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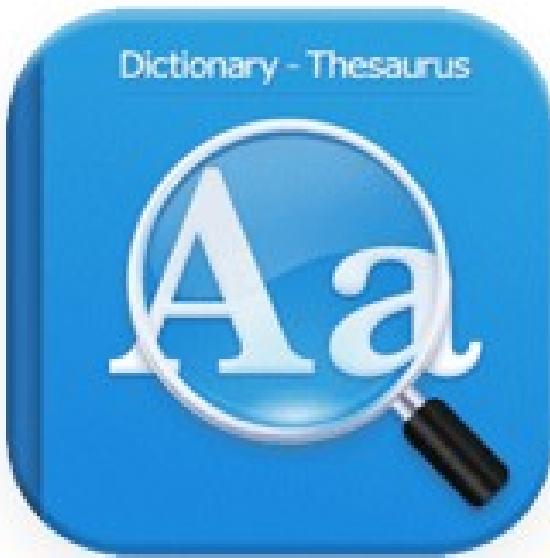
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Goings On

- [Fall Culture Preview](#)

Goings On

Fall Culture Preview

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

August 16, 2024



Shauna Lyon

Goings On editor

Beyond the fade of sweet summer lies a particularly sparkly fall culture season packed with tantalizing shows—enough to rival a political showdown for the ages. Stars hitting New York stages include Robert Downey, Jr., Mia Farrow, Adam Driver, Rachel Zegler, Patti LuPone, and Kenneth Branagh; Tammy Faye Bakker and Norma Desmond also make appearances. “Brat” summer continues into the cooler months, as Charli XCX hits Madison Square Garden with Troye Sivan; Sabrina Carpenter and Billie Eilish continue their world domination. The Met, *MOMA*, and the Guggenheim celebrate undersung artists and lesser-known movements in tentpole shows, and the Brooklyn Museum mounts a paean to gold. The New York Philharmonic welcomes a slew of guest conductors; American Ballet Theatre premières a dance based on “Crime and Punishment.” The

TV season heats up with an unrecognizable Colin Farrell as the Penguin, and Nicole Kidman, Cate Blanchett, and Kathy Bates lend charismatic mystery to new dramas. At the movies, anticipated works from Tim Burton, Francis Ford Coppola, Sean Baker, and Robert Zemeckis compete for popcorn sales with two unbeatable matchups: Clooney-Pitt and Joaquin-Gaga. Onward and upward with the arts!

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The Theatre



Double Acts, Stars Galore

Broadway sheds its summer lassitude with a season of starry double acts: Patti LuPone and Mia Farrow cohabit in Jen Silverman's "**The Roommate**" (Booth; starting previews Aug. 29); Ayad Akhtar's "**McNeal**" stars Robert Downey, Jr., and his "metahuman digital likeness" (Vivian Beaumont; Sept. 5); Julianna Margulies and Peter Gallagher swoon in Delia Ephron's romance "**Left on Tenth**" (James Earl Jones; Sept. 26); Helen J.

Shen and Darren Criss play love-struck robots in the musical “**Maybe Happy Ending**” (Belasco; Oct. 16); and, in David Henry Hwang’s Obie-winning “**Yellow Face**” (Todd Haimes; Sept. 13), Daniel Dae Kim stars as the playwright’s own conflicted doppelgänger.

London sends Broadway its most emotional fare with “**The Hills of California**,” Jez Butterworth’s seventies family drama (Broadhurst; Sept. 11); Jamie Lloyd’s blood-soaked version of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s “**Sunset Blvd**” (St. James; Sept. 28); and Elton John’s teary new musical, “**Tammy Faye**” (Palace; Oct. 19). As ever, there’s a dash of Shakespeare: Sam Gold directs “**Romeo and Juliet**,” starring Rachel Zegler, at Circle in the Square (Sept. 26), and Kenneth Branagh plays “**King Lear**” at the Shed (Oct. 26). But much of the homegrown season consists of classic American cultural touchstones. Kenny Leon stages Thornton Wilder’s “**Our Town**” (Ethel Barrymore; Sept. 17); James Monroe Iglehart plays Louis Armstrong in “**A Wonderful World**” (Studio 54; Oct. 16); the Avett Brothers score the shipwreck musical “**Swept Away**” (Longacre; Oct. 29); and the beloved “**Ragtime**” is at Encores! (City Center; Oct. 30-Nov. 10).

The Americana energy extends downtown, too: “**Gatz**,” Elevator Repair Service’s marathon staging of “The Great Gatsby,” returns (Public Theatre, Nov. 1), and Adam Driver goes country for a revival of Kenneth Lonergan’s “**Hold on to Me Darling**,” at the Lortel (Sept. 24). And, as always, we Americans look to the movies. The nineties cult hit “**Death Becomes Her**” rises again as a musical (Lunt-Fontanne; Oct. 23), and the indie “**Safety Not Guaranteed**” gets its own musicalization at BAM (Sept. 17).

Happily, our favorite playwrights all seem to have premières this season: Robert O’Hara’s “**Shit. Meet. Fan.**” opens at MCC in October; Hoi Polloi presents “**Family**” (site-specific; Sept. 12), an early play by Celine Song (“Past Lives”); James Ijames follows “Fat Ham” with “**Good Bones**” (Public; Sept. 19); and the Bushwick Starr mounts “**A Woman Among Women**,” by the deft Julia May Jonas (Oct. 15). Signature Theatre’s Dominique Morisseau series continues with “**Bad Kreyol**” (Oct. 8), while Katori Hall unfurls “**The Blood Quilt**,” at Lincoln Center (Mitzi E. Newhouse; Oct. 30) and Ethan Lipton switches on his new musical, “**We Are Your Robots**” (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; Nov. 10). Sarah Mantell’s “**In the Amazon Warehouse Parking Lot**” launches the

Playwrights Horizons season on Oct. 11, and Soho Rep bids farewell to the scrappy, minuscule Walker Space with Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "**Give Me Carmelita Tropicana!**" (Oct. 23). Talk about your double acts: Soho Rep will soon move into the Playwrights building, on Forty-second Street, and these two indispensable institutions will be roommates for a few seasons to come.—[Helen Shaw](#)

Contemporary Music



Charli XCX, Childish Gambino, Bikini Kill

The fall concert schedule kicks off with Afrofuturism and theatricality. The **Afropunk Festival** returns to Brooklyn, on Aug. 23-24, with the *BLKTOPIA* event headlined by **Erykah Badu**, and, days later, the renaissance man Donald Glover closes the curtain on his eclectic **Childish Gambino** project at Barclays Center (Aug. 26-27), alongside the star-child **Willow**. Early September keeps the hits coming with incomparable noise artists, sound designers, and genre distillers. At Radio City Music Hall, the Afro-R. & B. trailblazer **Tems** (Sept. 5) and the modern soul man **Jon Batiste** (Sept. 6-7) unleash voices that seem to filter history. Things amp up at Brooklyn

Paramount with the reunited riot grrrls of **Bikini Kill** (Sept. 7-8) and the guitar heroics of **St. Vincent** (Sept. 10-11). The bilingual pop shape-shifter **Omar Apollo** stops at Forest Hills Stadium for the “God Say No” tour (Sept. 7), and the composer-titan **Hanz Zimmer** brings cinematic sounds to Madison Square Garden (Sept. 12).

As fall gets into full swing, M.S.G. opens its doors for the main characters of this year’s pop summer, allowing them to settle into their victory laps: **Charli XCX** christens the success and excess of “Brat,” alongside the “Rush” sensation **Troye Sivan** (Sept. 23); **Sabrina Carpenter** relishes the newfound glow brought on by her pair of catchy, chart-conquering bops, “Please Please Please” and “Espresso” (Sept. 29); and **Billie Eilish** restlessly navigates the curious sounds of her May album, “Hit Me Hard and Soft” (Oct. 16-18). The arena also hosts **Vampire Weekend** (Oct. 5-6), which is again in rare form on the recent album “Only God Was Above Us,” and remains an indie-rock lodestar even as the genre’s locus shifts.

Beyond the Garden, there is no shortage of artists in full bloom. The singer-songwriter **Mk.gee** goes lo-fi at Terminal 5, on Sept. 25, and the English d.j. and producer **Nia Archives** trots out dance music for introverts at Brooklyn Steel, on Oct. 11. Webster Hall spotlights **Ravyn Lenae**’s tinsel R. & B. (Oct. 8) and **Empress Of**’s incandescent pop (Oct. 15), as Bowery Ballroom invites the “tenderpunk” of **Illuminati Hotties** (Oct. 18) and the Music Hall of Williamsburg showcases the slacker rocker **MJ Lenderman** (Oct. 25-27). In an inspired union of artist, venue, and moment, *BAM*’s Howard Gilman Opera House welcomes the experimentalist **ANOHNI** (Oct. 18-19) for her first shows with **the Johnsons** in a decade.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)*

Art



Fallible Flesh, Orphism, Gold

This fall belongs to groups. Relatively few of the tentpole art exhibitions have an individual at their center, and several of the most intriguing ones celebrate movements that, for as many reasons as there are tourists at the Met, still lack for fame. Shaker furniture is world famous for its plain, proto-minimalist design; to begin to understand nineteenth-century Shaker *drawing*, picture the exact opposite. A blast of bright color and wiggly shapes, sometimes verging on the psychedelic, is coming to the American Folk Art Museum under the banner of **“Anything But Simple: Gift Drawings and the Shaker Aesthetic”** (opening Sept. 13).

The place of Siena in Italian art history may seem as shaky as Florence’s and Rome’s are secure. There’s a very simple explanation: in the middle of the fourteenth century, a plague picked off the city’s finest painters, including Duccio, Simone Martini, and Ambrogio and Pietro Lorenzetti. Even if these Masters died just when things were getting interesting, they were crucial superspreaders of the Renaissance, as anyone who attends **“Siena: The Rise of Painting, 1300-1350,”** at the Met (Oct. 13), will be able to confirm.

Nobody could mistake the theme of *MOMA's "Vital Signs: Artists and the Body"* (Nov. 3) as neglected—it's hiding in plain view. More than a hundred works, mainly from the permanent collection, depict strange, sacred, fallible flesh, with special attention paid to the ways in which bodies are sorted by race and gender. Look out for drawings by Christina Ramberg, coming off of an excellent retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago, and Bhupen P. Khakhar's ecstatic "Kali," making its first appearance in these galleries.

Orphism, one of the most fascinating also-rans of European modernist painting, began, much like a rom-com, with the opposites-attract collision of hot, bright Fauvism and dun, jumbled Cubism. Its key figures, such as Robert and Sonia Delaunay and František Kupka, were prolifically inventive, but they lack, at least right now, the visibility of Picasso or Matisse. The Guggenheim's "**Harmony and Dissonance: Orphism in Paris, 1910-1930**" (Nov. 8) pays them some overdue attention.

Should the halos in Sienese painting whet your appetite for expensive, shiny, metal stuff, the Brooklyn Museum has just the thing. "**Solid Gold**" (Nov. 16) assembles more than four hundred works, including altarpieces, coins, designer clothing, sculptures, and jewelry. Is there an argument behind any of this—something about the perils of extraction, maybe? Does anybody need one to see this show? It's *gold*.—[Jackson Arn](#)

Movies



Auteurs Return, Along with Clooney and Pitt

The season's releases launch a spate of likely awards contenders from a wide range of well-established auteurs, starting with Tim Burton's "**Beetlejuice Beetlejuice**" (Sept. 6). This sequel reunites many of the characters from the 1988 original, bringing back actors including Michael Keaton, Catherine O'Hara, and Winona Ryder, for the reopening of a portal to the Afterlife, by the teen daughter (Jenna Ortega) of Ryder's (now grown) character. Francis Ford Coppola's long-planned superspectacle, "**Megalopolis**" (Sept. 27), which he self-financed, stars Adam Driver, Giancarlo Esposito, Nathalie Emmanuel, Aubrey Plaza, and Shia LaBeouf, in a drama that maps political conflicts of ancient Rome onto a futuristic science-fiction version of New York. Tom Hanks and Robin Wright star in "**Here**" (Nov. 1), Robert Zemeckis's adaptation of a graphic novel by Richard McGuire, a fantasy about the lives lived on a single plot of land in the course of thousands of years.

Ambitious movies from younger directors of international renown are also en route, such as Sean Baker's "**Anora**" (Oct. 18), a drama about a stripper (Mikey Madison) who marries a Russian oligarch's son (Mark Eydelshteyn). Steve McQueen's "**Blitz**" (Nov. 1) is centered on the experiences of a child

(Elliott Heffernan) in London during the Second World War. And Andrea Arnold's “**Bird**” (Nov. 8), starring Barry Keoghan, Franz Rogowski, and Nykiya Adams, lends the story of a poor family in Kent a supernatural twist.

The season's star vehicles come in many forms. In the French director Coralie Fargeat's horror drama “**The Substance**” (Sept. 20), Demi Moore plays an actress who undergoes a gruesome treatment to recover her youth. “**Wolfs**” (Sept. 20), directed by Jon Watts, showcases George Clooney and Brad Pitt as competing fixers forced to coöperate in the coverup of a murder. Joaquin Phoenix returns as the title character of “**Joker: Folie à Deux**” (Oct. 4), partnered with Lady Gaga, as Harley Quinn; Todd Phillips directed.

American independent filmmaking is the source of some of fall's most notable releases. Zia Anger's drama “**My First Film**” (Sept. 6) is based on her performance piece about her own unfinished movie; Odessa Young stars. In Aaron Schimberg's “**A Different Man**” (Sept. 20), Sebastian Stan plays an actor with facial tumors; after having them removed, he experiences unexpected changes in his career and his life. “**Christmas Eve in Miller's Point**” (Nov. 15), directed by Tyler Taormina, is a teeming comedy of an extended family's conflicts and epiphanies amid rowdy holiday celebrations.

—[Richard Brody](#)

Television



Colin Farrell's Penguin, Cate Blanchett's Thriller

TV gave us plenty of reasons to stay inside this summer, with big shows like “Bridgerton,” “The Bear,” “The Boys,” and “House of the Dragon.” In comparison, fall programming looks positively pared down. Theuzziest—and most confusingly cast—might be HBO’s **“The Penguin”** (Sept. 19), in which the decidedly handsome Colin Farrell is made unrecognizable as the rather unhandsome Batman villain. An origin story inspired in part by the “Godfather” movies, “The Penguin” will find Farrell’s mobster protagonist squaring off against his deceased boss’s dangerous daughter, played by a promisingly against-type Cristin Milioti. Other I.P. gambles arrive, too. Kathryn Hahn resumes her scene-stealing role in Disney+’s “WandaVision” as the titular witch in a spinoff, **“Agatha All Along”** (Sept. 18), and a new version of **“Matlock”** (Sept. 22), on CBS, has Kathy Bates taking over the character from Andy Griffith.

Autumn’s most auspicious prestige play is arguably Apple TV+’s psychological thriller **“Disclaimer”** (Oct. 11), starring Cate Blanchett as a TV journalist who encounters a novel that’s seemingly based on her life, and on skeletons from her past; it’s written and directed by Alfonso Cuarón, with a supporting cast including Kevin Kline and Sacha Baron Cohen. History

also gets dredged up in Hulu's "**Interior Chinatown**" (Nov. 19), about a struggling actor (Jimmy O. Yang) who stumbles upon family secrets, and also a real crime, while working on a police procedural. In Starz's "**Three Women**" (Sept. 13), a trio played by Betty Gilpin, DeWanda Wise, and Gabrielle Creevy choose to open up to a journalist, played by Shailene Woodley, about dysfunctional relationships in their lives. And I guess TV execs can't stop planting dead bodies in affluent environs: on Sept. 5, Netflix débuts "**The Perfect Couple**," set in Nantucket and starring Nicole Kidman.

On the lighter side, there's the comedian Brian Jordan Alvarez's "**English Teacher**" (Sept. 2), FX's more adult answer to "Abbott Elementary," which centers on well-meaning educators at an Austin high school who are chronically baffled by their students—and exhausted by the parents. Kristen Bell and Adam Brody tempt fate in the (hopefully not aptly named) Netflix rom-com "**Nobody Wants This**" (Sept. 26), about a rabbi and an agnostic who fall in love. An underfunded hospital is the unlikely comedic setting of Peacock's "**St. Denis Medical**" (Nov. 12), from Justin Spitzer and Eric Ledgin, the team behind "Superstore" and "American Auto." Meanwhile, the "Insecure" actress Natasha Rothwell gets her own starring vehicle in Hulu's "**How to Die Alone**" (Sept. 13), about an airport worker who finally lets her long-suppressed aspirations take flight.—*Inkoo Kang*

Classical Music



Politics at the Met, Guests of the N.Y. Phil

Summer's almost over, and politics are everywhere you look. At the **Metropolitan Opera**, a new opera by the famed Broadway composer Jeanine Tesori, “**Grounded**,” ponders a Reaper-drone pilot’s decisions and ethics; the mezzo-soprano Emily D’Angelo performs the lead (opening on Sept. 23). “**Ainadamar**,” Osvaldo Golijov’s tense, flamenco-inflected depiction of the life and assassination of Federico García Lorca, opens a few weeks later (Oct. 15), with Daniela Mack as the martyred socialist poet.

The **New York Philharmonic**, dramatically shorn of music director and president, turns the interregnum to its advantage, inviting an array of guest conductors to collaborate with the orchestra, among them, **Michael Tilson Thomas** (Sept. 12-13 and Sept. 15), **Thomas Wilkins** (Oct. 17-18), and **Susanna Mälkki** (Oct. 31-Nov. 2). The composer and conductor **John Adams**’s program (Nov. 14 and Nov. 16)—which includes his own “City Noir” and Gabriella Smith’s cello concerto “Lost Coast,” a nature-hymn-cum-climate-polemic performed by Gabriel Cabezas—may be a taste of things to come: the **Los Angeles Philharmonic** and **Gustavo Dudamel**, New York’s incoming music director, commissioned Smith’s piece. Dudamel leads the L.A. Phil as it opens **Carnegie Hall**’s season, with three

Latin-themed programs, including a Spanish version of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” complete with Mendelssohn’s incidental music, one night (Oct. 9), and **Natalia Lafourcade** the next (Oct. 10).

On the same stage, the chamber choir **the Crossing** and a group of local military veterans are among the performers in the New York première of “Can We Know the Sound of Forgiveness,” by Gabriela Ortiz (Oct. 18); **the Knights** perform Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” plus a new rhapsody by Michael Schachter (Oct. 24); and the innovative South African musician **Abel Selaocoe**, who joyfully layers Baroque cello technique with vocal traditions grounded in his homeland, appears with his group the **Bantu Ensemble** (Oct. 26).

Elsewhere, the Miller Theatre continues its “Composer Portraits” series with three recent pieces by **Courtney Bryan**, including her “Requiem,” performed by the Quince Ensemble’s quartet of sopranos (Sept. 12). At *BAM*, “**Sun Dogs: Filmmaker and Composer Pairings**” brings together such artists as Arooj Aftab and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Nov. 18-19). National Sawdust premières Paola Prestini’s “**Silent Light**,” an opera that churns the curdling emotions of a Mennonite community (Sept. 26-29). **Fourth Wall Ensemble** sings Caroline Shaw’s “Partita” at the Angel’s Share, in Green-Wood Cemetery (Sept. 5-7). And, at Little Island, a last gasp of summer: the countertenor **Anthony Roth Costanzo**, ever a one-man band, sings every leading role in a reconceived chamber version of “The Marriage of Figaro” (Aug. 30-Sept. 22).—[Fergus McIntosh](#)

Dance



A Dostoyevsky Ballet, Fall for Dance

Every mid-September, the dance season goes from zero to sixty in an instant—suddenly, dance is everywhere. One of the opening acts is City Center’s **Fall for Dance** festival (Sept. 18-29), its tickets priced to sell out quickly (this year, at thirty dollars), its programs a cheerfully jumbled mix. Among the highlights is a visit by the National Ballet of Ukraine, based in Kyiv, with “**Wartime Elegy**,” a work that contrasts the anguish of the past two years with the high spirits of Ukrainian folk dance. It is by Alexei Ratmansky, a member of the company in the eighties and nineties, and now an artist-in-residence at New York City Ballet.

And, speaking of **New York City Ballet**, the company is marking various anniversaries (David H. Koch, Sept. 17-Oct. 12), including a half century since the première of George Balanchine and Alexandra Danilova’s “**Coppélia**,” and Justin Peck’s tenth year as resident choreographer. The latter occasion is met with an all-Peck program; “Coppélia” has the distinction of being one of the happiest ballets ever made, and also of being set to one of the most melodious of ballet scores, by Léo Delibes. Look out, too, for a smaller work, Lar Lubovitch’s “Each in Their Own Time,” a tender pas de deux for two men set to Brahms piano pieces.

When **Bill T. Jones**'s “**Still/Here**” premiered, in 1994, the *AIDS* epidemic was still raging. Through an exacting workshop process, Jones gathered stories and gestures from people facing illness and death and turned them into choreographic material. The result was like capturing lightning in a bottle, a work that takes on with great honesty, rawness, and grace the themes of fear, connection, and human dignity. It returns to *BAM* Oct. 30-Nov. 2.

Over at **American Ballet Theatre** (David H. Koch, Oct. 16-Nov. 3), the big reveal is a new evening-length work based on Dostoyevsky’s paranoid tale of violence and redemption, “**Crime and Punishment**,” not necessarily an obvious choice for a ballet. Its choreographer, Helen Pickett, is a former member of William Forsythe’s troupe and a sometime Wooster Group performer who has carved out a niche as a creator of dramatic ballets based on literary subjects. The company is also bringing back “*La Bayadère*,” but—cannily sidestepping the rest of the ballet’s exoticism—just the abstract, all-white-costumed “Shades” scene, one of the marvels of nineteenth-century repertoire.—[*Marina Harss*](#)

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [This baseball-ballet moment](#)
- [Sade under the sea](#)
- [Baby beavers are born in London](#)

The Talk of the Town

- [Trump's Got Troubles](#)
- [Stop! Newspaper Thief!](#)
- [Chris Perfetti Considers the Lion](#)
- [Graduation Day at an Urban Kayak Camp](#)
- [Did R.F.K., Jr., Squander a Golden Opportunity with the Dead Bear Cub?](#)

Comment

Trump's Got Troubles

His campaign is careening, his poll numbers are slipping, and, after something of a summer lull, he is due for several confrontations in court.

By Amy Davidson Sorkin

August 18, 2024



On August 7th, as thousands of people gathered at an airfield in Michigan to see Vice-President Kamala Harris and her just-announced running mate, Governor Tim Walz, Donald Trump signed paperwork notifying the federal government that he would be suing the Department of Justice for a hundred million dollars. Trump wants the money because, he claims, a Federal Bureau of Investigation search of Mar-a-Lago, his Florida home, in 2022, was “highly offensive”—and part of a malicious “political scheme” engineered by Attorney General Merrick Garland and the F.B.I. director, Christopher Wray. The claim doesn’t make much sense. The F.B.I. had a warrant to look for White House documents marked as classified (and found plenty of them), and, while the resulting case has now been dismissed by Judge Aileen Cannon, her reasons had to do with the appointment of the special counsel, Jack Smith, which occurred months after the search. It took

a few days for the hundred-million-dollar filing to become known. Trump may have been too busy spreading the falsehood that a photo of Harris's airfield rally had been faked by A.I. He didn't believe that her crowd could possibly be so big.

Amid the spectacle of Trump's careening campaign—the declaration that President Joe Biden had been removed in “a coup”; a running mate, J. D. Vance, who disparaged childless women; Trump’s complaint that a *Time* magazine cover illustration of Harris was unfair because it made her look like his wife, Melania—it can be hard to focus on his personal legal problems. But Trump hasn’t forgotten about them, and neither have his lawyers or the prosecutors pursuing him. After something of a summer lull, Trump is due for several confrontations in court, just in time for the last, frenetic stretch of the campaign.

As the hundred-million-dollar suit indicates, none of the four criminal prosecutions against Trump is as yet a closed book, even though one has been dismissed (Florida) and another has resulted in a conviction (New York, on thirty-four felony counts of falsifying business records). A Georgia case alleging a conspiracy to steal the state’s electoral votes in 2020 has been stalled, but may see action: Mark Meadows, Trump’s co-defendant and former chief of staff, has petitioned the Supreme Court to move the case to federal court. Another prosecution brought by Smith, in Washington, D.C., also related to Trump’s alleged attempt to overturn the 2020 election, has been shaken up by the radical Supreme Court ruling, in July, that former Presidents enjoy broad immunity for “official acts.” Judge Tanya Chutkan has set a hearing for September 5th, to figure out whether any part of the indictment can survive—and thus test the limits of the Court’s decision. Smith’s office also has until next week to file a brief appealing the Cannon dismissal; that question, too, may end up before the Supreme Court.

Meanwhile, Trump still needs to be sentenced in the New York case, and he could face up to twenty years in prison. The sentencing was delayed when Judge Juan Merchan, who presided, agreed to consider Trump’s argument that the verdict should be set aside because—again—of the immunity decision. (His lawyers say that, under it, certain evidence should never have been introduced.) Merchan is planning to rule on that motion on September 16th—six days after the first Trump-Harris debate—and then to sentence

Trump on September 18th. By that point, Trump's lawyers complained in a letter last week, which asked to push the sentencing back until after the election, early voting will have begun. Given the stakes, the level of scrutiny, the novelty of the charges, and the setbacks that the other cases have experienced in higher courts, Merchan and Alvin Bragg, the Manhattan D.A., would be well advised to tread carefully. Any prison sentence would most likely be stayed pending an appeal, but it would still have an explosive effect on an already unsettling campaign.

Last week, after Merchan declined to either recuse himself or entirely lift a gag order that hampers Trump from attacking court employees and their relatives, Trump posted, "This is the real Fascist 'stuff.'" He has also, in the weeks since Biden dropped out of the race, described Harris as "a Communist," "crazy," "fake," "not a smart person," and, unforgettably, as someone who only recently "happened to turn Black." For good measure, last week, at a press conference at his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, he said of Walz, "He wants tampons in boys' bathrooms." The reference was to a Minnesota law Walz signed that simply requires schools to make period supplies available to "menstruating students" in fourth through twelfth grade. (Trump spoke in front of a display of bacon, Honey Bunches of Oats, and other groceries, meant to evince a concern for food prices.) Trump has said that Harris is not fit to be President because he finds her laugh strange; that, if she's elected, the stock market will crash; and that he had a near-death experience while flying in an out-of-control helicopter with Willie Brown, the former mayor of San Francisco, who once dated Harris and "told me terrible things about her." Brown says this never happened.

It's tempting to put all the smears in the same category: Trump, reeling, lashes out. "She was so disrespected just a few weeks ago, and now it's, like, *Kah-mala, Kah-mala*," he said at a rally last Wednesday in North Carolina. (It was one of the rare times that Trump pronounced her name correctly.) What he meant, it seems, was that he was so far ahead in the polls just a month ago, and now he's in a battle—and behind or tied in polls in several swing states. In that fight, one role of the criminal cases is to provide him and his followers an animating sense of grievance. Last week, after an awkward interlude in a live-streamed conversation between Trump and Elon Musk, in which Trump wondered why people talked so much about global warming "but they never talk about nuclear warming" (this had something to

do with a Third World War), Musk tried to regroup by asking about the “lawfare” waged against him. Trump replied, “It’s a terrible thing”—and was off and running, with tales of rigged trials and banana republics.

Trump’s legal battles are not just another campaign issue, though, because they are existential, not only for him but for the country and the rule of law. He is no doubt keenly aware that, if reëlected, he can get the federal cases against him dropped. The image of Harris the prosecutor taking on Trump the felon is a compelling one, but the attendant hazard is his knack for presenting himself as a martyr. In Bedminster, he said, “They tell me I should be nice? They want to put me in prison!” The White House is the nicer place. ♦

Printed Word Dept.

Stop! Newspaper Thief!

On one Yorkville block, print isn't dying—it's being stolen. Can a book conservator, a ninety-year-old fax enthusiast, and a vigilante nab a well-read bandit?

By Naaman Zhou

August 19, 2024



There are a lot of valuable things out on the street these days. Porch pirates swipe packages. Lift a catalytic converter from a Prius—between the engine and the muffler—and you can flip it for a thousand dollars. But what if you're looking for a more regular income stream? Some newspapers now go for four dollars an issue—six on the weekend. Could that be money for the taking?

On a tree-lined block of East Eighty-fifth Street, in Yorkville, not far from Gracie Mansion, Doris Straus, a retired book conservator (print subscriptions: *Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Financial Times*) noticed a disturbing trend: her periodicals kept going missing. One week—a particularly big one for news (headline: “*SOME IN ROOM WITH BIDEN*

SAY LAPSSES ARE INCREASING")—her *Times* was gone almost every other day. "It was driving me crazy," Straus said recently. "I can't eat my breakfast without the newspaper. It's not the same thing online." Neighbors were being victimized, too. Straus ruled out spotty delivery. It had to be a thief—one with particular tastes. "They only take the *Post* and the *Times*," Straus explained. She posted about the incidents on a local online forum. One person commented with relief, "I get *Newsday* so maybe I am safe."

A printed-word vigilante found himself drawn to the case. A careful canvassing of the street showed it to be a mix of doorman buildings, walkups, and homes with fenced-off gardens, shady and quiet—perfect for reading. The inky-fingered residents were on edge. "The only issue we've had is, like, people parking in front of the pumps," Bryant Lorenzo, a doorman, reported. "The stealing is really alarming."

Defensive measures were implemented. Straus's building has a pair of dark, stately columns that frame the entrance. A secure drop-off? The street's regular deliverywoman, Rene, started stashing the *Times* behind them. But the bandit seemed one step ahead. Straus, wearing sunglasses and comfortable brogues, pointed out the compromised rendezvous point with frustration. "You really can't see from the street," she said. "You have to know it's there." An inside job?

Just when the trail had gone cold, a tipster stepped forward. Cathy De Vido, ninety years old, saw it all go down from the front of her historic wood-frame farmhouse. Over a coffee-table interrogation, with Straus sitting in, De Vido, who has light-brown hair and wears clear oval glasses, sang like a canary.

It was early dawn. Six-twenty. De Vido was in her home office, reading a lengthy fax from her son, when she heard something. "Our gate creaks," she said. Someone was out there. De Vido crept to the front door and peered through a glass viewing slot. "I saw a baseball cap," she said. The hat was attached to a woman. De Vido opened the door and moved toward the perp, but the mystery woman avoided apprehension: "She was very agile." De Vido called out, "Hello!" The woman said, "Excuse me," and scurried away. Only later did De Vido notice that her *Times* was missing.

The witness described the scofflaw: "Curly white hair, jaw-length. Wearing a jean jacket, the baseball cap, and chinos." Age? "White-haired, but very spry," De Vido said. "I would say she had to be in her late seventies or early eighties." The advanced age didn't fit the typical profile of a thief, but De Vido suspected ties to a larger enterprise. "I think she was selected for that reason," she said. "You know, perhaps because she would be so unlikely to have any suspicion aroused."



Straus said, "It's a cabal!"

Enough speculation—this called for a stakeout. Straus suggested that a neighbor, Jim Hart, who gets the *Post*, could be good to keep watch. ("He's ex-Wall Street, ex-military.") But Hart wasn't a morning person. ("I'm retired—no, thank you," Hart said.) The vigilante had no choice but to go without backup. Straus and De Vido agreed to leave some papers ("WEAK JOBS DATA HELPS TO SPREAD GLOBAL SELL-OFF") outside, as bait.

On a warm morning, the vigilante settled in. It was five-fifty-eight. Joggers jogged. Pigeons pecked at a few trash bags. Many dogs were walked. A white pickup was idling for a suspiciously long time. A getaway car? Further investigation revealed a plumber, smoking a cigar while waiting for a job. No dice.

The thief seemed scared off. Rene, the deliverywoman, appeared, wearing a white cap and carrying a ring of jangling keys. (She declined to provide a surname; she prefers delivering the papers to appearing in them.) She'd been up since 2:30 A.M. "I don't do the job for money," she said. "I do it because I like to walk." She had a message for the thieves: "The Bible says, 'Thou shalt not steal.' That means even paper!"

She wandered over to De Vido's house, and was greeted at the gate. De Vido repeated her description of the suspect.

"I think I've seen a woman like that, one time," Rene said. "It rings a little bell."

The sun was up—a bright, early-morning light—and Rene went off to finish her route. De Vido picked up her *Times* and carried it inside. The suspect remained at large. ♦

The Boards

Chris Perfetti Considers the Lion

The “Abbott Elementary” star heads to the Bronx Zoo to research his role as a queer, existentialist feline predator in the play “Open Throat.”

By André Wheeler

August 19, 2024



Chris Perfetti, a star of the schoolhouse sitcom “Abbott Elementary,” paid a quick visit to the Bronx Zoo one recent afternoon. His day had had a so-so start. “I was biking here and got a flat very early on,” the actor, who was a little sweaty, said. He had planned to cycle from Brooklyn to the Bronx. “It was going to be, like, an hour and a half,” he said. Instead, he had to call an Uber.

At the zoo, Perfetti, who wore a backpack, deliberately untied sneakers, and tech-fabric gym clothes, had a straightforward objective: check out the lion exhibit. Big cats were on his mind. Perfetti would star as what he called a “queer mountain lion” the next day, in a stage adaptation of Henry Hoke’s novel “Open Throat.” He scanned the uncrowded zoo and smiled. “If I

didn't have rehearsal, I would probably stay here longer and get my forty-five dollars' worth," he said.

As he looked for the lions, he said that he felt a special connection to his "Open Throat" character, an existentialist kitty who brims with questions about human nature and civilization while roaming the hills of Los Angeles. "There was a lot I could relate to," he said. "I've only lived in L.A. a few years now, and that continues to be my experience—like, an incredibly isolating place." The emo role was a weeklong stint, at Little Island, in between filming seasons of "Abbott Elementary," in which Perfetti plays Jacob, an affable, glass-half-full history teacher. "Because of the strikes, we really shifted all of the shooting schedule for 'Abbott' this year," he said. "So there was a pretty tiny window of time for the play." The actors had only a few days of group rehearsal, so they decided that they'd just read from scripts onstage. "We're not hiding the fact that we don't have the book memorized," he said.

He stopped walking when he realized that he was about to venture into the zoo's parking lot. Wrong way. He studied a map, spun around, and headed in the other direction.

Perfetti said that playing a lion was a welcome change of pace. "I feel a permission and confidence to swing for the fences a little bit," he said. "There is, like, no way I am believable." He stopped to gawk at a set of life-size rhinoceros statues and then spotted a misting fan overhead. "For forty-five dollars, you better get you some mist," he said, before heading under. He grimaced. The water was warm. "That actually made it worse." The lion exhibit was still nowhere to be seen. "They're really not advertising these lions," Perfetti said.

Perfetti had been to the Bronx Zoo once before. After he graduated from drama school, at the Conservatory of Theatre Arts at SUNY Purchase, he went with his father. "He's obsessed with all things nature and animals," Perfetti said. "I kind of am, too. If you were to look at my Netflix queue, it's really just David Attenborough." He went on, "There's something about that man's voice that just lulls me."

“Oh, look, it’s a giraffe!” he said. A couple of ostriches were killing time a few feet away. “They’re, like, ‘We represent for the long necks!’ ” He shook his head. “I can’t believe there are giraffes in New York City.” A few strides away, Perfetti stumbled upon a line to view gorillas.

Still no lions in sight, so a zoo attendant provided directions. “They’re probably laying on the rocks,” she said.

Soon, Perfetti was in the African Plains section. “This cannot be the lions,” he said, next to an enclosure. “Because there’s antelope in there.”

But he was close. As he continued searching, he said, “I read an article about a tiger who escaped from its enclosure and just . . . attacked some kid.” Then he stopped in his tracks and pointed: “Lions.”

As the attendant had predicted, two lions were splayed out on rocks, gently breathing. Did they spark any sort of inspiration? “Honestly, it kind of only fills me with sadness,” he said. “You know, feet away from barbed wire. There’s a moment in the show where Heckit, the cat, breaks into the zoo and kills and eats a koala bear. He describes the smell upon approaching the zoo as ‘sick and sad.’ ” He paused and shrugged. “I know they’re also probably just hot.” Then he brightened. “I’m happy there’s two of them,” he said. A small smile appeared on his face. ♦

Downstream Dept.

Graduation Day at an Urban Kayak Camp

New York City teens, trapped in the concrete jungle, head out on the Housatonic with two pros, Jessie Stone and Eric Jackson, for some of their first river rides.

By Ben McGrath

August 19, 2024



Jessie Stone likes to call herself a medical doctor with a kayaking problem. For much of the year, she runs a clinic in Uganda that provides primary care as well as malaria education. The clinic sits next to the Nile, near its headwaters. “Lucky for me!” she said recently, though the more she elaborated, the less luck seemed to play a part. Stone, who is fifty-six, is a six-time member of the U.S. women’s freestyle-kayaking team. In 2003, she was descending the Nile with some other pros when their expedition leader, the occasional world champion Eric Jackson, fell ill with malaria. They were in Uganda at the time. While treating Jackson, Stone grew curious about the local population’s familiarity with how the disease spreads. She founded

Soft Power Health, a nonprofit that built the clinic, the next year, knowing that there was an enviable white-water source nearby. Work-life balance: achieved.

Stone and Jackson, who goes by E.J., have remained close. Every summer, they run a weeklong camp in New York for teens from difficult backgrounds. Stone got the idea while watching the Twin Towers burn. “I remember thinking, If I was a kid in the city, I would feel like my world was ending,” she said. “Trapped on this island, in the concrete jungle.” The camp begins in a swimming pool—still concrete—and then moves on to a swamp, with snapping turtles and slow-moving water, before concluding with some real rapids on a local river. This year, they chose the Housatonic, which Stone calls a “magic river,” as blissful in its quiet way as the Nile, the Zambezi, the Penobscot, or the Cal Salmon.

Friday was “graduation day,” with a surfable standing wave called George’s to look forward to. “You’re probably going to flip,” Brendan, a four-year veteran of the camp, told a newcomer as the two of them carried an inflatable kayak down a wooded trail. “But they’ll catch you in mad seconds.” Brendan flipped last year. He expected better this time. He was so enamored of being in nature that he mistook the crackling of power lines overhead for birdsong.

Jackson, who is built like a gymnast, wore an American-flag-themed Speedo and held a GoPro while the campers fastened chinstraps on their helmets and Stone went over some basics near the launch site. “Pop quiz,” she said. “If you come up sideways against a rock, what do you do?”

“You lean into it,” several campers answered in unison.

Not covered: what to do when you come to a halt on *top* of a rock. The newcomer, who had missed the beginning of the camp, found himself in such a scenario shortly after the group’s fleet of twenty or so kayaks, mostly plastic and a couple of inflatables, got under way. He improvised a scooching method of extraction, hoping that he hadn’t punctured the soft hull, and caught up to the others around a bend as they idled in an eddy beside a long, gently sloping ledge that was responsible for producing George’s—a tantalizing funnel of froth.

Brendan was one of the first to shoot the rapid. He emerged on the far side holding his paddle in the air, triumphant, and then quickly veered to the left bank, where someone had stashed a boogie board. The newcomer, meanwhile, noticed that his hull seemed to be deflating. Uh-oh. His lap pooled with water as he descended the chute, but he managed not to flip. The same, alas, couldn't be said for a camper named Keith, who had jokingly accused one of the instructors of trying to drown him during a previous expedition. Overboard he went. A group surrounded him in mad seconds. They shouted "Woo-hoo!" and "Keith, that was awesome!"

"My heart rate is so high right now," he said.

Brendan returned with the boogie board. "Whoever brought this, this was a good idea," he said, wide-eyed, and swam out to the wave from the downstream side.

Before long, everyone was floating downstream again, amid a succession of kingfishers, herons, and cormorants. Brendan began smacking a paddle blade on the surface, sending targeted sprays at his peers. "That's racist!" one of them joked. "You're only doing that because I'm a border crosser."

The worst part of kayaking, they all agreed, was getting off the river, which required lugging gear over rocks and weeds and then up a steep slope to a U-Haul. Pop quiz: How many white-water kayaks can you jam into a single truck? Answer: eleven, if Jackson is doing the lifting. Brendan asked Stone if she'd ever kayaked in the ocean. "Yeah, lots!" she replied. His eyes grew wide again. ♦

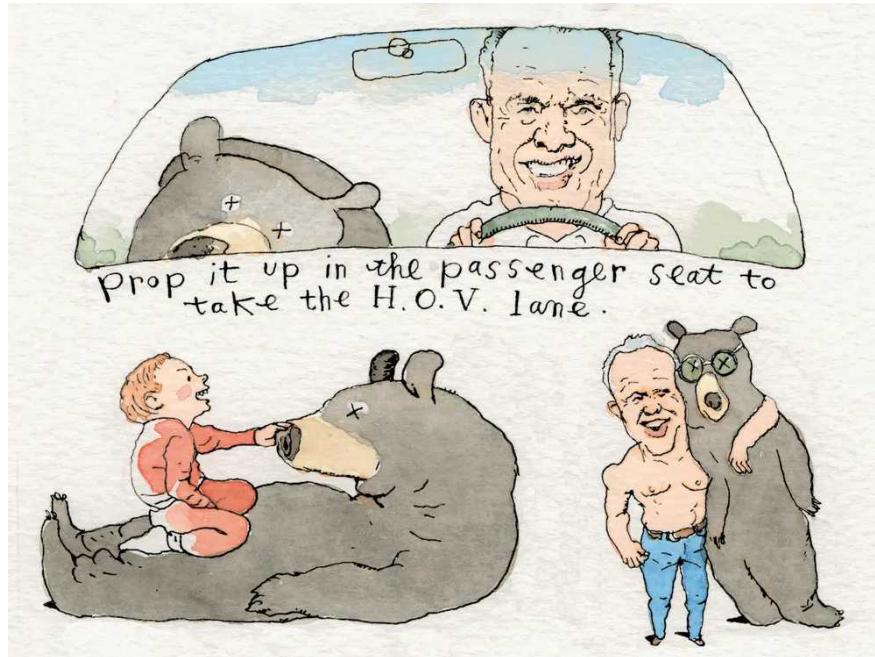
Sketchpad

Did R.F.K., Jr., Squander a Golden Opportunity with the Dead Bear Cub?

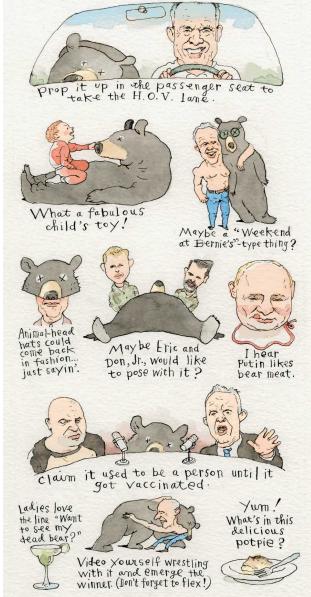
Sure, dumping it in Central Park was interesting. But had he even considered using it as a delicious gift for Putin, or as a pickup line with the ladies?

By Steve Martin, Barry Blitt

August 19, 2024



Other Things RFK, Jr., Could
Have Done with the Bear



Reporting & Essays

- [On Cancer and Desire](#)
- [Our Very Strange Search for “Sea Level”](#)
- [Infiltrating the Far Right](#)
- [The Cult in the Forest](#)

Personal History

On Cancer and Desire

Images from a complicated year.

By Annie Ernaux

August 19, 2024



I saw M.'s sex for the first time on the night of January 22, 2003, in the entryway of my house, at the foot of the stairs leading up to the bedrooms. There is something extraordinary about the first sight of the other's sex, the unveiling of what was hitherto unknown. So *that* is what we're going to live with, live our love with. Or not.

We'd had dinner together in a restaurant he knew well on Rue Servandoni, near the Jardin du Luxembourg. He had just left the woman he'd been living with for several months. During the meal, I said, "I'd like to take you to Venice," and immediately added, "but I can't at the moment because I've got breast cancer, and I'm having an operation next week at the Institut Curie." He showed none of the signs—the almost imperceptible retraction, the sudden stiffening—through which even the most educated and composed people let their horror show, despite themselves, when I told them I had

cancer. The only time he seemed disturbed was when I revealed that my new hair style, which he'd complimented many times, was a wig, and that I'd lost my hair as a result of chemotherapy. He was no doubt disappointed, even mortified, to learn that the object of his admiration was a hairpiece.

(Now it occurs to me that I said to M. "I've got breast cancer" in the same abrupt way that I'd told a Catholic boy, in the sixties, "I'm pregnant and I want an abortion"—in order to throw him into it, giving him no time to put up his guard and prepare his response when confronted with an unbearable reality.)

After dinner, we went to a deserted bar on Rue de Condé, with a big Buddha at the entrance. At one point, speaking as bluntly as I had when I'd told him about my cancer, he said, "I have an honest proposal for you: come spend the night with me at my hotel." I declined, because I had an appointment with the anesthesiologist the following morning, and instead I invited him back to my house. On our way out, we put a coin in the basin at the Buddha's feet. We took the R.E.R. together. All I remember of the trip is a young and fashionably dressed Black woman sitting next to us, talking on the phone with an earpiece and in a tone of argument that one would use only with someone close—husband, mother, child.

I didn't take off my wig in bed. I didn't want him to see my bald head. Chemotherapy had left my pubis bald, too. Near my armpit, sticking out under the skin, was what looked like a beer-bottle cap, a catheter implanted there at the start of treatment.



He later admitted that he'd been startled by my pubis, as naked as that of a little girl. He had never heard of this consequence of chemo—but who ever talks about it? I hadn't known, either, until it happened to me. He didn't notice that evening that I had no eyelashes or eyebrows, either, though their absence gave me the eerie gaze of a wax-faced doll.

At one point, staring at my chest, he asked me if the cancer was in my left breast. I was surprised. The right was visibly more swollen than the left because of the tumor. He probably could not imagine that the prettier of the two was the cancerous one.

•

There was a great sweetness to my stay at the Institut Curie for the surgery, which took place six days later. The tumor and several lymph nodes were removed. Analysis of those tissues would tell us whether the entire breast would have to be removed later. M. spent hours holding me in his arms. The smiles of the nurses and aides expressed approval. On Saturday, it snowed. I could see the white roofs from my bed. I could hear the sound of demonstrations against the imminent war in Iraq coming from the Boulevard Saint-Michel, and from the corridor the clear and regular chime of the

elevator stopping at my floor. I wrote in my journal that I felt infinitely happy.

Because of my totally smooth body, M. called me his mermaid-woman. The catheter that was like a growth protruding from my chest became a “supernumerary bone.”

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The hallway, March 6, 2003: Clothing and shoes are scattered all the way down a hallway with big, pale tiles. In the foreground, on the right, is a red sweater or shirt and a black tank top that appear to have been torn off and turned inside out in the same movement, resembling the bust of a statue, with its neckline revealed and its arms cut off. A white label is clearly visible on the tank top. Farther on is a pair of curled-up jeans with a black belt attached. To the left of the jeans, the red lining of a red jacket is spread out like a rag for cleaning the floor. On top of that, a pair of blue checkered boxer shorts and a white bra, one of whose straps is stretching out toward the jeans. Behind, a men’s boot lies on its side next to a rumpled blue sock. Standing far apart and perpendicular to each other are two black high-heeled pumps. Even farther away, protruding from under the radiator, is the black splotch of a sweater or a skirt. On the other side, next to the wall, is a small black-and-white heap, impossible to identify. In the background, you can make out a coatrack and the bottom of a trenchcoat whose belt is dangling down. The light of a flash illuminates the scene, whitening the tiles and the radiator, and making the leather of the pump we see in profile shimmer.

In another photo of the same scene, taken from a different angle, from a doorway, we see the other men’s shoe and the other sock, alone at the bottom of a staircase.

I’m trying to describe these photos from two points of view, one past, one present. What I see now is not what I saw that morning when I came down the stairs before breakfast and stood in the hallway with my hazy memory of the night before. It’s a scene in which certain elements cannot be identified at first glance, and this place is different from the one I’m used to being in every day. It seems bigger to me, the tiles huge. To tell the truth, it is neither

alien nor familiar, having simply undergone a distortion of its dimensions and a heightening of all its colors.



My first reaction is to try to discern beings in the shapes of the objects, as if in a Rorschach test whose inkblots have been replaced by pieces of clothing and lingerie. I am no longer inside the reality that gave rise to my emotion and then to the urge to take the photographs I took that morning. It's my imagination that deciphers the photos, not my memory. I absolutely need to get them out of my sight, so that, after a time, the images of spring, 2003, will come back to me in a sort of delayed remembering, so that thought itself will be set in motion.

I found the date of the photographs in my journal. On Thursday, March 6th, I wrote, "He left in the hallway the composition formed by our shoes, our clothes all mixed together and piled here and there, mostly red and black. It was very beautiful. I took two photos."

Now it seems to me that I have always wanted to preserve images of the devastated landscape that remains after lovemaking. I wonder why the idea of photographing it did not occur to me before, or why I never suggested it to any other man. Maybe I thought that there was something vaguely

shameful or unworthy in the idea. In a way, I felt it was less obscene—or now feel it was more acceptable—to photograph M.’s sex.

Perhaps, too, it was something that I could do only with this man, and only at this time in my life.

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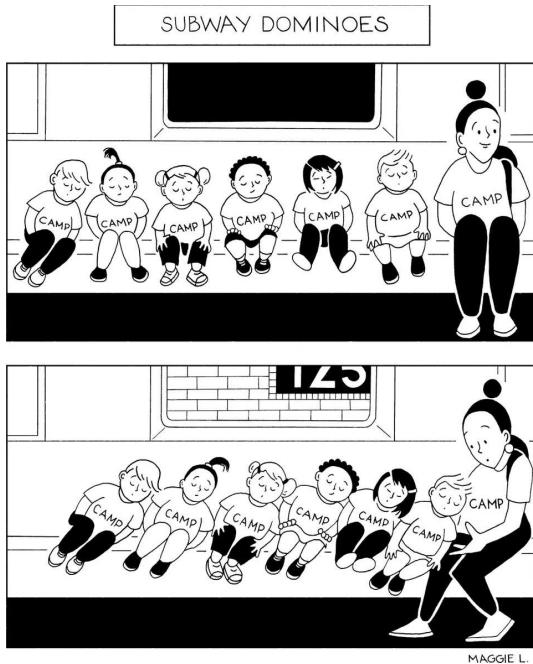
For years, when I went to the library of the Institut National de Recherche Pédagogique, on Rue d’Ulm, I saw the Institut Curie across the street, and its nearby rose garden. I generally crossed the street before passing the Institut. I’d rush into the I.N.R.P. with the sense of having escaped a kind of danger. I was temporarily safe. The first time I walked through the glass door of the Institut Curie, on the morning of October 3, 2002, I sensed that my reprieve had come to an end. I felt that breast cancer was something that was destined to happen to me, like all the things that happen mainly to women, though neither my mother nor my grandmother had had it, or any of my aunts or cousins. As with higher education, I was the first in my family, the trailblazer.

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When I bought the October issue of *Marie Claire*, I discovered that it was Breast Cancer Month. So, in this way, at least, I was keeping up with fashion. I remembered that I had picked up the magazine the summer before for its “sex supplement.”

I called the town hall to buy a cemetery plot. The employee asked me how old I was. It seemed it could not be done before age seventy. Then she wanted to know why I wanted to buy a plot, and it amused me to say, “To prepare for the future!” It was still in the future, after all.

On the Internet, I pored over the countless sites devoted to breast cancer.



Whereas at an earlier time in my life I'd seen signs of jealousy everywhere, now I saw signs of death. As I left the Leroy Merlin home-improvement store, I noticed an arrow pointing in the direction of the morgue; a gadget I'd received as a gift contained a tiny clock, and so on.

My aversion to housework became radical. The idea of organizing and conserving things seemed more absurd than ever. I wasn't going to add death to death.

I bought two pairs of shoes and two cashmere sweaters, telling myself that it was a big expense, useless in my condition—but money was useless, too.

Once, at the Auber R.E.R. station, at the bottom of the escalator, I passed a Romani woman holding out her hand, a child in her arms. I realized that she was breast-feeding. Her breast was purple. I retraced my steps and gave her a coin. For the sake of mine.

I remembered Violette Leduc and looked up in a biography how long she'd survived with her breast cancer: seven years. That was enough time to write. I was looking for a literary form that would contain my whole life. It did not yet exist.

In the Métro, at the bank, I'd look at old women, their deep wrinkles, their drooping eyelids, and say to myself, "I'll never be old." It wasn't a sad thought, just a surprising one. I'd never had that thought before.

The thing that struck me most was the simplicity of it all.

•

As I crossed the threshold of the Institut Curie for the first time, Dante's phrase came back to me: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." But once inside I felt, on the contrary, as if I were in a kind of ideal setting, unparalleled in our times, where smiling and attentive human beings gave care and kindness to other humans who were destitute. Very quickly, without thinking about it, I took the signposted route from the Luxembourg R.E.R. station, at the heart of the Latin Quarter, where, amid all the intersecting paths that led to classes, stores, lovers' meeting spots, and tourist attractions, there was also one for cancer patients.

To say "I've got chemo tomorrow" became as natural as it had been the year before to say "I've got a hair appointment."

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Morning kitchen, Sunday, March 16th: On the right in the photo, pale-wood cupboards, a white dishwasher. On the countertop, on either side of the gleaming sink, behind which trays are propped against the wall, are a chopping board, various electrical appliances, a bottle of bleach with a green cap, another of fertilizer for green plants, a packet of Whiskas, a black handle, shaped like a gearshift, on a potbellied kettle, a cast-iron casserole, a dish with food in it, an open Tupperware container with a red lid next to it, as if it were waiting to receive the leftovers from the dish, a dish towel. The ceramic-tiled floor a sort of fifties blue-and-beige checkerboard. Next to the cupboard from which it has been taken, a full trash can with orange peel pressed down on top. Touching the trash can, the dark puddle of a thick garment stretches out across the checkerboard tiles like a bearskin. Beside it, a white slipper with something written on it. At the foot of the dishwasher, a small heap of crumpled, reddish-purple fabric and the other slipper, whose tip rests on a kind of blue-and-white cloth. Behind the dark heap is a chair in

a strange position, perpendicular to a table on which sits a large microwave oven, as if someone had been listening to it, with an ear pressed against it, like a radio. The sun coming in through the window at the back projects jagged bands of light across the bearskin.

In another, vertical shot of the same scene, the light, more intense, illuminates the dishwasher and the countertop to the left of the sink with the fertilizer and the bleach, and projects an image of the window, long and white, onto the tiled floor.

Nothing has been put away here, neither the remains of the meal nor those of love. Two kinds of disorder.

It took me a long time to identify our bathrobes, his of dark-green terry, mine of plum-colored synthetic silk, and to make out what was written on the slippers: “Hôtel Amigo.” I no longer know what we ate the night before, the remnants of which can be seen in the dish. Nor do I remember anything of our caresses or our pleasure.

There is nothing in the photo of the smells of the kitchen in the morning, a mixture of coffee and toast, cat food and March air. None of the noises, either, the regular sound of the fridge starting up, the neighbor’s lawnmower, perhaps, a plane from Roissy. Just the light falling forever on the tiles, the orange peels in the trash, the green cap on the bottle of bleach. All the photos are mute, especially those taken in the morning sunlight.

•

I was able to put a date to the photo using my journal: the last Sunday before the United States attacked Iraq. Everyone was waiting for the war, which had been planned for months. Millions of people around the world were marching to stop it from happening, but it continued to advance, like a giant shadow over sun-scorched earth. I felt guilty for not having taken as strong a stand against the war as I had in 1991, simply hanging a white banner on my balcony as a sign of pacifist opposition, a gesture that was not so widespread in France, and whose only effect may have been to make me look crazy in the eyes of my neighbors.

One morning, I turned on the radio, and there it was: a distant horror that I could feel only through my love affair with M. It was a very hot day, the sun imperturbable, and I thought, Another beautiful spring. I was relieved of all obligations, even writing. All I had to do was live out this story with M. Waste time. The big holiday from life. The great cancer holiday.

At last, I was allowed to shirk the duties of politeness, and not reply to letters or e-mails. People's insistence, when I refused an invitation to a debate or a reading, seemed outrageous to me, a form of persecution. Of course, my reaction had to do with the fact that I was ill, of which they were unaware. Had I told them, they would have apologized profusely. But to feel that they were ascribing my refusal to a whim, taking it as a personal affront (that is, thinking only of themselves), made me intractable. I was done with other people's vanity. I was unreachable.

I had told very few people about my cancer. I wanted no part of the kind of sympathy that, whenever it was expressed, failed to conceal the obvious fact that for others I'd become someone else. I could see my future absence in their eyes. They had no idea that it was *their* deaths I was seeing, which were every bit as certain as my own. And I had an advantage over them, which was that I knew it.

•

One day, M. said to me, "You got cancer only so you could write about it." I felt that he was right, in a way, but, up until that moment, I'd been unable to come to terms with this. It was only when I started writing about these photos that I was able to do so, as if writing about the photos authorized me to write about the cancer. As if there were a link between the two.

In another way, he was wrong. I expect life to bring me not *subjects* but *unknown structures* for writing. The thought "I want to write only the texts that only I can write" refers to texts whose very form is dictated by the reality of my life. I could never have foreseen the text that M. and I are writing now, though it definitely came from life.

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In the study, April 6th: On the floor in the foreground, on the carpet that forms a sort of narrow green corridor between the white baseboard of a wall and the vertical side of a desk, are several sheets of paper, overlapping and in disarray, covered with handwriting. One sheet has slid halfway under the desk. Farther on is an extension cord with three cables running out of it, two on the floor and the other spiralling up toward the desktop, connected to a lamp that cannot be seen. At the far end, a dozen markers and pencils in various colors, fanning out in all directions, one on top of the other like pick-up sticks, next to the overturned cup that used to hold them. It's obvious that these objects have fallen off the desk.

This photo is one of a group of three taken the same evening, in the same room. Unlike the other two, which show the chaos of our scattered clothes, this one shows only the objects that we knocked off the desk without noticing. We had dined at the Auberge Ravoux in Auvers-sur-Oise, beneath the room where van Gogh once lay dying and which the proprietor had the thoughtful habit of allowing his guests to visit, free of charge, after they had eaten a succulent leg of lamb, roasted for five hours, and a creamy chocolate mousse.



The light of a halogen lamp turned all the way up, combined with that of the flash, brings out the whiteness of the pages and makes it possible to discern

the layout of the sentences, the erasures and the words written over them in darker ink. I would like to read what is written. In photos and postcards that contain an advertisement, a book cover, a newspaper, or anything written, I always try to make out the words, as a truer sign of the times than the rest of the image. In a prewar photo of my father in his Sunday best, together with an unknown communicant and a child I know to be my sister, who died at the age of six, there is a poster on the wall whose headline I can read: “*THE HIGH COST OF LIVING—SALARY HIKES—THE FORTY-HOUR WEEK.*”

But here, despite my best efforts, I cannot read the writing, even with a magnifying glass.

I can’t remember what I was writing at that time. Still, of this I am sure: the night we took the photo, if I’d had to choose between making love with M. and preserving my pages of notes, I would not have chosen the pages.

I thought, He makes me live *above* the cancer.

•

One night, at the beginning of our relationship, as we were lying side by side, unable to sleep, he said, of the woman he’d left, “Do you think I’ve become indifferent to her?” I got out of bed and went downstairs to the kitchen. The next afternoon, I had to go to the Institut Curie, where the surgeon who had performed my surgery a fortnight earlier was going to tell me whether the removal of the tumor was enough or whether my whole breast had to be removed. Sitting in a chair in the kitchen at two in the morning, I told myself that the pain caused by M. was worse, at that moment, than not yet knowing whether or not I was done for.

Every man I’ve been involved with seems to have brought me some kind of revelation, different each time. The difficulty for me in doing without a man has less to do with a purely sexual need than with my desire to know. To know what, I cannot say. I still don’t know what revelation M. was supposed to offer me.

•

Kitchen, April 7th: The kitchen again. The clothes are scattered in four heaps of different sizes on the yellow-and-gray checkerboard of tiles that occupies almost the entire photo. In the foreground, the biggest heap, which covers an area of six by five squares, consists of a skirt and a gray suit jacket turned inside out to reveal its shiny lining. Underneath is a blue shirt. Three dark cavities amid the folds of fabric make hollows in the lining that evoke a gas mask. The usual big Doc Martens boot lies next to the shirt, on its side. A long dark-gray stocking wriggles out of the heap onto the tiles. Next to the boot are the cups of a flower-patterned bra, delicately laid flat, and a pair of underpants, also with flowers. Above, on the right, is a small red heap—a sweater with a sleeve folded back. On the left, jeans with a belt, and a gap filled by a T-shirt. The other Doc is there, tipped on its side. An isolated sock. At the very back, between the feet of the old sewing-machine table: a small, closed trash bag and an empty rosé bottle.

It is a morning photo, without sun. In my journal: “This morning, pleasure in the kitchen.”

When this photo is taken, my right breast and the submammary fold are a brownish color, burnt by cobalt, with blue crosses and red lines drawn on the skin to precisely indicate the area and the points to be irradiated. At the same time, I have been prescribed a postoperative chemotherapy protocol that is different from the previous one, and every three weeks, for five days in a row, even at night, I have to wear a kind of harness, a belt around my waist with a fanny pack containing a plastic bottle, in the shape of a baby bottle, filled with chemotherapy products. It has a thin transparent plastic tube coming out of it, which threads up between my breasts to the collarbone, ending with a needle stuck into the catheter and covered by a dressing. Strips of adhesive tape hold the tube in place against the skin, whose heat causes the chemo liquids to rise and flow through my veins. Because of the bag on my belly, I cannot close my jacket or my coat, and I have difficulty hiding the plastic tubing attached to the bottle and threaded up under my sweater. When I’m naked, with my leather belt, my vial of poison, my multicolored markings, and the tube running up my torso, I look like an extraterrestrial.

I no longer know what other photos were taken when I had this body. It didn’t stop us from making love. He would say, “You’re not a serious cancer patient.”

If I think back to the prayer in the old missals, “Prayer to Ask of God the Proper Use of Sickness,” by Blaise Pascal, it seems to me I have made the best possible use of cancer.

•

For months, my body was a theatre of violent operations.

During chemo sessions, with amusement I compared my body to a dishwasher, which inevitably came to mind, given the length of the process (between an hour and ninety minutes) and the introduction of a rinsing agent at the end. And my body never ceased to change: baldness and complete loss of body hair, scarring, and, in the weeks after the operation, in the hollow of my armpit, a sort of big orange filled with lymph that forced me to hold my arm away from my chest. Then the hair grew back on my head, fine and frizzy, my body hair like that of a prepubescent girl. My sense of smell became extremely acute. I detected all odors from a distance, even the ones that were usually the least noticeable. They were palpable. It was quite a discovery, and I liked sniffing the world like a dog. One day, at the hospice in Y., where I had gone to visit my last surviving aunt, I felt as though I could see the smell of food, of rancidness and urine. It settled in a waxy layer on the faces of the men and women grouped around the TV; I was sure I could reach out and touch it.



Nothing was frightening. I applied myself to the role of cancer patient with diligence and viewed everything that happened to my body as an experience. (I wonder if doing what I do—not separating my life from my writing—means spontaneously transforming all experience into description.)

In the waiting room for Radiotherapy at the Pontoise clinic, I kept seeing an issue of *Madame Figaro* whose cover featured a bare-breasted girl in a thin voile dress. Written in big letters were the words “*DARE TRANSPARENCY!*” In France, more than a million women have had or currently suffer from breast cancer. More than a million breasts stitched, scanned, marked with red-and-blue drawings, irradiated, reconstructed, hidden under blouses and T-shirts, invisible. Indeed we must dare to show them one day. (Writing about mine is part of this unveiling.)

•

Brussels, Hôtel Les Écrins, Room 125, October 6th: Against a black background, a strange green object with a rounded shape, a dark border, dark spots, and a foot radiating a yellow light. It could be a poisonous mushroom, its cap sprouting a kind of short, thick growth, like a partly severed penis. Or it could be a Martian, its head adorned with an indefinable organ that serves perhaps as an antenna, perched on a device that lights up the night.

In reality, it's a very ordinary bedside lamp whose bulb is covered with a toothbrush glass, itself draped in a wash mitt that is slipping down on one side. I can't tell whether it's the glass or the wash mitt that gives it a green color. In that harshly lit room, this was the only way we could find to create a softer, indeed a more funereal, light.

This is the first photo taken after lovemaking since the end of June. There are no photos of the time between July and October. M. was often away, in Karlsruhe, in Montpellier, in Mauritania. I suspected him of having another woman. But maybe the only reason for the lack of photos was that we had very few clothes to remove, owing to the scorching heat.

My cancer treatment had ended two months earlier, and my hair had grown back five centimetres. It rained almost non-stop and there was an icy wind for the three days we spent in Brussels. We went back to the café Poechenellekelder, near the Manneken Pis fountain, where the two customers who sit drinking on a bench at the bar remain motionless for so long that people start to wonder before realizing that they are mannequins with wax faces.

In a shop selling old records, I recognized the cover of an Édith Piaf 45 that I bought when I was sixteen because of the song "Les Amants d'un Jour." It had a blue cover. Later, I gave away or resold this 45, as I'd begun to turn my nose up at anything that wasn't "quality music." There, in that shop in Brussels, I wanted to have it, not for "Les Amants d'un Jour"—which I'd heard too many times, its emotion exhausted for me—but for the blue cover, and for another song on the record that I'd completely forgotten, "Soudain une Vallée." M. bought it for me.

On October 7th, he asserted, "I've never been with a woman as feminist as you. Not by a long shot." I didn't ask him to say more. Suddenly, it was as if we didn't know each other. I don't really know what it's like not to be a feminist, or how women behave toward men who don't see them as feminists. That same month, when I opened a book belonging to M., I came across a photo of a young woman with a child and an older woman. It took me a while to realize that the young woman was his previous partner. When M. told me about her at the start of our relationship, he had said, "She's got a nice body, but her face is not so great." My first reaction to the photo was

triumph, as I looked at her nose and chin, saying, “But she’s ugly!”—and then anger at myself for having created a perfect image of her that made me feel inferior. Then I was overcome with sadness. It was worse for me that M. had loved this woman with her graceless features. His love for her only seemed more intense. I would have preferred her to be beautiful so I could explain his attachment to her on aesthetic grounds, both banal and objective.

I don’t know how to use the language of feelings while “believing” it. When I try, it seems fake to me. I know only the language of things, of material traces, visible evidence. (Although I never stop trying to transmute it into words and ideas.) I wonder if contemplating and describing our photos is not a way of proving to myself that his love exists, and in the face of the evidence, the material proof they embody, of dodging the question for which I see no answer, “Does he love me?”

•

At what point did I stop thinking and saying, “I have cancer,” and start to say, “I had cancer”? I feel as though I am still between the two, in a zone of uncertainty because at any time I could slide back from the second state into the first, my cancer having *recurred*. But if I measure the reality of cancer by how indifferent I was last year to things that interest the majority of people, by my remoteness from world events of that time, and measure the unreality of cancer by the anger those events provoke in me again, by the mostly futile preoccupations I engage in anew, and the stretch of future that I have granted myself by buying a five-year warranty on a dishwasher, for example, then I can say, “I *had* cancer.”

For months, my body was investigated and photographed innumerable times from every angle and with every technique in existence. I realize now that I neither saw nor wanted to see anything of my *inside*, my skeleton, my organs. I had to wonder each time I was examined what *more* they would find.

The catheter was removed in April. I wore it inside me for a year and a half. Over time, it became like a kind of jewel inlaid in my skin near the shoulder. I asked the doctor to give it to me, said I wanted to keep it. It was the first time he had received such a request, and he laughed: “As a souvenir?” I also

kept the wig. I saw it recently at the back of a drawer and I thought, I may never again have the chance to feel such strong emotion, and at the same time I thought, I'm mortal and I'm alive.

•

I've spread out all the photos on the table in the living room. They look like the cards from a game of Clue, where all you can see of the house and the different rooms are the floors, the baseboards of the partitions, the bottoms of doors, the legs of furniture. No murder weapon, just the repeated signs of a struggle. Without thinking, I took a photo of the collection. Perhaps to give myself the illusion of capturing a whole. All of our story. But it's not there. In a few years, these photos may hold no interest for either of us, except as testimonials to shoe fashion in the early two-thousands. ♦

—2004

(Translated, from the French, by Alison L. Strayer.)

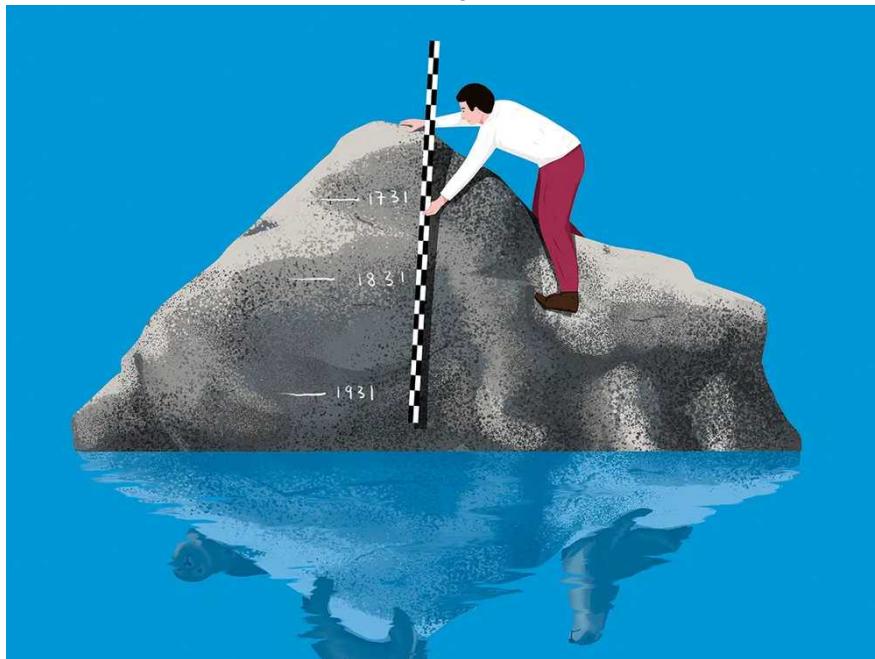
This is drawn from “[The Use of Photography](#).”

Our Very Strange Search for “Sea Level”

As the oceans ebb and surge, staggering ingenuity has gone into inventing the measure.

By Brooke Jarvis

August 19, 2024



In the mid-fifteen-hundreds, a Swedish peasant named Nils lived on an island called Iggon in the Baltic Sea. He was known to his neighbors as Rich Nils, apparently because of the plenitude of fish in the waters near his home and, even more lucrative, the seals that showed up to hunt them. There was one rock in particular where seals liked to haul themselves out of the ocean to rest and bask in the sun. Nils, for his part, liked to visit this rock with his harpoon.

Eventually, though, Nils noticed that the seals had begun gathering on a lower part of the rock, rather than on the high point, as they once did. It seemed that the water level no longer gave them access to the very top. This

was a troubling development for Rich Nils's income: the high point now obstructed the path of his harpoon when he approached the rock from the shore. Nils used fire to weaken the rock, chipping away at it until he'd not only removed the high point but also lowered the over-all height of the rock, so that seals would be able to rest on it even when the sea reached its lowest level of the year.

Some hundred and eighty years later, the Swedish physicist and mathematician Anders Celsius went looking for Rich Nils's rock. Celsius was known for his obsession with quantifying the world around him; he tried to calculate the distance between the Earth and the sun, was involved in the long quest to use meridian measurements to determine the size and shape of the Earth, and famously proposed a new scale for gauging temperature. Now he was once again in search of a way to measure what had previously been unmeasurable.

By the early seventeen-hundreds, an emerging consensus held that the level of the Baltic Sea was sinking. Shallow harbors became more so, until they had to be abandoned; offshore islands grew land bridges until they became one with the mainland. To many people of the era, this phenomenon made perfect sense. The Biblical great flood, after all, had covered the world with water. It stood to reason that, all these years later, such a huge volume would still be draining away, ever so gradually. Frustratingly, though, there was no scientific marker that could be used to track these changes, no way to know how quickly the land and the water were separating.

That's when Celsius realized that seal rocks, valuable pieces of real estate that were regularly described in official documents—tax declarations, inheritance papers, bills of sale—could offer some insight: they were fixed points against which to measure change. Sure enough, he found records of several rocks whose loss of use, and therefore value, was declared after the sea dropped so low that seals became unable to swim to them. It was even possible to identify a specific rock with a chiselled top and a taxation record going back to Nils's sons.

Between Nils's time and Celsius's sketch of the rock, in 1743, the water level had dropped nearly eight feet. Nils's island was gradually becoming part of the mainland; today, it is a peninsula. In 2012, the scholar Martin

Ekman located the rock that made Nils rich; by then, it was no longer in the sea at all. It stood in a young forest, surrounded by trees.

Mountains, oddly, are the reason most of us have learned to think of the level of the sea as a stable point, a baseline, an unmoving benchmark against which one might reasonably measure the height of great peaks. We confidently assert that Mt. Rainier rises 14,411 feet above sea level, without stopping to ask ourselves what exactly we mean: what sea, and where and when, and in what state of weather? The oceans, we know, are never at rest; they're pulled to and fro by the moon (in the Bay of Fundy, a single tidal change can lower the water by more than fifty-three feet), the wind, the atmospheric pressure, and the considerable gravity exerted by glaciers and landmasses. Even changes in a sea's temperature can affect its water level, by causing molecules of water to draw closer to, or farther away from, one another. More profoundly, oceans have risen and fallen by hundreds of feet alongside ancient changes in the Earth's glaciation (in the process allowing people to cross land bridges to the Americas and Australia and what are now the islands of the United Kingdom), and they are currently pushing, at a fairly rapid clip, over seawalls and into cities.

Given this history, it would seem ludicrous to take mean sea level—something “as ephemeral as a fleeting ray of sunshine on a wintery afternoon,” as the Australian geologist Rhodes W. Fairbridge wrote in 1961—to be a standard of stability. How on earth, we might wonder, did we come to treat the sea as a synonym for solidity?

The answer, the environmental historian Wilko Graf von Hardenberg writes, in “[Sea Level: A History](#),” is the same as it is for most of our reference points. Like the metre, the minute, or the meridian that runs through Greenwich, England, “sea level” is best thought of as a social and historical construct, the result of an inherently arbitrary decision taken by generations of people doing their best to make sense of a strange and chaotic world. Von Hardenberg’s history is a story not of the way sea level has changed over time but, rather, of the ways in which humans have understood, and made use of, sea level as a concept, a marker of where we stand in the world.

Throughout most of human history, maps offered no fixed elevations. For one thing, these were difficult to measure, although a method of doing so

through arduous triangulation had been known since antiquity. For another, people recognized that what mattered wasn't how high a point was in absolute terms but how high it was in relation to other points from which one might need to carry a load or build a bridge or pump water. Mountain summits, von Hardenberg notes, were of less interest to mapmakers than geographical features such as caves and passes, which were more relevant to people's everyday lives. Elevation was sometimes expressed as the amount of time it would take a person to climb to a destination, or as the distance from whatever baseline was locally known and useful: the surface of a nearby lake, the door of a certain church. There's little evidence that anyone was thinking about the abstraction of average water levels, since what one needed to be prepared for were the extremes: low water in which boats might founder, high water that might flood ill-placed settlements. People sometimes marked these extremes with rocks that could stand as warnings for a future that was in danger of forgetting the past. We know them now as tsunami stones and hunger stones. A famous one in the Elbe, commemorating a terrible drought, is carved with the words "If you see me, then weep."

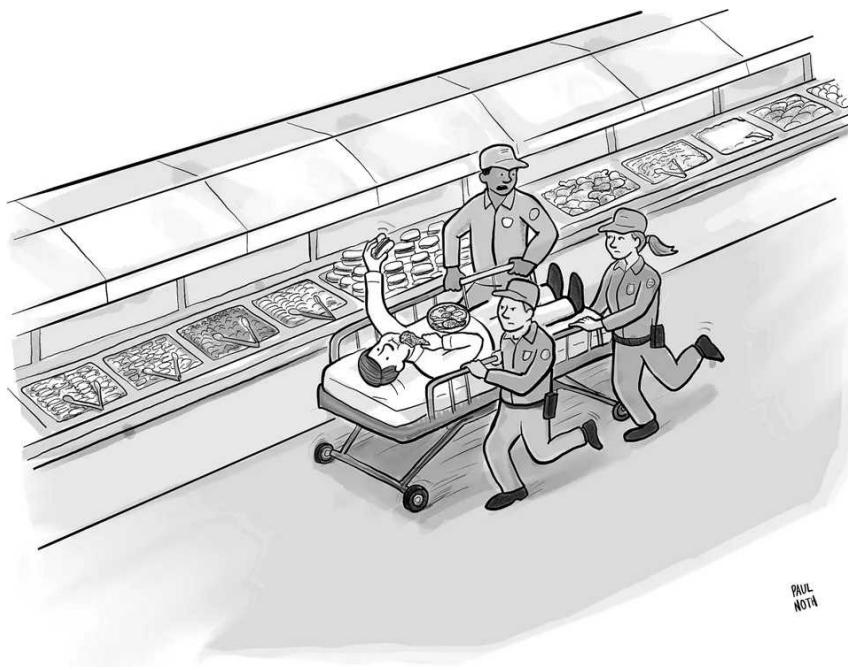
After Celsius published his calculations for the slowly dropping water of the Baltic, the scholars of Europe began arguing over their meaning. The great-flood faction contended that the erosive effects of so much draining water could help explain how coasts and mountains and river valleys formed. But critics of the diluvian theory, who believed the level of the sea to be fundamentally stable, asked why similar evidence of falling seas couldn't be found everywhere. To some, the sea seemed too large, too immutable, to do something so meek as disappear. "It is certain that the surface of the ocean cannot *sink*," a scientist wrote in 1810. "This the equilibrium of the sea will not by any means admit of."

The debate went on for decades. In the eighteen-thirties, the geologist Charles Lyell travelled from Britain to Sweden to study the question, visiting, among other sites, a rock on which Celsius had marked the sea level a century earlier. Celsius's mark now sat eighty-six centimetres above the water, but Lyell calculated that the rate of change was significantly different in different parts of the Baltic, leading him to argue that the true reason for the disappearing ports and seal rocks was not a drop in the water but a lifting of the land. (Lyell turned out to be right: the Scandinavian peninsula was,

and still is, rising relative to the sea, as a result of the phenomenon known as “postglacial uplift”—the slow bounce-back of land that was long compressed by the great weight of earlier glaciers.)

The era was, the mathematician John Playfair observed, a destabilizing one—literally so for people wondering what, if any, part of their world might stay dependably in place. “The imagination naturally feels less difficulty in conceiving that an unstable fluid like the sea, which changes its level twice every day, has undergone a permanent depression in its surface, than that the land, the *terra firma* itself, has admitted of an equal elevation,” he wrote.

The stakes were large, in part because the controversy was tied to a much bigger one. As scientists tried to make sense of dinosaur and mastodon bones and the stark geological evidence of immense, long-ago perturbations in the Earth’s lands and waters, different schools of thought emerged. One group concluded that a past shaped by huge, Biblical catastrophes had given way to a calmer present wherein the rules of life and geology now operated very differently. (In the words of Georges Cuvier, a leading proponent of this theory, “Nature has changed course, and none of the agents she employs today would have been sufficient to produce her former works.”) But Lyell and his cohort maintained that the world was essentially uniform—the same basic processes that had shaped the seas, the continents, and the life that inhabited them were still in effect.



Lyell's view that the present is the key to understanding the past eventually won out. But so did his theory of a sea whose global level was stable over time. The scientists and mapmakers of Europe, now in agreement that sea level was a metric worth standardizing, began debating which exact point would provide a shared reference for use in measuring mountains and—especially in the colonies over which their governments were working to strengthen their control—for use in drawing new maps and boundaries and in designing roads and ports and bridges. The quest to find a mean sea level for the whole world was part and parcel of the quest to make the world governable. And thus, von Hardenberg writes, did our idea of sea level as a benchmark emerge from a very specific time and place, becoming intertwined with the colonial project and “a long-held perception of holocene stability.”

In short order, the search for a universal metric of sea level began to founder on the shores of reality. Automated tidal gauges made it easier to collect reams of new data (previously, records were limited by the number of people willing to go out and measure the sea at regular intervals, braving storms and cold and darkness), but they, too, could prove less than reliable. Von Hardenberg recounts the story of the engineer Auguste Bouchayer, who found that fifty years of records of the Mediterranean’s levels at Marseille had been compromised because the gauge’s warden and his wife, for fear of

its getting broken, had been cutting off the gauge from the movement of the sea whenever the weather was bad. “Our bases are precarious!” Bouchayer lamented.

As data proliferated, European scholars gathered regularly to define sea level for the Continent. But tides and winds, plus coastal topography and changes in the Earth’s crust, meant that even the averages often differed significantly from place to place. Different countries, even different parts of countries, began adopting their own varied and highly local baselines. France chose, and then abandoned, the mean level of the Atlantic where the Loire River flowed into it. The Belgians, to avoid the need for negative elevation numbers on maps of the coast, settled on the low-water point recorded during spring tide at Ostend. In England, sea level was a hundred feet below a mark on St. John’s Church in Liverpool—until the datum was changed to one averaged at a certain dock at the mouth of the River Mersey, some forty-three feet higher than the previous reference. Today, when British maps refer to mean sea level, they’re actually referring to the average of the water levels that were recorded hourly between 1915 and 1921 at a pier in Newlyn, Cornwall.

But, even as scientists sought to determine the sea’s level, their ongoing studies of the Earth slowly undermined the theory of a stable sea. It was becoming clear that Europe’s glaciers had once been dramatically larger, and had left evidence of their past size in the form of fjords and erratically distributed boulders. Wouldn’t such an enormous unlocking of water—though this history was hidden as water rose to cover it—have affected the level of the oceans as well? Our bases, it seemed, were more precarious than anyone had recognized.

After decades of meetings, the effort to choose a single vertical datum for Europe quietly washed out. But height above sea level had by then become a common measure. It’s just that the specifics of what this meant continued to depend on where you were. In New York City, as late as 1915, officials were using more than ten different reference planes, and it was only in 1929 that the U.S. adopted a shared reference for setting mean sea levels around the country; it was derived from calculations based on twenty-six tidal stations and 106,724 kilometres’ worth of coastline surveying. “Change the frame of reference or the accuracy of an instrument,” von Hardenberg writes, “and

even the apparently stable measure of a mountain is revealed as but a snapshot of a specific technological moment.”

The definition of sea level is still far from straightforward. We know that, because of the way the Earth bulges as it spins, the water levels of equatorial seas are some twenty-one kilometres higher than the sea ice at the North Pole. (This bulge also complicates how we think about mountain heights, since the peak of Mt. Chimborazo, rising close to the equator, is actually farther from the center of the planet than is the peak of Mt. Everest.) A gravity anomaly in the Indian Ocean means that a large swath of its waters—an area nearly as large as India itself—has a top level that’s as much as a hundred and six metres lower than the global average. Contemporary systems for determining sea level, which can now incorporate G.P.S. and lidar and satellite altimetry and so on, no longer rely on water levels alone. Nowadays, many measurements of sea level are based not on the top level of the actual ocean but on calculations of where an imaginary sea—one that reflects the differing effects of gravity around the planet but is not beset by wind, tide, or current—would gather, if such a sea existed. This theoretical version of our watery world is known as the geoid.

Our awareness of the complexity of the question has also advanced alongside our technology. We know that relative sea levels (a measure of how the height of the ocean relates to the local elevation of land) are affected, for example, by land subsidence, which humans create by draining swamps, altering the course of rivers, and relentlessly pumping water, oil, and gas from beneath the Earth’s surface. (Parts of California’s Central Valley have fallen by nearly thirty feet as the aquifers beneath them have emptied, and areas of Louisiana, robbed of the Mississippi River sediment that once counteracted erosion, are sinking by as much as three-quarters of an inch per year.) Sea levels are also affected when humans burn fossil fuels, causing the atmosphere, and oceans, to heat up and the world’s immense reserves of ice to melt.

That ice was already thinning in 1940, when the Icelandic geologist Sigurdur Thorarinsson posited that worldwide “glacier shrinkage” could produce a new, modern era of sea-level changes. It’s remarkable just how early people grasped that [fossil fuels](#) could change sea levels. In 1959, the American

Petroleum Institute was warned that, if the world continued to burn oil, “the ice caps will start melting and the level of the oceans will begin to rise.”

We now know much more about the specifics. The Greenland ice sheet holds enough water to raise the height of the world’s oceans by twenty-three feet; a complete melting of Antarctic ice could lift them by two hundred feet. We know that a number of feedback loops—such as the effect of warmer seawater slipping under ice shelves and glaciers—are speeding the melting, and that [rising sea levels](#) are already increasing the danger of [hurricanes](#) and storm surges, pushing people out of low-lying homes, and contaminating soil and groundwater with salt. The higher sea levels are also setting the stage for future geopolitical conflicts—much, much larger echoes of the long-ago fuss over seal rocks—as the islands around which territorial boundaries and claims to fishing and mining rights were founded begin to disappear beneath the waves. Once again, our measurements struggle to keep pace with a fluid reality.

“There is no progress to be found in the story this book tells, no constant improvement of knowledge, no approach to a more ‘real’ system of reference,” von Hardenberg writes in his introduction. Instead, there’s a story of people abandoning a belief in some perfect natural reference point as it slowly becomes evident how complicated and changeable the planet on which they live truly is. The line between the land and the ocean, after all, has never been fixed; it is a binary abstraction we impose on a place that, as Rachel Carson wrote, is forever “changing with the swing of the tides, belonging now to the land, now to the sea.” For animals and plants that make their homes in the intertidal zone, survival depends on flexibility, on adapting to a world in which the only constant is inconstancy.

The ongoing rise in sea levels, along with the “weirding” of weather that accompanies a [changing climate](#), means that more and more places will have to learn to live between tides, both real and metaphorical. Now too wet, now too dry, we will yearn for the time when it was possible to believe in stability.

But while ours is, as Lyell argued, a uniformitarian world, it is not a uniform one. The great forces of ice and water are still shaping the planet as they always have, but their impact is altered and directed, in ways that the

scientists of centuries past could never have imagined, by a new, anthropogenic force.

In 2019, a plaque was erected to commemorate the first glacier in Iceland to shrink so much that it could no longer be considered a glacier. Like the tsunami stones of the past, the plaque carried a message for the future, a warning to believe in changes that might at first seem implausible. It also carried a recognition of responsibility. “In the next 200 years all our glaciers are expected to follow the same path,” the plaque reads. “This monument is to acknowledge that we know what is happening and what needs to be done. Only you know if we did it.” ♦

A Reporter at Large

Infiltrating the Far Right

The threat from domestic terrorism is rising, but, with Republicans decrying the “deep state,” the F.B.I. is cautious about investigating far-right groups. Vigilantes are leaping into the fray.

By David D. Kirkpatrick

August 18, 2024



Colton Brown, who lived with his father and stepmother in a single-story house outside Seattle, earned about fifty thousand dollars a year as an assistant electrician—but his real passion was fascism. In recordings of his private conversations, he argued that an “international cabal” of “hook-nosed bankers” was conspiring to replace white Americans like him with people of non-European descent, and he expressed alarm that the U.S. population would soon be less than half “ethnic American.” This so-called “great replacement” may have felt personal: his stepmother was Vietnamese. Brown, who has blue eyes and short, wavy blond hair, wore clothing with Nazi iconography, believed that white people deserved their own ethnostaate, and told his dad that other races could “go to hell.”

In 2021, when Brown was twenty-two, he became a regional director of Patriot Front—one of the most active of the [white-nationalist](#), neo-fascist, and anti-government organizations that academic researchers collectively characterize as the modern far right. (Such groups lie beyond even the fringes of the Republican Party.) Patriot Front’s leaders routinely summoned members to travel across the country, on short notice, for demonstrations: hundreds of young white men marched in identical uniforms, with protective helmets disguised as baseball caps, and neck gaiters pulled over their faces. At some rallies, Brown shouldered one of the tall metal shields that Patriot Front members were trained to use in street battles. The members frequently marched through racially diverse neighborhoods, almost baiting residents into fights (while maintaining that marchers would never throw a first punch).

The organization placed Brown in charge of a crew of a dozen men. He led them on nocturnal expeditions around Seattle, to plaster public spaces with Patriot Front propaganda. They stole [Black Lives Matter](#) and gay-pride signs, and spray-painted white-nationalist slogans and symbols over public art promoting tolerance or racial justice. His crew posed, masked, for photographs while on long hikes together, and they trained for street brawls by sparring with one another in boxing gloves. Sometimes they were invited to participate in “fight club” competitions with other white nationalists.

Like a pyramid scheme, Patriot Front effectively paid for its operations by amassing new members. Brown required his team to buy all sorts of supplies—badges, banners, posters, stickers, graffiti stencils—exclusively from the organization. An order of stickers was forty-five dollars, a rectangular badge was five, a round one was ten. Patriot Front’s founder, Thomas Rousseau—a twenty-five-year-old from an affluent suburb of Dallas, whose manifesto for the group maintains that the only true Americans are “descendants of Europeans”—told members that, without their repeated expenditures, “I can’t pay rent anymore. And then I have to get a job.”

Brown’s crew often tried to enlist men from other far-right groups, such as the Proud Boys. But he was always on the lookout for undercover F.B.I. agents. He was aware that Patriot Front’s vandalism (and occasional street fighting) broke the law, and could be met with increased penalties under civil-rights statutes. “Rule No. 1 is don’t get caught,” he often told his crew.

“No face, no case. Nobody talks, everybody walks.” Yet he couldn’t be *that* picky in his vetting process; after all, he was under pressure to increase membership. Nor could the movement expect every new member to be already “fashed out”—fully fascist. One of Patriot Front’s goals was to lure more mainstream *MAGA* types into the far right. Brown assessed applicants by quizzing them about their political evolution and influences, and about what future they foresaw for white people. As a “pro-white” organization, of course, the group required recruits to be Caucasian themselves. After a teenage applicant admitted that he was a quarter Filipino, others in the Seattle crew recommended rejecting him. (“His phenotypes are wack as fuck,” one complained.) But the recruit responded that Hitler’s Nuremberg race laws would have allowed him to have sex with an Aryan woman. What could they say? He’d out-Nazi-ed the neo-Nazis. The teen was let in.

Another recruit, whom they code-named Vincent Washington, was a much easier call. He had read Patriot Front’s manifesto and understood the need for a white homeland; at six feet four and about two hundred and twenty pounds, and trained in martial arts, he could also fight well. After Vincent joined Patriot Front, in July, 2021, he threw himself into even mundane chores, such as making banners. (At Halloween, he proposed carving “very fascist” jack-o’-lanterns.) He also turned out to be a skilled photographer, and used a high-end camera to take pictures of the group’s rallies and vandalism. Thanks to his skill and utility, Brown and Rousseau quickly began including Vincent in private online meetings that Patriot Front held for planning and coördination. One member recently told me, in an e-mail, that Vincent’s “nice camera and good experience” had likely sped his ascent in the group, and that Vincent had displayed a remarkable enthusiasm “to take part in any and all activism.”

Early that December, Rousseau summoned every available member to Washington, D.C., where the group planned to march without a permit on the National Mall. The Seattle contingent met at the airport. But Vincent didn’t show up. Although initially surprised, the crew soon learned why: Vincent wasn’t actually their ally. He’d made off with a huge cache of internal information, which documented everything from their bigoted and misogynistic rants to their recruitment methods and vandalistic exploits.

Vincent wasn't a Fed, though. He was one of a growing number of far-left vigilantes who are infiltrating the far right. Sometimes such impostors adopt false online personas in order to gain entrance to chat groups or private servers. Others, like Vincent, go undercover in the real world, posing as white nationalists to attend meetings and demonstrations. Some even participate in low-level crimes in order to establish their credibility—almost like undercover F.B.I. agents do, though they lack any of the protections, training, or restraints that come with a badge.

Rebecca Weiner, the deputy commissioner of intelligence and counterterrorism for the New York Police Department, told me that “part of the complexity of today’s Internet-driven threat environment is that law enforcement doesn’t have a monopoly on intelligence gathering anymore.” Amateur spies such as Vincent have become common enough that they pose “operational challenges.” She went on, “Government agencies collecting human intelligence have systems to deconflict with each other, but it muddies the waters considerably when you have civilians impersonating bad guys.” Such vigilantes can place themselves in life-threatening danger, Weiner said, and their ruthless exposure of far-right groups “can certainly ruin lives,” by getting members fired from their jobs or shunned by their communities. Still, she acknowledged, the disclosures could be useful. “The spectre of infiltration by Antifa is, in some ways, as inhibiting for far-right extremists as concern about infiltration by law enforcement,” Weiner said. “In fact, sometimes they are even more worried about their adversaries than they are about cops.”

Patriot Front has just a few hundred members, and scholars who study the far right say that only about a hundred thousand Americans actively participate in organized white-nationalist groups. But the [assault on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021](#)—and the deadly riot in Charlottesville before that—proved that even just a few hundred organized men can spearhead a devastating, history-making mob. Moreover, the far right’s online promotion of the great-replacement theory to countless sympathizers is accumulating an ominous death toll. In the past decade, lone gunmen inspired by far-right propaganda have [killed nine Black churchgoers in Charleston](#) (2015), eleven Jewish worshippers in Pittsburgh (2018), [twenty-three Walmart shoppers in El Paso](#) (2019), and ten Black residents of Buffalo (2022). Inside Patriot Front and across the far right, these mass murderers are venerated with the

title of “saint”—as in “Saint Dylann Roof,” who carried out the Charleston massacre. (Roof’s name was chanted at the Unite the Right rally, in Charlottesville, in 2017.) Cynthia Miller-Idriss, a professor at American University who studies extremist violence and sometimes advises the White House and the F.B.I., told me that Patriot Front’s marches and vandalism—even if they appear merely performative—“are intended to normalize these ideas, to help mobilize other people, to make them think that there’s a groundswell, to inspire violent action. And it’s effective.”



This year’s Presidential campaign drew its first blood with the attempted assassination of [former President Donald Trump](#), at a rally in Pennsylvania on July 13th, which resulted in the death of one attendee. F.B.I. officials have said that the shooter apparently maintained a social-media account, active in 2019 and 2020, in which he endorsed political violence and expressed antisemitic and anti-immigrant rhetoric that was “extreme in nature.” The shooting itself, however, does not appear to have been ideologically motivated—before Trump’s rally, the shooter evidently searched for targets in both parties. The F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security have since warned of potential “follow-on or retaliatory acts of violence,” noting that “individuals in some online communities” are threatening or encouraging revenge attacks. Rousseau, of Patriot Front, has portrayed the assassination attempt as a sign that white *MAGA* supporters

should do more than simply vote for Trump. “You’ve done that twice already and Our People are worse off than we were before,” he wrote on Telegram. “You must organize outside the system with others of Our People. Tribe & Train, build power, start to resist or cease to exist.” (He placed triple parentheses around “system”—a notation that is far-right code for “Jewish.”)

Trump has thrilled white nationalists from the moment he entered national politics—sowing doubt about Barack Obama’s birthplace, denigrating immigrants as criminals and rapists, bemoaning “shithole countries” in Africa and the Caribbean. Rousseau once told a journalist that although he understood why Trump could support white nationalism only indirectly, his rhetoric was nonetheless “encouraging,” adding, “Sometimes he even utters some truth about the Jew.” Trump recently complained to *Time* that the United States suffers from “a definite anti-white feeling” and “a bias against white,” which he vowed to end if he returned to the White House.

The F.B.I., which has worked to protect Americans from extremist violence since the nineteen-twenties, when it took on the Ku Klux Klan, has warned of a resurgence of the far right. Near the end of Trump’s term in office, the Department of Homeland Security declared for the first time that domestic violent extremists, rather than foreign terrorists, were “the most persistent and lethal threat” to the nation, primarily in the form of “lone offenders and small groups.” Christopher Wray, the F.B.I.’s director, clarified to a congressional committee that the threat was largely from adherents to “some kind of white-supremacist-type ideology.” Then came the storming of the Capitol. President Joe Biden, on his first day in office, commissioned White House staff to draft the first-ever “National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.” The document, issued in June, 2021, promised “a comprehensive approach to addressing the threat while safeguarding bedrock American civil rights and civil liberties.”

This past spring, I visited the headquarters of the F.B.I., a brutalist hulk of a building in Washington, D.C. Four F.B.I. officials, all of whom spoke on the condition that I not name them, joined me in a small office. I expected to hear about the Bureau’s accomplishments under that strategy, but the first thing I learned was the F.B.I.’s special vocabulary for political violence. The officials explained that the F.B.I. avoids using the term “far right.” They insisted that we instead talk about a more neutral category: “domestic

violent extremism,” or D.V.E. Nor does the agency track violence by white nationalists as a category. The F.B.I. favors the broader rubric of “racially or ethnically motivated violent extremism,” or *remve*, which can include militant chauvinists of any race. (For a time during the Trump Administration, the Bureau referred to “Black-identity extremists,” as if such militants were regularly shooting up predominantly white churches and supermarkets.) Far-right militias fall under the category of “anti-government or anti-authority violent extremism,” or *AGAAVE*, which could also include, for example, the leftists protesting Cop City, outside Atlanta. The officials acknowledged that their codifications could be confusing.

Liberal critics of the F.B.I. complain that its laboriously nonpartisan terminology hides the disproportionately greater size and lethality of the current threat from the right. According to the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, at the University of Maryland, between 2012 and 2022 far-right extremists killed two hundred and nine people; the far left killed thirty-seven. (Most of that violence took place after Trump’s election, including a hundred and fifty of the killings by the far right.) Yet the F.B.I.’s odd taxonomy serves a purpose: it avoids any hint that the agency is basing investigative choices on an antipathy toward certain political beliefs. The officials repeatedly reminded me that the First Amendment protects even the most abhorrent bigotry. One of them noted, “We will not investigate people for being antisemitic, because it is not illegal.” And ever since the Senate’s Church Committee revealed, in 1975, that the F.B.I. had conducted politically motivated surveillance of civil-rights leaders, environmentalists, and others on the left, agency bureaucrats have feared the wrath they would face from Congress and the public if they were again caught crossing that line.

Once I had mastered the lingo, one of the officials, a senior intelligence analyst, told me that around 2018 the F.B.I. began seeing an increase in racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists—in particular, “individuals espousing the superiority of the white race.” The toll from domestic terrorism continued to rise: the year 2019 was the deadliest since 1995, when Timothy McVeigh blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City. By 2021, the F.B.I. had more than doubled the number of analysts at its headquarters who focussed primarily on domestic violent extremism.

But if I thought that the Biden Administration's national strategy signified a crackdown, the officials told me, I was mistaken. The strategy focussed on prevention, especially on enlisting local authorities and the public to look out for telltale signs that an individual—on either the left or the right—was moving toward extremist violence. Federal law-enforcement agencies distributed forty thousand copies of a previously published booklet enumerating “violent extremism mobilization indicators,” including “disseminating one’s own martyrdom or last will video or statement” and “conducting a dry run of an attack or assault.” But the F.B.I. officials told me that the agency’s fundamental approach to the problem “didn’t change” under the Biden Administration.

In fact, the officials said, the First Amendment meant that there was little more that law enforcement *could* do to stop extremist violence. One of the officials told me that respecting constitutional rights is “probably the hardest part of the job on the domestic-terrorism front,” in part because it requires understanding that “rhetoric and intent are two different things.” Glorifying violence against a minority—even wishing aloud for it—is free speech: “Only when that moves to, say, plotting to kill Jewish people and planning to burn down a synagogue—that is when the F.B.I. can open an investigation.”

The officials refused to discuss specific far-right organizations known for engaging in property crime or street fighting, such as Patriot Front and the Proud Boys. The U.S. designates numerous foreign organizations, including Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, as terrorists, and many other countries, including the U.K., ban domestic groups that promote or glorify terrorism. Canada and New Zealand both classify the Proud Boys as a terrorist organization. But the First Amendment precludes criminalizing support for any domestic political group—even the Ku Klux Klan. As a result, the F.B.I. maintains that it focusses on individual offenders, not on the groups to which they may belong.

The case of Robert Rundo, a founder of the Rise Above Movement, a white-nationalist group based in Southern California, illustrates the difficulty of the F.B.I.’s job. Rundo, a thirty-four-year-old who once travelled to Germany to celebrate Hitler’s birthday, served twenty months in prison in New York for stabbing a Latino gang member in 2009. (Rundo belonged to

a rival gang.) By 2017, the Rise Above Movement claimed to have more than fifty members. The group boasted online of “smashing commies,” and posted videos of Rundo and a small army of white street fighters attacking counter-demonstrators at far-right and pro-Trump rallies in California. The next year, four Rise Above Movement members pleaded guilty to conspiring to riot at the Unite the Right rally. Afterward, federal prosecutors in Los Angeles arrested Rundo on similar charges for his brawling at the California rallies.

But Judge Cormac J. Carney, of the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, has repeatedly held that those charges impermissibly violate Rundo’s constitutional right “to spread vitriolic and hateful ideas.” Carney has also faulted the prosecutors for selectively targeting Rundo without bringing charges against any of the Antifa counter-demonstrators who clashed with Rise Above Movement fighters. Meanwhile, as the trial and appeals dragged on, Rundo used a fake passport to escape to Eastern Europe, where he met with other neo-fascists; last year, Romania extradited him back to the U.S., and he was imprisoned in Los Angeles. “Free Rundo” stickers, graffiti, and videos have spread around the world. Now a hero to the far right, Rundo has expanded his white-nationalist movement to include an online media arm, a Web site selling merchandise and apparel, and a fast-growing network of at least thirty fight clubs—known as Active Clubs. (His media outlet promotes Patriot Front, and members of the two movements often hike, train, and spar together.) Adam S. Lee, a former F.B.I. special agent who was in charge of a Virginia field office, told me, “If we start targeting extremists for their speech, we can create martyrs, so we risk making them even more dangerous.”

Republicans in Congress, meanwhile, have repeatedly claimed that the “deep state” has weaponized federal law enforcement against Trump and his supporters; this conspiracy theory has made it even more treacherous for the F.B.I. to investigate Americans on the far right. In 2022, for example, the F.B.I. ramped up its monitoring of a figure who had triggered concern: Xavier Lopez, an unemployed twenty-three-year-old who lived with his aunt outside Richmond, Virginia. As a younger man, the Bureau knew, Lopez had posted online about killing politicians. Once, while buying assault rifles, he’d been overheard talking avidly about political violence. Lopez had served a year in prison, for vandalizing a car, and prison authorities had

recorded him having phone discussions about amassing weapons to kill abortion-rights advocates, L.G.B.T. people, and Jews.

Several months after his release, Lopez joined a house of worship belonging to the Society of St. Pius X, a sect that broke away from the Catholic Church in opposition to Vatican II reforms. The Anti-Defamation League, citing the sect's long history of statements about Jews and Judaism, has called it "mired in antisemitism." (The society's Web page denies that it espouses "racial hatred" toward Jews.) On social media, Lopez posted that he was delighted to have found a church that wasn't "totally kiked."

The F.B.I. placed an informant in the church, who reported that Lopez was attempting to enlist congregants in violent schemes. That November, Lopez bought a truck, declared online that he planned to use it in an attack, and posted a photograph of a mass shooter. Only then did agents raid his bedroom. They found firearm components, a stockpile of ammunition, and eight Molotov cocktails mixed using a form of napalm. A crucifix and a rosary hung over a Nazi flag on his wall. Lopez pleaded guilty to possession of a destructive device and has been sentenced to eighteen months in prison. In all likelihood, the F.B.I. averted a massacre.

House Republicans, though, seized on an internal memo from the Richmond field office which noted that agents in Oregon and California had found other violent members of "the far-right white nationalist movement" trying to network in the Society of St. Pius X. Cultivating sources in such churches, the memo proposed, could help counter future threats. House Republicans decried the memo as evidence that the Biden Administration had weaponized the F.B.I. "against traditional Catholics," and accused the Bureau of proposing "to infiltrate Catholic churches."

Wray, the F.B.I. director, repudiated the memo, testifying to Congress that he'd felt "aghast" when he saw it. An internal review later concluded that the memo's authors had failed to use proper F.B.I. terminology for discussing extremism, and had wrongly suggested that the agency might scrutinize religious beliefs. Uproars of this type have had a chastening effect on F.B.I. agents and analysts, according to Elizabeth Neumann, who was a senior Department of Homeland Security official in the George W. Bush and Trump Administrations. She told me that she has "watched people in

multiple agencies with responsibility for law enforcement or intelligence gathering err on the side of not getting their hand slapped.” When it comes to First Amendment questions, she added, “there is a gray space where even the lawyers inside the agencies can’t agree what the line is. People are trying to stay away from that gray area, and, yes, that might mean that things are getting missed.”

As I sat in the F.B.I. office, I was feeling increasingly secure in my freedom to espouse bigoted violence (were I so inclined) but less sure of my personal safety from extremist attacks. Then the conversation turned scarier. The four officials described how digital technology had both further diffused and compounded the threat. In retrospect, the terrorists of the analog era—whether Al Qaeda, from abroad, or the Ku Klux Klan, at home—now looked like easy targets. These were physical organizations with leaders, hierarchies, telephone calls, face-to-face meetings. One of the F.B.I. officials told me, “The United States government got pretty good at stopping that kind of attack.” The Internet has given extremist groups new ways to recruit and organize that make it virtually impossible to contain their menace. The official told me that domestic violent extremists appeared to have learned from the success of their foreign counterparts in leveraging social media and online chats “to build a horrific lone-actor threat.” The official continued, “Someone can essentially self-radicalize ‘on their own’—‘on their own’ in quotation marks, because there’s always somebody on the other side of the keyboard.”

The F.B.I.’s achievements in thwarting these lone actors often go unnoticed. When I asked the officials to describe some of the Bureau’s recent accomplishments, they handed me a stack of press releases: a year in jail for a Michigan man who had threatened synagogues; eighty months for an incel who had obtained firearms for an intended mass shooting at an Ohio State University sorority; the arrest of three white nationalists from different parts of the country who met in Columbus, Ohio, and conspired to start a race war by shooting rifles at electrical substations. On March 3, 2022, a soldier entering Fort Liberty, in North Carolina, was caught with a 3-D-printed handgun; at his home, authorities found a short-barrelled rifle, neo-Nazi patches and flags, and notes for an “operation” to rid the area of Black, Latino, and Jewish people. (He was sentenced to eighteen months in prison.) Experts at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and

Responses to Terrorism say that the F.B.I. now thwarts about forty domestic extremist plots a year.

One official explained that many Americans suspected of moving toward domestic terrorism end up being arrested on other, sometimes unrelated, charges: "I'm not exaggerating when I say that every week one of our field offices briefs us that they are going to arrest someone on, you know, felon in possession of a firearm, or domestic violence—a local sheriff may even make the arrest—but in actuality we had a very meticulous investigation, starting with a lead that some source picked up, showing that this was an individual going down a pathway to shooting up a synagogue or a church or something else." The Bureau seemed to want to have it both ways. The officials thought that they deserved credit for respecting civil liberties by waiting for clear evidence of a threat to start an investigation. But they also wanted credit for getting volatile extremists off the streets by arresting them on charges that some might call pretexts. (F.B.I. officials say that they adhere to consistent standards for both opening investigations and bringing charges.)



Where the F.B.I. has hesitated, civilians such as "Vincent Washington"—the vigilante spy who penetrated Patriot Front—have entered the breach. Just as technology has opened new doors for extremists, it has also opened new

doors for amateur surveillance and infiltration. Alarmed at what they see as the failings of law enforcement, left-leaning “antifascist researchers” have formed their own elaborate networks. They often adopt such anodyne names as the SoCal Research Club or Stumptown Research Collective, and together they form a kind of intelligence counterpart to Antifa street fighters. The vigilantes’ primary weapon is the Internet, which they deploy to track and sometimes expose the activities, identities, addresses, and employers of supporters of the far right—in other words, to dox them. The disclosures produced by amateur infiltrators have furnished evidence for civil lawsuits that have crippled several white-nationalist groups. Experts say that information from antifascists has also led to the discharge of dozens of active-duty military personnel, not to mention a handful of police and government officials. Some vigilante research has even spurred criminal prosecutions led by the F.B.I.—most notably, against participants in the Capitol attack. According to Michael Loadenthal, an expert in domestic extremism at the University of Cincinnati, the charging documents in nearly a fifth of January 6th cases explicitly acknowledge information from civilian “sedition hunters.” The four F.B.I. officials told me that they welcomed the help. “We’ll take tips from whoever gives them to us,” one said.

It seems stinting to describe Vincent Washington’s intel as “tips”; it was more of a trove. According to court records, his birth name was David Alan Capito, Jr., although in 2017, possibly in connection with his infiltration work, he renamed himself Avenir David Capito; he then became Vyacheslav Arkadyevich Arkangelskiy, and more recently he changed his name to Ryan Smith. (I attempted to reach him through multiple intermediaries, but he didn’t respond.) He belonged for a time to the Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club, which declared in a manifesto that its members “work to counter the rise of fascist and far-right groups” and “don’t rely on the state to do our work for us.” In 2019, a longtime member of the club, Willem van Spronsen, attempted to firebomb an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention facility in Tacoma; the police shot and killed him. Vincent carried a banner at a memorial march in Spronsen’s honor, and sometimes wore a bullet that once belonged to Spronsen on a necklace. Antifascist activists like Vincent take a dim view of the police, and he was not about to hand over information to the F.B.I. Instead, he transmitted the results of his sting to an online publication called Unicorn Riot.

The headquarters of Unicorn Riot is a duplex loft carved out of a former bottling plant in Fishtown, a trendy neighborhood of Philadelphia. The loft is also the home of Dan Feidt, one of Unicorn Riot's founders, a forty-one-year-old with a boyish mane of wild curls. He got his start in journalism in Minneapolis, working for a local alternative-news Web site. During the 2008 Republican Convention, which was held in the Twin Cities, his height—he is six feet eight—helped him record unobstructed footage of a sweeping crackdown on protesters outside the event. He then worked on a film, “Terrorizing Dissent,” and helped document crackdowns on protests at the G-20 meeting in Pittsburgh, in 2009; Occupy Wall Street, in 2011; and a series of protests in the West over pipeline and mining projects. Among the people he worked with was Chris Schiano, a skinny thirty-four-year-old with deep-set eyes. I met with both men in the loft. Feidt, a self-described “homebody,” told me that he usually ran the video control room; Schiano, who was raised as a Quaker and graduated from Naropa University, a beatnik-Buddhist institution in Boulder, Colorado, dodged police batons in a helmet and body armor. After a while, Schiano told me, “it started to feel like ‘We work well together, let’s start something.’ ” With a handful of others, they set up a nonprofit and released a grand mission statement: to report “underrepresented stories” and illuminate “alternative perspectives.” The name Unicorn Riot, I was told, was the result of an online brainstorming session in which marijuana may have played a role.

The group’s coverage of the far right was shaped, in part, by a police killing. In November, 2015, an officer in Minneapolis fatally shot Jamar Clark, an unarmed Black man. Unicorn Riot live-streamed eighteen days of protests outside the officer’s station. During this period, Feidt and Schiano were surprised to see racist slurs surfacing in an online chat on their Web site. Many of the comments used the argot of the online far right. Schiano was at his computer one night, deleting the slurs, when two masked white men appeared in the live stream. Both wore armbands labelled “/K/”—for a gun-enthusiast forum on 4chan, a bastion of far-right extremism. A few nights later, three of the gun enthusiasts, who called themselves Kommandos, returned to the protests; this time, a handful of demonstrators began escorting them away—until one of the Kommandos pulled out a handgun and fired seven shots, severely wounding five protesters. Unicorn Riot recorded the scene.

All the victims survived, though some were permanently disabled. The shooter, Allen Scarsella, a West Point dropout, was convicted of attempted murder and sentenced to fifteen years in prison. On the drive to the protest, he and another Kommando had live-streamed themselves brandishing a pistol and bandying far-right memes. (A favorite was “make the fire rise,” an allusion to the catchphrase of a Batman villain.) Feidt said to himself, “Wow, this is more than just shitposting. They are coming *off* the Internet.” The battle lines, he realized, were no longer only between protesters and police: “People who are not the government are coming out, too.”

Unicorn Riot’s connection to undercover antifascist espionage began in 2017, shortly after Scarsella’s trial ended. Schiano got a call from an antifascist contact: a comrade in Seattle had infiltrated the online chats of people planning the Unite the Right rally, in Charlottesville, which was scheduled for the next day. Was Schiano interested?

The full ramifications of this call have only recently become clear, thanks to a series of court cases that culminated, this past July, in the federal appeals court in Richmond. The infiltrator, who asked me to withhold his name, has never before spoken publicly about his role. In a telephone interview, he told me that his politics could be fairly described as anarchist, “although I cringe at the term.” On the night of Trump’s Inauguration, he said, a friend had been shot and severely wounded during a melee around the appearance of a far-right speaker at the University of Washington. In the months that followed, the infiltrator became increasingly involved in attempts to dox members of neo-Nazi and white-nationalist groups. He took surreptitious photographs at demonstrations in the Pacific Northwest where street fighters from far-right groups such as the Proud Boys and Patriot Prayer rumbled against leftists. A few times, he crawled under parked cars and planted magnetized G.P.S. devices, to track targets. He told me that he’d helped expose the identities of at least two members of the Atomwaffen Division, a particularly violent neo-Nazi group, causing one to lose his job and the other to move from Washington to Texas.

That spring, the infiltrator saw posters around Seattle advertising a group that called itself Anti-Communist Action; the posters included the address of a Discord chat for new members. Thinking that he might be able to dox some members, he adopted the online handle Einsatz—a reference to

Hitler's paramilitary death squads—and applied to join. His code name was evidently credential enough: Einsatz was admitted to a series of online chats that eventually included about twelve hundred far-right extremists across the country.

Anti-Communist Action publicly described itself as “physically resisting leftist terrorists and rioters.” But in the private chats its users insisted that “Hitler did nothing wrong”; disparaged immigrants and Jewish, Muslim, and Black people; and predicted a coming “civil war” that might be “more of a massacre.” “Death to all non whites,” one wrote. “Let’s bomb a major federal building,” urged another. Some members shared detailed instructions for building bombs and booby traps. “Do it Boston bomber style,” one suggested.

That July, after Einsatz had been lurking for months, he saw a link inviting members to the Unite the Right rally. Clicking on it introduced him to another Discord chat, for the people planning the event, including the leaders of several far-right groups. They talked openly of their desire for “a race war,” for the extermination of Jews and nonwhites, and for hand-to-hand combat at “the battle of Charlottesville.”

Rousseau, Patriot Front’s founder, who was then helping lead a group called Vanguard America, said that he wanted to see “jackboots on commie skulls, blood on the pavement.” Robert Ray, a.k.a. Azzmador, who edited the neo-Nazi Web site the Daily Stormer, said that he was even more excited to fight Black Lives Matter activists than to square off against Antifa, adding, “Blacks are the easiest people on earth to trigger.”

Jason Kessler, a Proud Boy who first conceived of the rally, wrote, “Can you guys conceal carry? I don’t want to scare antifa off from throwing the first punch.” Planners discussed which flagpoles would most effectively double as clubs or spears. One organizer noted that “impaling people is always the best option.” The conversation returned repeatedly to using vehicles as weapons by driving them into counter-demonstrators.

Einsatz told me, “It was nothing but race hate and genocide, but the *purpose* was planning and coördination for violence.” Still, he never thought of warning the F.B.I. “I don’t talk to cops,” he explained. Instead, on a mass

Signal chat of antifascists, he shared details of Airbnb rentals that far-right leaders had reserved around Charlottesville. Activists besieged Airbnb with complaints, and the company cancelled reservations for many of the rally-goers—hundreds, according to the rally’s organizers.

Then one of the activists put Einsatz in touch with Schiano. At the time, Schiano was with two colleagues in a rental car, headed for Charlottesville. Einsatz told Schiano about plans for an unauthorized torch march that night through the University of Virginia campus—a deliberate evocation of the Klan. The tip enabled Schiano to be one of the few journalists in a position to cover the march, which culminated with hundreds of far-right protesters assaulting a few dozen counter-protesters. Later that weekend, a neo-Nazi named James Fields plowed his Dodge Challenger into counter-protesters, injuring dozens and killing Heather Heyer, a waitress and paralegal. “For all it’s worth, we fucking killed someone,” a member of the Discord chat posted. Kessler, the rally’s organizer, called Heyer “a fat, disgusting Communist.” Rousseau used a white-nationalist meme intended to mock Black people who complained of false arrest or police abuse: “Fields dindu nuffin tbh.”

Einsatz had given Unicorn Riot a password for the Discord chats, and Schiano logged on. He told me he couldn’t believe that the organizers “were this stupid”: they’d laid out explicit plans, in writing, for instigating violence. Anarchist computer programmers eventually helped replicate the entire cache, which Unicorn Riot published online, in searchable form.

The leaks became the basis of a landmark lawsuit, *Sines v. Kessler*, which concluded this past July, when the court in Richmond approved a verdict awarding a group of Charlottesville residents more than nine million dollars in punitive damages and legal fees, from a roster of far-right groups and their leaders. Prosecutors used the leaks to help convict Fields of the killing—he was given a life sentence—and to win plea agreements from four members of Rundo’s Rise Above Movement, who had been charged as “serial rioters.” The suit also led to the implosion of several white-supremacist groups, including Vanguard America. (Afterward, Rousseau led hundreds of the group’s members to form Patriot Front.) In addition, the leaks caused the dishonorable discharge of two U.S. marines who had participated. One of them, Lance Corporal Vasiliios G. Pistolis, a member of

the Atomwaffen Division, had boasted on Discord that during the rally he had “cracked 3 skulls together.” Sergeant Michael Joseph Chesny had asked in a Discord chat, “Is it legal to run over protesters blocking roadways?”

If federal law enforcement had been paying as much attention to the planning for the rally as Einsatz had, could the involvement of “serial rioters,” or organizers with a record of provoking street fights, have justified an investigation? Could the F.B.I. have prevented the bloodshed? In December, 2018, months after Unicorn Riot published the chat archive, the Bureau cited it in a search warrant seeking its own copies of the digital files, in order to determine whether the rally planners “had been aware of the potential for violence and may have encouraged or incited individuals to violence.” There is no indication, though, that this inquiry led to further charges, or to any charges against the Anti-Communist Action members who shared instructions for bomb-making.

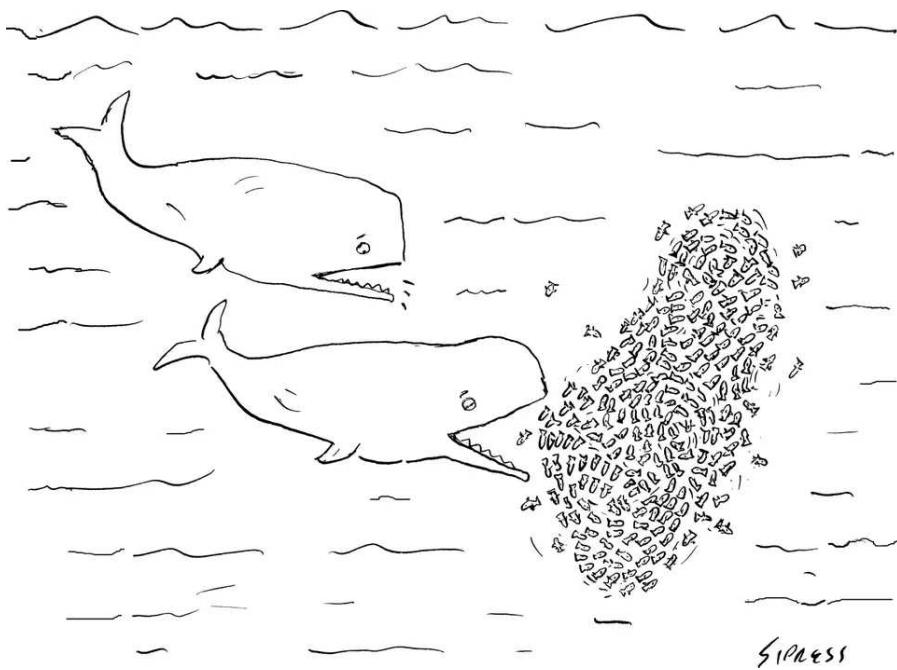
After Charlottesville, Schiano told me, Unicorn Riot “got this new reputation as a clearing house” for data dumps on far-right groups: “People who had done other infiltrations started sending us stuff.” Sorting through stolen troves of far-right communications became a virtually full-time occupation. “I was, like, ‘O.K., this is what I do now,’ ” he said. By 2022, Unicorn Riot had published at least fifteen major leaks delivered by antifascist infiltrators or hackers, in addition to two smaller leaks from Patriot Front. (Unicorn Riot enjoyed a wave of critical praise for [its unfiltered coverage of the Black Lives Matter protests in Minneapolis](#), generating a flood of donations.)

It’s not the only operation publishing such leaks. Two years ago, for example, the Anti-Defamation League [published the membership records](#) of the Oath Keepers, an anti-government militia; the files had been stolen by a hacking collective called Distributed Denial of Secrets. The Oath Keepers roster included nearly four hundred law-enforcement officers, among them ten police chiefs and eleven sheriffs, in addition to a hundred and seventeen active-duty service members, eleven reservists, and eighty-one people who either held or were seeking public office.

In 2022, the antifascist veterans’ group Task Force Butler, founded by Kristofer Goldsmith, an Army veteran of the Iraq War, obtained Telegram

messages from inside a group called Nationalist Social Club-131, which is led in part by a former Patriot Front member; Goldsmith's disclosures prompted the attorneys general of Massachusetts and New Hampshire to file civil-rights lawsuits against the group. (The Massachusetts complaint accuses N.S.C.-131 of, among other things, unlawful intimidation of hotels offering emergency shelter to immigrants; a lawyer for the group told me that prosecutors were contorting statutes "to apply to political protests.")

But Michael Loadenthal, the University of Cincinnati scholar, who runs a project tracking prosecutions involving domestic political violence, told me that Unicorn Riot has taken on a unique role as a "data launderer." It repackages leaks obtained by antifascist researchers—most of whom insist on anonymity and use deception, hacking, or other unsavory tactics—into forms that journalists, advocacy groups, civil-rights lawyers, and prosecutors can trust and exploit. "On-the-ground activists are delivering actionable intelligence to challenge and destabilize these networks, while law enforcement is often ineffective," Loadenthal told me.



"Virtually every single data dump and leak," he noted, has exposed members of the military, the National Guard, and the police as part of the far right, confirming what he said was a worrisome overlap. For example, in 2019 Unicorn Riot published hundreds of text messages and dozens of audio

recordings from Identity Evropa, the neo-Nazi group that coined the slogan “You Will Not Replace Us.” Journalists studying the leaks identified at least ten active members who were serving in the U.S. military or the National Guard. (A spokesman for the Pentagon declined to comment on how many of these service members had been discharged.)

The leaks also revealed a concerted effort to draw *MAGA* Republicans into unvarnished white nationalism. In the leaked Identity Evropa recordings, Patrick Casey, the organization’s leader at the time, stressed that it sought to reach “the average conservative white person.” He recommended that the group’s members set up front organizations like “a San Diego *MAGA* group,” or attend conferences “with your college Republicans.” (Casey was subsequently present at the Capitol on January 6th, but has not been charged with any crime in relation to the storming.) In an Identity Evropa seminar about political activism, Alex Witoslawski, then a Republican consultant, instructed members to avoid explicitly defending Nazism or denying the Holocaust. “You are essentially allowing the opposition to define you,” he explained. Instead of saying that “diversity is bad,” he advised, “say, ‘We want a unified, cohesive society.’” This, he argued, amounted to the same thing, because “when you have a more homogenous society, your society is more cohesive.” (Witoslawski, whose Gmail profile picture shows him making a white-nationalist hand gesture, told me, in an e-mail, that this “strange seminar” was his final involvement with Identity Evropa.) Soon after the leaks, the group collapsed.

Several years ago, Sam Bishop, a Boston-based freelance journalist and a contributor to Unicorn Riot, was browsing a public far-right message board, Fascist Forge, when he stumbled across an archive of private user data from a larger and more influential forum called Iron March. Founded in 2011 by a Russian neo-Nazi, Iron March had become an influential gathering place for roughly twelve hundred far-right extremists from around the world. It helped incubate major white-nationalist and neo-fascist groups in at least seven countries, and it was the online birthplace of the Atomwaffen Division, the American neo-Nazi organization, whose members have been linked to five murders and to a plot to blow up synagogues and a Miami-area nuclear power plant. (Atomwaffen’s founder belonged to the Florida National Guard.)

Bishop assumed that he was not the first person to notice the Iron March cache. He told me, “If it was that easy to do it, you would think that law enforcement would have done it.” But, just in case, he shared the files with a Unicorn Riot chat group, and it soon became clear that he’d made a discovery. The database spread from the chat: other Web sites published its contents, and journalists and researchers soon confirmed that among the Iron March users were at least eight active-duty American service members. (At least six members of Atomwaffen were in the military or the reserves.) Bishop, whose role in the leak has not previously been exposed, told me, “They could have been fired from those jobs a lot earlier—if the F.B.I. had known.”

Other than the no-show of Vincent Washington, Patriot Front’s demonstration in Washington, D.C., on December 4, 2021, started out as planned. After the Seattle crew landed, they drove to a park in suburban Maryland, where more than two hundred members of the group soon gathered. When it was time for the march, all of them squeezed into the back of several U-Haul trucks, which dropped them off in downtown D.C. Sock-puppet social-media accounts reported sightings of the Patriot Front march and posted video clips; the Rise Above Movement’s online media arm was on hand to film it. Outside the Capitol, Thomas Rousseau delivered a speech about “we the people born to a nation of the European race.”

Kevin Lowy, a Patriot Front member from New York with a short beard and glasses, stayed behind at the park in Maryland to watch over the group’s vehicles. As night fell, he later told police, he was working on his laptop inside his Dodge Ram when a masked figure splattered paint across his windshield. Lowy called the police as he drove off in a panic, but his tires had been slashed. He met a patrol car outside the parking lot. “It scared the shit out of me,” he told an officer.

By the time the U-Hauls returned and began disgorging hundreds of identically dressed men wearing Patriot Front gear, several other officers—most of them Black and Latino—were at the lot. When some of the men dissembled about their purpose, an officer told them, “We are not stupid, O.K.?” Another officer used his phone to Google “Patriot Front”: “That’s a hate—nationalist—group.” But, after consulting the F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security, the police let the marchers go on their

way. (One of them, Nathaniel Noyce, was later arrested for participating in the January 6th riot.)

The Patriot Front members had little to celebrate, though. Someone—presumably Vincent—had shared the location of the parking lot with allied activists in the D.C. area, who had slashed the members’ tires, smashed their windshields and mirrors, covered their windows in paint, and scrawled “*Patriot Fail*,” in bright red, across the side of a white van. Colton Brown, the Seattle-area director, later complained to Rousseau that a rental-car company had charged his credit card \$1,975.54 for vehicle damage. He also lamented that his “fav flannel” had been stolen from one of the cars, in addition to a special pillow. “That’s a \$100 pillow bro,” he informed Rousseau, who told him that the parking-lot damage had cost more than nineteen thousand dollars in total.

Vincent, with the position of trust he’d earned, had found his way deep into Patriot Front’s internal communications, which were conducted on the online platforms Rocket.Chat and Mumble. Patriot Front members later asserted that Vincent had conspired with hackers to further penetrate the group’s electronic files. One way or another, membership names and details of internal messages soon surfaced online, along with audio recordings of private conversations and meetings. In Seattle, members of Patriot Front found their neighborhoods plastered with posters identifying them as racists, and antifascists around the country exposed dozens of other members online, linking some to specific acts of bigotry or vandalism. The doxing was sometimes pointedly belittling. A “Nazi Watch” Web site reported that a Seattle-area Patriot Front member was “known for his extreme social awkwardness” and “incel-like behaviors” and was “so subservient to his Network Director”—Colton Brown—“that he would, and has, peed in a bottle on the highway rather than be a mere few minutes late to a meeting.” The site also declared that Brown “is unashamed to hold neo-Nazi beliefs and should not be welcomed in our community.”

By May, 2022, Unicorn Riot had released audio files documenting at least seventeen hours’ worth of internal Patriot Front meetings and calls, in addition to nearly a hundred thousand lines from internal chats. (Feidt and Schiano refused to talk about their source.) The chats revealed that Rousseau and other members had privately described the U.S. as a “Zionist Occupied

Government.” Recordings captured members discussing the need to ban homosexuality and to make women subservient, and fantasizing about how “rape gangs” could exert control over women in their future ethnostate. In one recording, a Florida network director of Patriot Front advised members to enlist their girlfriends in racist vandalism; then the members could blackmail their girlfriends, insuring their loyalty. The director mused in another recording that Patriot Front was, in some ways, “a criminal organization.”

Patriot Front officially disavowed violence. It also prohibited members from bringing firearms to events. But the leaks revealed that some members had a keen interest in guns. Photographs showed 3-D-printed “ghost guns” inside the home of a Seattle-area member. A video captured someone in Brown’s crew firing a rifle at a stolen Black Lives Matter sign, and chats indicated that another member brought two loaded handguns to the Washington march. (At least two people linked to Patriot Front in other areas have been arrested for illegal gun possession.)

The leaks also provided detailed evidence of coördination to carry out dozens of acts of vandalism intended to intimidate minority groups. These acts included defacing a statue in Portland, Oregon, that honored George Floyd; a mural in Olympia, Washington, that celebrated gay pride; and a mural in Richmond, Virginia, commemorating the tennis star Arthur Ashe. Rousseau, it was revealed, insisted on personally approving all major vandalism operations, in addition to some detailed schemes to evade arrest. (While defacing the mural in Olympia, members distracted police with a bogus 911 call.) Private photographs showed Patriot Front members posing in front of stolen signs about diversity, L.G.B.T. dignity, and racial justice. At one meeting, Rousseau ordered members to steal “a duffelbag-full” of American flags, so that they could be flown upside down, Alito style, at demonstrations.

Some prosecutors took action: a district attorney in Olympia brought charges against members for graffiti. Police in Coeur d’Alene, Idaho, received a tip about “a little army” of some thirty masked men with shields climbing into the back of a U-Haul. Among the men were Rousseau and Brown. A physical search revealed that Rousseau was in possession of a document describing plans to establish a “confrontational dynamic” by marching into a

local L.G.B.T.-pride rally; prosecutors charged Rousseau, Brown, and dozens of others with conspiracy to riot. (The charges against Rousseau were later dismissed on technical grounds; Brown pleaded guilty to parading without a permit.) Several civil-rights advocates, meanwhile, drew on the leaks when suing Rousseau and Patriot Front under the Ku Klux Klan Act, passed in 1871, which prohibits conspiring to intimidate on the basis of race or to deprive citizens of their civil rights.

A Black teacher and musician in Boston is suing Patriot Front over a clash at a demonstration which sent him to the hospital for stitches, and several Richmond residents are suing the group over the defacement of the Arthur Ashe mural. Arthur Ago, an attorney who helped file some of these lawsuits while working at the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, told me that Patriot Front's vandalism was "a twenty-first-century equivalent of cross-burning," intended to make vulnerable communities "live in fear." Ago, who is now at the Southern Poverty Law Center, a left-leaning advocacy group that tracks the far right, added, "We don't see the F.B.I. involved at all."

Phone campaigns and other pressure from antifascist activists cost many of the exposed Patriot Front members their jobs. Among those fired were a civil engineer, a real-estate broker, an H.V.A.C. technician, and an analyst at a tech company. Colton Brown, who lost his electrician job, moved to Utah. (A lawyer representing Brown told me that Brown's views have since changed, but declined to say how.)

In e-mails, members of Brown's crew told me that they quickly unearthed Vincent Washington's history as David Alan Capito. On social media, the Puget Sound John Brown Gun Club had posted photographs of him marching in a demonstration, and one Patriot Front member claimed to me that he had seen security-camera footage of Vincent's "face and fat ass" as he slashed the tires of Patriot Front members' cars in Seattle. In 2019, the men on Brown's crew noted, Vincent had been the subject of a temporary restraining order, for alleged harassment of an ex-girlfriend. In retaliation for his leaks, a Web site called Antifa Watch labelled him "a politically motivated violent extremist" with a history of "stalkerish behavior including hacking, vandalism of people's property, trespassing on people's homes, and just being a general creep."

The exposed Patriot Front members were furious at Vincent. To strike back, they appear to have enlisted an unlikely ally: the F.B.I. A former friend of his told me about receiving a phone call, in the spring of 2023, from an agent investigating whether Vincent was a dangerous left-wing extremist with access to ghost guns.

Other members turned to Glen Allen, a lawyer who has emerged as a kind of one-man far-right legal-defense team. On behalf of Brown and four others who lost their jobs, Allen has filed a novel lawsuit against Vincent which, if successful, could set a precedent for severely penalizing vigilante infiltrators, and help end the leaks that have bedevilled the far right.

Allen, a seventy-three-year-old with a short white beard and a slender, athletic build, lives in a modest brick house in Baltimore. He told me that, in 2022, he was contacted by Paul Gancarz, an exposed Patriot Front member who had been fired from his job as a civil engineer in Virginia. Gancarz needed a lawyer to negotiate his severance. But when Allen heard about Vincent's sting, he told me, "I said, 'This guy's going to get away with this?'" After enlisting Colton Brown and other exposed members as additional clients, Allen filed a suit for damages and lost wages under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, which prohibits the use of computer systems for unauthorized purposes. Vincent has now disappeared, and Allen is petitioning a judge to allow the publication of a summons in lieu of hand delivery.

Allen has personal experience with being exposed. Forty years ago, he became close to William Pierce, the leader of a far-right group called the National Alliance; Pierce is also the pseudonymous author of "The Turner Diaries," a novel about a coming race war, which has inspired generations of white nationalists. Allen told me that he eventually broke with Pierce over his violent rhetoric and views on women. But Allen attended an Alliance conference that questioned the Holocaust, and he contributed five hundred dollars to the group after Pierce died.



Allen kept all that to himself. He worked for twenty-seven years as a litigator at the law firm DLA Piper, and when he retired, in 2015, he took a job for the city of Baltimore. Soon afterward, the [Southern Poverty Law Center unearthed and publicized his ties to Pierce](#), calling Allen a “neo-Nazi lawyer.” The city immediately fired him. Allen told me, “I never talked politics at work. I was doing good work for the city. And none of that mattered.”

Antifascist doxing, Allen argued, was unfair, extrajudicial suppression of controversial speech. He has set up a nonprofit, the Free Expression Foundation, to defend what he called “victims of the thought police.” A lawsuit on his own behalf against the Southern Poverty Law Center failed, but it helped him garner numerous clients from across the far right. He is currently representing a dozen Patriot Front members, including the defendants in the Arthur Ashe mural case—Gancarz, the civil engineer, is one of them. Allen has asserted in court filings that civil-rights statutes don’t apply to the incident, because a Patriot Front logo does not convey the same threat of violence that a burning cross or a swastika does. In every case, his central argument is a First Amendment claim: that courts and prosecutors are unconstitutionally targeting his clients because of their views.

Allen, who told me that he would represent left-wing dissidents, too, if they came to him, said that he sees his role as safeguarding the singular American tradition of free speech—the same tradition that F.B.I. officials told me constrains their ability to investigate the far right. He noted that in *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, a 1969 case involving a Ku Klux Klan leader, the Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment protects more than criticizing the government, urging its overthrow, or deprecating a racial minority. Calls for violence or even genocide are also protected—unless those calls entail “inciting or producing imminent lawless action.” Allen told me, “It’s an amazing doctrine, when you think about it—only in America, I would think.” Antifascist spies like Vincent, Allen argues, are conspiring to deprive Americans of their civil liberties.

But some scholars, and some members of Congress, argue that Allen and the F.B.I. present a false choice between policing the far right and respecting free speech. They say that a clear-eyed, empirical assessment of crime data could cut through claims of bias by showing that some organizations on the far right can be fairly classified as street gangs or criminal enterprises, rather than as political movements merely expressing unpopular ideas. Mike German, a researcher at N.Y.U.’s Brennan Center for Justice and a former F.B.I. agent who worked undercover among far-right groups, told me, “The First Amendment issue is resolved if the F.B.I., and law enforcement in general, just focus on the criminal activity, rather than on the ideology.” The problem, he said, is “the F.B.I.’s positioning of far-right violence as political activity protected by the First Amendment,” because it deters law enforcement from cracking down on organized criminality—from brawling by the Proud Boys to property crimes by Patriot Front.

Goldsmith, the Iraq veteran who has been involved in vigilante infiltrations, told me that he has provided the F.B.I. with damning information about several far-right groups, including a militia that was preparing for violence on January 6th. He thinks that racial bias partially explains the Bureau’s caution about initiating investigations of far-right groups. Law-enforcement officers “see white people and think, Oh, *that* can’t be a gang member,” Goldsmith said. “But if law enforcement just examined these groups through the lens of criminal street gangs and organized crime, they have got all the predicate they need to at least *start* investigations.”

Congress, in defense-spending legislation passed in 2020, required the F.B.I. and the Department of Homeland Security to collect and share more comprehensive data on domestic violent-extremist crimes. But this isn't happening. In a follow-up report, issued in November, 2022, Senator Gary Peters, the Michigan Democrat who chairs the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, expressed frustration over the fact that the federal government still has not "systematically tracked and reported this data itself."

German, the Brennan Center scholar, told me that the failure to collect accurate domestic-terrorism-incident data—"actual crimes committed by various people for a political purpose"—has also made it needlessly difficult for the government to settle the question of "whether prosecutors are acting in a biased manner." In the case of Robert Rundo, the Rise Above Movement founder, reliable data collection could have helped prosecutors allay the judge's concerns about selective prosecution—for example, by documenting the over-all frequency and severity of violence from both the left and the right, and by keeping track of who got arrested after clashes between the two sides. Such data could also have shown how Rundo's pattern of aggression stood out from, say, the actions of counter-protesters who engaged in violence at one heated event. (In July, a federal appeals court overturned the district court's dismissal of the charges against Rundo and ordered a new trial, ruling that Rundo and company—whatever their politics—"behaved like leaders of an organized-crime group.")

Despite all the Republican talk in recent years about the deep state, academic experts have frequently asserted that the F.B.I. devotes disproportionate resources to policing radical environmentalist and anarchist groups, which may threaten property but do less bodily harm than the far right does. In the tumult after George Floyd's killing, these critics have noted, police forces often conducted mass arrests at racial-justice protests but let far-right rioters walk away—including many of the people who later stormed the Capitol.

Trump is now promising to pardon people convicted of crimes related to January 6th. German said, "What the far right is hearing is 'Violence against our political opponents is not something that should be criminalized.' It *absolutely* invites more violence." He added, "So many people felt that they

could mass and engage in violent criminal conduct at the Capitol on January 6th because a sense of impunity had developed over years of engaging in similar violence at various rallies and protests—including at Charlottesville—without law-enforcement interference. They were conditioned to believe that their violence was *sanctioned* by law enforcement.” When Trump has been asked about the potential for violence if he loses again, he has done little to discourage it. He told *Time*, “It always depends on the fairness of an election.”

Antifascist vigilantes, of course, can never match the scope of U.S. law enforcement. But they are determined to keep showing up both the police and the F.B.I., in part by building on Vincent’s leaks to Unicorn Riot. Last summer, about a week after the filing of the lawsuit against Vincent, a far-right Telegram account calling itself Appalachian Archives posted his supposed address. And last year Appalachian Archives attempted to dox nearly two dozen other people, including community leaders who had denounced antisemitism. Appalachian Archives threatened a Nashville television correspondent, Phil Williams, saying that “the day of the rope” was approaching, and also targeted another journalist, Jordan Green, who lives in Greensboro, North Carolina, and writes for the left-leaning Web site Raw Story.

At the time, Green was reporting on the 2119 Crew, a neo-Nazi gang linked to brick-through-the-window attacks against a synagogue and a Jewish center, in addition to vandalism targeting Muslim and Black people. (“2119” is alphanumeric code for “Blood and Soil.”) Appalachian Archives posted a head shot of Green and wrote, “The bastard above had been found out to be harassing our boys.”

One afternoon this past January, Green’s doorbell rang: a pizza that he hadn’t ordered was being delivered. The next day, Appalachian Archives posted a photograph of Green answering the door. A few weeks later, half a dozen men—many wearing skull masks, a neo-Nazi hallmark—gathered outside his house. Some gave straight-armed Roman salutes, and one carried a sign warning of a “consequence” for Green’s reporting. Appalachian Archives posted a picture of the stunt, as well as a photograph of the same contingent standing next to a marker commemorating the Greensboro

massacre, where, in 1979, white supremacists shot and killed five labor organizers.

But an antifascist collective called Appalachia Research Club, which was working with Green, had obtained a photograph of the vehicle driven by the stealth photographer at the pizza delivery. Armed with the license-plate number, they were able to identify the car's owner: Kai Liam Nix, a twenty-year-old from North Carolina. Having scoured social media and Unicorn Riot's database of leaks, they were able to match his face and birthday with a Patriot Front member operating under the pseudonym Patrick North Carolina. It seemed likely that Nix either ran the Appalachian Archives account or was closely linked to it. [With the help of Jeff Tischauser](#), of the Southern Poverty Law Center, the researchers discovered that Nix is also an active-duty soldier in the Army, serving in the 82nd Airborne Division and stationed at Fort Liberty, in North Carolina. Tischauser told me, "These antifascist researchers may not be up to the ethical standards of professional journalists, but some of them get quality information."

I reached Nix by phone, and he denied any involvement in the Appalachian Archives account or with Patriot Front. He told me, "That is a hate group, and you can't be in the military and a hate group at the same time." Nix pleaded with me not to publish the allegations, which, he said, would hinder an application he'd made to become a police detective after leaving the military, "to stop criminals." We agreed to discuss the matter the next day, at a Starbucks near Fort Liberty. Before we hung up, I asked him for his license-plate number—the key detail linking him to Appalachian Archives—and he claimed not to remember it. The next morning, he backed out of our meeting and stopped responding to my messages. On August 16th, a few days after I called the Army, a government official told me that the previous day federal agents had arrested Nix for illicit sales of firearms and lying on a background check. (Spokespeople for the F.B.I. and the U.S. Attorney in the Eastern District of North Carolina declined to comment.)

The online war between the far right and the far left continues. After recent marches in Nashville by Patriot Front and a neo-Nazi group, some antifascist researchers launched a campaign called Name the Bozo, which aims to publicly identify as many neo-Nazis as possible. About twenty "bozos" have been exposed so far. One member of the Appalachia Research Club told me

that members of far-right groups “have a First Amendment right to be assholes and voice their opinions—but I have a First Amendment right to call them out on that, and if that results in repercussions where they lose their jobs or go to jail, that’s on them, not me.” He continued, “It doesn’t seem like the authorities are interested. I don’t know if they are just turning a blind eye, or if there is something else. But I think this is important work, and I am going to keep doing it, because I think some of these guys are legitimately dangerous.” ♦

Letter from Kenya

The Cult in the Forest

A pastor led his followers into the woods. Hundreds have since been found dead.

By Alexis Okeowo

August 19, 2024



Everyone hopes for a miracle. And in Kenya—where evangelical Christianity is so popular that the President frequently prays with preachers during official events—the more miracles a pastor performs, the more followers he will gain. Some swiftly build large congregations and become multimillionaires. In 2018, Halua Yaa, a woman in the coastal town of Malindi, heard about a pastor named Paul Mackenzie, who, it was said, could heal the sick. Yaa's eight-year-old granddaughter, Bright Angel, had mysterious symptoms: she had severe stomach pains and often threw up after eating. “She looked like she was going to die,” Yaa told me recently. Doctors gave her medicine and an I.V. drip, but nothing helped. “I went to the hospital for almost a year and a half, and there were no changes,” Yaa said. When she heard that Mackenzie was holding a “crusade” in Malindi—a kind of religious festival—she decided to attend. “You feel like, if

Mackenzie can talk with Jesus for him to do miracles, he can also tell Jesus to take away this disease,” she said.

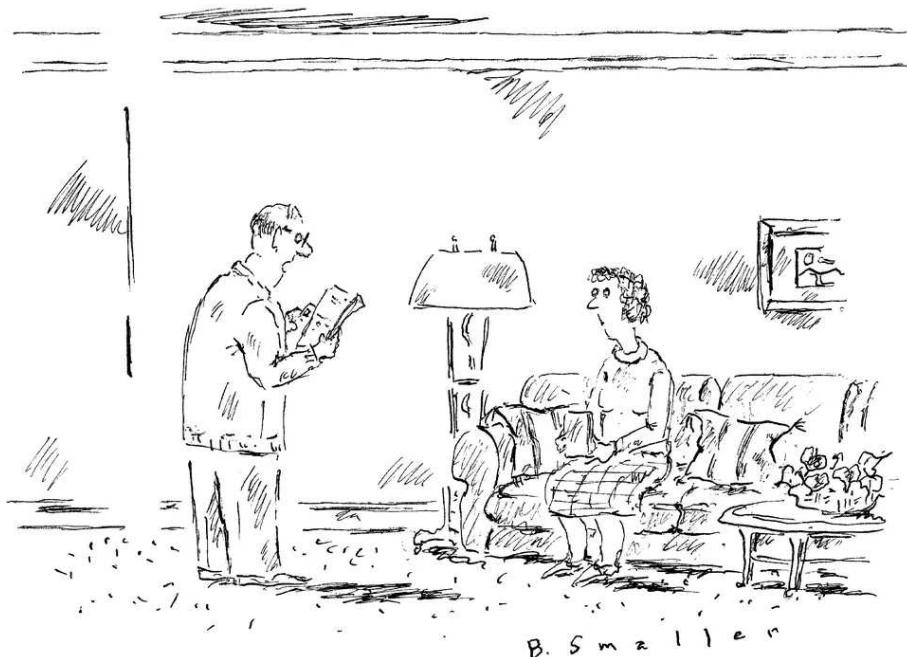
Yaa is fifty-four and petite, with full cheeks, cornrows, and a mischievous sense of humor. The previous decade had been difficult for her. After ten years of marriage, her husband left her for another woman, and she was forced to raise six children on her own. She developed a condition that caused her to lose sight in one eye. But she was smart and industrious; she started a café and eventually a farm in the countryside, built a home, and sent her children to school. Then, in 2010, one of her teen-age daughters got pregnant, and Yaa took on the responsibility of raising her granddaughter, too. She came to believe that this time in her life had been so painful because she was not devout enough, and found comfort going to a Catholic church. “Even if your heart is down, the word of God makes you hope,” she said.

Mackenzie ran a Pentecostal church called Good News International Ministries, on a spacious compound in Malindi, where he also lived. He was slender, with protruding eyes and a temperament that easily escalated from calm to fierce, and was known as a fervent preacher of the Gospels. He urged his followers to avoid television, sports, and other secular pastimes, to refuse Western medicine, and to take their children out of school. “I was told by the spirits to tell the people that education is evil—that it comes from man,” Mackenzie told me not long ago. He claimed to speak directly with God. When Yaa attended his crusade, she was impressed by his sermons, which promised that the apocalypse would bring believers eternal bliss. “I was not afraid of the end of the world,” she said. She was awed by the miracles she saw performed. One day, a girl was having a seizure, and when Mackenzie prayed over her the seizure stopped. Yaa heard afterward that her epilepsy had been cured. Another day, Mackenzie prayed over a man with a deep, infected wound; later that week, it seemed to have healed. Soon, she started attending his church.

In 2019, after getting into legal trouble for telling his followers not to send their children to school, among other things, Mackenzie closed his church in Malindi. But his assistant pastors contacted Yaa and told her that Mackenzie was starting a new community about forty miles away, in an eight-hundred-acre forest called Shakahola. Followers could move there, build a home, and

worship every day. Yaa decided to bring her granddaughter; hundreds of others went, too. Many sold their possessions and donated the resulting money to the church. A flight attendant reportedly left her career and sold the land she owned for about fifty thousand dollars, which she gave to the pastor. Yaa sold her goat for almost fifty dollars, a significant amount for her family, and gave some of the proceeds to Mackenzie. "I was excited," Yaa said. "I thought I was going somewhere good."

The forest was vast and dense, and life there was quiet. Followers lived in mud huts on *shambas*—plots of communal land—in small villages that Mackenzie gave Biblical names: Bethlehem, Nazareth. Yaa was in Jericho. The pastor came to each village regularly to lead lengthy prayer sessions. "Everyone was in their village praying," Yaa said. "No other activities." Mackenzie told followers that they should fast, to bring them closer to Christ. She had never read anything like that in the Bible. She tried to obey, but sometimes she sneaked off to a nearby market to buy biscuits, rice, and milk for herself and her granddaughter. "You cook quickly, you eat, you hide, you take away the fire," she said. Meanwhile, all that prayer appeared to be working: her granddaughter began eating porridge without vomiting, and gaining weight. After a month, they went back to Malindi. "Bright Angel was healed," Yaa said. "I was feeling good."



In early 2022, Yaa decided to return to Shakahola: she was suffering from a vaginal fistula, a condition that caused her pain and shame. She invited two friends to come along. One of her friends, Halifu, a thirty-five-year-old fruit-and-vegetable seller, hoped to get help for her depression after her husband died of a stroke. “I heard people were being prayed for, and they were healed,” she told me. The other friend, Remi, a twenty-seven-year-old who had grown up poor and dropped out of school, hoped to get relief for chronic chest pain and to improve her economic prospects. (Both women requested that I use only their first names, for their safety.) She had already attended Mackenzie’s church, and he had given her clothes. “When I went there, and Mackenzie prayed for me, all the problems I had in my home would disappear,” she said.

But, when they arrived at Shakahola, the mood of the community had changed. The fasting was more extreme. At first, they were given two slices of bread and a cup of tea every day. After three weeks, the women said, they were told that there would be no more food: followers had to starve themselves to death, in order to meet Jesus in Heaven. “I became afraid,” Yaa recalled. They wanted to leave, but were forbidden. Mackenzie had put together a security force, which patrolled the villages with machetes, hammers, and knives and prevented members from escaping. “It was crazy,” Remi said. “We were being locked up.” Yaa noticed that, when Mackenzie led prayer sessions, “even his eyes started to change. He was not like a human being.” She recalled him saying that the children would be the first to fast to death, then the women, then the men. “Whether you want to or not, there is no one who is going home,” he said. “You’re going to be buried here.”

The vast majority of Kenyans are Christian, a faith that arrived with early colonization. A group of Finnish missionaries brought Pentecostalism in the nineteen-hundreds. The colonial government tried to suppress it, because a faction of pro-independence freedom fighters belonged to the African Independent Pentecostal Church of Africa, which included messages about decolonization in its hymns. But after independence, in 1963, Pentecostalism and other forms of evangelical Christianity spread. They emphasized charismatic forms of worship—visions, spiritual healing, speaking in tongues—and a gospel that promised prosperity to the faithful. “If you want your church to be full, do what I call ‘spiritual gymnastics,’ ” Martin

Olando, a scholar of African Christianity at the Bishop Hannington Institute, in Mombasa, told me. “Jump up and down, prophesize good tidings, tell people what they want to hear.” By the nineties, Kenya’s President, Daniel arap Moi, enjoyed a beneficial relationship with Arthur Kitonga, an influential Pentecostal bishop. “President Moi has been appointed by God to lead this country,” Kitonga said at the time. William Ruto, Kenya’s current President, and its first evangelical one, brought gospel singers into his campaign team and party, and has donated cars, and thousands of dollars, to evangelical churches. His wife, Rachel, invited the U.S.-based televangelist Benny Hinn to preach with her at a crusade. (This year, Hinn apologized for giving fake prophecies. “There were times when I thought God had showed me something that He wasn’t showing me,” he told the Christian podcast “Strang Report.”)

Mackenzie was born in 1973, in Kwale County, on the Kenyan coast. His father, a shop manager, and his mother, a housewife, raised him and his nine siblings as evangelical Christians. “He was a good boy, he loved to go to church,” Robert, one of his brothers, told me. Mackenzie sang in the choir and gave guest sermons as a child. At home, he danced to gospel music. But he could quickly turn violent. When he was sixteen, Robert said, he got into an argument with another boy during a game of hide-and-seek and began viciously hitting him. “When you get him angry, he can beat you,” Robert said. After graduating from secondary school, Mackenzie worked as a street hawker in Mombasa, then drove a taxi in Malindi. He attended a Baptist church and began delivering popular sermons. In 2003, he founded Good News International, in the home of a follower. Joseph Katana, an early church member, said, “He was this person who, even when he just talked to you and gave you advice, you would end up feeling better.”

Initially, Mackenzie’s church reminded Robert of the one they grew up in, which focussed on careful reading of the Bible. But over time Mackenzie’s teachings became more severe. Julius Gathogo, who teaches religious studies at Kenyatta University, told me, “He was very eloquent. But he went to the extremes.” Mackenzie began arguing that hospitals and schools were demonic. “Even Jesus never went to school,” he said in one sermon. “Peter was never learned.” Mackenzie seemed able to see the future. “He told us that there was a sickness coming and that everything would be closed down,” Robert said. “After two years, *Covid-19* came.”

In 2015, Mackenzie started a broadcasting company to spread his sermons, and eventually acquired a local station, which he called Times TV. He had married a woman named Agnes, with whom he had a son and a daughter, but she died in 2009, of complications related to asthma. He got married again, to a woman named Joyce, but she died in 2017—of pneumonia, Mackenzie told his brother. By then, hundreds of followers attended his church every day, but his teachings about school were also generating controversy. Aisha Jumwa, then Malindi’s member of Parliament, publicly denounced him. Samson Zia Kahindi, Shakahola’s representative in the county assembly, told me, “He knows how to write, he knows how to speak English, he knows how to read. Why are you denying it for others?” In 2017, Mackenzie was charged with promoting radicalization through the church, and failing to send his own children to school. He was acquitted. Two years later, he was arrested again, and found guilty of running an unlicensed TV studio.

According to a Kenyan parliamentary report, Mackenzie may have been influenced by the teachings of Dave and Sherry Mackay, the Australian founders of a fringe religious movement known as A Voice in the Desert, started in 1981. The Mackays preach about the “end times” and instruct their followers to surrender their earthly possessions and relocate to an isolated community to serve the group’s leaders. In 2019, according to the report, Mackenzie hosted an associate of the Mackays, who gave sermons to his congregation, telling them to follow Mackenzie to a “promised land.” (The Mackays have denied any contact with Mackenzie.) Then, for a time, Mackenzie seemed to go silent. One of his former employees told me that he was searching for a new home for the church. “He wanted a sacred place, a huge place,” he said. The employee said that Mackenzie’s closest deputy, Smart Mwakalama, suggested that they could get land cheaply in Shakahola. “We are living in the last days,” Mackenzie said, in a sermon released on his YouTube channel in 2020. “The wrath is strong on this earth. . . . We don’t have much time.”

On a hot day last November, I drove from Malindi to Shakahola. By the time I got out of the city, rain was falling heavily on the lush, green countryside. The roads became mush, and I had to stop several times to determine whether I could pass through pools of water without being submerged. I came to a village bordering the forest. Beyond the thickets of trees, where

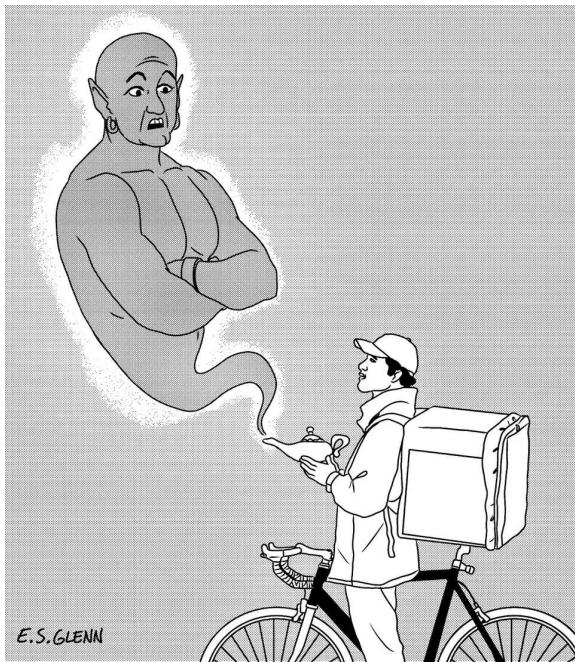
birds sheltered from the rain, lay mud huts built by Mackenzie's followers. The forest seemed like a fortress.

Many parishioners had been excited to follow Mackenzie to Shakahola. Joseph Katana, the early member, said that joining Mackenzie's church, in 2012, "saved me from madness." Joseph had suffered from mental illness since childhood, sometimes having manic shouting fits during which his parents had trouble restraining him. When he was twenty-four, his parents took him to Mackenzie for help. He lived at the church for two years, with other parishioners dealing with mental illness. The church leaders tied his arms and feet with rope, he said, and kept him on a mattress in the church's main space. "They feared I would run away," he told me. "They freed me to eat." During services, he and the others were moved under a tree outside, so that they wouldn't disturb other church members. Mackenzie often prayed over Joseph, and it seemed to work. "Within three or four months, I was feeling free," Joseph said. He could relax and sleep through the night, and visit his family without problems. He spent the next several years renting an apartment from Mackenzie and working as the church's watchman. "Mackenzie told me that, when I go back home, maybe the sickness will attack me again, so I have to serve God all of my life," he said. Joseph's wife, Elizabeth, went to Shakahola with their five small children, while Joseph remained in Malindi and worked part time as a tour guide. Elizabeth had seen Mackenzie perform miracles, including the healing of a mentally ill woman who seemed, she said, to be "possessed by demons."

By 2020, Mackenzie had begun telling his followers to fast for the sake of their souls. He may have been inspired by the teachings of William Branham, an American evangelical preacher who became known in the forties and fifties for his doomsday theology. (Kenyan investigators found copies of Branham's sermons in Shakahola.) Branham gave tirades against the health and education systems, and encouraged fasting as a way of achieving "atomic power," a form of spiritual strength. He later mentored Jim Jones, the cult leader who orchestrated the 1978 murder-suicide of more than nine hundred followers in Jonestown, Guyana. According to former followers and the parliamentary report, Mackenzie eventually told his people that the world was ending, and that everyone would soon die; the only way to insure a place in Heaven was to starve to death. "Getting to Heaven is not as easy as bread and margarine," he said, in one sermon. "You have to deny

yourself and go against yourself. You have to get to the point of ending your life for the sake of Jesus.” Children would also have to fast. “Let them die,” he said. “Is there any problem? It’s Jesus who gave you those children.” He tasked a group of security officers with enforcing the fast, according to former accomplices and Kenyan prosecutors, and put Mwakalama, his deputy, in charge. Mwakalama is trim and bearded, with small-boned features, and had previously been an accountant at a hotel. “He was very close to Mackenzie,” Elizabeth said.

Elizabeth tried to fast, but she was nursing a baby and began to sneak food at night and get water from streams where animals drank. Soon, though, she learned that people were truly starving themselves. The security force punished people who resisted or tried to escape by tying them to trees outside, according to witness testimony and reports from the Kenyan National Commission on Human Rights. When people seemed close to dying, some were told that it was their “wedding day”; Mackenzie and members of the security force would show up at their homesteads and strangle them, to send them to Heaven. (In the case of children, mothers or aunts were sometimes given this final task.) Mackenzie watched the strangulations, Elizabeth and other followers said, and made others watch as well. “I felt hurt and powerless,” she said. When Joseph visited his family in Shakahola, he was distressed by what he saw. A woman who had H.I.V. had stopped taking her retrovirals and soon died. Children had fevers and ringworm. Many people were dying of starvation, or in “wedding” ceremonies. He persuaded his wife to escape with their kids, but others refused to go with them. “Some stayed and are dead,” he said. “They believed that was the way to see Jesus.”



Some followers were as fervent as Mackenzie. One of the church's earliest members was Mary Kahindi, a shopkeeper in her forties. Mackenzie's church had initially held services in her parents' home; her family eventually left the church, but Mary became more deeply involved. She married Mwakalama, the deputy, closed her shop, and took her children out of school. She insisted that the TV be turned off when she was around, her sister Betty recalled; everything was "satanic." She moved to Shakahola with her husband and children, saying that it was the end times. "She had beautiful kids," Betty told me. In the end, Mary and Mwakalama came out of the forest, but none of their children did. When Betty asked her recently what happened to them, Mary started crying and refused to answer. Betty suspects that Mary and Mwakalama let their children die in Shakahola. "I'm still thinking, till today, how my sister got to that point," Betty said. "She was a good mother. How the heart changed."

Robert Mwakwaya, a chef in Malindi, told me that his wife, Delena Kafadzi, went to Shakahola in 2021, with her sister. Two things prompted her to go. First, the government had introduced a controversial digital-I.D. system called Huduma, which collected biometric data; Mackenzie told members that this was "the mark of Satan." Then, when *Covid-19* arrived, Kafadzi was resistant to taking the vaccine, and came to believe that the pandemic was a sign of the end times. She told her husband that she had bought a farm

a hundred miles away and had to be there for months at a time; in fact, she was in Shakahola. “She was my wife. I trusted her,” he told me. When she returned, she had shaved her head and was thin and dirty. “Even when she faced me, she never wanted to maintain eye contact,” he said.

Kafadzi tried to persuade him to sell some of their land, presumably to give the money to Mackenzie. She took things from their house to the forest: chairs, a table, a mattress, their children’s bicycles. One day, she took their kids—a fourteen-year-old girl and nineteen-year-old twin boys. When he spoke to the kids over the phone, they said that they were at the farm. “She brainwashed them,” he said. In the end, her sister, Joya, was the only one who made it out of the forest. All she would tell him was that his wife was no longer alive. “She knows that they are all dead,” he said. (Joya did not respond to requests for comment.) When I visited him at a café that he runs, he told me that he felt betrayed by his wife. “In my dreams, those kids, they call me when they are suffering and tell me that they are hungry,” he said.

Halua Yaa and her friends were trapped in Shakahola for months. Every day, followers gathered outside to pray for hours with one of Mackenzie’s assistant pastors. The three women survived on wild fruit that they covertly foraged in the forest. “At times, I’d get so dizzy to the point of shortness of breath,” Remi said. They feared the security force, which roved from house to house, dragging out those who refused to fast. “Security beat them to death, or attacked them with machetes, or strangled them,” Yaa said. She saw a woman and her children killed because they tried to escape. Around six months into their time in the forest, the women helped another parishioner who was going into labor. The woman had complications during the birth, and decided to seek medical help outside the forest, but the security officers stopped her. “They came to our homestead and tried to take the baby,” Remi said. “When the mother refused to hand over the baby, they hit it with a hammer on the head, and it died immediately.” They killed the mother afterward, Remi added. Yaa questioned why God would allow such suffering. “We cried at night, we cried in the afternoon,” she said.

One member of Mackenzie’s security force was a man named Lucky Chanzera, who had joined the church in 2018. He quickly came to believe that Mackenzie’s miracles were fake: he once saw Mackenzie plotting to stage one with a parishioner. “He used to go to specific people, touch them,

and then have them pretend that they've been healed," Chanzena told me. By then, though, he was making money from the church for doing odd jobs and for recruiting other members. When he joined the security force in Shakahola, he found that, though others lived in harsh conditions, officers were treated like kings. His family wasn't expected to fast; instead, he was given sacks of maize during the harvest and paid a stipend of roughly seventeen dollars every two months. "In Kenya, it's very hard to find a job," he said.

Chanzena patrolled the villages each day with a machete to make sure that no one tried to leave. "Once you go to that place, you're not supposed to come out again," he said. He took his orders from Mwakalama, a "heartless animal," who selected the team's next victims for strangulation—"mostly women and children." He saw one colleague strangle a woman as Mwakalama watched. Another day, he saw five or six people lying dead on the ground—some of whom were likely killed in a similar manner. He saw security officers rape women in the community, but he claimed that he didn't participate, telling me, "I have a wife." He also claimed that he never personally took part in the killings. "What I regret so much is, there was a day some women were running away, and they had already escaped, but we took them back," Chanzena said. "We never saw them again." At the end of 2022, Mwakalama told Chanzena that he would have to give up one of his own children to be sacrificed. According to Chanzena, Mwakalama said that he had done so himself already. "That's why I had to run away," Chanzena said. He escaped with his family after Christmas, pretending that they were on their way to a wedding.

Another man, named Eunity Charo, spent about two years on the security force. He was paid well and ate meals of meat, rice, and *ugali*, a maize dish. If he recruited a group of between ten and twenty people to Shakahola, he could receive a bonus of four to seventeen dollars; he told me that the security officers were also paid for killings. "If you strangled anybody in that church to death, you were given money," he said. "That was, like, a sacrifice to Mackenzie." As the months went by, he stopped believing in Mackenzie's teachings and prayed only to escape the forest. But members of the security force were themselves being monitored, he thought—including their use of cell phones—by Mackenzie's most loyal deputies. "If we went against his will or his law, we'd also be killed," Charo said. "So, we did

those things.” At first, he told me that he didn’t want to think about his role in the killings, because it was “very painful.” Then he backtracked, saying, “I thank God I didn’t kill, but I know I put three families in that place.” (Victor Kaudo, the head of the Malindi Community Human Rights Centre, was skeptical of both men’s claims of innocence.)

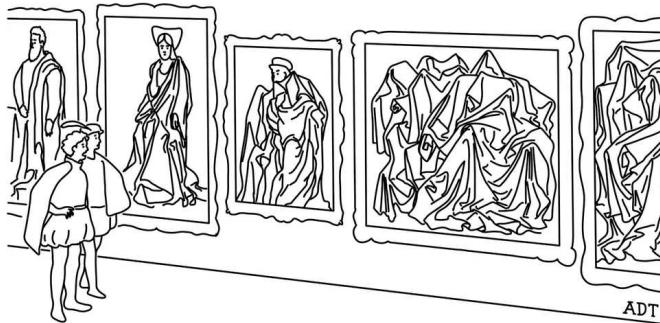
In mid-2022, four security officers arrived at Remi’s hut, took her away, and raped her. “There, in the bushes,” Remi told me. “I was very scared.” She had initially felt that her time in Shakahola was proving beneficial: her chest pains seemed to be getting better. But after the rape the women began making plans to escape. They studied the routes that Mackenzie and his officers walked while on patrol. Remi, who was pregnant, ate wild dates to get enough energy for the journey. In February, 2023, they ran into the forest. “We left the others in dire conditions,” Remi said. “Because of the hunger, some were very confused—they just sat in a corner and cried.” The women walked at night and slept under trees during the day. They knew that, to the west, the forest was thicker and easier to hide in, so they travelled in the direction that the sun set. They drank from watering holes with their hands. Shakahola borders a national park, so they had to take care to avoid lions, hyenas, and leopards.

On the fourth day of walking, they reached a road and flagged down a car, which took them to a village. “We broke down and started crying,” Yaa said. Residents gave them clean water to drink and food to eat. Eventually, members of the Malindi Community Human Rights Centre brought them back to Malindi. The women refused to tell anyone about the fasting or the strangulations; Yaa was still afraid that Mackenzie might track them down and have them killed. But they told Kaudo, from the Human Rights Centre, that sexual violence was happening in the forest. “They still had some belief in Mackenzie, so they felt they needed to protect him,” Kaudo told me. “But they gave us the crucial information that led to everything.”

Recently, I met Kaudo on a street in Malindi. He is short with a full beard, and possesses an aura of sadness. Kaudo had first visited Mackenzie’s church, out of curiosity, in 2019. “It was packed full,” Kaudo said. Mackenzie told him that he would need to shave his beard if he wanted to become a member, and that an Arsenal soccer jersey he was wearing was satanic. He told Kaudo’s female colleague that she would have to cut off or

cover her hair; braids were forbidden. After the service, Kaudo was summoned by church elders, who, he said, showed him videos claiming that the Illuminati had taken over the world, and urged him to quit his job, turn over his identity documents, and attend church seven days a week. “ ‘If you’ve decided to join the church, you should now forget about the world,’ ” Kaudo recalled them saying. “It was so hectic for me.”

By early 2023, stories about the forest community were slowly getting out to the wider world. “There was news that this guy had brought a church, that there were people who were fasting,” Changawa Mangi, the elder of a nearby village, told me. In February, two boys, aged ten and twelve, escaped from Shakahola to the village. They told Mangi that they had been eating sand to survive, and that one of their mothers had died of starvation. Mangi’s wife cooked for them, but they had diarrhea and vomited after each meal. “They got so used to me they started calling me Dad,” he said. In March, two hundred villagers ventured into the forest to investigate, but men from the security force attacked them with machetes and bows and arrows, and burned some of their motorbikes. Mangi had to run about two miles back to the village.



That same month, a pastor named Titus Katana visited Kaudo’s office. Titus had been a deputy of Mackenzie’s in Shakahola, but, in 2022, he became

alarmed by what he was witnessing: rampant starvation, beatings, and public killings. “Women were told to fast every day with the kids,” he recalled to me. “I saw some being strangled to death.” Mackenzie told Titus and the security officers that they were entitled to rape the female followers. “The teachings of Mackenzie say that, if you fast, you can do that, because you are holy,” Titus said. (Kithure Kindiki, Kenya’s interior secretary, has said that postmortem examinations of women who died in Shakahola showed signs of sexual abuse.) Titus confronted Mackenzie, taking him through the Bible to show him that it didn’t condone any of this behavior. But, Titus said, “he wouldn’t listen to me.” Titus tried to persuade others to run away, but they didn’t heed him, either. Eventually, he fled, and he is still in hiding.

Titus showed Kaudo a video of a woman and two children being punished for eating. “I saw people being surrounded, like how we keep our cows in Africa,” Kaudo said. “Then people were hitting them with crude weapons, like huge sticks, and punching them on the head. It was very painful to watch. Mackenzie was sitting like a king, just sitting and watching.” Soon, Kaudo met Francis Wanje, a sixty-year-old lecturer at a teachers’ college, who was trying to track down his daughter Emily and her three sons. “Emily was a very good girl—a very committed Christian,” Wanje told me. She had joined Mackenzie’s church with her husband, Isaac Ngala, and their children. Her parents disapproved, and in 2022 she told them that she had left the church. But in mid-March, 2023, Wanje got a call from one of Ngala’s relatives, who said that Emily was in Shakahola. The relative described the horrors there and said that he had fled, but that Emily had refused to leave. “It was just a shock,” Wanje said. Kaudo, Wanje, and Titus each went to the police, but they were told that more evidence was needed for officers to take action. (Kenya’s Directorate of Criminal Investigation did not respond to requests for comment on this matter.) Kaudo began hearing from others: one man was looking for fourteen family members in Shakahola. “So I decided, Let me take the risk,” Kaudo said. He would help stage a rescue operation.

One morning, according to the parliamentary report, Kaudo and others—including two of Wanje’s nephews—headed into the forest. “You could just hear birds singing,” Kaudo said. They came upon mud huts and then found one of Wanje’s grandsons tied to a tree with wire. He wasn’t wearing a shirt, and he was so skinny that his rib cage stuck out. That day was supposed to

be his “wedding day,” he told them. Kaudo untied him, and the boy held on to him and cried. They asked where his brothers were, and the boy pointed to two graves. He later told Wanje that his mother had strangled one of his brothers. “It’s something which you cannot imagine,” Wanje said.

As the group began retracing its steps, Kaudo said, it was surrounded by security officers carrying machetes, sticks, and bows and arrows—“strong men, huge men, people who were armed. The only weapon I had was my phone.” Then Ngala, the boy’s father and one of Mackenzie’s followers, arrived. He spoke with Wanje on the phone and finally agreed to let the group leave. Wanje was reunited with his grandson at a hospital in Malindi. Soon afterward, he hired men to look for Emily and Ngala in Shakahola, but neither was found. “They have not been seen,” he told me. “To us, it’s like they are no more.” He begged for help from local media outlets and the police. He later had a mental breakdown from the stress and spent two weeks in a hospital. He sometimes mistook other women for Emily.

In late March, police officers arrested Mackenzie at his home in Malindi. He was initially released on bail. But the next month he was rearrested, and dozens of heavily armed officers raided Shakahola. Kaudo went with them as a guide, using directions from Yaa and others. Some church members heard them coming and escaped into the forest on motorbikes. Others were near death. “They were true believers,” Kaudo said. An elderly woman and her granddaughter protested as Kaudo and a police officer took them out of the forest, saying that they were being prevented from meeting Jesus. Kaudo saw several mass graves. “It wasn’t even a decent burial,” he said. “The graves were not deep, like three feet down. All of these bodies were very thin. The women were naked.” In a single grave, he saw a woman, a man, and six children. Four people who Kaudo tried to bring to the hospital died on the drive there; one of them, a child, died in his arms. He felt grief and anger. “If the government had coöperated from the very beginning, we could have rescued hundreds of people,” Kaudo said.

Nearly four hundred and fifty bodies have been recovered from Shakahola so far, and many more are likely still in the ground. The government has not given an estimate; one worker at the site guessed that hundreds remained. The victims were mostly women and children. “That is the bitter and sad story of Shakahola,” Sebastian Muteti, who works on children’s issues for

the Kenyan government, said. Many of the bodies that Kaudo saw were missing organs. “They didn’t have kidneys,” he said. “They didn’t have eyes.” It’s unclear why these organs would have been taken, if they were. In an affidavit last year, Chief Inspector Martin Munene said that “postmortem reports have established missing organs in some of the bodies,” and added that it was “believed that trade on human body organs has been well coordinated.” In response, Kindiki, the interior secretary, said that talk of missing organs was merely a rumor. But a police officer working on the investigation, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told me that at least two hundred of the bodies he saw—almost half of those recovered—were missing organs. “Kidneys were being harvested,” he said. (Kenya’s interior ministry did not respond to several requests for comment.)

James Karisa has been exhuming bodies in Shakahola since last year; he and other men dig up the corpses, put them into body bags, and transfer them to the hospital in Malindi, for DNA testing. If there is a DNA match, the families can take the bodies home with them. “They’re in bad condition, Madam,” he told me. He has seen bodies with missing eyes, kidneys, and genitals. Karisa’s own ex-girlfriend went to Shakahola, after they broke up. He found her body in one of the graves, wearing clothes that he had bought for her. Her corpse, too, was missing its genitals. “I have never experienced such a thing in my whole life,” he said. “I’m twenty-five.” He regularly had nightmares about the victims. Recently, the exhumations were paused. When I visited Shakahola with Kaudo, we had to stay near the perimeter. Kaudo thinks that some of Mackenzie’s accomplices are still hiding in the forest or in the adjacent national park. He told me, pointing into the brush, “We believe those people are there.”

Mackenzie is not the only one of his kind. In Kenya, promising miracles has proved lucrative. A preacher named David Owuor is said to have brought a woman who had been dead for two hours back to life. He travels in a fleet of luxury cars and was gifted a private jet. In 2014, the *Nairobian*, a Kenyan publication, accused a pastor named Thomas Wahome of telling congregants that, for a fee, he could find out whether their names were in the “Book of Life,” where, some believe, God records who will go to Heaven. He also allegedly charged them to touch his clothes, an act that he said would heal them. (Wahome denied these allegations to the *Nairobian*.) That same year, a popular pastor named Victor Kanyari was accused by the Kenyan media

outlet KTN News of faking miracles, including curing people of H.I.V., so that congregants would give him money. (Kanyari denied the allegations to KTN.) His preaching has made him rich; another news outlet, Citizen Digital, reported that he has claimed to have so many cars that he doesn't have room to park them all. In 2017, Gilbert Deya, a Kenyan televangelist based in the United Kingdom, was extradited to Kenya after being accused of falsely claiming to create miracle babies for several women who couldn't get pregnant. In fact, according to a BBC investigation, his wife, Mary, had taken one infertile woman to a clinic in a poor Nairobi neighborhood, where she was told that she had gone into labor and then given a baby; a subsequent BBC report raised the possibility that the Deyas were engaged in child trafficking to find Kenyan babies for the infertile women. (The Deyas denied wrongdoing and insisted that the miracle births were real.) In 2007, Mary was convicted of stealing a baby and was incarcerated; in 2011, she was convicted of stealing another child. Last year, a Kenyan court acquitted Gilbert of child trafficking, for lack of evidence. As of this month, he was still preaching in Kenya.

People in vulnerable emotional and material circumstances can more easily end up in cults. "Maybe they had a loved one who died. Maybe they have an illness. Maybe they had some trauma earlier in their life," Steven Hassan, an American psychotherapist who works with cult survivors, told me. "Nobody thinks they're joining a cult. They get deceived. It's a systematic, step-by-step seduction." Those who join do so in search of possibility, stability, and a sense of meaning. Jim Jones promised an egalitarian commune free of racism and classism. He seemed to work miracles in which people who claimed that they couldn't walk threw away their crutches or jumped out of wheelchairs after his "healing." Members of Heaven's Gate, a doomsday cult in California, believed that they were preparing to become higher beings through a monastic life style; in 1997, dozens of them died in a mass suicide. Mackenzie's indoctrination also started benignly. He began by promising to cure his followers' ailments and end their hardships. By the time he allegedly told people to submit to their own deaths, they were already deeply enmeshed with the group and isolated in the forest. "They were promised hope," Julius Gathogo, the religious-studies professor, said.

Some observers believe that Mackenzie viewed the church as a path to riches. "In Kenya, if you want to get money, there are three ways: education,

religion, and politics,” Geoffrey Wango, a psychology professor at the University of Nairobi, said. “Mackenzie picked religion.” His followers sold land, houses, livestock, and cars to give him the proceeds, and emptied their bank accounts; Titus, his former deputy, estimated that these assets amounted to more than seven hundred thousand dollars. While his followers starved, Mackenzie apparently lived well. Mangi, the village elder, saw him come to town in his car to buy flour, maize, and beans. “Mackenzie was not fasting,” Titus said. Chanzera, the security officer, saw him drinking Coca-Cola. “He was after money,” Titus said. “Money is everything—he used to tell me that.” Others have argued that, to go to the lengths he did, Mackenzie must have come to believe in his own fantasy. “Cult leaders are typically malignant narcissists, and they surround themselves with true believers,” Hassan said. “They start to believe their own stuff in a way that is pathological.”

Ninety-four of Mackenzie’s accomplices are now in custody, including Mwakalama. (According to press reports, all ninety-four have pleaded not guilty. James Mouko, who is defending six of the defendants in one of the trials, including Mackenzie and Mwakalama, said that the two men have denied all charges.) But many remain at large. I met Chanzera at a secluded spot in the countryside. He told me that he regretted his involvement in the church. “I came to learn that it was kind of a business,” he said. “Most of the people are so desperate for salvation. Even me, I would like to meet Jesus one day, if possible.” His wife had been an early member of the church, but she divorced him when she learned of his role in the violence at Shakahola. He was now moving from place to place, worried about being attacked by followers who remained loyal to Mackenzie. “Those people who were arrested are not the only people who are associated with Mackenzie,” he said. Later, I visited Charo, the other security officer, at an apartment outside Malindi, where he was in hiding. I asked him what he thought Mackenzie’s mission was. “Killing,” he said.



Mackenzie has been charged with the manslaughter of two hundred and thirty adults, through suicide pact, and the murders of a hundred and ninety-one children. "Mackenzie will not get out of jail," Kindiki, the interior secretary, said, adding, "He will age in there" and "meet the wrath of God." Residents of Malindi were so angry after Mackenzie's arrest that they vandalized the building that once housed his church. Wycliffe Makasembo, another of Mackenzie's lawyers, told me that he was innocent. He said that the state was compelling church members to make statements against their will. "They're fake stories," he said. He claimed that the government was dumping bodies from around the country in Shakahola, as part of a setup. "Any person who has disappeared in Kenya is being blamed on Mackenzie," Makasembo said. "They're fixing him." (When contacted later about accusations that Mackenzie staged fake miracles, made money from followers, ate while they fasted, and encouraged sexual violence, Makasembo refused to comment unless he was paid for it. "I'll give you a much bigger story, deeper secrets," he said.)

Not long ago, I visited Mackenzie in a holding cell at a courthouse in Malindi. Several of his family members were visiting, including his mother; his third wife, Rhoda Maweu; and some of his children. When he saw me, Mackenzie smiled and beckoned. "Come in, it's O.K.," he said. He was wearing a blue-and-green striped shirt and a red baseball cap. He was calm

and immediately engaging. I sat next to him on a bench; we were so close that our legs and arms were touching.

He said that he had advised his followers not to go to hospitals or schools, but that he had not forced them to do anything. His wife noted that he was not the only one concerned over the types of things that children were being taught in schools—including L.G.B.T.Q. issues—and that in Florida the government was censoring textbooks. Mackenzie said that he had stopped preaching in 2019, after his arrest, and that he had never set up a formal place of worship in Shakahola. “There is no church there,” he said. “There was nothing. It was just *shambas*.” He had lived there as a member of the community. “It was sort of like a village,” he said.

Mackenzie denied that he had told his followers to fast: “No! No! No, no!” He said that allegations that his security force had killed followers were false. “There’s nothing,” he said. I asked him about the accounts of mutilated bodies found in graves in Shakahola, and he said that these stories were lies. I mentioned that more than a hundred children had reportedly been found in the ground there, and he claimed ignorance. “The thing is that I’m just hearing it,” he said. Government officials “have never taken me there.” When I said that there seemed to be substantial evidence that people had died in the forest, he responded, “Maybe. Maybe.”

He then claimed that, if his followers *had* died, it was because Jesus Christ had come and raptured them away. “Jesus himself did it,” he said. “Nobody killed anybody. I did nothing. And nobody can stand anywhere and say, ‘Mackenzie did this and this.’” His wife, who said that she had never been to Shakahola, was more careful; she said that there seemed to have been a “mixture of some fights and conflicts,” and that she was “convinced” this was the cause of the deaths. When I asked if she, like her husband, believed that people had been raptured, she said, “I don’t—I don’t have a view of that because I wasn’t there.” (Since my visit, she has been charged as an accomplice to manslaughter, child negligence, and radicalization. She has pleaded not guilty, and Makasembo, her lawyer, declined to comment on her case.) Mackenzie argued that his religious beliefs were being repressed. “What I can say is that they are trying to fight my faith,” he said. “The government doesn’t want what I believe, and what I used to preach.” His expression was clear-eyed and assured. “I’m very O.K., because I know

“where I’m going,” he continued. “I know my destiny—Heaven. So, I fear nothing.”

Some months back, I visited Yaa at her simple homestead in the countryside outside Malindi. When I arrived, she was preparing dinner with Halifu and Remi, who were living there with their children. While I was there, Yaa’s granddaughter, Bright Angel, now thirteen and healthy, came home from school, smiling. The child that Remi was pregnant with in Shakahola, a baby girl, was almost a year old. Remi and Halifu said that they wanted to get back to work and provide for their children. “I’m taking care of them,” Yaa said. “If I care for these ones, I know God is there. He will help me.” The government had put many survivors, including Yaa, into mandatory “rescue centers,” and had released them only when they said that they would testify. Yaa had reluctantly agreed, but she now feared retaliation from Mackenzie’s supporters. “I’m afraid my life will be in danger,” she said. Halifu and Remi are in hiding from Mackenzie’s sympathizers.

The country is still reeling from the tragedy. Sebastian Muteti, the government officer, compared the event to 9/11. “It was a great test for us,” he said. Some people have been reunited with loved ones. Wanje said, of his grandson, “He’s everything to us.” Some are still waiting to learn the fate of their relatives. Mwakwaya, the chef in Malindi, gave a DNA sample to government officials, and just heard that they found a match for one of his twin sons. “It’s terrible,” Mwakwaya told me. “It is now a reality that my children are all dead.” Kaudo said that, even in a rescue center, Mary Kahindi, Mwakalama’s wife, had tried to persuade other survivors to continue fasting. (Makasembo, who also represents Mary, declined to comment on her case.) She recently called her family from jail, asking that they take responsibility for her so that she could be released. “She was telling me the kids escaped in the forest,” Betty, her sister, said. “But with all the search operations those kids have not been found.”

Trials for Mackenzie and his co-defendants have now begun. One man testified that, on a trip to look at land near the Shakahola community that he was considering buying, he and a group of associates came across four emaciated, naked women crying for help; men from Mackenzie’s security force then chased the group away. One of Mackenzie’s former followers described having to let his daughter starve to death. Another said that

Mackenzie tasked the force with surveilling followers, and that he decided which members should be killed next.

Kenyans seeking a salve in religion remain in danger of exploitation. “There are so many Mackenzies in Kenya—people who take advantage of ignorance and poverty,” Martin Olando, the scholar of African Christianity, said. Mackenzie’s TV station was taken over by a pastor named Ezekiel Odero, who claims that he can make infertile women conceive and sells holy water and handkerchiefs that he says have the power to heal the sick. The wife of Kenya’s Deputy President has attended his crusades. Last year, the police reported that fifteen people had died at his church after coming there to be healed. The pastor, through his lawyers, told the Kenyan newspaper the *Nation* that they had been critically ill when they arrived for their “spiritual interventions.” He has denied any wrongdoing.

Yaa regrets going to Shakahola, and feels guilty that she took Halifu and Remi with her. She considers it her duty to take care of them, even though she barely has the means to provide for her own family. She sometimes sees the faces of people who died in the forest in her sleep. The other women are also haunted; Remi occasionally sleeps in Yaa’s bed. She told me that she doesn’t blame Yaa: “We were just following salvation. It was our decision to go with her.” Today, Yaa doesn’t let pastors pray for her; she does it herself. “I know my God,” she said. She no longer believes in Mackenzie’s teachings. Still, she told me that she continues to fast, off and on, to ask for God’s forgiveness. “I know how to read a Bible—there is nowhere in the Bible saying that we fast until we die,” she said. “But I needed to see a miracle.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

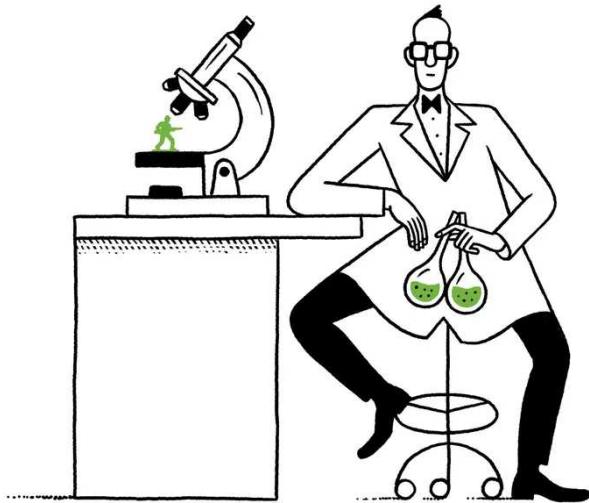
- [My Life's Work](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

My Life's Work

By Mike O'Brien

August 19, 2024



Tiny plastic shards found in human testicles, study says.

—CNN.

(For Leonard)

Who am I? I'm nobody. I was cut from every team in high school. I didn't go to an Ivy League college. I don't make six figures. My wife constantly cheats and recounts it to me. My teen-age children do not speak to me.

All I have in the world is a paternal aunt and a tank of fish that love me. And my work. I'm nobody.

But every day for the past forty years, I've got up in the morning and tried to figure out how to get tiny shards of plastic into human testicles. Specifically, into the testicles of one very resilient test subject, Leonard W.

I'm not sure when we humans first decided to give a genuine try to getting a piece of plastic inside a man's testicles. The 1971 horror film "Little Plastic Army Man in My Testicles" may have planted the idea, although that film deserves no other accolades, and should probably be categorized as a hate crime for its portrayal of the Vietnamese. But it proved to put a bee in the bonnet of the United States government, which has given us more than five hundred million dollars to get a piece of plastic into a man's testicles, ideally before the Russians do.

For our first attempt, we surgically inserted a little army guy into Leonard's testes, with assistance from the best doctors in the U.S. and England. Leonard complained of swelling in the region, and of discomfort while biking, so we had to take the army guy out and go back to the drawing board. For the record, we took his complaints seriously. But keep in mind that Leonard also said that the tissues in our offices were "scratchy" on his nostrils. So we sometimes worried that we'd chosen a whiner as our only test subject.

Next we had Leonard put his testicles into an overturned toaster oven with a dozen plastic army guys wrapped tightly around them. We set it for a bagel amount of toasting. The army guys did, in fact, melt around Leonard's testicles, but unfortunately none osmosed past his epidermis. So we had nothing. No one was mad at Leonard, but at this point we simply had nothing.

Around this time, our government funding was brought into question. We had promised to get plastics into human gonads, which would, in theory, deposit endocrine-disrupting chemicals in the body. But, after a decade, we had not delivered.

To make matters worse, Leonard said he wanted to leave the study. He said that his wife had become pregnant during one of their conjugal visits (a bit of an "in your face" to all the work we'd done, if you ask me), and claimed that the research-study compensation wasn't worth the physical damage he was incurring. He didn't use the word "incurring," obviously. That was me. I can't remember his exact wording, but I don't think he knows that word.

We explained to Leonard that, although he was free to leave at any time, if he did we would have to throw out all the data we'd gathered on him and his testicles, and another man would have to start from scratch. Plus, Leonard would have to return all of the compensation. He said he didn't have that compensation anymore, because he'd spent it on the baby, or whatever.

So we pressed on. We put Leonard into stirrups and pelted his testes with shotgun blasts of chopped-up Michelob-six-pack rings. At one point, we gave his testicles tiny silicone breast implants. He woke up from that one pissed as heck. We hadn't told him about it beforehand, though we probably should have. He said, "I missed my son's christening for this?"

After more failed tests, a chimpanzee that I knew from another study asked me, in sign language, "Have you guys ever checked to see if there are *already* plastics in his testicles?"

We had not. So we ran a test and, sure enough, Leonard had microplastics and nanoplastics in his testicles! And in his lungs, blood, and brain! In fact, we all do!

This was definitely a "Dorothy moment" for us. The thing we had been searching for had been inside of us all along.

I was fortunate enough to make the following telephone call: "Mr. President," I said, "there are little shards of plastic in your nuts as we speak, sir. A bunch of tiny, broken bits. And there are going to be even more next year. And the year after that."

So who am I? I'm nobody. I'm just the guy who got to tell the President he's got a little army guy in his nuts. Who are you? ♦

Fiction

- [Supplies Needed for a Tech C.E.O. Murder-Mystery Dinner Party](#)
- [The Narayans](#)

Sketchbook

Supplies Needed for a Tech C.E.O. Murder-Mystery Dinner Party

By Ali Fitzgerald

August 19, 2024



Fiction

The Narayans

By Akhil Sharma

August 18, 2024



Mrs. Narayan was small, dark-skinned, oval-faced. She had a wonderful singsong voice. She'd come up to you at temple on Holi or Diwali and offer congratulations so heartfelt you'd feel as if it were the first time the day had ever been celebrated. We all liked her. She was an immigrant, too, but she didn't seem to have jangled nerves the way we did. She cooked for many of us and regularly tried to refuse payment. "This is from my side," she'd say. "A horse can't be friends with grass," we might answer.

Mr. Narayan we didn't like. He was short and squat. He spoke roughly to his wife. He owned a television-repair shop and described himself as an engineer, even though he hadn't finished high school. Our kids would go over to his house to see his children, and he'd play Ping-Pong with them. When he won, he'd crow about it. He got into stupid arguments with the kids, over facts like the world's population. If someone showed him an almanac that proved he was wrong, he'd grumble about the ignorance of American authors. We'd see him smoking in his car in the driveway of the

high school, as he waited for his children, a shower cap on his head because he was dyeing his hair.

The Narayans had two children. The daughter, Madhu, was fourteen, two years younger than her brother. Mr. Narayan wouldn't let her sit on the front porch, where she might be seen. He also wouldn't let her wear shorts. She wore jeans in gym class.

Nehali, who was the same age, told her mother about this.

"Poor girl," Dr. Shukla said. "Why do you sound happy talking about it?"

"I'm not happy," Nehali said. She was standing beside her mother as Dr. Shukla rolled dough for parathas. "Why shouldn't I talk about it?"

"Religious people can be conservative."

"Mr. Narayan isn't religious."

Dr. Shukla was another person we all liked. Although she ran a clinic on Oak Tree Road, she also made house calls. She addressed women as "elder sister," even if they weren't educated. She had a face that was kindly and square and so hairy that she appeared to have sideburns.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Akhil Sharma read "The Narayans"](#)

One day, Nehali came to her mother's clinic after school. She was giddy, her eyes bright. "Madhu's pregnant," she announced, almost swaying in her excitement. "Vikas is the daddy." Vikas was Madhu's brother.

Dr. Shukla became confused. "How do you know?" she demanded in Hindi. She always spoke Hindi when scolding.

"The nurse told Madhu, and Madhu told the principal."

"Did the principal tell you? Are you the principal's beloved?"

Nehali looked at her mother. She felt it was wrong that her enthusiasm was being interfered with. Maybe her mother didn't understand how interesting all this was.

"Does the principal hold your hand and ask how you are doing?"

Nehali didn't answer.

"You don't hear me? You hear things that no one is saying to you, but you don't hear me?"

Madhu's pregnancy was soon confirmed. All over town, we questioned our children. Had they ever been alone with Vikas? Had he ever touched them? We weren't totally sure, though, that it was Vikas who had got Madhu pregnant. Some of us suspected Mr. Narayan. Anyone who wouldn't let his daughter sit on the front porch and made her wear jeans in gym class had to have weird ideas about sex.

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

Mrs. Narayan began going to temple all the time. Whenever we were there, we'd see her. She'd lie face down on the wall-to-wall carpet, her arms stretched toward the idols of God Ram or Krishna-ji, her palms pressed together. We'd seen people who had cancer in their families do this. Those prostrated men and women had frightened us. Here was what life finally came to—being sick, or watching loved ones be sick. Seeing Mrs. Narayan, however, we felt a sense of indignation. There were so few Indians in Edison, New Jersey, in those days; we felt that each of us reflected well or badly on the others. The Narayans had stolen some piece of our self-respect.

We learned soon that Vikas was getting beaten at school. One morning, as he was going down a flight of stairs, a large group of white girls crowded him, tripped him, sent him tumbling as they punched him and clawed at his shirt and hair. This, we all felt, was not wrong. He was male, and he belonged to his family. Still, we worried. If such an attack could occur under just circumstances, surely it could happen unjustly, too. Had those girls felt free to beat him up because he was Indian? Would they do the same to our children?

Madhu was given an abortion, and two months later she was taken out of school and sent to India. This we understood as proof that Mr. Narayan was the one who had impregnated her. If it had been Vikas, his parents could have just kept him locked in his room at night.

When Dr. Shukla was a little girl, in India, her parents, like many middle-class people, had forbidden the servants from sitting on the furniture. When she'd see her parents sitting on a sofa while a servant girl not much older than she was squatted in a corner, her stomach hurt. She felt so bad once that she gave a servant girl stickers that could be scratched and sniffed. The scratch-and-sniffs were her favorite, and it had felt important to give the girl the very best thing she had.

That guilty awareness of her own good fortune had always made her tender toward women from poorer backgrounds. While the rest of us now felt that the entire Narayan family was wretched and should be excluded and forgotten, Dr. Shukla actually imagined the nightmare that must have been the Narayan household: the frightened Madhu, Vikas living under a shadow of unspeakable and most likely unjustified blame, the gray ranch house standing in the flat light of the afternoon. And although she believed that Mr. Narayan was wicked, one of those monstrous men India was full of, she also blamed Mrs. Narayan, since she must have known and chosen to ignore and deny.

After Madhu was sent to India, Mrs. Narayan vanished for a while. We didn't see her at temple; we didn't see her at the Indian grocery store, renting videotapes. Vikas we heard about. At school, he had to eat lunch in a classroom by himself. This was for his own protection.

One evening, Dr. Shukla drove home from her clinic, Nehali in the passenger seat. Pulling into her driveway, she saw Mrs. Narayan's silver station wagon and Mrs. Narayan beside it. Mrs. Narayan looked nervous, her face tense and drawn. Nehali twitched under her seat belt, wondering what story she would be able to unfold to her friends at school.

Dr. Shukla turned to her. "You speak about this and I'll beat you like a nail."

They got out of the car.

Mrs. Narayan waited for Nehali to go inside.

“Shukla sister, I can’t breathe.”

“In reality?”

“I take two steps and get out of breath.”

“Come.”

In the kitchen, Dr. Shukla took Mrs. Narayan’s blood pressure. She had Mrs. Narayan take deep breaths while she held a stethoscope to her back. She felt uncomfortable with her hand on Mrs. Narayan’s shoulder, as if touching her suggested acceptance.

“Madhu didn’t tell me anything.”

Dr. Shukla felt revulsion.

“How are you sleeping?”

“I’m scared to sleep.”

Mrs. Narayan began coming to Dr. Shukla’s house every few weeks. She’d arrive in the evening and Dr. Shukla would check her blood pressure, talk to her. Mrs. Narayan would stay as Dr. Shukla began cooking dinner. She’d linger even after Mr. Shukla came home. Only when the family sat down to dinner would she depart.

Once, Dr. Shukla told Mrs. Narayan that she should come to the clinic. Mrs. Narayan demurred. “When people look at me, I feel I’m being scalded.”

One of the reasons that people had hired Mrs. Narayan as a cook was that she was Brahman, so we didn’t have to think about what fingers had touched the food that we had in our mouths. When we tried to swallow her food now, the masticated globs seemed to dangle down our throats from a long hair.

Mrs. Narayan got a job at Kmart. Mrs. Bilwakesh, a real-estate agent, went to the store and spoke to a supervisor. Mrs. Narayan was let go. This, we

felt, was too much. To take away someone's ability to earn a living seemed evil.

Time passed, months and years. The big change came with the opening of Hilltop Estates. Before Hilltop, the only Indians who had lived in Edison were those who could afford to buy or rent a house. Now Indians who couldn't buy a car were seen walking along the sides of roads. Rusty splatters of betel nut appeared on sidewalks near gas stations. At J. P. Stevens High School and John Adams Middle School, there were boys and girls who couldn't speak English and wore coats that were too large for them, passed down from relatives. Before, if you wanted garlands for prayers, you bought flowers and used a needle and thread to make your own. Now you went to an apartment in Hilltop, where three old women sat on a floor surrounded by mounds of marigolds. There was also an apartment full of freezers, where you could buy smuggled Bengali fish.

If Madhu's pregnancy had been discovered after Hilltop opened, people wouldn't have cared as much. After Hilltop, there were so many Indians that there wasn't the same feeling that one family reflected on the rest. Mrs. Narayan might also have felt less isolated. She could have befriended the families that came to Hilltop, many of whom had chaotic stories of their own.

Vikas graduated from high school. He went to Georgia Tech to study engineering. After he had been there for one semester, Mr. Narayan emptied all the bank accounts, sold his shop, took out a second mortgage on the house, and returned to his town in India. We learned this from Mrs. Bilwakesh and from Mr. Narayan's brother-in-law, who lived in Philadelphia but had a friend in Edison.

Mr. Narayan had always wanted to be rich. He had always wanted to be important, to listen to people while standing half turned away, as if the person speaking weren't worth his full attention.

Mr. Narayan's town in India had eight thousand people. There was one main road with shops, and then branching lanes with houses facing sugarcane fields. In the afternoon, you could hear the crickets, even if you closed the windows.

Mr. Narayan began to lend money. People would visit his house, and he'd sit on his veranda and talk with them. Some of the loans were for only twenty-four hours. Mostly, the people he lent to had collateral—tractors, water pumps, scooters, generators. He'd pick these things up in the evening so that his debtors wouldn't be tempted to sell them overnight. Mornings, farmers appeared at the gate of his house, to pay him back and collect the tractor or the generator.

Mr. Narayan didn't take risks. If someone missed a payment, he took the collateral to Ahemdabad and sold it that same day. He hired hoodlums to go with him in the evenings. He did all the right things, including bribing the police.

Mr. Narayan had several servant girls. When he took his afternoon nap, he'd make them massage him, and often he'd pull one of them onto the bed. Because Mr. Narayan had been back in the town for only a short time, the girls' parents didn't know if the police had strong ties with him, or if they might be able to enlist the police's help in getting some money out of Mr. Narayan for what he was doing. As everyone knows, for a moneylending business to succeed, several family members need to be involved. That way, if one person is arrested, the others can keep the business going. It is the interruption of business—the moment that people begin to think they can avoid paying—that destroys a moneylender. When the parents approached the police, the police reasoned that, since Mr. Narayan didn't have brothers to keep the business going, he'd be forced to pay up quickly—money from which they could extract their share before passing the rest on to the parents of his victims.

Mr. Narayan was arrested and beaten, made to squat in a corner holding his earlobes. Then, instead of refusing to pay a bribe, he paid. He returned home. The air-conditioners in his windows were gone, and the windows looked like gouged eyes. The doors to all the rooms were open. The servant girls had taken shits on the bed, the sofas, on top of the dining table.

A few days later, he was arrested again. This time, he didn't pay a bribe and was kept locked up for five days. When he got out, nobody would give him collateral or repay the money he had lent.

Mr. Narayan stopped lending money. A few months after all this occurred, a constable came to Mr. Narayan's house and suggested that he start lending again. This time, he was told, the police wouldn't try to shake him down. The regular bribes would suffice.

When Mr. Narayan died, what we heard was that he'd had a surgery and had been told not to eat radishes afterward but had done so anyway. What seems more likely is that the police beat him, then released him to die of his injuries at home.

Our first thought was: Thank God we didn't live in India, where such things occurred. We weren't surprised, though. Someone who molests his own daughter is bound to molest other girls. Also, if one begins doing criminal activities, one is likely to have to deal with criminals.

Mr. Narayan's sister wanted to organize prayers for his passing. Neither Vikas nor Mrs. Narayan would participate, and the prayer ceremony got delayed again and again, until his sister gave up on the idea. When we realized there were going to be no rites, we felt a shiver of fear—that we, too, could die and have no rites.

Time passed. New people kept coming from India. Most of them were young, and so they made us aware that we were no longer young. These new immigrants brought with them a more modern India, an India where there was cable TV and a fashion channel, which was basically a way to watch attractive women saunter down runways all day long.

In the mall, we saw Indian men wearing shorts. At parties, women took sips of beer. Even in Brahman households, you might find a buffet where both vegetarian and nonvegetarian food was offered. We who had been in America longer felt that these young people were in some ways more American than we were. Of course, those were the fortunate ones, who had come as graduate students or young professionals, not the ones who settled in Hilltop or the small, decrepit houses in Iselin.

Madhu was thirty-one when she returned to Edison. She was tall and wide-shouldered and had her father's round face. She had lived longer in India than in America, and she had the metallic smell of poor Indians, of people

who live without enough water to wash their clothes properly. She was married but childless, we knew, having lost a son to pneumonia when he was six.

Before Madhu's arrival, Mrs. Narayan went to the families she kept in touch with and asked if they could invite Madhu to lunch or dinner and give her gifts—"something nice."

By then, Dr. Shukla was no longer disgusted by Mrs. Narayan. After all, how would she herself have behaved if she were uneducated and had been beaten for years?

Mrs. Narayan and Madhu came for lunch. It was a bright, hot day. They entered through the back door, into the laundry room. Madhu, lifting her feet, peeled back the Velcro straps of her thick rubber sandals. Nehali was standing with her mother in the doorway to the kitchen. Nehali was a doctor now. She felt protective of Madhu. She didn't know what to say that would not evoke the past. "Do you remember me?"

Madhu nodded.

"You are married," Dr. Shukla said.

"That is not good news," Madhu said.

"Ahh."

"At first, his parents locked me in a room whenever they left the house."

Mrs. Narayan had been smiling and nodding. She kept doing so.

In the kitchen, there were pots on the stove and stacks of puris, wrapped in aluminum foil, on plates.

"Can I wash my hands?" Madhu asked.

Nehali took her to the bathroom. By the sink were plastic steps for Nehali's daughter to climb to wash her hands. Madhu's son had not been able to

reach the sink, and so he would squat by the drain beneath the sink and Madhu would pour a mug of water on his hands as he rubbed them.

Madhu washed her hands and went to the dining table in the kitchen.

“Nehali did most of the cooking,” Dr. Shukla boasted.

“Wonderful,” Mrs. Narayan said.

“How is it to be back?” Nehali asked.

Everybody was seated now. Madhu looked at Nehali and Dr. Shukla and then at her plate. Tears slid down her cheeks.

“You don’t have to speak, daughter,” Dr. Shukla said.

“Just eat. Just eat,” Mrs. Narayan said.

They were all silent for a while. The house smelled of summer heat.

“Do you want to go to New York?” Nehali asked.

Madhu wiped her nose with the back of her hand.

“She is a wonderful girl,” Mrs. Narayan said.

“What does her husband do?” Dr. Shukla asked.

“He repairs tires.”

The lunch went this way, with Madhu silent and both Dr. Shukla and Nehali trying to welcome her.

At the end of the meal, with the bowls and plates still on the table, Dr. Shukla went to another room and brought out presents. On one large rectangular box there was a picture of an oval-shaped radio and CD player. The other box was small and gray.

“Look at how nice Nehali and Dr. Shukla are,” Mrs. Narayan said.

Madhu opened the gray box to discover a thin gold chain.

“The necklace is from Nehali,” Dr. Shukla said.

Madhu didn’t speak.

“Can’t you say thank you?” Mrs. Narayan said, in a joking tone.

Madhu kept looking down. She had her hands in her lap, her fingers entwined.

“I can take you to New York if you want,” Nehali said.

Madhu looked across the table and fingered a white ceramic bowl of yogurt.

“We can go on a Sunday or one evening.”

Madhu picked up the bowl and emptied it onto Mrs. Narayan’s head. Mrs. Narayan’s shoulders went up. After a moment, she began patting her head with the paper napkin that she had been using to wipe her hands. Nobody said anything. Then Madhu reached for another bowl. “Hey, hey,” Dr. Shukla said, grabbing Madhu’s wrist.

Madhu remained in America. We saw her at Foodtown and Patel Brothers and sometimes walking around the lake in Roosevelt Park. Often, we saw her fighting with her mother, screaming at the top of her voice while Mrs. Narayan stood there looking embarrassed. Once, their neighbors called the police on them.

A few months after she returned to America, Madhu visited us one by one and asked if she could mow our lawns. She said that she had applied to work as a bank cashier, but even if she got the job she wouldn’t be able to earn enough, since she hadn’t finished high school. Her request flustered us, and we said yes.

Now, on weekend afternoons, we saw Madhu all over town, mowing lawns. She’d be leaning forward, pushing the roaring mower, a trail of shorter grass forming behind her. High above her was the blue sky, and a few hundred feet

away the afternoon was peaceful. All around her, though, was immense noise. ♦

The Critics

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On Television

The Kamala Show

How Vice-President Harris's public persona has evolved, from tough prosecutor to frozen interviewee to joyful candidate.

By Vinson Cunningham

August 19, 2024



If you're looking for threads of consistency spanning Kamala Harris's career in public, start with this: the Democratic nominee for President likes to work and hang out and have fun and be seen with her close kin. Maya Harris, her younger sister—a Stanford-educated lawyer, a former law-school dean, and a policy adviser for Hillary Clinton in 2016—chaired Kamala's 2020 Presidential campaign and can often be seen at her side. Maybe it's this instinctive family intimacy, so hard to fake, that keeps me replaying a video of Kamala and Maya, chatting with an unseen interviewer from the Daily Beast, in 2012. Maya's talking about how her sister's climb up the political ladder has caused a teasing fracas between the sisters on the topic of ceremonial titles. Kamala was, at the time, California's attorney general.

“When they’re attorneys general?” Maya says, her voice brimming with mock exasperation, “they call them ‘General.’ ”

“Yes, they call me General Harris,” Kamala says. “And she hates that.”

Maya goes on to set her boundaries. If Kamala becomes President someday, then, sure, she’ll switch to “Miss President.” It’s not exactly “Madam,” but still: you can hear a formal ring. Until then, she’s just Kamala.

Kamala, feigning sternness, says, “No, I’m Big Sister.” Then, loosening a bit around the eyes, letting her face bloom into a joke: “Big Sister General.” Both women lose it—their eyes go skyward, and their heads lurch forward. Their laughs synchronize: a fluttering cackle, quick and light and precise as a bird’s heartbeat. It’s the kind of bust-out, stomach-hurt, jaw-sore mutual guffaw you really only see in nineties broadcasts of the standup showcase Def Comedy Jam—they crack each other up.

It’s genuinely endearing to watch these sisters enjoy each other like this. But the little moment sticks out for me because its elements—formality and informality, family business and public duty, the tension between title and role—are fundamental to Kamala Harris’s odd, protean presence. She’s always musing, in public, on her deep identity—her inheritance, political and familial—and how it might fit with the jobs she’s sought and, more often than not, won.

The Vice-President often talks about when she told her family that she’d chosen to be a prosecutor. Her mother, a biomedical scientist, and her father, a leftist economist, met as youthful participants in the civil-rights movement, always “marching and shouting about this thing called justice,” as Harris often said during her 2010 attorney-general campaign. They venerated lawyers such as Thurgood Marshall, Charles Hamilton Houston, and Constance Baker Motley. But none of these were prosecutors. Prosecutors don’t set captives, Black and otherwise, free—they’re the ones who put them away in the first place. Harris’s answer, then and now, was that, by her mere presence, “I would have the power to make decisions. . . . Prosecutors have so much power.” The problem, her argument might go, was never with prosecutors per se, just with who was allowed to sit in the office—whose sister might get called “General” now and then.

To hear Harris tell this origin story is to watch all of her speakerly tics parade by. When she says that she had to defend her vocational choice “as one would a thesis,” she chuckles through that intentionally baroque bit of syntax. When she starts talking about presence and power—the twin pillars of her political philosophy—she gets steely around the mouth. Once, back in 2010, speaking about her first book, “Smart on Crime,” she sprinkled in a bit about “a whole lot of folks”—murderers, rapists, molesters—“spending a very significant amount of time in state prison” at her behest. Then she smiled, the smile of common sense, explaining to her audience that wrongs get rectified when the right person—she, Kamala Harris, or someone similarly invested with good will and good sense—is in a position to act.

You might call this the “Hamilton” theory of political action: the principal thing is to be in “the room where it happens,” as Lin-Manuel Miranda’s song goes. It’s not simply a banality or another way to suggest that a politician is devoid of positive values. It’s an entire school of center-left, post-civil-rights thought, a well-trodden path forward after the great emotional and legislative heights of the fifties and sixties. That tense meeting of the Harris clan over Kamala’s career is a metaphor for a generation of idealists passing the torch to their more cold-eyed kids.

It’s always been a mistake to think of Harris as a next-gen version of Barack Obama, as commentators who are fixated on color and on vibes sometimes do. (Look elsewhere for that: younger white male politicians such as Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg and Governor Josh Shapiro, of Pennsylvania, do quite unabashed physical and vocal impressions of Obama.) Instead, Harris takes an approach to politics that’s better compared with, say, that of the latter-day Al Sharpton. He’s a man of many causes, to be sure, but one who knows how to keep on the right side of the street—he shrewdly decided to make nice with Obama, to be an inside man instead of an outside critic. He stayed in the game and had his small say. Harris is also a spiritual child of the Congressional Black Caucus, a business-friendly bunch who nonetheless have claimed for themselves some of the moral sheen of the anti-capitalist Dr. King—utter loyalty to the Democratic establishment and its donors is the reason for the caucus’s continued power. If Harris has a televisual twin, it’s Clair Huxtable, of “The Cosby Show,” played by Harris’s fellow Howard University alumna Phylicia Rashad. Harris and Huxtable are both attorneys who sometimes get telegenically

tough, and who portray upward mobility—in politics as in life—as totally compatible with the day-by-day dictates of justice.

Harris isn't a particularly good orator, in part because her persona behind the podium doesn't seem like an extension of her personality away from it. The best speakers make it appear as if their speeches are being delivered by the same person who, hours earlier, was enjoying beers in a Cedar Rapids bar, or scarfing down a burger in a Manchester diner. Harris is different. Especially when she's reading her speech from a teleprompter, you always feel a gap between the speaker and her text. Big Sister General is in there somewhere, but she's walking on a track that feels narrowly constraining. Harris is a person in a role, and sometimes, while speaking, she wears that role the way a groomsman wears a tux he doesn't like. The function of her nonverbal gestures—especially that big, bright laugh—is to ask you to trust your eyes more than your ears. Famously, she often repeats an injunction to "believe in what can be, unburdened by what has been." Fundamental to her appeal is a similar, unstated formulation: "Believe in me, unburdened by what you think about this speech."



Maybe this is why, until very recently, Harris's zenith as a figure on political television came during sessions of Senate questioning. The hearing room is a nakedly ceremonial space, where individuals go to act out their parts—

where “sister” and “general” come together. The point, if you want to stand out, is to make your real motives show through all the official choreography—to be the right person flexing power in the right job, however visible the strain.

During the notoriously dramatic Supreme Court confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh, Harris pressed the nominee hard. She set her face neutrally and peered intently at him, asking questions meant less to gather information than to speak directly to the TV-watching audience: “Can you think of any laws that give government the power to make decisions about the male body?” Her voice was low and mellifluous and strong: a prosecutor’s sharklike gravitas. There wasn’t a good answer to the question, which was the point. Kavanaugh, whose own face, those days, was a mask of semipermanent bewilderment, looked as if he might puke. “Uhhh,” he said, perhaps hoping to be rescued before he could finish an answer, “I’m happy to answer a, uh, more specific question.”

“Male versus female,” Harris answered, nodding her head rhythmically. Kavanaugh knew what she meant, and so did everybody back home. Her star turn in the Senate—and, specifically, on C-SPAN and cable news—was a vindication of the thought process that led her, all those years ago, to be a prosecutor. Get in where you fit in, use your power where you can.

The test of that credo came during what almost everybody agrees was the low point of Harris’s life in public, the first three years of her tenure as Joe Biden’s Vice-President. Her 2020 Presidential run had petered out before it even got started, weighed down by halting speeches and a vague approach to policy that left her lost in a large field. Now, though, ensconced in the Vice-Presidency, she had another chance to use her presence to effect change, even in a position of questionable worth. But: no dice. Unlike the true autonomous power of a prosecutor, the power of a veep is totally dependent on somebody else’s whims—so much ceremony without a real hammer to produce results.

The nadir came during an interview with NBC’s Lester Holt, in response to a question about the constant quagmire at the U.S. southern border—an area in which Harris had notionally been given power by Biden, but manifestly no actual agency. Holt, reason emanating from his estimable forehead, asked

what sounded like the easiest question in the world: “Do you have any plans to visit the border?”

“I’m here in Guatemala today, I—at some point . . . you know, I—” She paused, as if stranded in thought. “We are going to the border; we’ve been to the border. So, this whole—this whole—this whole thing about the border: we’ve been to the border. We’ve been to the border.”

“*You haven’t been to the border,*” Holt said.

Another frozen pause. “And I haven’t been to Europe,” Harris said, laughing. “I don’t understand the point that you’re making.”

The real answer to Holt’s question was that, even in one of the most visible roles in the country—in the world—she didn’t have much freedom to act. She couldn’t answer because, even though she was ostensibly on the hook for the immigration crisis, she wasn’t the one calling the shots. She’d calculated long before that acquiring institutional power was the way to complete the work that her parents and many others had begun during the civil-rights era, and now she was learning, excruciatingly publicly: not always.

These days, by contrast, Harris looks unbounded, emancipated, often genuinely happy. In her speeches, she seems tickled to have another chance at the Presidency, and energized by the prospect of running against Donald Trump and all he stands for. She often looks overcome by joy, ready to crack Maya up again, this time laughing alongside any Democratic voter who’s willing to take the ride. Since choosing Minnesota’s governor, Tim Walz, as a running mate, she has often revelled in the unlikely identities represented by the ticket: “Two middle-class kids: one a daughter of Oakland, California”—here a brilliant smile as the crowd goes wild—“the other a son of the Nebraska plains who grew up working on a farm. Think about it. Think about it! Only in America is it possible that the two of them would be running together all the way to the White House! Only in America!”

Harris is, all of a sudden, in her favorite position, as a politician and as a performer. There’s an obvious role to play. She’s still a prosecutor, poised to use her position for one good reason, the rest be confounded: stop Donald

Trump from settling in behind the Resolute desk ever again. It doesn't matter, by her lights, what the Presidency means, only what she means to do with it. In a matter of days, at the Democratic National Convention—her biggest TV date yet—she'll have a chance to tell us how she'll fend off chaos, how she'll wield her power. I think she's having fun. ♦

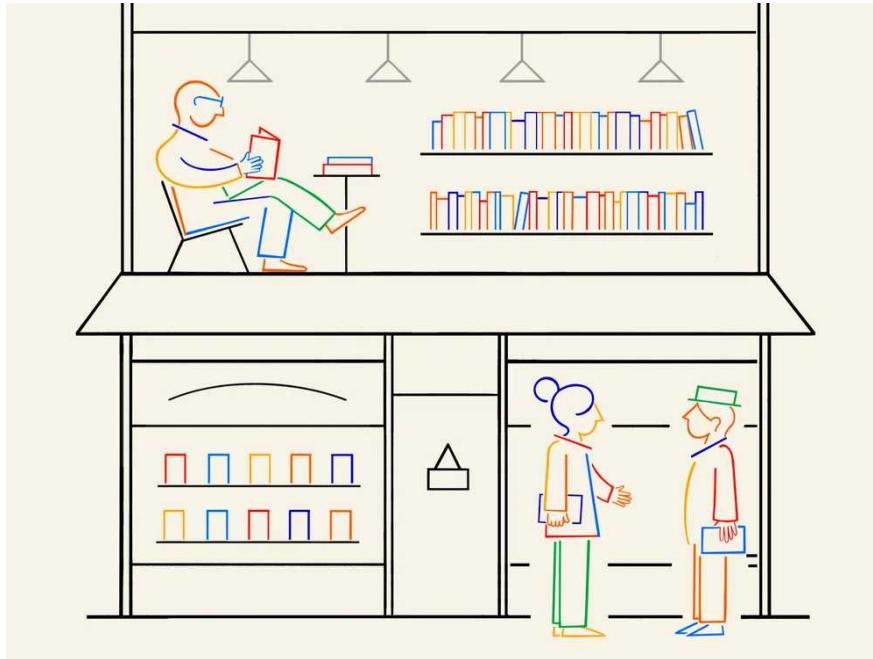
A Critic at Large

Are Bookstores Just a Waste of Space?

In the online era, brick-and-mortar book retailers have been forced to redefine themselves.

By Louis Menand

August 19, 2024



The pandemic wasn't good for much, but it was good for bookstores. Exactly how good is a little hard to measure. For all sorts of reasons, the data on book sales, bookstores, and most things bookish are notoriously inexact. Not only is there no settled definition of what counts as a bookstore; there is no settled definition of what counts as a book.

If I self-publish a book and sell it on my Web site, is that a real book? And am I a bookstore? If we think that, to be "real," a book must have an ISBN (International Standard Book Number), we are faced with the fact that the ISBN of a hardcover book is different from the ISBNs of the paperback, audio, and digital editions of the same book. Are these all counted separately? The Bible is a book. So are "Pickleball for Dummies," "Spanking Zelda," "Pat the Bunny," and "The Big Book of Sudoku." When

we ask how many Americans read books, are those the kinds of books we have in mind?

According to Kristen McLean, an industry analyst, two-thirds of the books released by the top-ten trade publishers sell fewer than a thousand copies, and less than four per cent sell more than twenty thousand. Still, it's generally agreed that book sales rose after 2019 and that, since the end of the pandemic, there has been a small but significant uptick in the number of independent bookstores. Explaining the first bump seems simple enough. Reading turned out to be a popular way of passing the time in lockdown, more respectable than binge-watching or other diversions one might think of. A slight decline in sales over the past couple of years suggests that people felt freed up to go out and [play pickleball](#) instead of staying home and trying to finish "War and Peace."

The explanation for the second bump, however, is not so obvious. Before *COVID*, physical bookstores seemed to be pretty high on the endangered-species list. Between 1998 and 2020, more than half of the independent bookstores in the United States went out of business. Yet, somehow, the bookstore outlived the pandemic. Why? Two new books, Evan Friss's "The Bookshop: A History of the American Bookstore" (Viking) and "The Secret Lives of Booksellers and Librarians: True Stories of the Magic of Reading" (Little, Brown), compiled by James Patterson and Matt Eversmann, suggest a few reasons.

Neither book is quite as advertised. "The Bookshop" is not a comprehensive history of bookselling. It's a series of thirteen mini-profiles of notable bookstores and their owners, from Benjamin Franklin and his printing shop in the early eighteenth century to Jeff Bezos and Amazon's brick-and-mortar stores today. Friss does not get very deep into the economic nitty-gritty of the business. He is mainly interested in capturing the bookstore vibe.

James Patterson is, yes, [James Patterson](#), one of the best-selling authors ever. (Matt Eversmann, a former Army Ranger, was a central character in Mark Bowden's "Black Hawk Down" and is a best-selling author himself.) When the pandemic started, Patterson launched a movement, #SaveIndieBookstores, to help such businesses survive. He pledged half a million dollars, and, with the support of the American Booksellers

Association and the Book Industry Charitable Foundation, the campaign ended up raising \$1,239,595 from more than eighteen hundred donors.

Patterson and Eversmann's "Secret Lives of Booksellers and Librarians" is being promoted with the line "Their stories are better than the bestsellers." Better than "Spanking Zelda"? I don't think so. Readers hoping for scandalous revelations will have to be satisfied with heartfelt testimonials from some sixty or so North American bookstore people and librarians, who talk about how they got their jobs and why they love them. A number of them have nice things to say about James Patterson, as well they should. Still, the situation these books are addressing is a very old one.

The United States has had a bookstore problem since before the nation's founding. There have never been enough. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, books were sold mostly by printers, like [Franklin](#), whose store was in Philadelphia, or publishers, such as Ticknor & Fields, which operated the Old Corner Bookstore, in Boston. (Ticknor & Fields later became part of Houghton Mifflin.) Because there were few places for customers to get books, some entrepreneurs figured out ways to get books to them. There was a book barge on the Erie Canal in the early nineteenth century, for example, and there were book caravans—vehicles outfitted to display books for sale—until well into the twentieth century.

Even after the distribution of books improved, it was not easy to get your hands on new ones unless you lived in a major city or a college town. In 1939, about a hundred and eighty million books were produced, in one estimate, but only twenty-eight hundred stores sold them. Books were also sold in gift shops that stocked a few titles or department stores that offered discounted books as a loss leader to attract a tonier class of customer.

Americans could buy books by mail directly from publishers, and they could subscribe to book clubs, such as the Book-of-the-Month Club, which was founded in 1926, or its rival, the Literary Guild, founded in 1927 and once owned by Doubleday. (Those clubs still exist. They print their own editions, which they sell for well below the publisher's retail price.) But most people had no way to browse new books.

One reason for the distribution problem is that each book is a unique good. It is handcrafted by a writer and a postproduction team of editors and designers. Even in 1939, there were too many new titles for a small shop to stock—an estimated 10,640, and that doesn't include perennial sellers, like Bibles and dictionaries, or classics.

And, unless you are a “just looking for something to read on the beach” kind of customer, there are usually no acceptable substitutes. When you go to a supermarket, the store may carry two brands of milk or ten. It doesn’t matter. You just want milk. But book buying doesn’t work that way. You want the book you want. If the choice was between doing without and mailing a check to a publisher in New York City (publishers, stupidly, did not have warehouses in the middle of the country), many people probably chose to do without. This was not a sensible way to run a business.

The problem got bigger after the Second World War, when, thanks in part to a huge increase in the number of college students, who had to buy books for their courses, and the relaxation of obscenity laws, which made books more attractive to grownups, the publishing industry boomed. In 1950, eleven thousand new titles appeared, according to *Publishers Weekly*; in 1970, the number was thirty-six thousand, a threefold increase. Local bookshops tended to be low-margin affairs. They couldn’t afford the rent for large retail spaces, and the load of new books was too heavy for them to carry. Publishers needed more places where people could shop for their product. The market responded with the chain store.

The first major bookstore chains were B. Dalton, which opened a store in 1966 and by 1978 had outlets in forty-three states, and Waldenbooks, which began in the nineteen-thirties as a book-rental company, opened its first retail store in 1962, and by 1981 had seven hundred and thirty-five outlets. Chain stores were big spaces. They could carry many titles, and they were usually embedded in department stores and malls. Like supermarkets, they were basically self-service. Their staff were generally not trained to make reading recommendations. But the chains offered two things the independent-bookstore ecosystem lacked: convenience and inventory. By 1982, Waldenbooks and B. Dalton made about twenty-four per cent of all book sales in the United States.

It was still not enough. The industry kept growing, and the chain stores gave way to the superstores. These were enormous freestanding retail spaces, averaging almost thirty-six thousand square feet and carrying a hundred and twenty-five thousand titles, plus other leisure goods, such as CDs and DVDs. The big players were Borders, which opened in 1971 and began to expand in the nineteen-eighties, and Barnes & Noble, an old New York store, situated on lower Fifth Avenue, which Leonard Riggio bought in 1971.

Riggio adopted the strategy of selling *New York Times* best-sellers at a forty-per-cent discount. He made the brand famous for these discounts, and people would travel out of their way to a Barnes & Noble store just for the savings. It was an aggressive move when best-sellers were what kept many small bookstores above water.

In 1987, Riggio bought B. Dalton, and by 1997 Barnes & Noble and Borders were selling forty-three per cent of all books in the United States. By then, more than sixty thousand titles were coming out every year. The largest Barnes & Noble store carried upward of two hundred thousand, many of them marked twenty or thirty per cent off the list price. It was not a business model that small independent bookshops could adopt. They had to make a decent margin on every sale.

This was around when the term “independent bookstore” gained force. It was plainly deployed as a rallying cry. It couldn’t have been that the owners of the local store didn’t care about their bottom lines. But the term signals an old-fashioned virtue, and the independents versus the superstores got cast as a David-and-Goliath struggle, a version of the family-farm-versus-agribusiness rivalry that had got a lot of attention in the nineteen-eighties.

The big-little bookstore battle was covered so extensively by the media, in fact, that a film about it, “You’ve Got Mail,” directed by [Nora Ephron](#), was one of the biggest hits of 1998. (Amusingly, the movie, ostensibly a criticism of corporate overreach, made *Rolling Stone’s* list of “[Most Egregious Product Placements in Movie & TV History](#).”) It is practically an advertisement for AOL, which would soon merge with Warner Bros., the film’s distributor.)

Meg Ryan's character made out all right in "You've Got Mail," but her store still closed. Nationally, the Davids were losing. After 1998, the mortality rate among independents shot up. By 2021, only about two thousand were still in business. The Goliaths were left to slug it out. In 2011, Riggio bought what was left of Borders, which had declared bankruptcy, and Barnes & Noble is now the only nationwide bookstore chain in the United States, with six hundred stores. (The original flagship store, on lower Fifth, which had become mainly a place for students to buy textbooks, closed in 2014.)

Still, the distribution problem was far from solved, because two hundred thousand books is nothing. Today, something like three million books are published every year, including self-published e-books that are available only on digital platforms. And the greater the number of books that come out and remain in print, the longer the publisher's backlist. Developing a backlist is one of the ways publishers can afford to take gambles on big advances. No retail space can accommodate all that inventory.

This whole history explains why Amazon began, in 1995, as an online bookstore. Books were the only products it sold. [Jeff Bezos](#) must have looked at the publishing industry and judged it ripe for disruption—the classic tech move. Publishers had had two hundred years to figure out an efficient way of getting their products to consumers, and they were haggling over shelf placement (face out or spine?) and table space (front of the store or back?) in enormous stores where each book was competing for visibility with a hundred thousand other titles.

Amazon discounted books deeply from the start. It was happy to lose money, and its venture-capitalist backers didn't mind, because they saw that what Bezos was investing in was a future in which people's first instinct when they needed to buy something would be to go online. That future has arrived, and today Amazon is worth \$1.8 trillion.

The company still discounts many titles, and you don't have to go out of your way to take advantage of the savings. My office is across the street from Harvard Book Store, one of the best independent bookstores in the country for people like me. Even so, if I go there for a copy of "Middlemarch," I'll have to elbow my way through a gaggle of tourists to

get to the literature section in the back, and there's a chance that "Middlemarch" will be out of stock.

But I can order "Middlemarch" from Amazon in less than the two minutes it would take me to walk to the store. I will get a discount (currently thirteen per cent on a Penguin edition), and, if I have Amazon Prime (a sunk cost), the book will ship for free and appear in my mailbox tomorrow. Oh, and as long as I'm online, I'll get a new grill brush, too. Harvard Book Store does not carry grill brushes.

Even though books make up a relatively small fraction of Amazon's sales, they constitute more than half of all book purchases in the United States. Amazon is responsible for more than half of all e-book sales, and it dominates self-publishing with its Kindle Direct platform. (E-books are also a threat to the brick-and-mortar store, of course, though their sales peaked in 2013.) Most significant, Amazon offers something like thirty million different print titles. The company has deals with purveyors of used and remaindered books, who are linked to on the site. It owns AbeBooks, the leading site for rare and out-of-print books. And there are many other places online where you can buy books, including barnesandnoble.com. So why does the world need bookstores?

Both Friss's book and Patterson and Eversmann's book suggest some answers. One is the obvious benefit of being able to fondle the product. Printed books have, inescapably, a tactile dimension. They want to be held. "Browsing" online is just not the same experience. For that, you need non-virtual books in a non-virtual space.

The level of customer service is another benefit. Amazon's "Frequently bought together" and "Products related to this item" can be useful, but these groupings work better for grill brushes than for books. Books are not just all cheaper or more expensive versions of the same thing.

You will probably soon be able to chat online about your book interests with a bot, but a bot is not a person with green hair, a tattoo, and a sense of humor who might have some offbeat suggestions for you. Salespeople today tend to be book lovers themselves (historically not always the case), and they can recommend a new book or help you find a book whose title you have

forgotten. Amazon's wisdom-of-crowds rating system and customer reviews aren't quite substitutes for this individualized treatment. There is usually a reviewer who gives a book one star because of a delivery problem.

Then there is what the scholar Janice Radway, adapting Walter Benjamin, calls the "auratic" quality of physical books. People don't regard books as ordinary commodities. Friss and the retailers in "The Secret Lives" see the small bookstore as a haven from commercialism, a place where books are not treated as mere merchandise.

Of course, selling books is as much a business as selling grill brushes. But the gross margins are small, and bookstore owners tend to be what the sociologist Laura Miller calls "reluctant capitalists." The owners of Three Lives, in the West Village, which is Friss's ideal bookstore, don't like their business being referred to as a "store." "Shop" is the preferred designation. In the West Village, that's probably smart marketing.

This aura of anti-commercialism has a history. It dates from the mid-twentieth century, when publishers saw themselves in competition with Hollywood and television for Americans' leisure time and dollars. They promoted their product as superior to mass entertainment—more refined, more edifying. They rethought the strategy when it became clear that readers like mass entertainment and dislike being taken for snobs. The industry also saw a gold mine in movie tie-ins. Still, the general sentiment that reading is somehow superior to viewing persists.

But using the number of books that the average American reads a year as a barometer of our civilization's moral health, which people love to do, is kind of pointless. Many books are used, not read. You don't "read" a cookbook or "Pickleball for Dummies." And many books are bought to register the buyer's approval of the message or the messenger. Current Times best-sellers include [Kamala Harris](#)'s "The Truths We Hold" and [J. D. Vance](#)'s "Hillbilly Elegy." How many of the people who bought those books (and I wonder how much overlap there is) will actually read them? They won't feel they need to. They have cast their ballots.

The chief rationale offered for brick-and-mortar bookstores today is that they are community-building spaces. That is how Friss describes the Three

Lives bookstore—forgive me, *shop*—and it's how almost all the store owners in “The Secret Lives” (and many of the librarians) explain what they do and why it gives them satisfaction. They are practitioners of bibliotherapy. They introduce people to books that will help them overcome grief or minister to confusions about life choices or personal identity.

And the stores are fashioned to be neighborhood gathering places, like park playgrounds. They welcome everyone—toddlers, oddballs, and professors. They schedule author appearances and other events, often hundreds of them a year. Regulars drop in to chat about books. With any luck, there is a café. Nowadays, this is as true of Barnes & Noble chain stores as it is of Three Lives. That is what it means to run a bookstore. The rewards are not just material. The bookstore survives by redefining itself.

This constitutes a major shift in the ethos of bookselling. Traditionally, owners of bookstores, and of used bookstores in particular, had a reputation for being surly (unlike librarians, who are trained to be helpful). That was certainly my experience when I began to frequent New York bookstores in the nineteen-seventies and eighties. It was true of the Shakespeare & Co. on lower Broadway and of the National Book Store, on Astor Place, both now long gone; it was even true of the Strand, near Union Square. One good thing about online stores is that they can't see that you're a penniless graduate student.

Still, for much of my life, I've been a haunter of bookstores. I have no interest in spending a lot of money on a book. I don't collect books, and I can't understand why anyone would pay extra for a first edition. I buy books I want to read. I like older and out-of-print books, as long as they're readable and “like new.” So the key to a good bookstore, for me, is the curation. In this area of life, anyway, size doesn't matter. I don't want two hundred thousand titles to choose from. I want the staff to have selected, from the zillions that are out there, the kinds of books that interest me. Ideally, the store will stock a mix of new and used.

Friss doesn't mention the famous “secret bookstore” [Brazenhead Books](#), which was run out of a rent-controlled apartment on East Eighty-fourth Street by a character named Michael Seidenberg, who died in 2019. It was said to be like a night club. Cocktails were served, and people could hang

out at all hours. There was no sign outside, since the store seems to have been legally unsanctioned. You had to know someone to know where it was.

I was never cool enough to be invited to a secret bookstore, but there were stores “just for me” in New York. One of them, which Friss mentions briefly, was Books & Co., which was founded in 1977. Its collection, all new books, seemed to be expressly curated for grad students in literature. Friss says that the store had an advisory board chaired by [Susan Sontag](#), and few people have had their hand closer to the intellectual pulse than Susan Sontag. The founder and owner was Jeannette Watson, a granddaughter of the founder of I.B.M.

One unusual thing about Books & Co. was its location, 939 Madison Avenue, between Seventy-fourth and Seventy-fifth Streets, next to the old Whitney Museum. The Upper East Side isn’t where you would expect to sell a lot of Baudrillard, or all four volumes of Heidegger’s lectures on Nietzsche. But you could. I passed on the Heidegger; I did buy [Robert Hughes](#)’s “Shock of the New” there, an inspirational book for me. Books & Co. was, surprisingly, not an unfriendly place. Or maybe I fit in better with the clientele there than elsewhere. St. Mark’s Bookshop, which opened in the East Village the same year, was the bomb thrower’s alternative.

Books & Co. had money problems almost from the start. Watson lost an opportunity to buy the building, which was purchased instead by the Whitney. When the lease expired, the museum doubled the rent. Watson tried to find ways to keep the store alive, but it closed in 1997. St. Mark’s hung in there until 2016. Today, 939 Madison is an Aquazzura, a luxury boutique chain with stores in Saint-Tropez, Paris, Milan, and Dubai. I think the best store in Manhattan currently for new books curated for artistic and literary tastes is 192 Books, in West Chelsea. In five years, it will probably be a Jimmy Choo.

Because bookstores don’t last. When I came to New York, the stretch of Fourth Avenue between Eighth and Fourteenth Streets was known as Book Row. In 1969, it had more than twenty bookstores and, [according to the Times](#), more than three-quarters of a million volumes. The Strand began on Book Row and operates in its spirit, advertising a huge inventory. It claims to have eighteen miles of shelves. The store moved from Fourth Avenue to

its present location, on Broadway and Twelfth Street, in 1956. In time, the owner, Fred Bass, wisely bought the building. The store is now a tourist attraction and gets a significant portion of its income from the sale of tote bags and T-shirts. It does make money. Bass used to live in Trump Tower.

I cruised Book Row when it, and the New York it belonged to, was on its last legs. A lot of those millions of books were worthless. When books are damaged, they should be thrown out. The Book Row stores were barns. They attracted buyers who enjoyed hunting for a needle in a haystack. The Strand does not carry damaged books, and there are always some needles in there. But it also has a ton of hay.

Art galleries played a big role in the development of modern art; bookshops played a lesser role in the history of modern literature. But there were some that mattered. Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company, in Paris, is the best known. Beach published [James Joyce](#)'s "Ulysses" in 1922—the only edition you could buy until 1934, after a judge ruled that the book was not obscene. (The store was shut down in 1941, when the Germans were in charge. The Shakespeare and Company on the Left Bank today is no relation.) The closest American counterparts are City Lights, in San Francisco, founded by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1953, which published (and still publishes) [Allen Ginsberg](#)'s "Howl and Other Poems," and the Gotham Book Mart.

The Gotham Book Mart was founded in 1920, by Frances Steloff. It moved around a bit but ended up at 41 West Forty-seventh. The location, even more incongruous than that of Books & Co., was in the diamond district. The Gotham's clientele included Broadway theatre people. It was also popular with celebrated writers, housed a James Joyce Society, and was known, back in the day, as a place where you could buy banned books.

I was interested in modern poetry and eager to shop there, but by the time I showed up Steloff had sold the store (she was in her eighties and remained present; you could see her at a desk in the back), and it had lost its modernist glamour. The offerings were haphazardly chosen and indifferently displayed, and the vibe was hostile. I'm sure they had dealt with a lot of shoplifting. The store moved again, in 2004, and closed three years later.

I preferred to hang out in the Pomander, on West Ninety-fifth Street. The bookstore was founded in 1975 by a Colombian émigré, Carlos Goez, and it featured British and American literature and philosophy—my kind of collection. Goez sold the Pomander in 1986 (he died soon after), and the store briefly relocated to 107th Street and West End Avenue, two blocks from my apartment. Although the inventory was still attractive, there was less turnover, and the store eventually closed.

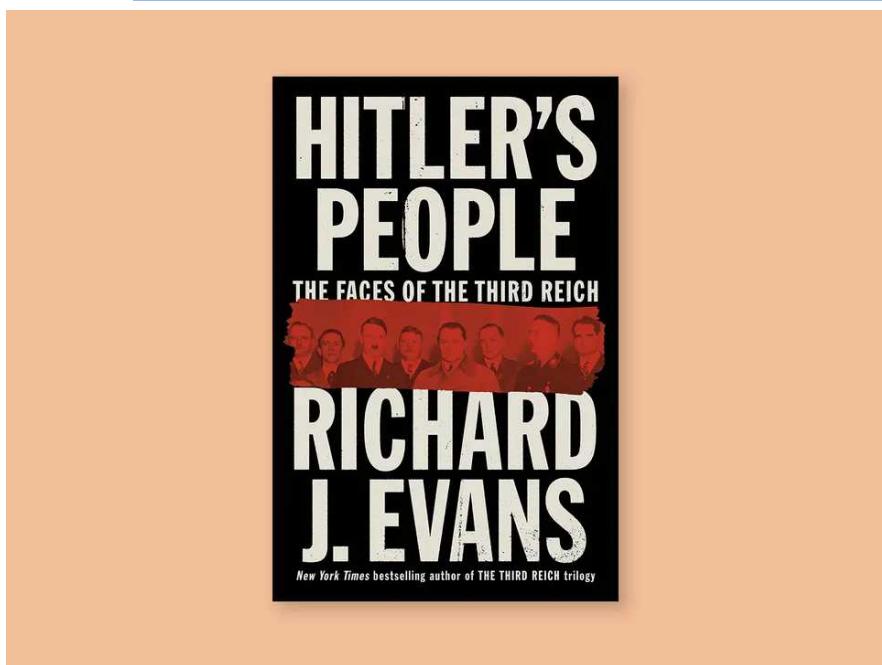
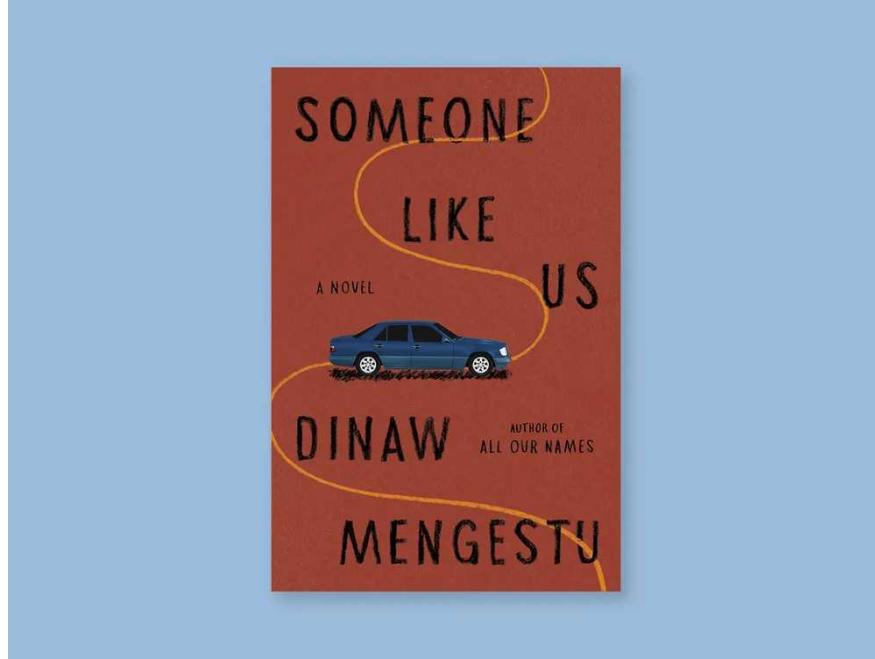
But curation is probably still the way for bookstores to go. It no longer makes business sense for a small shop to stock a bit of everything. Learn from Aquazzura and Jimmy Choo: go boutique. The big winner in the pandemic was the romance novel. Eighteen million print copies were sold in 2020; in 2023, more than thirty-nine million copies were sold. Romance is among Amazon’s most popular genres, and, [according to the Times](#), the number of bookstores dedicated to it recently rose from two to more than twenty. The stores’ names are not coy: the Ripped Bodice, in Brooklyn and Culver City; Steamy Lit, in Deerfield Beach, Florida; Blush Bookstore, in Wichita. You can fondle the product all you want, and the staff will be eager to assist you. ♦

Books

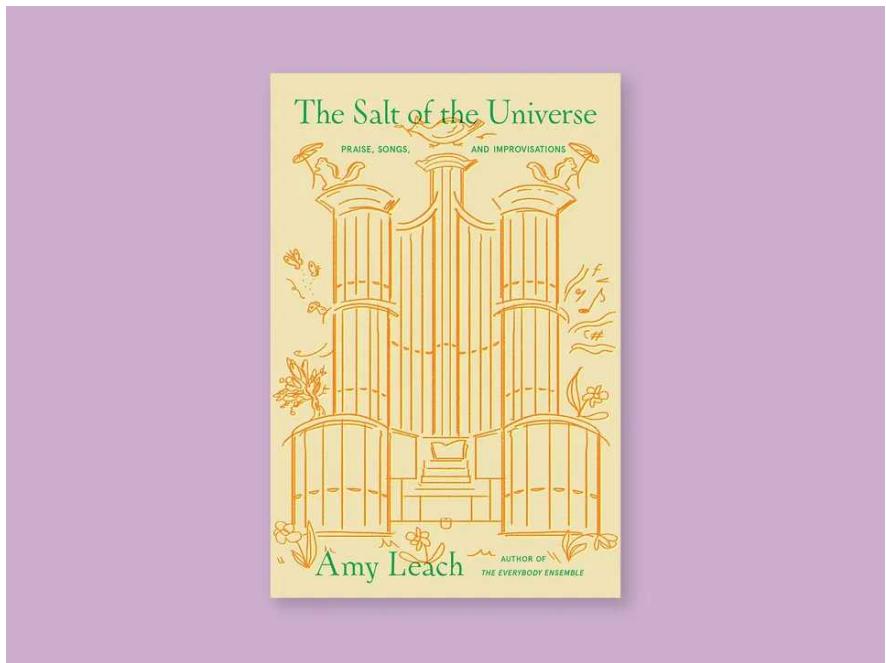
Briefly Noted

“Hitler’s People,” “The Salt of the Universe,” “The Safekeep,” and “Someone Like Us.”

August 19, 2024

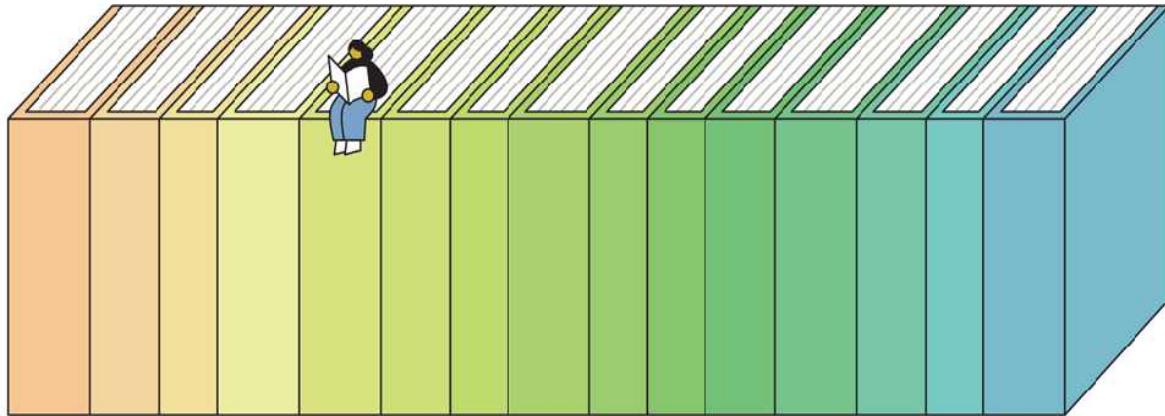


Hitler's People, by Richard J. Evans (Penguin Press). Through a series of biographical essays on prominent Nazis—including Hitler, Adolf Eichmann, and Leni Riefenstahl—this book explores how members of the initially small but violently fanatical National Socialist movement came to dominate German politics and carry out unprecedeted atrocities. Evans, a noted historian of modern Germany, complicates earlier portrayals of these figures as either bloodthirsty psychopaths or the inevitable product of historical forces. Instead, he foregrounds the ways that their individual psychologies and sociocultural backgrounds primed them to make self-interested and ideologically motivated decisions that ultimately resulted in the horrors of the Second World War.

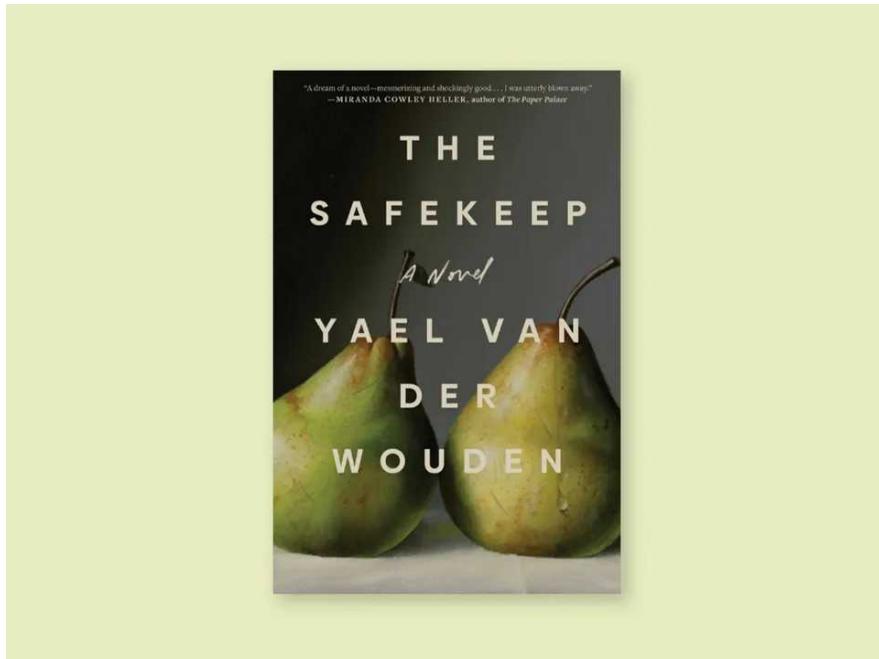


The Salt of the Universe, by Amy Leach (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This volume of comic essays recounts Leach's upbringing in the Seventh-day Adventist Church and her eventual withdrawal from "the regulated march of fundamentalism." With an off-kilter tone and a dexterous, irreverent attitude toward religious fervor, Leach explores a range of topics, including vegetarianism, contemporary Christian music, and teaching English classes in Paraguay. Many of the chapters are attuned to the beauty of the natural world. "In the forest one is exempt from instruction and dogma," Leach writes, "though not from sermons, for the birds preach: *Sing*. The grapevines preach: *Climb a tree*. The lichens preach: *Patience*."

What We're Reading

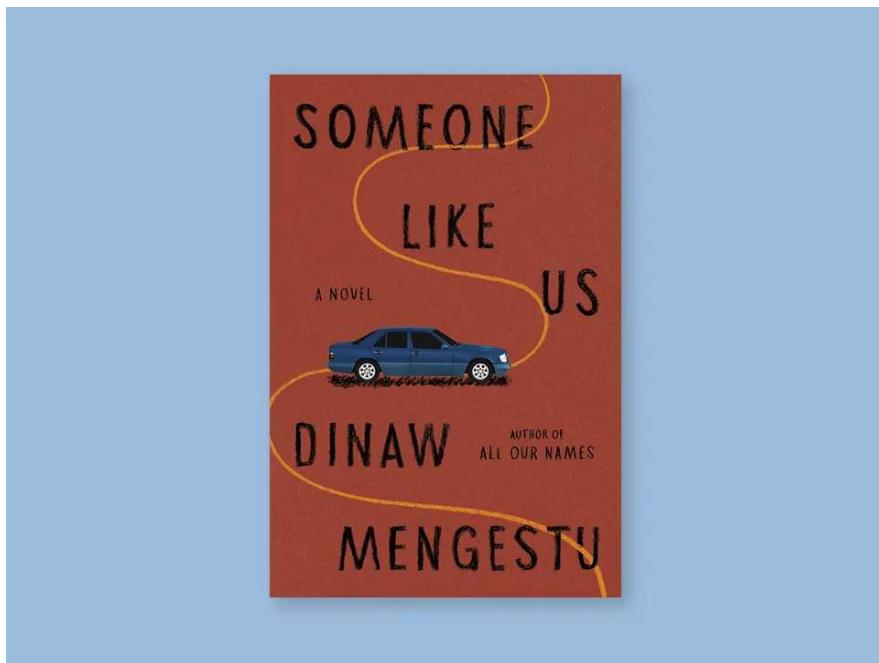


Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



The Safekeep, by Yael van der Wouden (*Avid Reader*). This impressive début novel, which is long-listed for this year's Booker Prize, is set in 1961

in the Dutch countryside, where the traumas of the Second World War have festered and conservative social attitudes prevail. Isabel, the story's misanthropic protagonist, still lives in her childhood home, long after her siblings have moved to the city. When her elder brother's vivacious, mysterious girlfriend turns up at the house for a monthlong stay, Isabel is suspicious and treats her with contempt. Yet her disdain soon transforms into desire, leading the two women into a clandestine relationship. Ultimately, the pair's sensual love story is tested by revelations that force Isabel to reckon with the Netherlands' role in abetting the Holocaust, and her family's in silencing its survivors.



Someone Like Us, by *Dinaw Mengestu* (*Knopf*). A pensive anomie pervades this potent novel about Ethiopian immigrants in the United States. The narrator, a journalist who lives in Paris, arrives at his mother's house, in Virginia, to learn that his biological father, a taxi-driver, has died by apparent suicide. The journalist proceeds to investigate the mystery surrounding the man, who was “full of secrets” and less a father to him than “something like an uncle.” In doing so, the narrator, a drug user in flight from a failing marriage, also investigates his own troubled childhood. The result is an exemplification of storytelling as a consolation for the yearning and dislocation of immigrant life. As the father says, “We are always in more than one place at a time.”

Books

Is A.I. Making Mothers Obsolete?

Helen Phillips's new novel takes place in a dystopian world where the environment has been devastated and humans have outsourced their best selves to tireless, empathetic robots.

By Katy Waldman

August 19, 2024



“Hum,” Helen Phillips’s third novel, begins with a needle being drawn, steadily and irreversibly, across a woman named May’s face. She is participating in a paid experiment in “adversarial tech,” undergoing a procedure that will ever so slightly alter her features, making her harder for surveillance cameras to identify. As the book opens, May is mid-op, the needle advancing its “slender and relentless line of penetration” across her temple, toward the skin of her eyelid. What lies on the other side of the surgery? “Some sort of transformation, undeniable but undetectable,” Phillips writes. “Faint shifts in shading . . . her features wavering a bit between familiarity and unfamiliarity, the way she might look in a picture taken from a strange angle.”

The novel takes place in a dystopian world that is at once recognizable and subtly different from our own. Climate change has devastated the environment. (“If only the forests hadn’t burned,” May thinks. “If only it wasn’t so hard, so expensive, getting out of the city, getting beyond the many rings of industry and blight.”) Cameras and screens are as omnipresent as the pollution in the air; privacy, access to nature, and freedom from advertising have become luxury goods. Many jobs have been automated, including May’s. Previously employed by a company that developed “the communicative abilities of artificial intelligence,” May was laid off after unwittingly training an A.I. network that made her obsolete. Her husband, Jem, a former photographer, is keeping them afloat as a gig worker, emptying mousetraps and cleaning out closets. The couple’s anxiety about the future has filtered down to their children, the eight-year-old Lu and six-year-old Sy, who are shown doting on a cockroach, obsessing over disaster-preparedness manuals, and rejoicing at flavorless strawberries. The kids fill their insomniac parents with love and fear. “What will this planet hold for them by the time they’re our age?” May and Jem ask, clutching each other in bed.

Phillips specializes in imparting a gentle shimmer of uncanniness to the intimacies of domestic realism. Her novels draw on sci-fi and suspense tropes, but they tend not to be plot-driven or outwardly dramatic. Instead, Phillips writes meditative fables about marriage and motherhood, grounded in sensuous details (the “sizzle” of seltzer, the “numbing calm” of lotion) and interested in the material facts and affective textures of their characters’ lives. “Hum,” in particular, belongs to a class of recent fiction that entwines everyday descriptions of parenting with ecological anxiety. These books grow out of a salutary trend in literature that, as the author and translator Lauren Elkin wrote in 2018, “put the mother and her perspective at the center of their concerns,” exploring maternal ambivalence in order to combat idealized notions of caregiving. Books such as “A Life’s Work” (2001), by Rachel Cusk, “Department of Speculation” (2014), by Jenny Offill, and “Little Labors” (2016), by Rivka Galchen, circled themes of shame and guilt, often in the context of creative ambition: when the narrators worked on their art, they felt bad about ignoring their kids, and vice versa.

In eco-anxiety mom lit, the shame and guilt have found a new object, not unwritten pages or unrealized professional goals but the destruction of the planet. The narrators of these books are painfully aware of anthropogenic climate change and runaway capitalism. They radiate terror about the dystopian world that coming generations stand to inherit. In Lauren Groff's story collection "Florida" (2018), a mother spends her day doomscrolling: "While my sons are in school, I can't stop reading about the disaster of the world, the glaciers dying like living creatures, the great Pacific trash gyre, the hundreds of unrecorded deaths of species." The narrator of Offill's novel "Weather" (2020), also a mother, might have the same tabs open; she's taken a job answering panicked listener e-mails for a climate-crisis podcast. In Kate Zambreno's "The Light Room" (2023), a mom ventures outdoors in "spooky heat—a flash of the future for her children." "Why have children?" her babysitter wonders. "We'll all be dead in fifteen years." Animating these books is a recurring concern that maybe you can't be a good mom in the age of climate collapse; maybe, if you aren't actively blowing up oil pipelines, you shouldn't have kids at all.

The vision of the future presented in "Hum" is less apocalyptic than some of these mothers fear. (The protagonist of Christine Smallwood's "The Life of the Mind," from 2021, imagines children clinging to a storm-tossed raft while they berate her for her inaction on carbon emissions.) The book's chief interest is not the Armageddon hovering in the wings but the dehumanizing, anhedonic grind of May's daily life, a constant battle against the temptations of consumption and technologically mediated distraction. In Phillips's plausible dystopia, people rely on technology to compensate for ecological ruin; they bathe in the beauty of screens because they've made the physical world ugly.

The book shrewdly connects maternal guilt to consumerism. May signs up for the facial modification in part so that her family can afford a swoony, unthinkable extravagance: a visit to the Botanical Garden, a walled nature park that is the toast of rich-person Instagram. The trip is an attempt to atone for the precariousness of Lu and Sy's childhood, and when, in the admissions line, the kids light up at an advertisement for overpriced gumdrops, May can't bear to deny them. No sooner does she approve the purchase—it only takes two words—than the gumdrops are "in their mouths . . . dissolving fragrantly on their tongues." The scene raises the

question of what lasting happiness you can offer your children in a world where pleasure is craved, conjured, and exhausted in the width of a breath. How do you preserve their well-being when everything is disposable, and, if you can't, how do you make it up to them? Of course, May's society is set up to exploit these anxieties. She's endlessly targeted with ads for kid-related products and experiences that she feels terrible buying and terrible not buying.

In "Hum," Phillips keeps her world just one degree shy of recognizability, deftly turning the dials of similarity and difference, a mechanic fine-tuning eeriness instead of car engines. Dinnertime finds May and Jem absorbed in their phones. Lu and Sy plead to be excused so that they can go talk to their bunnies—wearable A.I. companions on their wrists—in glowing, human-size eggs, called wooms, whose walls stream content. Adults also have wooms, although these are as likely to be used for porn as they are to be set to their original backdrop, with its "veined reddish light and the whoosh of a heartbeat," designed to make users feel "safe and loved."



As Phillips's characters outsource their humanity to their devices, the machines that they've built become mirrors. Hums—graceful, tireless, superintelligent robots—seem to have absorbed their best selves. Phillips said in an interview that she chose the name "hum" in part because it's "a

beautiful-sounding word that can call to mind a parent humming a lullaby . . . and it's a form of the sacred sound om." Programmed for gentleness and empathy, hums occupy a growing number of positions in the workforce, especially in the service sector. At the Botanical Garden, they evoke Prospero's obliging spirits, their ever-present hands causing pastries to materialize on the ground and globes of light to appear in the trees. The hums may be the most utopian thing about "Hum," yet they seem to herald a family that marches not to the beat of a heart but to the purr of a processor.

May is anxious about the hums' impact on society and labor, but she's also terrified that their supernatural loving-kindness has rendered her unnecessary as a mom. There's an implication that she wants to go to the Botanical Garden not only to immerse the kids in the last wisps of nature and break them of the tech fever that she helped spread but also to restrict the access of these digital "parents," as in a custody battle. The night before the trip, she confiscates her children's bunnies, dramatically ripping the tech off their wrists. Her gesture backfires: at the Botanical Garden, the kids get lost, wandering down a hidden corridor that deposits them back into the grimy hell of the city. Since they aren't wearing their bunnies, their hysterical parents don't know how to find them.

This scene dramatizes the primordial fear that animates eco-anxiety motherhood novels: while May and Jem remain in the garden, enjoying its natural bounty, their ill-equipped children navigate a burning world alone. The image is so potent that you could imagine Phillips spending the rest of the book developing it: how May, terrified, responds to being cut off from her kids and trapped in a fantasy she entered voluntarily; how Lu and Sy fare on the streets. Instead, the crisis resolves almost as soon as it begins. A hum sends "an emergency search inquiry out to the network," after which the kids, shaken but unhurt, are retrieved by another hum.

Up to this point, Phillips has nimbly modulated the faceprint of our world so that her novel's events are just slightly askew. Here, though, in an unconvincing twist, May's story goes public, and she turns into a social-media villain, inundated with strangers' rage at her decision to separate her children from their devices. Phillips is right that mothers are judged harshly for small imperfections, and that the Internet has amplified the pressure they feel by incubating impossibly glamorous momfluencers while hinting to

users that they are constantly being watched. But this depiction of public shaming feels like a paranoid fantasy, an externalization of May's guilt, rather than a believable development. When the Bureau of Family Aid opens an investigation into May "related to the negligent treatment of minors," it reinforces the impression that the novel, like its protagonist, is losing the ability to distinguish between real and imagined threats. Though the state does regularly uproot children from their families, those families are not often middle class; raising your kids without screens is less a taboo than a status symbol, like buying them ergonomic wooden toys and sending them to bougie no-tech camps with equestrian facilities and gluten-free kitchens.

"Hum"'s swerve into unreality is inseparable from its increasing emphasis on May's guilty conscience. During the section of the novel concerned with her harassment, even the language grows hallucinatory, saturated in horror tropes, underscoring that May, who loves her children and loses sleep over their safety and happiness, has become unrecognizable to herself: a monstrous mother. It can seem as if the novel's real question is less whether she will be found to be a good parent by the Bureau than whether she will salvage her self-image and manage to *feel* like a good parent.

A similar longing to be reassured runs through many novels of maternal guilt and ecological anxiety. In "Beautiful World Where Are You" (2021), by Sally Rooney, Eileen, one of the protagonists, grapples with her decision to become pregnant: she's fearful about the state of the planet, but she displaces that uneasiness with worry about "whether I am fit to parent a child in the first place." This progression from the outside inward mirrors the path that "Hum" traces as it registers the challenges of mothering in an age of A.I. and environmental collapse. The book seems to quell its larger anxieties—the charred forests, the bunnies—by redirecting focus to May's guilt, allowing her, and, by extension, the reader, to revel in the pleasurable drama of shame and its release rather than think about an unthinkable future.

The book's final pages offer May the gift of recognition, of being seen with love and tenderness. The evidence is weighed, the experts speak: she is worthy. It's as if Phillips, like an overprotective parent, has swooped in to solve her narrator's identity crisis—and to whisk the less tractable societal problems out of view. By making May's recovery of her sense of motherliness, her caregiver's identity, central to the plot, the book accepts

her prioritization of her own ego and fetishizes what it portrays as May's desperate devotion to her kids—an insistence on primal mom-love that wishes away the irresolution built into parenting. What was always true about raising a child is exquisitely true in the era of climate change: no one can absolve you or tell you with certainty that you succeeded. You live in the not-knowing, in the organ toward which the needle is moving, wondering whether, when it arrives, you might start to see. ♦

With “Close Your Eyes,” a Legendary Filmmaker Makes a Stunning Return

In his first feature in more than two decades, the Spanish director Víctor Erice tells a story haunted by the ghosts of cinema past.

By Justin Chang

August 16, 2024



At the beginning of “The Spirit of the Beehive” (1973), Víctor Erice’s sublime first feature, a travelling projectionist arrives at a remote Castilian village, bearing a print of James Whale’s “Frankenstein.” It’s 1940, not long after the end of the Spanish Civil War, and the townsfolk, eager for entertainment, are soon transfixed by this sad, haunting tale of a man-made monster—none more so than Ana (Ana Torrent), a six-year-old girl with a solemn gaze and a steadfast belief that she is witnessing something terrifyingly real. And who, having experienced Whale’s classic themselves, could argue with her? Ana’s older sister, Isabel (Isabel Tellería), does try to allay her fears: “Everything in the movies is fake.” And yet, Isabel insists, with a twinkle of mischief, there is an actual monster in the village, a

mysterious spirit with whom they can communicate at will. “Close your eyes,” she whispers, “and call him.”

Five decades later, “The Spirit of the Beehive” still ranks among the most auspicious of débuts and the greatest of Spanish films; released during the last years of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship, it established Erice as a leading voice in a national art cinema that was just beginning to reëmerge. It also made clear, right from the start, that cinema itself would be Erice’s grand obsession. Everything in the movies may be fake, as little Isabel says, but there is nothing phony about their power over us—a lesson that Ana learns at an early age. So does Estrella, the thoughtful young heroine of Erice’s second feature, “El Sur” (1983), whose life is forever changed after she spies her father walking alone into a cinema, chasing the spectre of his lost love. Erice’s own love of the movies has never been in doubt, even when the movies haven’t loved him back. “El Sur,” adapted from a novella by Adelaida García Morales, was both an exquisite work and an incomplete one; its final third was never filmed, reportedly for financial reasons, though Erice has disputed this. Since then, he has made a superb documentary, “The Quince Tree Sun” (1992); a 2007 nonfiction collaboration with the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami; and several shorts, but he has struggled to get another feature-length drama off the ground.

Until now: well into his eighties, Erice has made a quietly astonishing new movie, called “Close Your Eyes.” Beyond its stealthy callback to “The Spirit of the Beehive,” the title primes us for a kind of trance, as if we were not just watching a film but attending a séance—a gathering of the ghosts of cinema past. It begins, slyly, with scenes from a film-within-a-film, although this one, unlike “Frankenstein,” springs from Erice’s own imagination. It’s called “The Farewell Gaze,” and from what we see of it—a stately, gray-toned prologue, set at a French château in 1947—it appears to be a postwar adventure yarn, about a mission to recover a lost loved one. But the film, we learn, remained unfinished; it shut down production in 1990, not long after its lead actor, Julio Arenas (José Coronado), mysteriously disappeared. He was never found, and the director, Miguel Garay (Manolo Solo), a close friend of Julio’s, never made another picture. More than two decades later, Miguel dwells in a shack by the sea, catching fish and dreaming of what might have been.

One day, what might have been comes knocking. A Madrid-based TV journalist (Helena Miquel) is investigating Julio's disappearance, and she wants to interview Miguel and air his unscreened footage. Miguel agrees to participate (he could use the money), and begins to conduct inquiries of his own. Early on, we meet his longtime editor, Max (Mario Pardo), who keeps a room stocked with film cannisters and grumbles things like "Miracles haven't existed in the movies since Dreyer died." Harder to track down is Lola (Soledad Villamil), an Argentinean singer who was once Miguel's lover *and* Julio's. In a scene that drolly quickens the story's pulse, she and Miguel muse over how the actor might have met his untimely end—and Lola, tickled by Miguel's grim control of narrative, cannot help but commend his inner film geek.

And then there is Julio's daughter, Ana, who is reluctant to excavate her precious few memories of a man whose reputation as an actor—and as a "professional ladies' man"—far eclipsed his conduct as a father. She speaks willingly to Miguel, though, and in her pain and confusion a hushed, gorgeous aria of abandonment emerges. It hits all the harder for being delivered by none other than Ana Torrent, who is now in her late fifties. She has a more peripheral role than in "The Spirit of the Beehive," but her presence has lost none of its striking, becalmed gravity. To see her all these years later is its own kind of miracle—not something out of Dreyer, perhaps, but still a mighty vindication of cinema's glories.

You could describe "Close Your Eyes" as the story of how a movie about a missing person spawns a show about a missing person, which is scarcely the least of the meta ironies that Erice and his co-writer, Michel Gaztambide, have dreamed up. Lonely images and ideas from the director's first two features—a small box full of cherished possessions, a father's long estrangement from his daughter—have a poignant tendency to resurface here, as though Erice, for all his formidable gifts, were powerless to tell anything but the same sad story. Indeed, it requires no leap of the imagination to view Miguel as Erice's fictional stand-in, an artist whom time and cinema nearly forgot, now peering into the past and seeking to salvage something of his art. Nor is it a stretch to see, in "The Farewell Gaze," the gloomy vestiges of Erice's own compromised projects: "El Sur," *bien sûr*, but also "The Shanghai Spell," a wartime drama that Erice had planned to

direct in the early two-thousands. (It was instead made by Fernando Trueba, in 2002.)

All this runs the risk of making Erice's film sound unduly self-involved, though it isn't any more so, really, than some of this season's other epic comebacks from suddenly renascent filmmakers. Neither critics nor audiences had much use for "Horizon: An American Saga—Chapter 1," the bloated first entry in a purportedly multi-film campaign to restore the big-screen Western—and, with it, the directing career of Kevin Costner—to a perch of artistic and commercial viability. I hope better fortunes await Francis Ford Coppola's forthcoming "Megalopolis," a self-financed, long-aborning passion project that is fuelled by a heroically foolhardy belief in the medium and its potential for self-renewal. "Close Your Eyes" has its own warm spirit of optimism but, happily, none of the self-regarding solipsism you might fear from such a personal valentine to cinema. I can imagine many a moviegoer entering the theatre knowing nothing of Erice and his work, and getting caught up in the gentle grip of his filmmaking. Miguel's journey may sway to a leisurely, elegiac art-film beat, but that rhythm barely conceals the pulsing machinery of a detective story.

Any initial bursts of impatience will evaporate entirely midpoint: a magical seaside interlude, during which Miguel, unwinding in the company of a few beach-bum neighbors, picks up a guitar and strums his own version of "My Rifle, My Pony and Me." Those who cherish Howard Hawks's "Rio Bravo" (1959) will no doubt sense the hovering spirits of Dean Martin and Ricky Nelson, and might even be tempted to join in as Miguel transforms the séance into a concert:

The sun is sinking in the west
The cattle go down to the stream
The redwing settles in the nest
It's time for a cowboy to dream.

"Close Your Eyes" isn't a Western, and the Spanish coast bears little resemblance to the American frontier, but from this captivating sequence onward it has us in the grip of a heartrending Hawksian spell—which is to say, a belief in the sustaining power of community. As Miguel continues to search for answers, he finds aid and solace from unexpected parties,

including a sharp-eyed social worker (María León) and a few kindly nuns, whose presence confers on his mission a special kind of blessing. That mission, of course, runs parallel to Erice's own—to discover if, more than half a century after his first feature, the movies still have a place for him.

That question manifests itself in his very images. The lovingly contrived footage from “The Farewell Gaze,” supposedly shot in 1990, has the richness and granularity we associate with celluloid; the rest of “Close Your Eyes,” by contrast, has a slick digital polish. In a sense, the challenge that Erice has set for himself is to reconcile these two visual modes, and to see if, in the harsh, flattening light of the present day, he can still recover the expressive delicacy and luminosity of his earlier work. A deeply satisfying answer arrives, at long last, in the only place it could—a dilapidated old movie theatre, where his characters find themselves in every sense, and where the meaning of the title finally snaps into focus. If you have ever loved a film so much that you had to turn away—as if you were in danger of experiencing too much of a good thing—perhaps you know its meaning already. Close your eyes, and succumb: it’s time for a moviegoer to dream. ♦

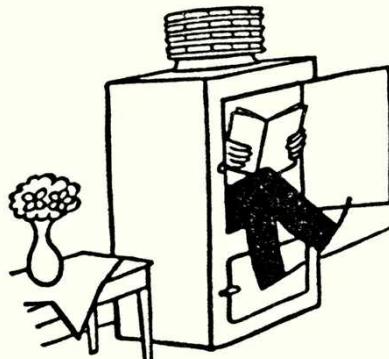
Poems

- [While It's Happening](#)
- [On Emptiness](#)

While It's Happening

By Deborah Landau

August 19, 2024



Other people were always talking in the cafés,
the girls were young, the women were old,
the men were always just men.

Turenne to Bretagne, Bretagne to Charlot,
it's good to walk slowly,
to feel what's under your feet,
it's good to breathe the heavysooted air,
to pass the men smoking in front of Le Progrès,
the dogs having their walks, les enfants.

On Rue Debelleyme the paintings hang jade and cyan,
an azure shining so alive it startles,
and the pigeons are lulling, a seduction . . .
careful what you're gonna do.

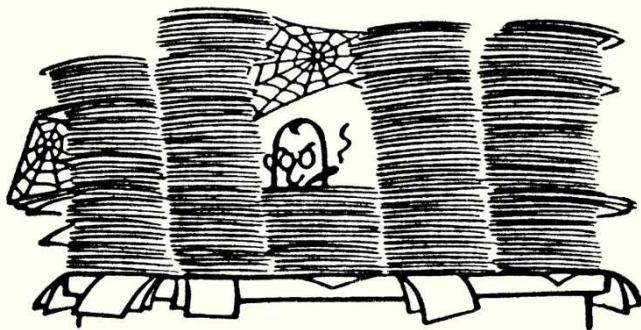
Must I be abstemious. Must I be pure.
A woman enters summer leaving behind a past,

its fizzled magic. Salut says the sky.
The days go on and on, a diminishing bliss
seeping out of the horizon,
down by the river people are dancing,
a kind of sex in the open air,
and the birds have something to say
the moon has something,
the trash does even the rats.
Dear summer, increase my heat.
Dear summer, another pastis.
Another daybreak with full breach.
The days flip by and fleet the nights and back
on the bed again again again these finite pages the years.
But why grieve, you are breathing.

On Emptiness

By Garrett Hongo

August 19, 2024



The T'ang Chinese did it best, a poet's solo
in progressions gathered from wilderness,
while he stood beside the long, vertical scroll of a cataract
hung by a natural god,
its script the Heraclitean flow of the Way.
Or sitting on mats at tea with a friend and fellow bureaucrat
posted on borderlands far from the capital of their educations,
the two of them engaged in brisk repartee,
citing amiably from "The Book of Songs,"
their light banter a fellowship of *otium*,
the lyric axis of contemplation,
while the world persists awhirl in famine, regional war,
or harvests of plenty.

What they took from one another, gazing at the festival moon
as it rose over crags of mountains,
the slithers and fountains of rivers
surrounding their hut, ten-foot square,
was a joyous loyalty to reflection,
a stilling of the mind that invites the soft thoughts
of an unknotted wind,
caravels of contentment with the Grand Whatever. . . .

Let it be was not to them a credo, but daily practice,
a hermeneutics of calm retreat
like those aquamarine waters below my window today,
only ripples and whorls like sapphire fingerprints
and ephemeral wings of *bleu de France* upon the sea.

In *M*A*S*H*, the colonel in command fly-fished a trickle of stream—the middle of the Korean War—checked out and privileged to pull a wineglass and bottle of Chardonnay from his creel.
Did he have it right?

A firecrest chitters, cicadas claxon in waves,
clicking their thoracic chambers of amplification,
and an excursion boat's engine drones on through the harbor,
trailing a long wake of immaculate lace over the channel's
Persian-blue table.

The slate sea fills my window, and I can see the horizon line from here,
the white palette knife of a sail just below it,
and I wonder if the pale flamingos of Camargue
might present themselves to me someday. . . .

Why has this lesson been so hard to re-learn all these years,
why have I allowed the settled law of my soul to be disrupted
by tyrannous magistrates of the everyday,
a groundswell of incessant woe flushing
a salty tincture of gentian through my mouth,
my head constantly hung like a seabird hunched before its dive
instead of lifted to meet the new day's yellow light?

I've strong espresso in the morning,
and some kind of warbler makes its melodic cry outside my window.
I can't see Africa from here,
but I can feel its continental drift,
a steady tumulus of soul-making,
arising from perigee and about to cross the expansive idylls of ocean.

If only I could stand the infinite measures, wait long enough,
and not waste their buoyant resolve.

If only I might dwell in Emptiness the rest of my days.

This is drawn from “Ocean of Clouds.”

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, August 14, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, August 14, 2024

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Robyn Weintraub

August 14, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from our Readers](#)

Letters from our Readers

Readers respond to Nick Paumgarten's piece on Dead & Company, Lauren Collins's article on the Prince de Conty shipwreck, and Louis Menand's review of a book about yuppies.

August 19, 2024

The Show Goes On

Nick Paumgarten's critique of Dead & Company's residency at the Sphere, in Las Vegas, is an amusing account of his reckoning with nostalgia for the Grateful Dead, but it's a missed opportunity to consider this new iteration of the band on its own terms ("[Dead Reckoning](#)," July 29th). Having attended nine of Dead & Co.'s Sphere shows (and about fifteen of their shows before that), I would argue that their approach to both the music and the visual elements of their live performances is a rich and ecstatic continuation of the ever-evolving, improvisatory philosophy that guided the original troupe. Paumgarten seems unwilling to part with his own rigid notions about the aesthetics that surround the music—the new band members' style, the crowd, the theatrics of the Sphere—and as a result he overlooks the majestic, even transcendent, quality of the artistic expression itself, thus ignoring one of the tenets of Dead ideology: the music plays the band.

*Dylan Byers
Los Angeles, Calif.*

Dust to Dust

Lauren Collins, in her piece about the Prince de Conty shipwreck, refers to "dusty files in the National Archives" of France ("[Old Money](#)," July 29th). Too often, archives and their contents are described as "dusty." As a former archivist at the Library of Congress, I know the hazards of dust, and any archivist worth his or her salt will keep collections as dust-free as possible. There is a family of journalistic clichés to which "dusty archives" belongs,

including “in a sleepy village” (most villages I have visited seem no sleepier than a New York City neighborhood) and “Communist Cuba” (as opposed to, say, “capitalist Belgium”?). Whenever my wife and I come across these clichés, we cannot help but recite, “In a dusty archive in a sleepy village in Communist Cuba.” To *The New Yorker’s* famous admonition “Block that metaphor!,” we might add “Block that cliché!”

*Michael Taft
Ottawa, Ont.*

Whither the Yuppie?

I read with personal interest Louis Menand’s review of Tom McGrath’s “Triumph of the Yuppies: America, the Eighties, and the Creation of an Unequal Nation” ([Books](#), July 29th). In his book, McGrath cites Jerry Rubin, a founder of the Youth International Party (or the Yippies), as a symbol of the transition from activism to consumerism undertaken by his generation. I was another founder of the Y.I.P., and Jerry was my boyfriend from 1965 to 1970. He was a complicated man, and I wish that he had made some different choices. But the Jerry who lives in my head remains sharply critical of American society and government. He was a brave, brilliant organizer who could imagine a better future and was willing to do unpopular things that were necessary to challenge the existing order.

In answer to Menand’s question “What happened to the yuppie?,” I prefer to ask, “What happened to the Yippie?” Well, we’re still here. We just happen to now be feminists, fighting for reproductive rights and against misogyny. We push for the abolition of prisons and an end to immoral disparities of wealth. We’re present at ceasefire protests around the country. We’re also demanding a swift and just transition away from fossil fuels. The Jerry I know would have embraced all of this.

*Nancy Kurshan
Oakland, Calif.*

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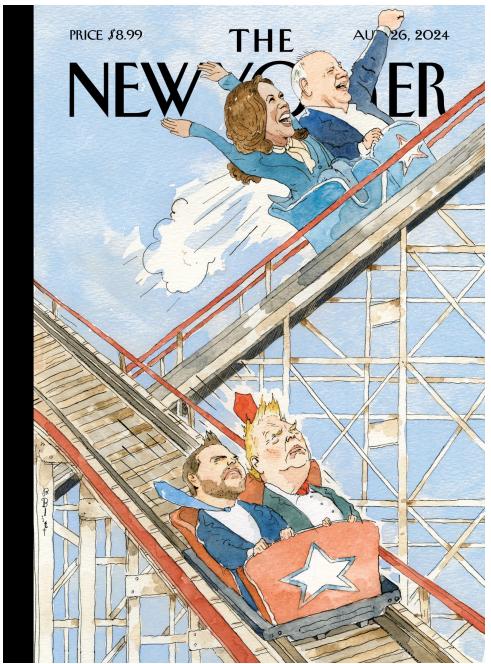


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