Koya, an udon bar in London, Yamasaki cooked live eels, whose bodies could remain jumpy and unwieldy even once their heads had been chopped off. After learning how to paralyze the spinal cord on an eel, he found handling other fish to be easy. "Ask a vet—it's much more difficult to do an operation on a Chihuahua than a Doberman," he told me.

In 2018, Yamasaki moved to L.A. to open a Japanese restaurant, which evolved from a pandemic-era food truck to an idiosyncratic *izakaya*, called Yess, in the Arts District. (After his current lease ends later this month, he will open a cheekily named pop-up, Fuck Yess, while he looks for a new location.) From the start, he knew that he wanted to serve seafood, and that he wanted to commit to using local ingredients, as he'd done at Koya. Between London and L.A., he spent a few months at a Zen temple back in Japan, where practitioners grew their own vegetables and rice. "They pursue this as kind of a mission to learn about life," he told me. He was dismayed that the best seafood he could access in L.A. was imported from Japan: "It's fresher than the fish, ironically, from Santa Barbara, which takes a couple of days, sometimes a week." He researched species native to California's waters—opaleye, calico bass, moray eel—only to discover that most weren't even sold commercially. "And then I found this YouTube video of somebody spearfishing, and I said, 'Oh, my God, this is what you have to do,' " he told me.

Many of this era's chefs claim to be obsessed with seasonality and local sourcing; for Yamasaki, it's a life style, an all-encompassing pursuit. After taking swimming lessons, he learned to spearfish, and to free dive, so that he could gather fish, sea urchin, and lobster by hand. Without a commercial license, he wouldn't be able to sell what he caught; he realized that if he wanted a steady supply of the best possible fish for Yess, he'd need some local fishermen to take up *ike* and *shinkei jime*. Most of his cold e-mails and Instagram D.M.s went unanswered. Finally, Eric Hodge, an auto mechanic in Ojai who'd been fishing commercially for a few years, agreed to take him out on the water for a demonstration. Hodge was amused that Yamasaki was prone to seasickness. "I think he threw up all day," Hodge said, of their first fishing trip. But, after tasting what they'd caught and butchered, he was convinced that Yamasaki was on to something.

Yamasaki told Hodge that if they created a market for the product, and got other chefs and fishermen excited about the technique, Hodge could triple his revenue. (Hodge overshot this almost immediately.) Soon afterward, Yamasaki met Mitchell, who supplies seafood for his own restaurant, Dudley Market Venice. "What we learned, especially from Junya, was way more about the philosophy of why you're doing it," Mitchell said. "It's not

just ‘Run the wire down the fish.’ It’s about the fact that you’re trying to care this much from the second you take this fish’s life.” Within a few years, *ike* and *shinkei jime* became the gold standard for locally caught seafood in L.A. Among the prestigious restaurants to which Hodge sold his catch was Providence, in Hollywood, one of only two restaurants in the city to earn three Michelin stars.

In El Segundo, just north of Manhattan Beach, the founders of a startup called Seremoni have designed and manufactured a machine, the Poseidon, that performs an automated version of *ike jime*, with the goal of making high-quality fish more accessible. The company installs Poseidons, each about the size of a phone booth, on the boat decks of local fishermen, then purchases the catch at a premium. Each fish is slipped into a tubular opening of the machine, as if going in for an MRI, and then an A.I.-powered sensor determines where on its head to insert a mechanical spike. Restaurants, including Eleven Madison Park and Le Bernardin, in New York, have started serving what the company calls “Seremoni-grade” fish. Yamasaki himself serves the brand’s black cod.

Though I admire the ingenuity and idealism behind Seremoni, it was easy to see, on the Jamaica Day, what would be lost by delegating any part of the process to a robot. As we motored offshore in the morning, the brisk wind lashing our faces, we spotted a pair of sea lions dozing on the surface of the water; later, dolphins arced around us in every direction. Several times, at dusk, after the group had agreed to pack it in, a flash on the radar or a fresh flock of birds inspired Mitchell to whip the boat around and chase one more catch. When I remarked that the addictive thrill of deep-sea fishing seemed not unlike that of gambling, Mitchell laughed and said, “I think just as many people have lost their wives doing it.” As the sun set, he grew reflective. “The thing I’ll never get over is how there are so few people out here, and we all know each other,” he told me. “It’s the greatest place to be alone in L.A. I hope the TikTok kids never figure it out.” ♦

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

The Art World

The Cold Comfort of a Helene Schjerfbeck Painting

At the Met, the Finnish artist’s spare, melancholic work has the strange effect of jolting your senses.

By Zachary Fine

January 19, 2026

“Self-Portrait with Silver Background,” from 1915.Art work by Helene Schjerfbeck / Courtesy Turku Art Museum / Metropolitan Museum of Art; Photograph by Kari Lehtinen

It’s 1917, and you’re Finnish. (Lucky you.) After six centuries of Swedish rule, and more than a hundred years as a grand duchy of Russia, your nation is finally on the brink of independence. To the south, Europe is tearing itself to bits in the First World War; to the east, there’s the Russian Revolution. Most of the art you’ve seen at this point is either second-rate or beats a patriotic drum—lakes and forests and scenes from the “Kalevala,” a national epic featuring some cosmic eggs and a drowned girl who turns into a fish. One afternoon, in the heart of Helsinki, you stumble into an art

gallery and see a retrospective of a painter named Helene Schjerfbeck. It all feels familiar, but not. Here is a world where people read empty books in empty rooms, flesh is stretched tautly on the bone, and eyes are cold enough to freeze the light behind them. You're not sure you like it, exactly. But of this much you're certain: Finland has produced a modern painter.

The Helsinki exhibition drew around four thousand visitors, a record for the Finnish art world at the time. A local art historian, in his review, compared Schjerfbeck to Titian, Frans Hals, Rembrandt, and Beethoven. Notice the scramble of names there: a Renaissance master, two very different Baroque titans, and a German composer. The art historian was grasping at straws. A century later, we still are. The subject of "Seeing Silence: The Paintings of Helene Schjerfbeck," in the Met's Lehman Wing, is a portrait painter seemingly uninterested in people, an artist of the "golden age" of Finnish art who isn't associated with its goldenness, and a modernist you'd have trouble finding in almost any history of modernism. That's also what makes her work tantalizingly great.

"The Door" (1884).Art work by Helene Schjerfbeck / Courtesy Finnish National Gallery / Metropolitan Museum of Art; Photograph by Yehia Eweis

To become a famous Nordic painter, it helped to be born between 1860 and 1865. Hilma af Klint, Edvard Munch, Vilhelm Hammershøi, and Akseli Gallen-Kallela all understood this; so did Schjerfbeck, who arrived in 1862. As a child, she fell down some stairs and broke her hip. The injury left her with a permanent limp, creating an open invitation for every art historian and critic to psychologize her paintings as disguised self-portraits of suffering. Her father, a downwardly mobile civil servant, gave her pencils, paper, and crayons as she convalesced, and what started as art therapy turned into a calling. From an early age, she was plied with scholarships, travel grants, prizes, and exhibition opportunities. When she turned eighteen, she took a steamboat to Paris.

The Met show opens in the eighteen-eighties, when naturalism flowered in Parisian art schools. To see Schjerfbeck in peak naturalist mode, look up “A Boy Feeding His Little Sister” (1881); then dart up to the second floor of the museum, where Jules Bastien-Lepage’s “Joan of Arc” (1879) is on display. Note the square, almost pixelated brushwork and earthy palette Schjerfbeck adopted from Bastien-Lepage, who taught at the academy where Schjerfbeck took classes. This coarse, descriptive mode of painting was being used by the Third Republic for nation-building, uniting the motley cultures of France with an easy-to-chew visual language of freshly plowed fields, restaurant kitchens, and medical laboratories. I mention the nation-building because it’s what made naturalism such an exportable style, especially for a country like Finland, which was rushing to consolidate its identity overnight. In theory, Schjerfbeck was supposed to be one of Finland’s soldiers—she was in France on the dime of the Art Society and the senate—but her commitments were always more artistic than ideological.

“Self-Portrait with Black Background” (1915).Art work by Helene Schjerfbeck / Courtesy Finnish National Gallery / Metropolitan Museum of Art; Photograph by Hannu Aaltonen

In 1883, Schjerfbeck travelled to Brittany, where her first coup of ingenuity arrived, with paintings like “Clothes Drying” (1883) and “The Door” (1884). By filtering the grammar of naturalism through a fine mesh strainer until all that remains are skeletal forms and eerie compositional croppings, Schjerfbeck forces your eye toward an occluded or trivial detail. “The Door” shows a chapel interior with a closed door, a smudge of light, and no signs of life, except for the fact that the vanishing point is low enough to put us in the eyes of a child or a goat. In paintings, doors tend to function as little narrative machines, producing expectation or action. But Schjerfbeck’s is a narrative dead end. It’s as if she took one of Pieter Jansz. Saenredam’s empty church interiors and shook it until even the emptiness fell out.

What helped Schjerfbeck ascend from naturalism into the modernist ether might surprise you: Old Master paintings. In the eighteen-nineties, the Finnish Art Society sent Schjerfbeck to St. Petersburg, Vienna, and Florence to reproduce famous pieces for its collection. While reverse engineering works by Velázquez, Holbein, and Fra Angelico, she started to

revise her techniques, fiddling with tempera, gouache, watercolor, and charcoal, and roughing up her surfaces. Puvis de Chavannes, whom she'd met in Paris, had been imitating the faded and matte look of fresco. Schjerfbeck also liked the way Degas bleached his pastels to deaden their tone. By pushing against the varnished, slick look of academic painting, and sapping its color into a chalky haze, she could pierce the viewer with a feeling of antiquity and melancholic potency. Once the patina of fresco entered her work, it never left.

In 1902, Schjerfbeck and her mother, Olga, moved to a one-bedroom flat in Hyvinkää, a small rail hub about thirty-five miles from Helsinki. The rustlings of Post-Impressionism hadn't made an impact on Schjerfbeck when she was in Paris, but suddenly Cézanne, Gauguin, and Whistler crashed into her work, partly thanks to French art magazines. In Schjerfbeck's homemade modernism, subject, color, and space all tend toward the minimal. With Whistleresque pieces like "The Seamstress (The Working Woman)," from 1905, and the almost scary "The School Girl II (Girl in Black)," from 1908, her palette constricts to pale blacks, grays, whites, and tawny browns. Rounded shapes are flattened or approximated with broad planes, so that clothes aren't worn by the figures so much as blocked on, like shadows. Schjerfbeck's mature style doesn't just use vague forms but rigorously militates against detail. Details can be chatty and overeager; they populate the eye with information, rather than allowing the mind to invent it. "Let us imply," Schjerfbeck said.

By the time Schjerfbeck had her solo show in Helsinki in 1917, two men had joined her camp. One was Gösta Stenman, who served as Schjerfbeck's gallerist and local champion; the other was Einar Reuter, a young forester and artist, who became her confidant and crush. "Einar Reuter (Study in Brown)" (1915-18), painted during the honeymoon phase of their friendship, shows how Schjerfbeck, at the height of her powers, chose to paint someone she admired. It's bleaker than you would hope. Schjerfbeck uses the rough weave of the canvas to turn Reuter into a husk of himself, with an empty pair of brown eyes and a mangled ear. Don't mistake the depressive air for his own. Schjerfbeck's portraits are not about showing you a person's appearance and essence but, rather, about taking them away.

Her anti-portraits, at their best and most psychologically lacerating, remind you how painful it can be not to have access to another person's inner life.

The major exception to Schjerfbeck's downcast eyes and turned-away heads is her self-portraiture. I've kept it out of the picture until now because it seems to operate on a different time line, as if there were a small, hidden room that Schjerfbeck entered every decade or so, to find herself again. Of the forty-some self-portraits done between the eighteen-eighties and 1946, when she died, there are two remarkable clusters. The first set, from 1912 to 1915, shows Schjerfbeck in her fifties, her face milk white, her lips pinched and stern. In one from 1912, a few colored brushstrokes—gray-blue above the brow, icing pink on the cheeks, a flash of gold in the hair—threaten to burst the illusion of her face into dozens of little painted moments. It's the kind of loose handiwork that would have made Velázquez jealous.

"The Tapestry" (1914-16).Art work by Helene Schjerfbeck / Courtesy Private Collection / Metropolitan Museum of Art; Photograph by Per Myrehed

The second cluster, from 1944 to 1945, includes some of the most bone-chilling self-portraits in the history of painting—more so than anything Rembrandt, Goya, van Gogh, or Kollwitz attempted. At the age of eighty-two, in a final sprint of twenty pieces, Schjerfbeck painted herself as a putrefying corpse, with enucleated eyes and goblin ears. There are touches of Munch's screamer, Daumier's withering caricatures, and Géricault's

dissected bodies. But more jarring than any of this is the lack of humanity that Schjerfbeck perceives in herself. In one portrait after another, you see her skull emerge from a bed of living flesh. It's the closest an artist has come to painting herself from beyond the grave.

The "silence" of the exhibition's title, along with the depressive tenor of the show, plays handily into our penchant for Scandinavian noir and age-old stereotypes about the Finns as a bunch of cold, miserable forest dwellers on the edge of civilization. For all her cosmopolitanism, Schjerfbeck didn't do much to dispel this. She was unapologetically chilly and, like Munch, cultivated her suffering. "Poor my life would be without the grief," she said. I'd suggest that the real Finnish story here is that of an artist who painted freely, without being absorbed into the ho-hum progression of European modernism or Finnish nationalism, *and yet* was well supported by the state in her key years of artistic development. That might not sound like the most electrifying reason to celebrate a painter, but you're unlikely to get one as daring, rangy, and brilliant as Schjerfbeck without it. America should take note. ♦

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Pop Music

Zach Bryan’s Stubborn, Shaggy New Album

The singer-songwriter has become one of the most popular musicians in America without much changing his no-frills approach.

By Kelefa Sanneh

January 15, 2026

Before Bryan, nobody knew an ornery troubadour could be this popular, in this era.Illustration by James Noellert

In 2019, it seemed possible that the next big country star would be a Navy aviation ordnanceman from Oklahoma named Zach Bryan, who recorded scruffy videos of himself hollering fervent lyrics about nights that lasted forever and relationships that didn’t. “I put as much thought as I could into, like, writing the songs,” he told the country critic Grady Smith, in a

YouTube interview that summer. “And no thought into how I was going to put it out there.” Listeners found him anyway—helped, no doubt, by social-media algorithms that can spot a new viral hit long before human gatekeepers catch on. “Heading South,” one of Bryan’s first songs to draw a large audience, had a refrain that served as a declaration of regional pride. “Don’t stop headin’, headin’ south / ’Cause they will understand the words that are pouring from your mouth,” he sang, sounding like a young man who had finally found his place in the world. The polemical music site Saving Country Music suggested that Bryan could stand to “refine his guitar playing and delivery,” but it also made a prediction: “Zach Bryan will have a strong career in country music if he so chooses.”

The prediction turned out to be about halfway accurate. In the past six years, Bryan, now twenty-nine, has built not merely a strong career but a singular one, and he has done it without much changing his no-frills approach. He ranked No. 8 on Spotify’s 2025 list of the most popular musicians in America, and in September he drew more than a hundred and twelve thousand fans to a concert at the University of Michigan football stadium; according to the industry site Pollstar, it was the biggest concert in U.S. history, excluding festivals and free shows. And yet Bryan wears his “country” identity lightly, when he wears it at all. He has generally ignored country radio, and been ignored by it in turn. Neither his voice nor his arrangements are particularly twangy, and the bars he sings about tend to be not honky-tonks but, rather, places like McGlinchey’s, a Philadelphia dive that he mentioned in an appealingly ragged tune called “28.” That song appeared on Bryan’s 2024 album, “The Great American Bar Scene,” which included, in a sign of his growing stature and not-quite-country identity, a pair of high-profile guests: John Mayer and Bruce Springsteen.

Since Bryan’s début, words haven’t stopped pouring from his mouth. His songs are propelled by idiomatic lyrics that sound as if they have been set to music only begrudgingly; many of his albums begin with a poem, as if to confirm that he has more verses than melodies to put them to. Last year, for the first time since 2021, there was no new Zach Bryan album, though fans still got a half-dozen new songs, along with a series of updates about his life. He carried on a public dispute with his ex-girlfriend Brianna LaPaglia, a podcaster, who had previously accused him of “narcissistic emotional

abuse”; in the summer, footage emerged of him scaling a barbed-wire-topped fence in an apparent attempt to fight the country singer Gavin Adcock, who had accused him of phoniness; about two months after the incident, he announced, on Instagram, that he hadn’t had a drink in nearly two months, and suggested that he had been using alcohol to cope with “earth-shattering panic attacks”; on New Year’s Eve, in Spain, he got married, for the second time, and shared a video of himself singing Springsteen’s “Tougher Than the Rest” at the reception.

The marriage may have pleased Zach Bryan fans who want him to chill out and settle down, but his new album, which he released earlier this month, is more likely to please the other ones, who may well constitute the majority. It is called “With Heaven on Top,” and it is a shaggy record composed of twenty-four songs (and one poem) about chasing peace of mind around the world. There are no high-profile guests, unless you count the horn players who arrive at the beginning of the third track, “Appetite,” serving not to add polish but to subtract it. Much of the playing on the album is cheerfully imprecise; Bryan has said it was recorded in a handful of houses in Oklahoma, but the recordings, which include sing-alongs and stray noises, evoke the blurry conviviality of a bar band at the moment between last call and lights on. “Slicked Back,” about romantic bliss, seems to have been written under the influence of Tom Petty—when Bryan sings, “You’re so cool,” he could almost be Petty, drawling, “Yer so bad.” And on “River and Creeks,” a frisky ballad about fickle lovers, he tries out both a yipping falsetto and an Elvis-ish baritone.

Unlike many country-inspired singer-songwriters, though, Bryan doesn’t seem intent on re-creating an earlier musical era. His music, with its simple strumming and its unmediated lyrics, is generally too plain to be retro. Some of the early reactions to the album concerned not the music but the lyrics. “Bad News,” which Bryan previewed in October, features a reference to Immigration and Customs Enforcement (“*ICE* is gonna come bust down your door”); this alarmed some of his fans and excited others. But the song turns out to be less a protest than a nonpartisan lament: “Got some bad news / Fading of our red, white, and blue.” And “Skin,” a breakup song about an ex-lover with tattoos, has been widely interpreted as a new chapter in his ongoing exchange with LaPaglia, who has plenty of tattoos,

and who has said that Bryan got a tattoo of her early in their relationship. “I’m taking a blade to my own skin,” he sings, or, rather, sneers. “And I ain’t never touching yours again.”

Bryan’s startling success—no one knew an ornery troubadour could be this popular, in this era—has helped build an audience for a cohort of like-minded singer-songwriters: Sam Barber, from Missouri, specializes in desolate ballads; Waylon Wyatt, from Arkansas, sings country breakup songs with a quaver and a hint of a yodel. Last year, Bryan uploaded a video of himself singing and strumming with an emerging singer-songwriter named Joshua Slone. Slone has a much softer and more plaintive voice and, judging from his finely wrought songs, a tendency to contend with heartbreak not by going out and raging but by staying in and ruminating. Especially compared with a singer like Slone, Bryan is an uncommonly stubborn performer: to enjoy his songs, you have to enjoy his halfway hoarse voice and his tendency to stray from the tune, not to mention his willingness to return time and again to familiar themes and familiar bars, like McGlinchey’s, which makes a return appearance on “With Heaven on Top.”

Bryan surely knows this, though he doesn’t always know what to do about it; one of the new songs, “Miles,” evokes the trudging repetition of the touring life a bit too faithfully, with Bryan repeating the titular word forty-two times. But “Plastic Cigarette,” an early fan favorite, is gentler and more effective, distilling a bygone love into a simple image: “I saw you on the river’s edge / Draggin’ on a plastic cigarette / With your swim top still wet.” After twenty-four tracks comes the title song: a benediction, sweetened with pedal steel, that is beautiful in a way much of Bryan’s music is defiantly not. This is the end of the album—but not, as it happens, the end of the story. Just as “With Heaven on Top” was being released, Bryan posted a note on Instagram that seemed surprisingly crotchety, coming from a guy with a new bride and a new record. “I’m assuming this record is just like all the other ones and there’s gonna be a billion people saying it’s over produced and shitty so I sat down in a room by myself and recorded all the songs acoustically so I didn’t have to hear everyone whine about more stuff,” he wrote. And so, a few days after the album arrived, he issued “With Heaven on Top (Acoustic),” which contains almost nothing but an

acoustic guitar and Bryan's voice, demonstrating how little adornment his best songs need. The acoustic version sounds nearly exactly like the old Zach Bryan, and it is hard to tell whether this means he is stuck or just sticking to what he does best. ♦

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."

Poems

- **“Psalm for the Slightly Tilted”**
  “This is not / a good year. / But it has / witnesses.”
- **“Snow Falling”**
  “What does a single flake know / of its big/little fate?”

Poems

Psalm for the Slightly Tilted

***By** Ilya Kaminsky*

January 19, 2026

This is not
a good year.
But it has
witnesses.

When you see them protest the powerful,
since who else does,
they stand
like flagpoles outside the courthouse
after a northeaster.

They came with
the wrong shoes
for revolution.
Still,
they showed up.

Comfort, Lord,
their bodies—
each a question mark
doing time
as a coatrack,
hung with borrowed jackets.

They are your legion
of bent spoons.
They are the only ones

who showed up—
with their orthopedic flair.

I saw my people lean—
not toward hope but toward each other.
They chant off-rhythm
and mean it.

These are my kind of people:
no tears—just
steam from a kettle
that never quite boils.

In times like these, don’t forget us:
the lopsided
leaning on one another,
like sodden paperbacks
left out on the stoop—
Nobody opens them.
But they still insist
on carrying the plot.

Comfort us standing up—
half scarecrow
half saxophone
with a squawk.
While stiffness becomes state policy,
comfort us sitting—
in that collapse called calm.

In the year they come for us
watch my people
make protest signs
out of old pizza boxes.
Watch—

there are no boring people
which is unfortunate.

You’d think statistically
we’d get at least a few—
one-speed souls
with just *meh* stuff to do.

But none of them are dull.
Each—
a suitcase
held together
by duct tape.

These are your coffee-stained saints
who rise not with trumpets
but with Advil.
They stand
and wait
creased like maps
of a country
that doesn’t exist anymore.

Ilya Kaminsky is a poet and a translator. With Katie Farris, he translated, from the Ukrainian, "Letters of the Alphabet Go to War," by Lesyk Panasiuk, due out in January 2026.

Poems

Snow Falling

***By** Marianne Boruch*

January 19, 2026

in spite of love, the history of *is* or *is not*. Toward *dread*,
darkness though *dawn* could be my guess, snow morphing
to hardship, delight, mindless over and over. You forget

but I forgot so long ago. What does a single flake know
of its big/little fate? A very cold microscope might
seek out each never-the-same beauty. Snow's

only choice: freeze. Or melt and flood. But falling means
right now back to prehistory where *human* isn't
a thing yet, nor glass born of fire. The making's done,

a canvas rolled up, flown across an ocean that shares its
infinity of vivid, all blues, reds, shadow, light, and wow—
look at that!—I'm stunned. Genius opens

its very few colors, the body bent to paint that way,
the arm no longer knows itself, nor the hand
a hand, nor the brain how to think.

As a child, I practiced small ways
to jump time and lose reason, grew blank enough
for snow-in-July! In that god-awful heat, I invented

iced-out streets, pointillism freezing mid-flight
albeit ninety degrees. In winter, in reverse, near zero,
I tried to try too, calling up the hot days—

crickets, bright leaves, the noise of what
intricate nonsense we get to be in summer.
Simply couldn’t *see* it among the cold high drifts.

Clearly I flunked Imagination.
Because it’s not prophecy or remembering.
My nowhere keeps coming, snow

the still center of it all. It falls, an erasure of mind.
I was walking just now. Another vast silence
is a field gone mute with it.

Marianne Boruch was recently an artist-in-residence at the Institute for Advanced Study at Central European University, in Budapest. Her most recent book of poems is “Bestiary Dark.”

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the January 26, 2026, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Wednesday, January 14, 2026**
  A beginner-friendly puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, January 14, 2026

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

***By** Robyn Weintraub*

January 14, 2026

Loading game...

Robyn Weintraub has been constructing crosswords since 2010 and began contributing puzzles to The New Yorker in 2020. Her puzzles have appeared in the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.