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THE

MARCH 2, 2026

THE NEW YORKER



March 2nd 2026

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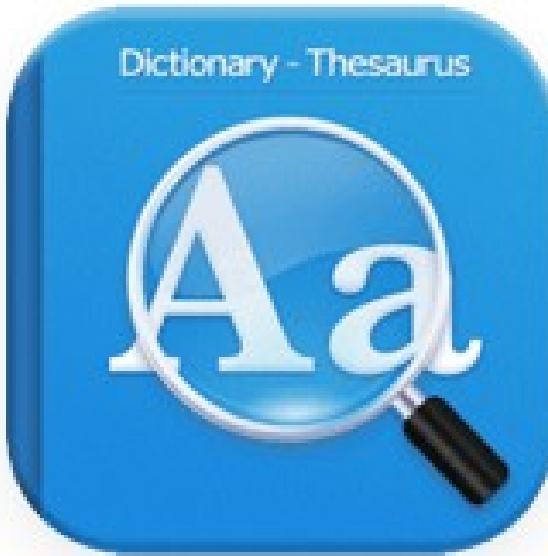
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Goings On

- [Mitski's Spellbinding Intensity](#)
- [The Director of "Crime 101" on His Favorite Anti-Western Westerns](#)

Going On

Mitski's Spellbinding Intensity

Also: the actions and art work of Lotty Rosenfeld, mixed-martial-arts sparring in the play “The Monsters,” a cocktail adventure at Oddball, and more.

By Sheldon Pearce, Marina Harss, K. Leander Williams, Jillian Steinhauer, Emily Nussbaum, Richard Brody, Taran Dugal, Molly Fischer

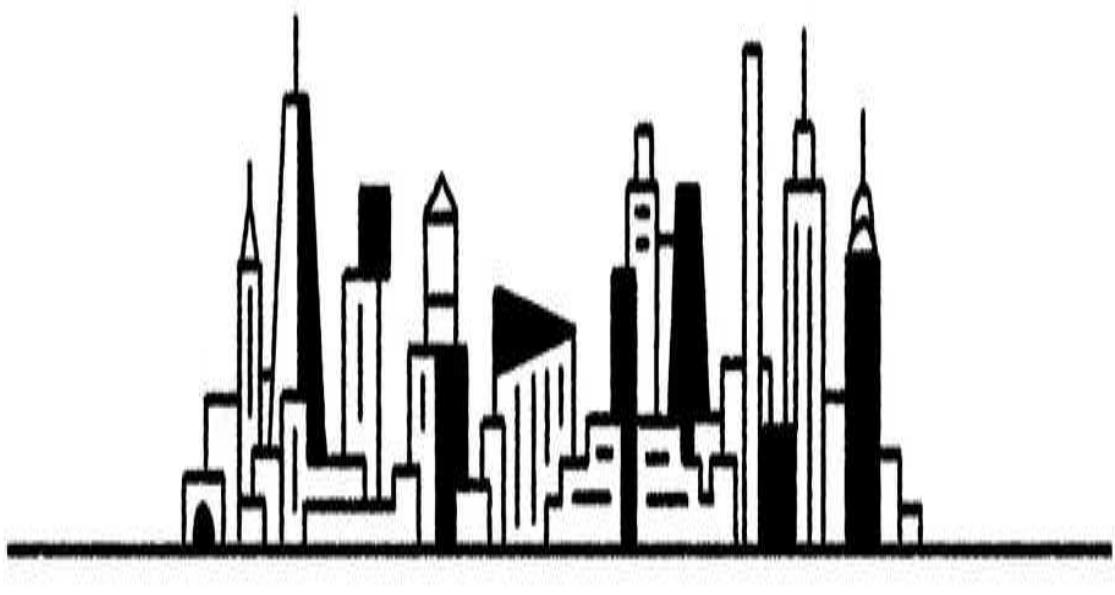
February 20, 2026



For more than a decade, the singer-songwriter **Mitski** has been a totem for yearners. The artist has described herself as a black hole where people can dump their feelings, but her music moves beyond ugly emotions toward catharsis. “Still, nobody wants me / And I know no one will save me, I’m just asking for a kiss / Give me one good movie kiss and I’ll be all right,” she sings on her 2018 nu-disco single “Nobody,” her voice at once covetous and wistful. There is a heightened intensity to her songs, even at their most muted—a simmering cauldron of woe in near-constant threat of bubbling over.



From her 2016 hit “Puberty 2” to her 2023 album, “The Land Is Inhospitable and So Are We,” Mitski has carved out one of the more spellbinding and successful careers in indie music. Alongside her producer and longtime collaborator Patrick Hyland, she has drifted from dream-pop to folk rock to dance music, webbing genre tatters together into a kind of understated yet snug comforter. Her voice is capable of imbuing any canvas with melancholy, but it would be reductive to label her a mere singer of sad songs. Her lyrics crackle with a desire to be made whole, as evidenced by her most recent single, “I’ll Change for You”: “How do I let our love die / When you’re the only other keeper of my most precious memories?” she appeals. Mitski’s new album, “Nothing’s About to Happen to Me,” is out Feb. 27; on the heels of its release, she will play a six-show residency at the Shed (March 2-4, 6-7, 9), opening the spiritual void once more.—*Sheldon Pearce*



About Town

Dance



The New York downtown scene of the sixties and seventies was a place of overlapping friendships and studio space, and the artist Robert Rauschenberg was at the center of it. Rauschenberg's designs brought a witty, even Surrealist edge to the works of the choreographer Merce Cunningham; later, Rauschenberg worked with the younger Trisha Brown. Almost nine years after her death, Brown's **Trisha Brown Dance Company** performs her silvery, fluid "Set and Reset" (1983), to a memorable score by Laurie Anderson, paired with Cunningham's "Travelogue" (1977), for which Rauschenberg created a performance arena that included bicycle wheels, flags, and tin cans—everything but the kitchen sink.—*Marina Harss ([BAM](#);* Feb. 26-28.)

Classical

In much the same way that youngsters might dig their parents' Beatles records, the pianist and composer **Amy Williams** had a formative relationship with the music of the minimalist composer Morton Feldman. Her father, Jan, a percussionist who taught alongside Feldman at the University of Buffalo, also participated in the premières of several of Feldman's major works, giving Williams a head start in understanding the logic of his elongated tones and weighty silences, which are now the signatures of compositions such as "For Philip Guston" and "Rothko Chapel." In a nod to Feldman during the year of his centenary, Williams performs his sprawling, evergreen piano piece "Triadic Memories"; its repetitions and ghost harmonics were once described by Feldman as the "biggest butterfly in captivity."—*K. Leander Williams ([Miller Theatre](#);* March 3.)

Art

In 1979, the Chilean artist **Lotty Rosenfeld** affixed strips of white fabric across the dotted traffic lines of a street in Santiago, turning legible marks into symbols with more open-ended meanings—plus signs or perhaps crosses—and reclaiming the landscape from the regime of Augusto

Pinochet. It was the first of many actions Rosenfeld would take, and art works she would make, that disturbed the order of public space as a way of protesting Pinochet's seventeen-year dictatorship. Alongside her more public, often collaborative, projects, she also made collage films whose emotional impact is built on unexpected juxtapositions—another kind of disruption. “Lotty Rosenfeld: Disobedient Spaces” gathers an eye-opening range of material for her first retrospective in the U.S.—*Jillian Steinhauer* ([Wallach Art Gallery](#); through March 15.)

Pop

The rapper turned pop star **Lizzo** felt like a lodestar of the twenty-tens Zeitgeist. She transitioned from new-age sensation to feel-good success story: a lyricist with pipes, a twerking flautist, and a high-energy sex- and body-positive entertainer, whose skills and charisma culminated in the 2017 mega-hit “Truth Hurts.” Her 2019 album, “Cuz I Love You,” remains a time capsule of all that felt distinctive about Lizzo as an artist—the duality of her songcraft, its sonic malleability, and her effervescence as a performer. She has since faced allegations of misconduct from former dancers, but her comeback mixtape, “My Face Hurts from Smiling,” which dropped last June, is a reminder of an enduring dexterity.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Blue Note](#); Feb. 27-28, March 1.)

Off Broadway

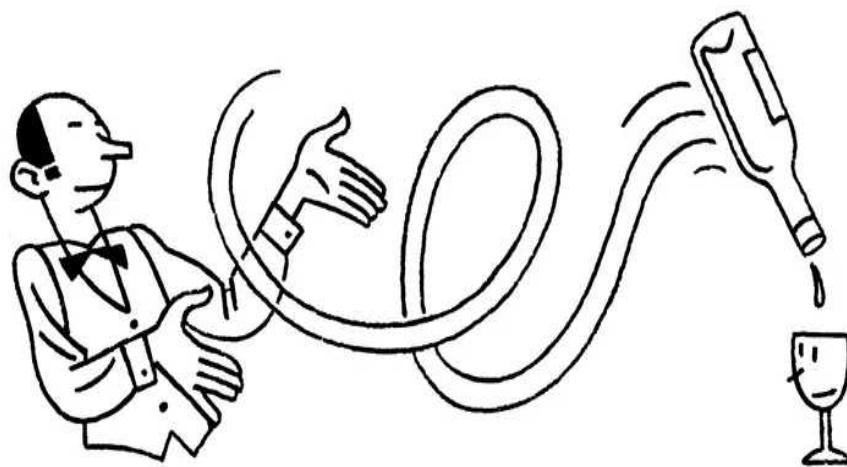


The playwright and director Ngozi Anyanwu's "**The Monsters**," for Manhattan Theatre Club, is a tender two-hander about estranged half-siblings. It's also an unusual athletic performance, which opens with Big (Okieriete Onaodowan), a mixed-martial-arts champion, pummelling an invisible nemesis, like Jacob subduing the Angel. His muscled arms slam the mat, and the audience can smell the sweat. The play isn't subtle; the final sequence leans hard on truisms about addiction and trauma, which are affecting but overly explicit. But both Onaodowan and the terrific Aigner Mizzelle, as Big's messy, openhearted younger sister, Lil, are utterly electric and connected. In the most thrilling, soul-filling sequence, Big trains Lil, and then they become their younger selves, play-wrestling with the joy that only children get to feel before the world's judgments set in.—*Emily Nussbaum ([City Center Stage II](#); through March 22.)*

Movies

Raymond Depardon, who launched his career as a teen-aged photographer in the nineteen-fifties, turned to filmmaking in the seventies and became one of the era's most artistically distinctive and politically probing documentarians. A [retrospective](#) at Film at Lincoln Center (through March 1) includes a remarkable set of films made behind the scenes of the French judicial

system. In “Caught in the Acts” (1994), Depardon spotlights a peculiar practice: prosecutors interrogating suspects without a defense lawyer present. Keeping the camera still in a courthouse’s small, windowless chambers, Depardon depicts these face-to-face showdowns as litanies of misery, as the officials make suspects confront the grim circumstances leading to their arrests. With radical austerity, he evokes the burden of hard lives and the crushing force of governmental power.—Richard Brody



Bar Tab

Taran Dugal ventures into strange cocktail territory.



Think back, if you can, to your initial foray into cocktails—the revelation in discovering the foaminess of egg whites or, perhaps, the horror of your first dirty Martini. **Oddball**, a new bar in Alphabet City aimed at “bringing out-there flavors down to earth,” intends to deliver similar thrills to even the most experienced barflies. On a recent icy weekend, two first-timers passed under the scarlet orb affixed above the fogged-up glass entrance, and sat beneath a vintage Japanese jazz poster, as the flickering of their table candle cast shadows on the wall. Soothing R. & B. played as they eyed the menu and its three categories (Easygoing, Energetic, and Explorative). Unwilling to appear faint of heart—“Easygoing is for chumps!”—they opted to start in the middle, with the Lightspeed Drifter, a blueberry-and-whey-based Daiquiri featuring a strong horseradish taste, which took more than a few sips to get accustomed to. Luckily, the Far Side, with its refreshing notes of cilantro, dill, pineapple, and tomatillo, allowed the duo to regroup, taking solace in what tasted like a tropical salsa. There’s no rest for the thirsty, however—the waiter returned, and the guests, after some brief recon, ventured into the Explorative section. The Infinite Loop (“a Vesper Martini goes on vacation,” as the menu put it) was met with grimaces galore, its sharp, dry mix of guava and brandy far too harsh for their taste buds. The explorers, in over their heads, ran for cover to an old reliable, and arrived at the house’s whiskey sour: a sweet, frothy delicacy topped with exquisitely marbled foam. Tongues tested, palates finally pleased, the adventurers

decided that this was as good a place to stop as any. When it comes to cocktails, they realized, the well-trodden path trumps the road less travelled.

This Week with: Molly Fischer

Our writers on their current obsessions.

This week, I'm still thinking about Braden ([Clavicular](#)) Peters and the “looksmaxxers,” a subculture of young men obsessed with extreme physical self-improvement and baroque slang who seem to have achieved a new level of public awareness in recent weeks. The looksmaxxers are surely the subject for which several generations of gender-studies Ph.D.s have been training; I can only hope, given the embattled state of the academic humanities, that the experts are here for us when we need them most.

This week, I loved “[Anno’s Counting Book](#).” My mother-in-law was a longtime preschool teacher, and she gives my almost three-year-old son unexpected and excellent books. Recently, she found a thrift-store copy of this wordless 1977 picture book by the Japanese illustrator Mitsumasa Anno. I am not someone who’s inclined to gas up math, but these drawings make the subject feel somehow . . . intuitive, beautiful, and fun?

This week, I cringed at “[The Pitt](#).” I won’t quit “The Pitt,” no matter how clunkingly didactic or saccharine it gets. I’m just going to sit back and let lines like “Most people who think they have a penicillin allergy actually don’t” wash over me. I do, however, wish that the show would stop insisting there is some kind of interesting chemistry between Noah Wyle and the new attending played by Sepideh Moafi; there is not.



This week, I'm consuming waffles. I am generally skeptical of single-use kitchen gadgets, but I recently made an exception for a waffle-maker and won't look back. I get neurotic making pancakes but waffles are gratifyingly foolproof. Invite people over, promise them waffles. Who says no to waffles?

Next week, I'm looking forward to Playreaders. A few months back, a friend who lives in my neighborhood and is a genius started a semi-regular gathering called Playreaders. It's like a book club, but for reading plays. There is no homework (preparation is actively discouraged); we just eat dinner, drink some wine, read the play aloud, then talk about what we've read. For the next installment, we're doing "Dance Nation," by Clare Barron.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Robyn's A.M.A.](#)
- [Sheila Heti on tripping for her mental health](#)
- [What does Obama know?](#)

The Director of “Crime 101” on His Favorite Anti-Western Westerns

Bart Layton, whose new film stars Halle Berry, Chris Hemsworth, and Mark Ruffalo, discusses a few of his favorite novels that question the romance of the frontier.

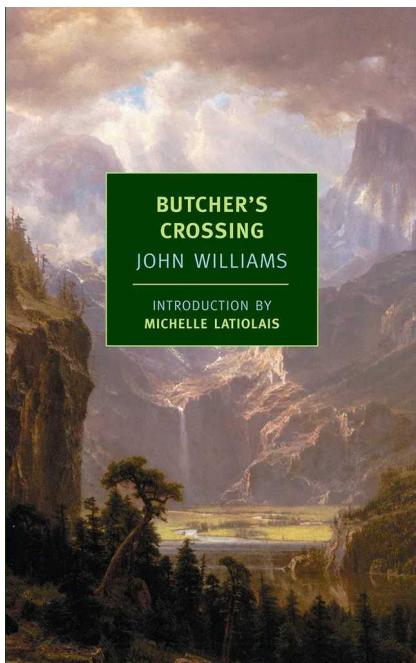
February 11, 2026



When the director Bart Layton—whose new film, “Crime 101,” opens on Friday—recently reflected on his favorite novels, he realized that many were what might be termed anti-Westerns. “Most Westerns are great adventures about risk and endeavor and glory,” he said. The books that he loves invert that mythology, focussing on characters in situations that don’t necessarily conclude in triumph and dominion, and depicting a different kind of self-discovery. “Like, if I go into this, I’ll be confronted by the measure of myself. I’ll be made to confront the question, ‘Am I of substance?’ ” His remarks have been edited and condensed.

Butcher’s Crossing

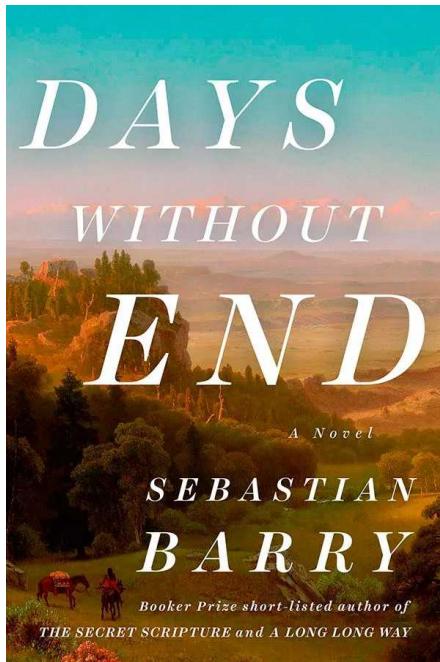
by John Williams



A few years ago, I made a film called “American Animals,” which is about a group of kids who commit a heist. They do it partly because of the financial benefits, but more because they want to see what lies on the other side of a line that should never be crossed. The main character in “Butcher’s Crossing,” [Andrews](#), is in a similar kind of situation. Andrews is an educated guy—he’s a student at Harvard in the late eighteen-hundreds—but he feels like he doesn’t understand some important things. Like what hardship feels like, what it means to be challenged on a more essential level, and the essence of being a man. So, to try and gain that understanding, he leaves school and signs up for a buffalo hunt in Kansas—an experience that turns out to bring not knowledge but, rather, disillusionment.

Days Without End

by Sebastian Barry



This is the story of two queer soldiers who meet amid the complete brutality of the Civil War. To me, it's a book about vulnerability that is set at the edge of an incredibly violent moment in history. The main characters are surrounded by the most abject violence, occupying a world that can sometimes feel lawless—and yet, they are able to create a small haven through their love.

Like several of the other books I am recommending here, [Barry's characters'](#) voices aren't particularly articulate, because they don't belong to educated narrators. But what emerges as a result is, I think, a particularly poetic and immersive reading experience.

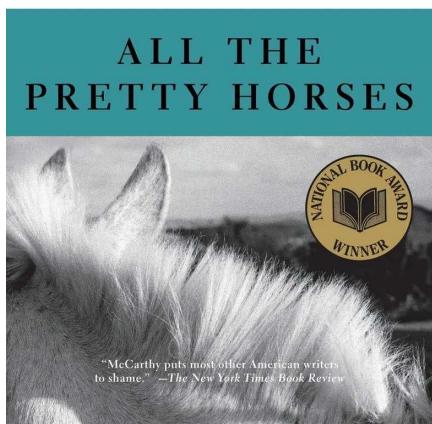
All the Pretty Horses

by Cormac McCarthy

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

Cormac McCarthy

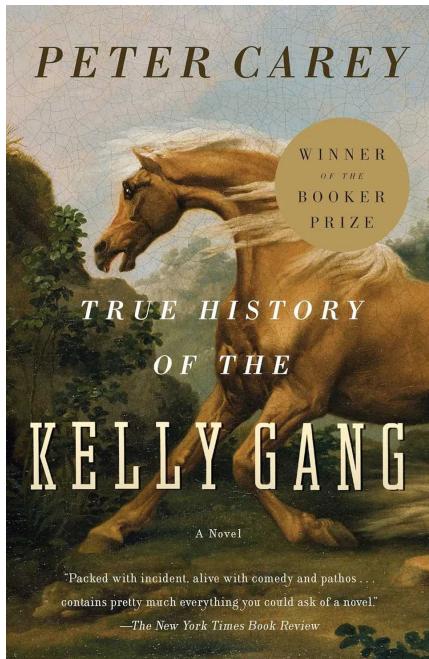
Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Road*



I haven't read [this](#) book since I was nineteen or twenty, but I still think of it as my favorite. It's a bildungsroman about two young boys in the American Southwest in the middle of the twentieth century. What's always stayed with me about it is the way that it shows how human purity becomes corrupted, and how, in the book, its analogue can only be found in horses. The horses, not the people, are the unimpeachable souls, whereas we see how humans get it all wrong because they can be driven by the wrong things, like the pursuit of wealth and status.

True History of the Kelly Gang

by Peter Carey



Like “Days Without End,” this one has a narrator who isn’t entirely literate, a fictionalized version of the Australian outlaw Ned Kelly. “True History” is framed as though it were written testimony left behind by Kelly. It feels very raw, and there’s an innocence and a truthfulness to it.

Kelly is a folk hero who committed murders and robberies in the late nineteenth century. He justified these crimes as acts of resistance against authority—his parents were sent to Australia from Ireland, along with tens of thousands of other Irish people, and he grew up in pure poverty. [Carey’s book](#) expands on Kelly’s claim that his criminal activity was a response to the violence the English committed against the Irish, both in Europe and, now, in their colony. In the book, those cruelties, along with the cruelties of Kelly’s own experience, change his perspective. They also shape the way that you think about the novel’s central questions, which are also questions that, I suppose, I’m interested in in “Crime 101.” Questions like, Who’s really on the right side of the law? Who does it protect, and who is a victim of it?

The Talk of the Town

- [Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's Life in Pictures](#)
- [Ian McKellen Swings from Shakespeare to Gandalf to Virtual Reality](#)
- [Natasha Pickowicz, Hot-Pot Alchemist](#)
- [Jan Staller, Constructor of Image](#)
- [Move Over, Olympics—Iceboating Is the Hottest Sport](#)

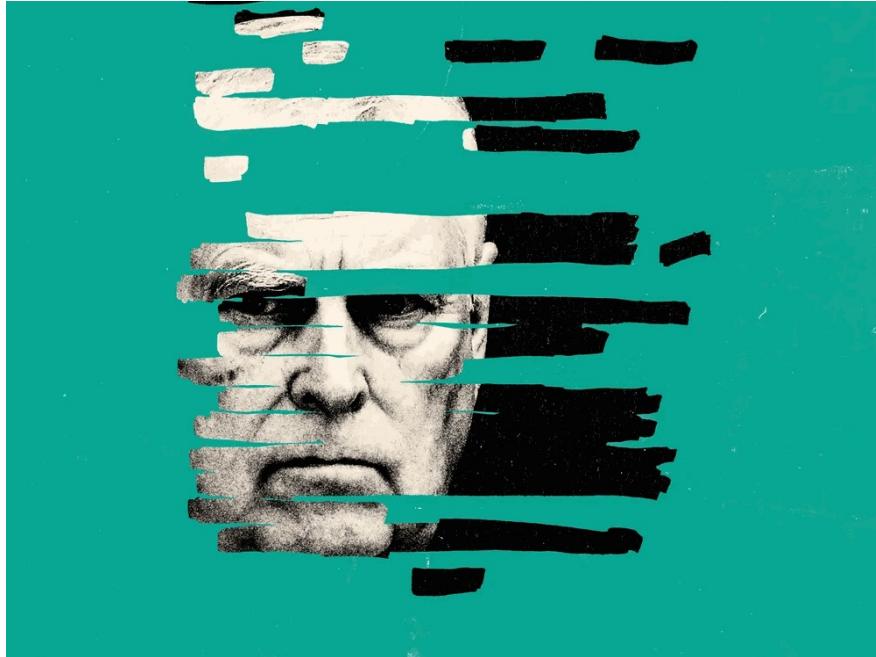
Comment

Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor's Life in Pictures

Following his arrest last week, Andrew spent his first birthday as a commoner in circumstances as degraded as earlier celebrations had been grand.

By Rebecca Mead

February 21, 2026



When Queen Elizabeth II was delivered of a baby boy on February 19, 1960, the birth—the first to a reigning British monarch in more than a century—was marked by public celebration. The bells of Westminster Abbey pealed for an hour. The Royal Air Force performed a fighter-jet flyover of central London, as guns saluted from Hyde Park and the Tower. The ships in the Royal Navy fleet were notified of the arrival of a prince—his name, Andrew, had not yet been announced—with the injunction “Splice the mainbrace,” a euphemism for the distribution of a celebratory tot of rum.

Given such an entry into the world, any individual might get ideas above his station—particularly if, as was the case with young Andrew, the second in line to the throne after his brother Charles, there were only two positions in the social hierarchy that *were* actually above his station. Birthday celebrations in subsequent years seem hardly to have been calculated to kindle a sense of humility. On turning six, Andrew received a custom-made Aston Martin electric toy car. For his twenty-first, there was a party for about six hundred at Windsor Castle, and, for his thirtieth, a lavish “Dance of the Decades” at Buckingham Palace. When Andrew turned forty, he, along with his ex-wife, Sarah Ferguson, and their two daughters, commandeered a pod of the London Eye Ferris wheel—other riders complained bitterly about royal queue-jumping—then had a reportedly thirty-thousand-pound blowout at Sunninghill Park, the house they still shared in Berkshire. In advance of his fiftieth birthday, as Andrew Lownie recounts in his indispensable biography, “[Entitled](#),” the Prince told a journalist he was doing “nothing big” to celebrate. Nothing big turned out to be a reception for some three hundred at Buckingham Palace, followed the next night by a bash at St. James’s Palace, with guests, Lownie reports, receiving a miniature album featuring photos of Andrew, as a party favor.

It was photographs, of course, that precipitated Andrew’s unravelling. In 2011, one day after his fifty-first birthday, a newspaper splashed an image of him walking alongside the convicted sex offender [Jeffrey Epstein](#), headlined “*Prince Andy and the Paedo.*” Shortly after that, another paper published a snapshot from 2001 of Andrew with his arm around the waist of seventeen-year-old Virginia Giuffre, with a grinning Ghislaine Maxwell, Epstein’s sometime paramour—and, since 2021, a convicted sex-trafficker—in the background. That photo was taken less than a year after Maxwell and Epstein were guests at yet another birthday celebration for Andrew, a party at Windsor Castle.

Andrew has always maintained that he has no memory of ever meeting Giuffre, and that he committed no wrongdoing in any of his relations with Epstein, who died in New York’s Metropolitan Correctional Center in 2019, while awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges. Nonetheless, in 2011, Andrew stepped down from his decade-long role as a U.K. international-trade envoy. In 2019, after a disastrous television interview in which he

admitted that he had “let the side down” by his association with Epstein, Andrew stepped back from royal duties.

Just over two years later, Andrew was stripped of his royal patronages and military roles; soon afterward, he reached a reportedly multimillion-dollar settlement with Giuffre in a civil sexual-abuse suit, in which he admitted no liability. Last October, with the posthumous publication of Giuffre’s memoir, in which she alleged that she had had sex with Andrew on three occasions, he surrendered the use of his title Duke of York. Then—in what would once have seemed an impossible demotion—he was effectively stripped of his royal status altogether, and reborn as Mr. Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor. For a man whose identity was constituted around a sense of social superiority—according to Lownie’s book, if Andrew was met with insufficient deference upon entering a room he would loudly announce, “Let’s try that again,” before exiting and reentering to hastily performed bows and curtsies—the reduction in status was surely a profound humiliation. Even Charles I, who was executed for treason in 1649, went to the scaffold as King.

Last week, Andrew spent his first birthday as a commoner in circumstances as degraded as earlier celebrations had been grand. At around eight in the morning, he was arrested at a farmhouse on the King’s Sandringham estate—not in relation to any sexual offenses but on suspicion of misconduct in public office. The arrest apparently resulted from documents recently disclosed by the United States Department of Justice suggesting that as trade envoy he had shared privileged information with Epstein. (Mountbatten-Windsor has, as of this writing, not been charged with any crime.) Identified by the police as “a man in his sixties from Norfolk,” Andrew, who is the first senior member of the Royal Family to be arrested since Charles I, spent about eleven hours in custody before being released under investigation. As the car carrying him departed the police station, a photographer captured another indelible image, of the former Prince slumped in the back seat, wide-eyed and slack-jawed—the boy for whom the chimes once pealed looking very much like a man for whom the bell now tolls.

Andrew is not the only highly placed member of the British establishment whose reputation, at the very least, has been destroyed by an association with Epstein. [Peter Mandelson](#), the former Ambassador to the U.S., is under investigation for passing privileged information along to the financier.

(Mandelson has not been arrested or charged, and a report by the BBC noted its understanding that “his position is that he has not acted in any way criminally.”) That scandal has shaken an already unsteady Prime Minister [Keir Starmer](#), despite Starmer’s having never so much as encountered Epstein himself. “Nobody is above the law,” the Prime Minister said during a television interview, broadcast last week just as Andrew was being arrested.

In Britain, on the current evidence, that appears to be true: investigators have been promised the “wholehearted support” of the King, who issued a statement while his brother was still in custody that “the law must take its course.” It is striking that, by contrast, no authorities in the U.S. seem willing or able to seek comparable accountability from the powerful men who entered Epstein’s orbit. President Trump, when asked whether more former Epstein associates might face arrest, replied, “Well, you know, I’m the expert in a way, because I’ve been totally exonerated,” deflecting the question while allowing that events were “very, very sad” for the Royal Family, as if this were a parochial affair among posh Brits, free from implications for an American élite. Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor’s legal fate is still unfolding, but whatever the future holds, the party is over for him. When will it be over for the rest of them? ♦

The Boards

Ian McKellen Swings from Shakespeare to Gandalf to Virtual Reality

On a visit to New York, the actor reflected on mortality and coming out, and unleashed an Elizabethan anti-*ICE* monologue on “Colbert” that went viral.

By Henry Alford

February 23, 2026



How eerie: when you put on a headset to watch the film “An Ark,” at the Shed, you behold ghostly, real-seeming 3-D images, similar to holograms, of four actors, including Sir Ian McKellen. But, if you saw “An Ark” on a recent Tuesday, you might have noticed that one of the other headset-wearers in the audience was the flesh-and-blood McKellen, who was watching the film for the first time.

Before McKellen could deliver his critique of the show, he had to face a gauntlet of schoolkids in the audience, who knew the eighty-six-year-old

actor not from his turns as Lear but as Gandalf and Magneto. One boy wondered why the actors in “An Ark” had talked so much about death; McKellen, dressed in a capacious wool sweater and squashy orange sneakers, told him, “We’re angels, really.” He patiently answered another child’s question—“Have you ever thought of being a comedy actor?”—by saying, “Have a look at ‘Extras,’ with Ricky Gervais.”

Moments later, McKellen was in a conference room, where he surveilled a tray of snacks. Selecting a bag of potato chips, he enthusiastically read aloud the word “Classic” from the package and commenced gobbling. “An Ark” was so lifelike that he had instinctively reached out his hand when one of the characters had encouraged the audience to touch her; still, he said, “it is with a sigh of relief that I say that this medium is not going to overtake the theatre as an art form.” He had tangled with technology in the early days of filming the C.G.I.-heavy “Lord of the Rings,” in 1999 and 2000: in one scene, tasked with interacting with a group of other actors represented only by their photographs, McKellen had mumbled, “This isn’t why I became an actor,” and then he wrote a letter to the film’s director, Peter Jackson, offering to quit. “I couldn’t do that scene,” he said. “I don’t think any actor could. So we found some other way to do it.”

The ruminative quality of “An Ark,” which is written in the second person and chronicles “your” journey from birth to afterlife, is consonant with McKellen’s own outlook. “It’s a fascination with, or an acceptance of, the fact that I am not immortal,” he said. “It’ll be my turn soon.” He had previously wanted his funeral to close with the song “One Singular Sensation,” from “A Chorus Line”; those plans changed after he bequeathed his body to science.

McKellen had a brush with mortality in 2024, while playing Falstaff in London: he fell off the stage. “I shrieked out to a full house in the Noël Coward Theatre, ‘I’m sorry! I don’t do this!,’ and then, ‘Help me, I’m dying!’ ” he said. “Those are the thoughts that went through my head.” McKellen and the audience member he fell on were both rushed to the hospital; McKellen suffered chipped vertebrae and a fractured wrist. “But I’ve tested myself since—I did five films last year and I’ve been onstage now five times since, and everything’s working,” he said. “The Christophers,” a film about art forgery that he made with Steven Soderbergh,

comes out in April, and he'll soon play Jacob Marley opposite Johnny Depp in a film about Ebenezer Scrooge.

The day after McKellen saw “An Ark,” he went on Stephen Colbert’s late-night show and recited, from the Elizabethan play “Sir Thomas More,” a monologue lambasting anti-immigrant sentiment. The four-minute clip went viral. He is as beloved by many for his gay-rights activism as he is for his mastery of Shakespeare, but he wears that tiara lightly. “I did it on my own behalf,” he said about coming out, in 1988, at the age of forty-nine. “Nobody was surprised. Simon Callow, who was the first English actor of any note to come out before me, had to come out in a biography, because whenever he talked about it, the press wouldn’t report it.” McKellen said that he has experienced no disadvantages to publicly acknowledging his homosexuality. “And it freed up my emotions to no end. I’d always found strongly emotional scenes very difficult,” he said. “I was playing Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya, and suddenly I could cry at every performance. That was all because I was honest. Everything was better. And life was much more fun, going around saying, ‘I’m gaaaaay!’ I used to think it would be fun to have a coming-out campaign like Billy Graham—that Elton and I and the Pet Shop Boys and whoever else wanted to, we’d get a big tent and when we arrived in your town we’d announce, ‘Now is your chance! You can stand up and come out!’ ”

McKellen smiled and put the almost empty bag on the table: “I used to think my gravestone would read, ‘Here lies Gandalf. He came out.’ ” ♦

Dept. of Sharing

Natasha Pickowicz, Hot-Pot Alchemist

In the aisles of H Mart, the James Beard-nominated chef chats about her new book, “Everyone Hot Pot,” and her leap from pastries to soup.

By Charlotte Goddu

February 23, 2026



Natasha Pickowicz is in possession of the key to personal fulfillment. Standing in front of an H Mart in Long Island City one recent afternoon, the chef and cookbook writer confided, “I feel like I’m sitting on this secret to happiness. And when people do it, when they experience it, I feel smug.”

The secret? Hot pot. A communal vat of bubbling broth in the middle of a table, surrounded by plates heaped with frilly cabbage, thin-sliced lamb, pale cubes of tofu, and bright crescents of kabocha squash, all ready to be poached and eaten. It’s the kind of meal that requires more shopping than actual cooking, which is why Pickowicz, who was wearing black jeans and a leather jacket over a red sweater, was prowling the produce aisle, eying enoki mushrooms and Napa-cabbage hearts.

Her first cookbook, the James Beard-nominated “More Than Cake,” was an ode to fancy layer cakes strewn with flower petals and tarts made with fresh fruits and vegetables. Pickowicz swerved away from sweets with her newest book, “Everyone Hot Pot,” which is an introduction to soup-centric dinner parties, illustrated by her mother, Li Huai. (Friends have suggested that Pickowicz get a tattoo of one of the images. Her mom hates the idea: “She’s, like, ‘Please don’t do it!’ ”)

Studying an array of soy-based products on offer—she particularly likes fried tofu rolls, which get pleasingly soggy in broth—Pickowicz admitted that she’d had some reservations about doing a cookbook devoted to communal soup-eating, especially in the post-pandemic era. She knew she’d be up against cultural prejudices about the potential germiness. “You look at something like a cheese board that is big in Western cultures, and everyone’s putting their fingers on the cheese board! Chinese cultural traditions are being held to a different standard,” she said.

The Long Island City H Mart, set next to train tracks and a Home Depot, is special for Pickowicz. The wide aisles—a little slice of the suburbs—make her homesick for the 99 Ranch Market where she shopped with her mom as a kid, in San Diego. The only child of an artist mother from Beijing and an academic father from Massachusetts, Pickowicz ate hot pot on Christmas Eve and birthdays. “Growing up, we didn’t go out for hot pot once,” she said. “I didn’t even know it was a meal you could have at a restaurant.” Later, living in a Bushwick loft while she worked as a pastry chef at Diner and Marlow & Sons, she hosted elaborate soup feasts at home, using thin-sliced meat, offal, and bones supplied by her butcher boyfriend.

Recently, Pickowicz went out for hot pot with a chef friend who was new to the experience. She was charmed to notice that the friend did a few things that looked “effortlessly Chinese.” Pickowicz said, “She was fishing bites of food out of the broth and putting them on my plate. It’s a very auntie thing to do!” Her dream quartet of hot-pot guests would include Ina Garten (“an American domestic goddess”), George Saunders (“a little more enigmatic”), Maggie Cheung (“elegant and severe”), and Zohran Mamdani (no explanation needed).

Pickowicz said that she'll eat almost anything in broth—tripe, heart, “blood can be really good!”—but confessed, “I struggle with brains.” Lately, she's been preferring vegetable-focussed meals. The best part of hot pot, she said, is how changeable it can be: “Are you vegan? Are you broke? Are you cooking for twelve people or two people?” One constant: “I'm a bit of a control freak, so I like to make the same sauce for everyone.” Her go-to is a white-sesame-and-cumin mixture.

Among the store's wares, Pickowicz admired a cute pink camp stove, her preferred heat source for hot pot. “There's something about seeing the open flame that's very evocative for me,” she said. But she resisted, knowing that she could probably get a cheaper one next door at Home Depot. Even though one of her chapters features a surf-and-turf banquet of king crab and rib eye, she's keen to teach her readers that hot pot can be affordable. Cookbook writing “is just one small piece of the puzzle for me, in terms of income,” she explained. Pickowicz has worked with a laundry list of brands, ranging from All-Clad to J. Crew. Maybe someday H Mart would join the rotation. But, until then, she'd have to get her butane elsewhere. ♦

Hard Hat Dept.

Jan Staller, Constructor of Image

The photographer shoots the bolts and beams of building sites. His latest subject? The Gateway tunnel project being targeted by Donald Trump.

By Nick Paumgarten

February 23, 2026



“I photograph construction sites,” Jan Staller says to security guards when they try to shoo him away. He doesn’t like to be told no, but some version of no is usually what he gets. So he shoots from outside the fence. In recent years, he has focussed on material held aloft by cranes. In isolation, against a white background that is actually overcast sky, a hook or a caisson or a sheaf of rebar appears sculptural, abstract, exquisite.

Since last spring, on gray days, Staller has been prowling the perimeter of the Gateway tunnel site, by the West Side rail yards, with his giant telephoto lens, like a birder who has lost his way. A clamshell bucket is his snowy owl.



The Gateway project includes a pair of new passenger-train tunnels under the Hudson River, and also the rehabilitation of the existing tubes, which are more than a hundred years old and were damaged during Hurricane Sandy, in 2012. A want of money and a surplus of political petulance have thwarted versions of this undertaking for three decades. Under President Joe Biden, federal funding finally became available, the lion's share in 2024, only for President Donald Trump to threaten to withdraw it a year later. The funding stopped during the government shutdown last fall, and the Trump Administration refused to restore it. Trump reportedly told Senator Charles Schumer that he'd free up the funds only if Penn Station and Dulles Airport were renamed for him. A month ago, work on the Gateway project stopped. No money, no tunnel. Around a thousand union laborers were laid off.

A few days before the cease-work order, Staller, who is seventy-three, was in his studio getting ready for an outing to the site. "I find it hard to believe they'll actually just shut it down," he said. "They've already sunk two billion dollars into it." His studio shares the garage of his home, a town house in the West Village, with a Mini Cooper and a metalwork shop, where he designs and fabricates fixtures and furniture. Some aluminum frames of his own design held large-format prints of urban ruins and renewal. He's been walking and shooting the West Side of Manhattan for half a century, from its most desolate period, in the mid-seventies, to the Erector-set frenzy

of recent decades. “I like things in transition—construction, demolition, decay,” he said. His current preoccupation with building components, the subject of his new book, “Manhattan Project,” began in 2013, when Steve Witkoff, now Trump’s envoy to the Middle East, started constructing a luxury apartment building on the lot across the street. “I spent a year just shooting materials from my window,” Staller said. Then came six years of lurking around Hudson Yards.



The Hudson River, half a block west of his house, was a tangle of ice. Staller, in East German army-surplus wool pants and felt-lined boots, and an olive-drab parka, trudged along a snowy sidewalk on the West Side Highway. “This is nice,” he said, pointing to panels of fence screen covered in graffiti, near the Standard hotel. “With a sidewalk in front of it, it usually looks like shit, but with the snow . . .” He climbed atop a filthy bank to get the right angle. “The excitement is if there’s something more to it than the thing I see.”

He turned east at the Gateway site, on Twenty-ninth Street. “A lot of people here know me already,” he said, nodding to a worker in a hard hat. Inside the fence line were cranes, fuel tanks, and spools of cable; a crew was splicing together cages of rebar to sink into the ground. He pressed his lens to a chain-link slot. “One of the problems is that a lot of the objects being picked

have snow on them, so they don't have that purity of line, but today there's nothing airborne here anyway."



On Thirtieth Street, an open gate gave him a clean shot of a panel of rebar that looked like an Afro pick. "You can't go here," a guard said.

"I hate the word 'no,'" Staller said.

"It's my job to say no."

"You're doing it."

There were other sites to photograph, if the Gateway were to stay off-line for long. At the Port Authority Bus Terminal expansion, half a mile uptown, Staller trained his lens on giant tubes of steel rimmed with teeth—core drill sections, frosted with snow, like colossal ziti topped with mozzarella cheese—which a crane was hoisting into place. A horn blew, and a section went aloft. "This might be the money shot," Staller said.

After a while, he made his way back down to the Gateway site. (His phone, when he got home, said he'd walked six miles.) He wanted a shot of the rebar cages welded together, in the twilight, before the whole thing had to shut down. "They're not going to leave this huge project unfinished, as

mysterious ruins for future Manhattanites, or whatever they'll call themselves." Not yet, anyway. Last week, the Trump Administration, responding to a judge's order, released the funds. Construction is scheduled to resume this week. ♦

The Sporting Scene

Move Over, Olympics—Iceboating Is the Hottest Sport

This winter was finally cold enough for the legendary race along the Navesink River. But who brought home the trophy?

By Ben McGrath

February 23, 2026



The Navesink River only freezes every so often, which is a shame, given that one of the world's only dedicated iceboating clubhouses still sits on its southern shore, at Red Bank, New Jersey, an ongoing museum to a formerly aristocratic pastime that propelled humans at speeds not yet known to be worthy of an interstate. "Whether it's climate change or what, I don't know," Jack Mulvihill, an avid iceman, said recently. "We haven't had cold winters." This winter, of course, has been an exception—a throwback. Mulvihill was sitting on the second floor of the clubhouse, next to a gas-fired stove, while, out on the brackish slab, the wind chill was minus seven, and a long-awaited race for perhaps the oldest North American sports trophy

was on the cusp of being postponed, yet again, on account of gale-force gusts.

Mulvihill was the keeper of the trophy: the Van Nostrand Challenge Cup, a silver chalice with wintry sailing scenes in bas-relief. His club, the North Shrewsbury Ice Boat and Yacht Club, won it in 1891, in a race on Orange Lake, in Newburgh, New York, where the cup was commissioned by a local businessman, Gardiner Van Nostrand. (Hockey's Stanley Cup, often said to be the continent's oldest trophy, wasn't commissioned until 1892.) Then—well, “it's a very fickle sport,” as an ex-commodore from the rival Hudson River Ice Yacht Club put it. The temperature, the wind, the rules, human memory: all fickle. Iceboating, a common fixation of turn-of-the-century sportswriters, fell out of favor for several decades, and the Van Nostrand lost its lustre. North Shrewsbury club members passed it around among themselves. “They just called it the Commodore Trophy,” Mulvihill said. “Nobody knew what the hell it was. They took it up to Tiffany's one day in the nineteen-seventies when there was no ice, and they had it appraised. We almost fell off our chairs.” A jeweller had apparently estimated its worth at nearly twenty thousand dollars. The sportswriters returned.

The first—and only—Van Nostrand race of the twentieth century took place in 1978, and it was contentious. “There was blood flowing down these stairs,” Mulvihill said, facetiously. The winning skipper was a retired Marine Corps pilot named Reuben Snodgrass, from Ronkonkoma. But the Shrewsbury club set the rules and awarded itself first place, on team-score grounds. “He made his own cup, he was so mad,” Mulvihill said of Snodgrass. The Snodgrass version of the Van Nostrand was on display on a nearby table, unpolished. A New Yorker had brought it down as a playful provocation. The real trophy, meanwhile, had resided in a safe that had once belonged to Mulvihill's grandfather, a Depression-era banker. “Nobody can get in there unless they put a gun to my head,” Mulvihill said.

HONEST ANNOUNCEMENT CARDS



POLLYLOUADAMS

Warmer winters helped alleviate some of the tension, as the New Jersey sailors, seeking more reliable ice, accepted invitations from their old adversaries up in Newburgh and on the Hudson, north of Poughkeepsie. Another race for the Van Nostrand was convened on the Navesink in 2003. The locals won again. “We’re used to hard ice,” Dan Lawrence, a third-generation iceboater from Orange Lake, the cup’s original home, explained. “This is what we call sherbert.” The salt softens the surface. Iceboats run on blades, like giant skates, which are sometimes sharpened with belt sanders. Lawrence said that he had broadened his blades’ angles this year, in anticipation of a rematch: a hundred and five degrees, instead of ninety.

The fourth running of the Van Nostrand, when it finally transpired, after two days of postponement, featured three boats from the Shrewsbury club and three from New York. All, per the rules, were so-called “A” boats: restored antiques, wooden, with gaffed rigs. From a squinting distance, they resembled Hudson River sloops. Up close, they were more like giant crosses atop machetes. The wind was a fluky northwesterly, gusty at the starting gun, such that a couple of blades levitated briefly, as if launching into flight. Then came the lulls, and a reminder that sailing, even on sherbert, can be a “hurry up and wait” kind of sport. Dan Lawrence’s son, Luke, piloting Ariel, which once belonged to the Roosevelts’ neighbor Archie Rogers, took the first heat, and then the second, obviating the need for a third. No team scores

needed this time. The New Yorkers had won, and the cup was going home to Newburgh after a hundred and thirty-five years.

“In twenty years, we can do it again!” a New Yorker joked.

“Well, we were thinking after lunch,” a New Jerseyan countered.

“You know what? It takes a lot off my mind,” Jack Mulvihill said, as he contemplated relinquishing his charge. “They’ll take good care of it.”

But first they had to fill it with champagne. ♦

Reporting & Essays

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- [The Migrants in the Ancient Forest](#)
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Personal History

Cash and Carry

I guessed correctly that the woman had found this cabinet on the curb, just as I had found my current desk chair and countless pieces of furniture in the past.

By David Sedaris

February 23, 2026



The fitness center I go to in New York is thirty blocks from my apartment, and I was walking home from it one autumn afternoon when I came upon a woman who was attempting to carry a cabinet. It was waist-high and maybe five feet long—a metal frame with eight canvas drawers. I watched as she lifted it, took a few steps, and then set it back down with an expression that read as both *How badly do I really need this?* and *Why can't we temporarily shrink things when getting them from place to place?*

The woman had silver hair that was cut short. She was lean and had no makeup on.

“Hello,” I said. “Can I help you with that?”

I guessed correctly that she'd found this cabinet on the curb, just as I had found my current desk chair and countless pieces of furniture in the past. I'd got my kitchen table in Chicago the same way. When I moved to London, my first table was used as well, but that one wasn't found on the street. Rather, it came from an Indian restaurant I'd gone to with a friend who was visiting from Arizona.

"Anything else?" our waiter had asked at the end of the meal.

"Yes," I'd said. "Can I have this table? It's the perfect size for my kitchen."

The man asked if we could wait for a moment. Then he made a phone call and returned saying he could let it go for twenty pounds.

"Sold!" I said. "Now, what about our napkins and the metal bowl my saag paneer was served in?"

With my friend's help, the table, the napkins, and the bowl weren't difficult to get home. Unlike the cabinet. The thing wasn't heavy so much as cumbersome. I thought it might be easier for me to carry on my own, but the woman wouldn't hear of it. "You're too old," she said. "I can't let you hurt yourself on account of me."

You want to talk old? I thought, looking at her age-spotted hands and at the slight wattle beneath her chin. *You've got to have a good . . . eight months on me.*

It was her find, though, so we did it her way—me on one side and her on the other, the two of us facing each other and separated by a distance of eighteen inches, the bottom of the cabinet bashing our shins with every step. "Can we just stop and . . . rest for a minute?" she panted in the middle and at the end of every block. I was in a hurry to get home because I had a show that night. I needed to take a bath and iron my clothes. I also needed to figure out my program—what I would read and in what order.

"Are you coming from work?" I asked the woman, suspecting that she was retired but wanting to hear it from her own mouth.

“Oh, I stopped all that a few years ago,” she said. “I’m on my way home from [pickleball](#). Do you play?”

I’d heard of this game, but I tend to tune out when the topic turns to sports. Thus, I had no idea what it actually was. Tennis with pickles would have been my first guess, but if that were the case I’d likely have smelled vinegar on the woman’s clothing.

“It’s a great way to meet people,” she continued. “I had colleagues at my job, but they weren’t exactly friends, if you know what I mean.”

She told me that she was born in San Juan but moved to New York as a child.

“This city is nothing like it used to be,” she said, frowning at a high-rise apartment building that had recently gone up. “My neighbors now, they’ll see someone bleeding on the street and walk right by. That would never happen back where I’m from. In Puerto Rico, if someone’s hungry, you feed them—end of story.”

I thought of all the people who’d passed this woman as she’d tried to carry the cabinet by herself. Some, undoubtedly, were elderly or had children with them, but what of the others? I know my brother Paul would have stopped to help, and my friend Mark. *But would Amy?* I wondered. *Would Hugh?*

“New York is just for the rich now,” the woman complained. “They run the show. It’s all about them.”

I wanted to ask what she meant by “rich” because, of course, it’s subjective. Would I have qualified, or was she talking about people with billions? In the paper earlier that week, I’d learned that [Elon Musk](#) was on track to become the world’s first trillionaire. I think that if you have that much money you should at least be forced to sit down and count it all. From what I read online a few hours later, dressed for my show and riding the elevator from my apartment to my building’s lobby, if Musk recited a number every second, it would take him more than thirty-one thousand years to reach a trillion. A regular lifetime wouldn’t put a dent in a figure like his. One of his children would have to take over when he died, followed by one of their children, and

on for a thousand generations. By that time, a trillion might get you a chicken wing and a bucket of house paint. A nonillionaire is what you'll want to be in the future. That's one followed by thirty zeros. I looked up how long it would take to count that high and was presented with a math equation.

Counting *my* money, by contrast, would take around five hundred days. After a week, would I say, "That's enough! I'll forfeit the rest. My freedom is more important than sitting in this chair," or would I picture something I really wanted to buy—a gorilla on five acres of land, maybe—and keep going? At what point, if any, would I decide that I had enough?

This question was on my mind as I waved good night to my doorman and started walking downtown, in the direction of my first New York apartment, which was in the West Village. It wasn't mine, technically—rather, I was the roommate of a guy named Rusty, who'd had the lease for thirteen years. We both smoked a lot, but he liked to keep the windows shut, which left the place smelling sad and stale. When the outside temperature dipped below seventy, he'd turn up the heat as high as it would go, the way they do in nursing homes and in tanks where bearded dragons live. My half of the stabilized rent was three hundred and fifty dollars, an astronomical sum to me in 1990. The first time I was late giving Rusty his money, he said firmly but not unkindly, "This can never happen again. Do you understand?"

Back then, it would have taken me all of two minutes to count my money. That's normal for a seven-year-old, but I was thirty-four, and, by most measures, a failure. No job, no prospects. A single pair of shoes. I'd go to the A.T.M. and curse it for not dispensing singles. A broken pay phone near my apartment spat six dollars in change at me one afternoon, and, scooping it up with both hands, I tasted what it felt like to be rich. In those days, I could either buy a newspaper or a cup of coffee, so I would dig the *Times* or the *Village Voice* out of a trash can and go to Chock Full o' Nuts to read the help-wanted ads.

Looking at the available positions, I'd kick myself for never developing a skill. Yes, I was writing every day, but only with one finger, and it was hardly the sort of writing that would have landed me any of the jobs I saw advertised—the one, for instance, at Little Golden Books. They were

looking for someone to produce a short educational manuscript about outer space, and were willing to pay five thousand dollars—a fortune. After reading the ad, I got a library card and started doing research. Little Golden Books were for children, and that, I thought, would make it easier. “Can you imagine life without gravity?” I wrote on my first page. “WHOOPEE!” This was followed sometime later by “How does a weightless astronaut use the toilet? Let’s find out!”

I wrote about Miss Baker, a squirrel monkey who was one of the first two American animals to launch into space and return safely. Her fellow-passenger, also a monkey, but a rhesus, named Miss Able, died four days after their rocket was recovered, in the Atlantic Ocean. Miss Baker, though, lived to be twenty-seven and died of kidney failure. “Why were the first two astronaut monkeys unmarried?” I wrote. “Do you think husbands would have distracted them from the duties at hand?” It was, I thought, something a kid might wonder about.

When my sample chapters were rejected, I was devastated. All that work, all that research, for nothing. To make it worse, in my head I’d already spent the five thousand dollars. First, I figured I’d find an apartment of my own. They were hard to come by, so maybe Rusty could die in a quick, painless way and the landlord would decide that since I had already settled in he could just turn the lease over to me. I’d get a nice desk, a bed rather than a futon. I would paint the nicotine-stained walls and then buy a second pair of shoes.

The day I learned I would not be writing “The Little Golden Book of Space,” I was forced to consider what I had been pushing out of my mind since arriving in New York. It was the worst thing imaginable: moving back to Chicago. I’d had a nice life there and lots of good friends. I could get my old job back just by asking, but I’d seen what that looked like—the person who returns with his tail between his legs, the one overheard at parties saying, “The thing is that New York is completely overrated. I was paying a fortune for a shoebox there, a prison cell, while here I’ve got five rooms and can practically see Lake Michigan from my roof.”

That was evading the point, though. Unlike Chicago or Raleigh or any of the other cities I’d spent time in, New York was about everyone who’d ever

lived there, or at least everyone in the arts, people who'd arrived just as I had, audaciously and with nothing. It was a test, your final exam, but what you needed to pass, on top of any talent you might possess, was luck. It was the sort of thing that might come anyone's way, yet it couldn't be arranged. Nor could it be bought, and that put everyone on the same playing field, the person with a graduate degree from Yale and the one who'd taken five writing classes, one of them at the Y. Luck could be waiting for you at the public library, but it was just as likely at the grocery store or on a traffic island. It wasn't that someone might tap you on the shoulder and say, "I'm with Little, Brown and Company. Do you by any chance have a manuscript we can publish?" But you might see something or hear something you could write about, something that would knock an idea loose or strike a chord. Even being robbed or hit by a car could prove fruitful. So what are you doing reading a magazine in your bedroom, a towel under the door to blot out the sound of your roommate's TV? Get out there where luck can find you!

The Puerto Rican woman and I carried the cabinet downtown for a good six blocks and had just reached her street when a stout man in coveralls walked up to a van that was parked on the corner. "Hey," she called to him before breaking into rapid Spanish. I understood the words "help," "apartment," and "stairs," along with the phrase "I'll pay you."

An exact sum was not proposed, but still the man agreed. When *he* offered to carry the cabinet on his own, the woman didn't argue; rather, she gave him an address in the center of the block. "So what's your name?" she asked me as the guy took some gloves out of his pocket and fitted his plump, paint-spattered hands into them.

"David," I told her.

And she said, "Oh, just like my son."

We waved goodbye then and parted, saying we'd maybe see each other in the neighborhood. As I hurried downtown, a man sitting on the ground outside a liquor store held out an empty cup. "Help the homeless?"

It irritates me when, by "the homeless," people mean themselves.

It should be “Help one of the homeless,” I wanted to tell him. Otherwise it sounds like you’re going to take whatever you collect and distribute it to other people in need.

The man saw all this playing out on my face and barked, quite unfairly, in my opinion, “I hope you burn in Hell.”

Which, of course, is another reason to live in New York—every day delivers a kick, and always in a different spot. There are times when being condemned to Hell really gets under my skin. *Am I a terrible person?* I’ll ask myself. *Am I crueler than most? Am I thoughtless?* If I’m cursed by a mentally ill person, I’ll really dig in and claw at myself. I’ve always seen them as prophets, and hold my breath as I pass, afraid of the truth they might reveal. Early in my time in New York, not long after the Little Golden Book episode, a woman dressed in rags in the Staten Island Ferry terminal looked me in the eye and told me I was going to die before I reached fifty. Thousands of people moving about like ants, yet I was the one she singled out. Her voice was clear and authoritative, like an oracle’s. Our brief encounter really lit a fire under me. *I’ve got only sixteen years to make a splash,* I thought, knowing that time would pass a lot faster than I’d want it to. When I didn’t die at age fifty—when I woke up in Paris, as alive as I’d been the day before—I was shocked but also greatly relieved, for my life was good by then, and I didn’t want it taken away from me.

This time, though, I walked on by. *Burn in Hell, indeed,* I thought. First off, the guy on the sidewalk outside the liquor store was a drunk, not an oracle. Second, I had just helped a stranger carry a cabinet down York Avenue for what felt to me, and probably to her, too, like an eternity. And a person gets points for things like that. ♦

Letter from Poland

The Migrants in the Ancient Forest

Five years ago, Belarus began enabling people from high-conflict countries to attempt the crossing into Europe. Despite high walls and backlash, they're still coming.

By Elizabeth Flock

February 23, 2026



Last August, Ahmed found himself in Belarus, at the Polish border, watching a smuggler lean a ladder against a very high wall as members of the Belarusian border guard looked on. Ahmed, a nineteen-year-old Somali, is tall and lanky, with close-cropped curly dark hair. At home, in Mogadishu, he liked to watch Manchester City football and TikTok videos. One day, members of the terror group Al Shabab came to his house to recruit his father in their fight to overthrow the government. When his father refused, they killed him. Soon, they came for Ahmed, too. His uncle had heard about a new route to immigrate to Europe; a travel agency in Mogadishu was advertising tickets. Ahmed's family bought him a three-thousand-dollar package that included flights to Russia on a tourist visa and a taxi to neighboring Belarus, where a smuggler would help him cross to Poland.

Now the smuggler, an Afghan man, urged Ahmed to climb the wall and jump.

This story was supported by the International Women's Media Foundation's Kari Howard Fund for Narrative Journalism and by the Pulitzer Center.

The wall was eighteen feet tall, made of steel, topped with concertina wire, and equipped with cameras and sensors. Built by Poland in 2022, it cuts through the heart of the Białowieża Forest, a UNESCO World Heritage site that is Europe's last great lowland primeval forest, largely untouched by humans. The forest, which straddles Poland and Belarus, is famed for its old-growth trees and its rich biodiversity: it is home to thousands of plant and animal species, from endangered fungi and lichen to lynx, wolves, and the largest free-roaming herd of European bison. In the past four and a half years, Białowieża and neighboring forests have also become a route for thousands of migrants, primarily from the Middle East and Africa, seeking to enter Europe. Ahmed (his name, like those of the other migrants in this story, has been changed for his safety) climbed the ladder and jumped into Poland. He fell on his arm and his shoulder, fracturing bones. Then it was time to run.

Ahmed told me that in the next two days he traversed some twenty miles of Polish woodland with other Somali teen-agers. They were trying to reach the edge of the forest, where a smuggler's van would meet them. They encountered shaggy elk and snuffling wild boars, which ran at the sight of them. Taking cover behind towering oaks, alders, and ash trees, the teen-agers hid from border guards and from local villagers, some of whom turn migrants in to the authorities.

Exhausted and in pain, Ahmed often wanted to give himself up. Six months earlier, he could have tried to claim asylum instead of crossing illegally. But, in March, Poland had suspended that right for most people. Now, if he were caught, he would likely be sent back to Belarus or be deported to Somalia, where, he was certain, he'd be killed by Al Shabab.

On the second night, the Somalis reached the meeting point with the smuggler, a twenty-one-year-old Romanian man. He drove them northwest, toward Białystok, the closest city. According to a police report, sometime

after 9 p.m. the smuggler tried to circumvent a police roadblock near Białystok and veered into a ditch. Photographs taken by the police show the van on its side and a group of young Somali men, including Ahmed, handcuffed and lying face down in the grass.

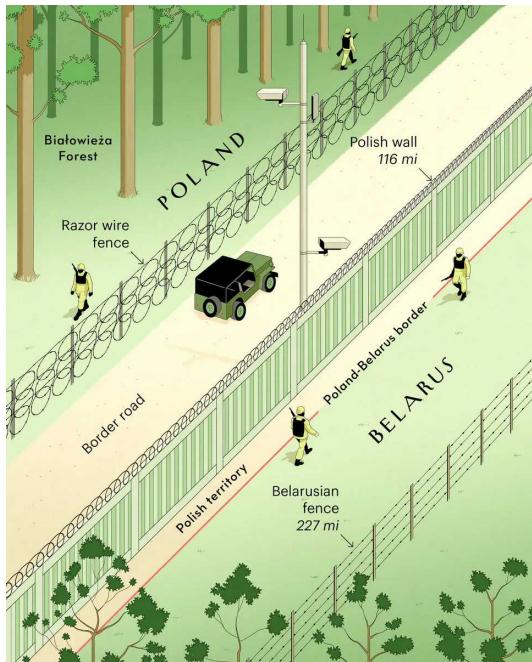
It was in the summer of 2021 that people from Somalia, Iraq, Syria, and other countries with ongoing conflicts began showing up in the Polish woods. Many had children with them. They entered at the Belarusian border, through perhaps the world's most politically engineered migration route. Months earlier, Aleksandr Lukashenko, the Belarusian President, had diverted a plane carrying a journalist, triggering sanctions against him by the European Union. In response, Lukashenko announced, "We stopped drugs and migrants. Now you will have to eat them and catch them yourselves."

The Belarusian regime began advertising to people in high-conflict countries the promise of easy entry into the E.U. On social media, state-run Belarusian tour agencies promoted enticing travel packages. One post offered pickup at the airport and a week in a hotel, promising that "you will feel safe." Belarus also loosened its visa rules, lowered application fees for tourist visas for "hunting" or "spa" visits, and added flights on the state airline to Minsk, the capital. Migrants quickly appeared at Belarus's borders with Latvia and Lithuania, and, in the greatest numbers, with Poland. When Poland constructed a barbed-wire fence at the border, Belarusian guards reportedly gave migrants wire cutters.



In August, 2021, thirty-two Afghans who had fled their country just before the Taliban took over arrived at the border, hoping to claim asylum. Poland refused to process them. So the Afghans, stranded, sat in a muddy no man's land, flanked by armed border guards on both sides. Technically, they were already in Poland, in a tiny village called Usnarz Górnny. There was no fence there, so locals and journalists could interact with the refugees. Images of an Afghan woman camped out with a gray cat went viral. The European Court of Human Rights soon ordered Poland to give the migrants assistance and temporary shelter.

Within weeks, Poland announced a state of emergency and closed areas near the border to medics, humanitarian workers, and reporters, among others. The Polish journalist Aga Suszko, who helped with the reporting for this piece, recalled, "I'm in a democratic country, covering something happening before my eyes that's very significant, and suddenly: 'You cannot see it, so you cannot report on it, because you cannot see it.' "



The weather in the forest cooled, and rain set in. The Afghans were sleeping on the ground. That September, Poland's interior minister held a press conference, aired on national TV, in which he displayed a photo, purportedly of a man having sex with a cow, and claimed that it had been discovered on a device confiscated from a migrant.

In October, migrants attempted more than ten thousand crossings (the Polish border guard counts crossings, not people), and Poland passed a law effectively legalizing “pushbacks.” In a pushback, authorities force migrants back across the border immediately after they arrive, often violently, without considering asylum claims or other needs. (The guards often send them through access gates.) The law appeared to violate E.U. and international law’s principle of non-refoulement, which forbids returning people to places where they face threats to their life or freedom. The Afghans would clearly be in danger if sent home. Even if they were returned only to Belarus, they would be at risk: border guards there regularly beat migrants who failed to complete the journey to Poland. Yet Poland pushed back the thirty-two Afghans, including a fifteen-year-old girl, arguing that they had remained outside Polish jurisdiction the whole time, so non-refoulement didn’t apply.

The next month, hundreds of desperate and marooned migrants, freezing in makeshift encampments on the Belarusian side of the border, tried to break

through the barbed-wire fence to Poland. Polish border guards responded with tear gas and water cannons. “I had my life before 2021 and my life after,” Suszko, the journalist, told me. She’d grown up hearing the story of how, in the nineteen-eighties, the Solidarity movement had heroically overthrown the oppressive Communist regime, transforming the country into a democracy that generally respected human rights and the rule of law. “It was the death of Poland as I knew it,” she said.

Since 2021, Poland has built the permanent border wall that Ahmed crossed; razor-wire fences stand on both sides of it. Thousands of security officers are now stationed there, along with cameras, thermal and motion sensors, night-vision devices, and other surveillance tools.

These days, most migrants don’t make it to Poland on their first try. Often, they are pushed back to Belarus, where they get stuck in forest encampments along the border or in Minsk, in a kind of dangerous purgatory. Others die on the journey or disappear, leaving behind only traces—a water bottle, a shoe.

Still, the so-called Green Border remains a safer route to Europe than crossing the Mediterranean. With the help of smugglers, many migrants eventually make it to Poland or farther into Europe. Among those who do, nearly half arrive with physical trauma, and the majority are in psychological distress, according to a recent brief by Doctors Without Borders. The group attributes these injuries to the militarization of the border, including a rise in violence by guards. Many pushbacks are performed by masked officers who use pepper spray, strip searches, and beatings to force migrants back, though the Polish border guard maintains that they do not use physical violence, and that measures such as pepper spray are used only in retaliation against attacks from migrants.

Suszko looks back on her initial disbelief about the treatment of the Afghans at Usnarz Górnny as naïve. “Because it has only changed for the worse,” she said. “And we let it happen.”

In fairy tales, the forest represents both refuge and danger—a site of respite or a place where you might be devoured whole. During the Holocaust, many Jews hid in the Białowieża Forest, constructing shelters from natural

materials or hunkering down in swamps. As Rebecca Frankel writes in “Into the Forest,” an account of the Rabinowitz family, who survived for two years in Białowieża, “It was unthinkable that anyone would choose to hide here—madness even to try,” in part because of the treacherous wetlands.

In recent years, according to a Polish humanitarian collective called We Are Monitoring, more than a hundred people have died crossing from Belarus to Poland, mostly owing to hypothermia or exhaustion. The true number is likely higher, since the government is not closely tracking the situation; nonprofit groups have tried to fill the void. We Are Monitoring said that at least twenty bodies have been pulled from rivers in the forests, which migrants often try to wade through because the border wall does not extend into the water. On a list of deaths maintained by the collective, the first entry is a man from Iraq who drowned while trying to cross, leaving behind a two-year-old daughter. In July, 2025, several guards noticed a body floating in the Bug River, along the border; when they approached it, they found a second body. Many people who died had been pushed back by border guards. Some bodies are too far decomposed to be identified.



Grupa Granica (Border Group), a Polish humanitarian-aid coalition, found a pregnant Kurdish woman named Avin Irfan Zahir unconscious after she'd spent days wandering through the woods with her husband and five children.

She had advanced hypothermia, and when she was taken to a hospital she was diagnosed with acidosis. Zahir had a miscarriage, and then died. Her body was sent to Iraq for burial, and a Muslim group in Poland buried her baby.

Since the wall was built, fewer women and children have been crossing the border, but some still make the journey. A woman I'll call Amara told me that she fled Cameroon to escape her husband. He was so violent that a therapist had advised her not to relate the details, to avoid being retraumatized. We were talking by phone, and her voice was slow and heavy. Later, she sent me a document that she'd written on arrival in Poland, summarizing what she had endured. She couldn't bear to reread it. The account described months of rape by her husband, who beat her when she fought back. He said that if she left him he'd track her down and have her killed.

Amara said that she was able to get a visa to study Russian at a university in Moscow, out of her husband's reach. But in Moscow she discovered that she was pregnant, and the university kicked her out. Her visa was revoked, so she went to neighboring Belarus. There, a new friend suggested that they try the route to Europe together and paid four thousand dollars to a smuggler for their passage.

The journey, in 2024, went poorly from the start, according to Amara. It was May, but the forest was bitterly cold. She was seven months pregnant. A group of migrants stole her food, and she became exhausted. She realized that she would be unable to scale the first razor-wire fence. She saw tracks on the ground where other migrants had crawled along it. "So, I worked out, that was what we had to do"—crawl until they found an opening to go under.



Amara and her friend ended up in the no man's land between the first razor-wire fence and the wall—an area that some migrants refer to as "the jungle" or "the death zone." Independent monitors are not allowed to access it; when people die there, according to a humanitarian worker, other migrants dig their graves. Amara encountered people from around the world in the death zone, all stranded in front of the biggest wall that she'd ever seen.

A day later, still stuck there, Amara started to feel ill. She had consumed only an energy drink and some river water, and was experiencing severe gastrointestinal issues. Her friend began yelling to the Polish border guard. She pulled up Amara's shirt to show her swollen belly, and the officers allowed her through.

I met Amara in September, in Białystok, where she had applied for asylum. She was living in a camp for migrants—a drab building across a highway from a chemical plant—with her son, who was now a year old. Visitors weren't allowed, but she could come and go while she awaited a decision on her case. In July, anti-migrant demonstrations organized by the far right had been held across Poland, with chants like "Stop the migrant invasion!" and "All of Poland, only white!" Amara said that she and her son had stopped going out; at home in Cameroon, protests were typically followed by violence. Still, Amara considered herself lucky—many people at the camp

had worse stories. Around the time Amara crossed, an Eritrean woman had given birth alone in the forest.

When Amara and I went out for a meal, she wore a curly black wig and blue press-on nails, and said that she was working hard to become the person she'd lost during her marriage. Someone joyful. She was learning Polish, had found a job cleaning houses, and kept herself busy with her son, who took his first steps inside the camp.

In September, Russia sent some twenty drones into Poland's airspace, an incursion that Poland's Prime Minister described as the closest the country had come to open conflict since the Second World War. Since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022, Poland has been on high alert, fearing that it will be the next target. Three days after the drone incident, Russia hosted the Zapad (West) military exercises in Belarus, amassing thousands of troops at the Polish border for defense simulations.

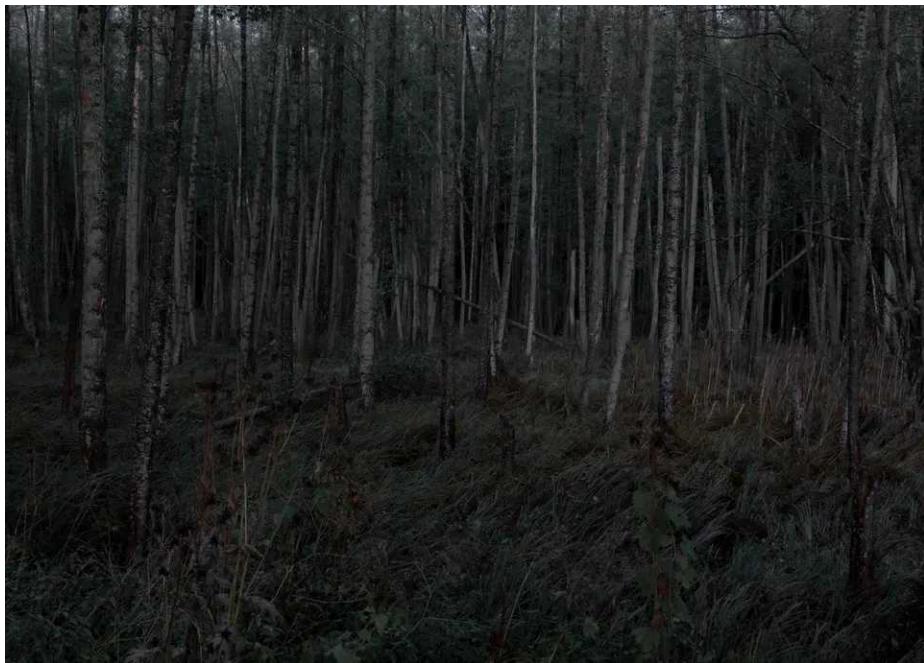
The migrant crisis in the forest and Russia's war in Ukraine are intimately linked, according to Franak Viačorka, a politician in the Belarusian opposition, who spoke to me from exile in Vilnius. He is one of many people who believe that Russia, in collaboration with Belarus, has orchestrated the migrant crisis from the beginning. The situation, he said, is "very advantageous to Russia, because, instead of supporting Ukraine, the European Union spends money on border protection." The Polish border wall alone cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Plus, he said, the crisis has helped Russia discredit the E.U., making it look inhumane to those fleeing violence and "creating anti-migrant moods in the society." Poland, which is overwhelmingly white, has long been averse to non-Western migration.



After the war in Ukraine began, the Polish government welcomed millions of Ukrainian refugees, offering them food, shelter, and temporary permission to remain. Poles could identify with these refugees, with whom they shared not only history and culture but also a common enemy. Today, more than 1.5 million Ukrainians live in Poland. But the country has continued to turn away the thousands of desperate people of color arriving at its Belarusian border, referring to them as “living weapons” in a “hybrid war,” sent by Russia and Belarus to destabilize the country. Some Poles also believe that migrants who come for economic reasons are gaming the asylum system to get to Europe. Even support for Ukrainian refugees has started to wane. A recent survey by the Polish research firm Opinia24 showed that three-quarters of Poles oppose accepting migrants into the country, regardless of their background. (The majority of Europeans are now worried about uncontrolled migration.)

Fundacja Dialog (Dialogue Foundation), a nonprofit in Białystok, helps both Ukrainians and people who entered from Belarus. Białystok, because of its proximity to several borders, has long hosted people from elsewhere; it has also long been the site of racist and antisemitic attacks. I met Ahmed, who was allowed to stay in Poland after his arrest because of his fractured shoulder and arm, in the hallways of Dialog. (When Poland suspended the right to asylum, it made exceptions for the seriously injured, for pregnant

women, and for children, though those guidelines aren't always followed.) Ahmed wore a black T-shirt, flip-flops, and navy-blue gym shorts; his eyes darted around constantly. He had a cast and a sling on his left arm. Ahmed said that it was his job to send money home and to protect his mother and siblings from Al Shabab. "I'm a man," he told me, though he couldn't yet grow a beard. He knew that he'd arrived in Poland at a bad time, with asylum suspended and anti-migrant sentiment climbing. His chances of being able to stay were close to zero.



In Dialog's courtyard, I met two other men who had recently crossed from Belarus and were accepted into Poland because of severe injuries. "From the border, all the broken ones," Dialog's front-desk worker told me. One of the men, an Afghan who said that he had fled the Taliban, sat hunched on a bench as he described how the Belarusian border guards had beaten him so badly that they broke his back. (The Belarusian border guard said that coverage of the migrant crisis is "often biased.") The other man, a young Senegalese footballer, said that he had been held for weeks in a forest camp in Belarus, where he had been beaten daily. Many migrants are held on the Belarusian side as they wait for an opportunity to cross, such as when the wall is breached or a patrol is distracted. "When he tired, he brings a dog," he said of a border guard, laughing at the sheer absurdity of his situation. He

kept rubbing his jaw, which he said was broken, and on his arms and legs he had scars that he attributed to dog bites.

All three men had arrived after Poland suspended the right to asylum, joining Finland, which had first done so in July, 2024. Greece soon followed, and other European countries are considering doing the same. Even the European Commission, the E.U.'s independent executive branch, has voiced support for the move. Henna Virkkunen, the European Commission's executive vice-president, has argued that "exceptional measures" like suspending asylum are needed, at least temporarily, to respond to the "weaponization" of migration by hostile states.

Kevin Allen, the head of the United Nations Refugee Agency in Poland, who works closely with the Polish government and the E.U., argues that suspending asylum is not the solution. Allen, who is American, served in both the Peace Corps and the Marines before joining the U.N. He told me that he has been advocating for the Polish government to establish better border-screening procedures, to identify which individuals merit asylum and which should be humanely returned to their countries of origin. Meanwhile, Allen's agency is encouraging Poland to streamline the application process for economic migrants; this could ease the pressure on the asylum system and discourage smugglers. Poland is on the verge of becoming one of the world's twenty largest economies, and, Allen said, thousands of additional workers are needed, given the country's aging population. At Dialog, Ahmed told me that he wanted to work as a driver; trucking is one of the industries affected by the labor shortage.

Yet public dissatisfaction over migration and political pressure from far-right gains throughout Europe make Allen's proposals a hard sell. In December, the E.U. approved new measures that will, among other things, fast-track deportations and create "removal hubs"—offshore detention facilities—for migrants.

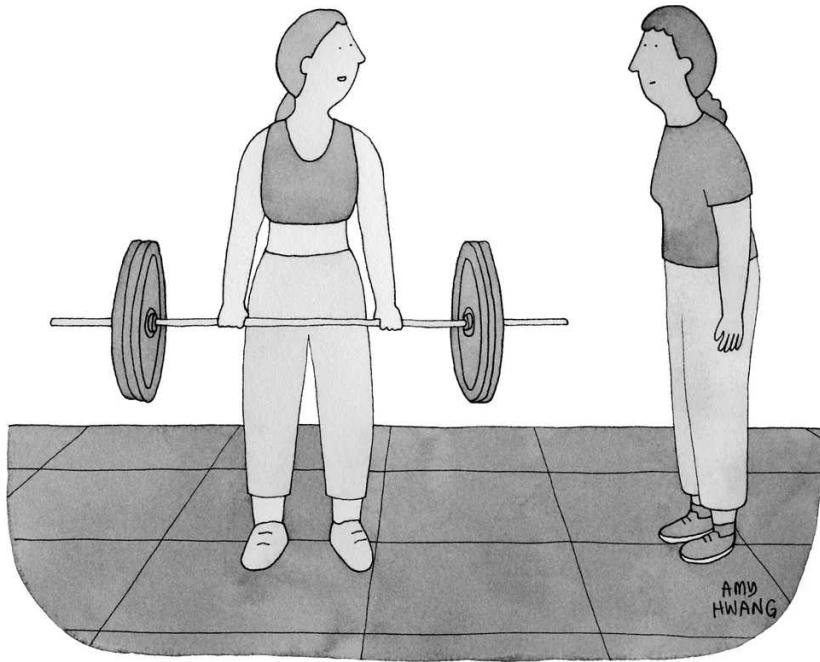
In the village of Białowieża, in the heart of the ancient forest, a pair of souvenir stalls sell magnets, handcrafted wooden spoons and cutting boards, and bison and elk stuffed animals. Tourists and researchers come from across Poland and around the world to see the forest; it's the reason I started visiting Białowieża, two years ago. On my most recent trip, the stalls'

shopkeepers—a new mother and an older woman sitting under an umbrella in the beating sun—were happy to discuss the migrant problem. They spoke primarily about crime, rehashing stories pushed by far-right politicians which framed migrants as violent rapists incapable of assimilating to Polish society. The new mom, herself a migrant from Belarus, said that she feared for the safety of her baby boy and for her friends' daughters.

The conversation turned to an incident, from 2024, in which a Polish soldier was stabbed to death through the border fence. Polish authorities said that the perpetrator was from the Middle East but never revealed his identity. At the height of the migrant crisis, the women said, the plaza had been used for an Army kitchen. They acknowledged that they had never seen any violence in Białowieża by migrants, though thousands of them had passed through.

As we spoke, another local, Jaroslaw Bajko, who was wiry and bald, rode up on a yellow bicycle. He said he was disturbed by the litter that migrants left in the forest. Humanitarian-aid workers, who Bajko alleged were helping migrants “for money,” often found discarded water bottles, food cans, clothing, and more. Far-right citizen patrols briefly sprang up at the border in 2024, and I asked if he’d joined one. (The Polish border guard has made it clear that citizens cannot make arrests.) Bajko hadn’t, but he and a friend had once informed the border guard of a group of Arab people he saw being sheltered in a local house. “Europe is too small to take all of Africa, right?” he said, shaking his head.

Poland had recently held its Presidential election, and Bajko had voted for Grzegorz Braun, a far-right politician who has called the gas chambers of Auschwitz “fake” and launched a campaign against Ukrainian refugees. (Karol Nawrocki, a conservative former boxer and ex-football hooligan, won the election.) Just as in the U.S. and elsewhere in Europe, the politics of migration have forced moderates and progressives to rethink their platforms. Donald Tusk, a center-left former president of the European Council, became the Prime Minister of Poland in 2023; during his campaign, he contemplated anti-migrant proposals that rivalled those of the incumbent right-wing government. Once in office, his government adopted a strategy called “Take Back Control. Ensure Security,” which led to a marked increase in deportations.



The strategy has not succeeded in defanging the right wing, whose politicians regularly share inflammatory videos on social media of migrants beside burning cars or smashed windows; one showed a Black man licking a knife. In July, 2024, a leader of the far-right political coalition Confederation posted a photo on X of a group of men in the forest, soaking wet and covered in dirt, eyes cast down as they made bunny ears with their fingers above their heads, at the order of the guards. He captioned it “New rabbits.” Hamid, an Afghan migrant I met in Warsaw, saw the post. “I suddenly recognized the people and the photo, and knew myself,” he told me. “I said, ‘Oh, this is me, this is me and my friends . . . posing like animals.’” While crossing the border, Hamid had run out of food and water and collapsed, but the worst part of the ordeal, he said, was how the border guards had treated him.

I met a unit of the border guard in the town of Kryni, where Ewelina Lewkowicz, a press officer, agreed to take me out on patrol. As we drove in a Land Cruiser toward the wall, on roads slick with mud, Lewkowicz brushed off the bunny-ears incident, saying there was no confirmation that the picture had been taken by Polish border guards. Around us, things seemed peaceful. We passed stands of birch trees swaying in the wind. A three-toed woodpecker called out; a herd of bison ambled by. But Lewkowicz told me that the border guard had blocked five thousand

crossings in August. Finally, we came within sight of the massive wall. An excavator was levelling the ground to build more fortifications. A message popped up on my phone: “Welcome to Belarus.”

At the wall, we met two men and a woman who had just joined the border patrol. Each was equipped with a 9-millimetre Glock handgun, a bulletproof vest, handcuffs, and pepper spray. Patrols had been made easier by a new surveillance system that used thermal imaging and night vision to detect people on the move. Lewkowicz claimed that they were now stopping ninety-six per cent of migrants. The guards were jokey and unapologetic. Defending their homeland and the E.U.’s eastern flank against people illegally trying to enter was not morally ambiguous to them.

Lewkowicz insisted that border guards always considered the “human factor”: any migrant who was hurt, she said, got medical aid. (I had read many migrant testimonies that suggested otherwise.) When I asked her about the humanitarian-aid groups that assisted people with their journeys, Lewkowicz said that there was a “thin line between helping someone in need and aiding in an illegal crossing”—that is, human trafficking.

A humanitarian organization called P.O.P.H. (Podlaskie Volunteer Humanitarian Emergency Service), found Hamid lying motionless near some abandoned train tracks after he crossed the border a second time. He was alive but in shock, too dehydrated and exhausted to continue. “Angels in the forest,” Hamid called the volunteers.

Since 2021, one volunteer group has received more than twenty-six thousand requests for help. Migrants use their phones to drop pins with their locations so that they can be found in the dense forest. Aid workers bring them food, water, phone chargers, sleeping bags, and, sometimes, medical help, all of which are legal to provide. If they house or transport anyone, however, they risk being charged with assisting in an illegal border crossing.

During my visit, Ewa Moroz-Keczyńska, who was born nearby, in Hajnówka, and works as an anthropologist in the education department of the Białowieża National Park, was on trial, with four other people, for giving assistance to illegal migrants. In March, 2022, she had provided food, water, and clothing to a Kurdish couple, their seven children, and a young Egyptian

man. Then the four others had agreed to transport the group to the nearest town. They were pulled over by border agents, who testified that after they stopped the vehicle they saw movement in the back, where they found migrants hidden under blankets. The volunteers faced up to five years in prison.

“Everybody that I meet is asking me, how am I feeling? How the fuck am I supposed to feel?” Moroz-Keczyńska told me, when we met. “The incident that we’re talking about took place sometime in 2022. It was one of hundreds of interventions that I participated in. And now it’s 2025.” Even if a decision in the case was delivered soon, it would likely be appealed. “I live in this awful iteration of a state that’s persecuting its own citizens,” she said.

Aleksandra Chrzanowska works for the Association for Legal Intervention, a member of Grupa Granica. In September, she agreed to take me along on an “intervention” like the ones Moroz-Keczyńska participated in. Chrzanowska had previously worked with asylum seekers in Warsaw. Now she was more often in the forest than in the city, and migrants sometimes stayed in her Warsaw apartment.



“The forest is a kind of an ally,” she told me. “If you go out of the forest, out to the village or a field, you can be quite easily found, whether you’re a

person on the move or a support. When you are deep in the forest, you're safe."

One morning, Chrzanowska messaged me that Grupa Granica had received a call from an Afghan man with a wounded hand. I met her and two of her colleagues in a parking lot in Białowieża. Chrzanowska, who was suntanned and tired, sat in the passenger seat, navigating for a young volunteer as we made our way down a narrow forest road. A woman with a gray-and-white braid sat beside me in the back seat. Everyone wore muted shades of green and brown.

After a while, the driver pulled over, and the three of us ran into the forest. The Afghan man had dropped a pin just a hundred yards from the road, so we had to be careful not to be seen.

For the next hour, we searched in widening circles. We found a Belarusian water bottle and a candy wrapper with Arabic writing, but the man was nowhere to be seen. The group's helpline had lost contact with him, and when Chrzanowska called out only a woodpecker replied.

The two women sat down and rolled cigarettes. The forest floor was soft, blanketed with moss, pine needles, and clover. Little white mushrooms and sprigs of grayish-green lichen dotted the ground. The women discussed what to do, messaging back and forth with the helpline, until—"Contact," the woman with the braid whispered. The Afghan had dropped a new pin, across the road. When we arrived, we found three circular patches, where bison had recently lain, but no migrant.

After three hours, the women decided to leave a backpack for the man, hoping that he'd find it later. They packed nuts, crackers, chocolate, water, phone chargers, a sleeping bag, clothes, and bandages for his hand.

As we got back to the car, a young man with curly dark hair darted into the woods in front of us. The sight was jarring. Here, in the middle of the Białowieża National Park—a primeval forest, a tourist destination, a place where Polish villagers foraged mushrooms to fry in butter and salt—was a man on the run from the border guard. A local had compared the village of Białowieża to Twin Peaks, because nothing there made sense.

“Please, don’t call police,” the man whispered in English with his hands up as we approached. He was from Afghanistan, but he was not the man who’d called the helpline. His sneakers were falling apart but he was warmly dressed, with a single, ripped glove. He said that he was trying to find his smuggler’s car. “Poland good,” he said, with a thumbs-up, and paused. “Belarus guards bad.” He was twenty-three, wearing glasses that had fogged up. He hadn’t eaten in two days. Chrzanowska gave him what supplies she had left, including a power bank for his phone, and wished him well. He nodded and disappeared into the trees.

No one knows how many migrants are trapped in Belarus. Hope & Humanity Poland estimates that the number is in the thousands. Aid workers say that, ever since the border wall was built, the true crisis has been out of sight.

On WhatsApp, I connected with Desta, a young man who’d fled Ethiopia for Belarus and had been stuck there for nearly a year. He said that he’d left his country after being kidnapped from a bank where he worked and taken to a detention center for Tigray people, who have been the victims of ethnic cleansing in Ethiopia since 2020. Desta eventually escaped, flew to Russia on a tourist visa, then travelled by car to Belarus. He’d attempted to cross into Poland twice. In early 2025, he tried to organize a peaceful march to the border with other East African men, to raise awareness about their need for asylum. A Polish humanitarian worker dissuaded him, saying that a few hundred Black men marching to Poland’s border likely would not go over well. So Desta again tried to cross, with five other people. In August, he said, he crossed somewhere north of Białowieża; like Ahmed, he climbed a ladder and jumped from the border wall, fracturing his foot. An alarm on the wall went off, and Polish border guards quickly surrounded his group.

Desta told me that he asked for medical attention, since he couldn’t walk, but the Polish officers responded by confiscating his phone, power bank, and wallet, and pushing him back into Belarus, through a door in the wall. It is illegal for border guards to take migrants’ belongings, but aid workers say it is a common practice, intended to discourage people from attempting to cross a second time. (Guards also often take people’s shoes, which has resulted in numerous amputations of legs and feet, owing to frostbite.) I asked the border guard if I could see the surveillance footage from the day

Desta crossed, but a representative told me that the guard had recorded dozens of attempts to illegally cross the border that week, including by Ethiopians, and that no one required medical attention or had asked to see a doctor.



While Desta recovered from his injury, he stayed in a cramped apartment in Minsk with seven other migrants, including several women who were trying to cross into Latvia, because the route to Poland had become too difficult. But pushbacks have been effectively legalized in Latvia and Lithuania, and when I reached one of the women on WhatsApp she sent a picture of herself in the forest, red-eyed and wearing a hood, with the message “I’m going to die here.”

Desta said that the Minsk police were going from apartment to apartment, rounding up migrants who had failed to cross and sending some to detention facilities to await deportation; others have been sent to the Russian border and conscripted into the Army, to fight in Ukraine. He told me that an officer had recently come to his door and peered through the peephole; he and the others inside stayed motionless, and eventually the officer left. “I really afraid this time and stress is going up,” he wrote to me, in October. In January, police arrested Desta at his apartment, then left him at the Russian border in the snow. Yet Desta made his way back to Minsk, and Hope &

Humanity helped him secure a temporary order from the United Nations Human Rights Committee which prevents Poland from expelling him.

In October, I messaged Ahmed to see how he was doing at Dialog. He replied, “Hello sister. Am in Germany.” He had become increasingly uneasy about staying in Poland, after more anti-migrant protests, so he had hired a smuggler taxi to drive him to Berlin. There, he said, he submitted an asylum application and was sent to a refugee camp in Bremen, in the northwest. His arm was still healing, and he had learned that he’d also broken his hand. Ahmed remained worried about another Somali teen, who had been sent to a detention center in Poland. “Please, help my friend,” Ahmed wrote. Nearly every migrant I interviewed was concerned about someone who had accompanied them.

Ultimately, the five Polish aid workers were acquitted, but the verdict was recently appealed, and the group faces further legal proceedings. The forcible return of the thirty-two Afghans led to a legal case, filed in 2021 at the European Court of Human Rights by the Association for Legal Intervention. The case alleged that the migrants had faced “collective expulsion, denial of the right to seek asylum, and exposure to real risk of harm in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights.” In 2024, the case was referred to the Grand Chamber, where it awaits a decision. A couple of dozen similar cases are also pending with the court. These decisions could impact how Poland—and the rest of Europe—treats the people arriving at the border.

Despite Europe’s rightward swing on migration, perhaps the “precious institution of asylum,” as the U.N.R.A.’s Kevin Allen called it, can still be preserved. “You can build walls very strong and very high,” he told me. “And people will still get around them.” Late last year, the Polish border guard found tunnels dug under the wall. Many humanitarian workers say that no barrier will keep people from coming. Chrzanowska, of the Association for Legal Intervention, said, “Once open, a migration route does not close.” Desta said he had no choice but to keep trying. “My home, there is active war,” he wrote to me. In February, he crossed into Poland, with only his phone, two T-shirts, and a pair of pants. “I really miss the day to speak loud my problems,” he added. “To walk freely across any place.” ♦

A Reporter at Large

The Trial of Gisèle Pelicot's Rapists United France and Fractured Her Family

After fifty-one men were convicted, Pelicot became a feminist hero. But additional accusations left her children struggling to accept her new role.

By Rachel Aviv

February 15, 2026



Gisèle Pelicot was sitting by a tennis court in October, 2020, watching her granddaughter hit forehands, when she saw that she'd missed a call. When she called back, a police officer named Laurent Perret asked if she was aware that a few weeks earlier her husband, Dominique, had been questioned by the police. A security worker at a supermarket had caught him filming under three women's skirts with his cellphone. Gisèle, feeling a small sense of victory, explained to Perret that she already knew. She had told Dominique, "What you did was ridiculous," and urged him to see a therapist and apologize to the women. "I forgave him, because I know it's

not like him,” she later told Perret. “I told him that we had to face this situation together.”

The Pelicots lived in a one-story yellow house with pale-blue shutters and a swimming pool, in Mazan, a village in Provence. They had moved there from Paris, seven years before, when Gisèle retired. A few weeks after Perret’s phone call, they drove to the police station for an appointment with him. Dominique wore dark-green corduroy trousers and a pink polo shirt that Gisèle had picked out the night before. “Don’t worry, it’s only a formality,” she reassured him.

Gisèle, who was sixty-seven, was taken into a private room, where Perret asked her about their marriage. “It was love at first sight,” she responded. She and Dominique had met when they were eighteen. They’d been together for forty-nine years. “He is kind and thoughtful,” she told Perret, according to the interview transcript. “He’s a great guy, we get along well, which is why we’re still together. He’s not perfect, but those are his main qualities.” When Perret asked about her social life, she said that she and Dominique were close with a couple whom they’d known for more than twenty years. “We share the same values: family, grandchildren,” she said.

Perret asked if she and her husband had ever been interested in swinging.

“No, how awful,” she responded. “I need feelings. I’m not an open woman.”

Gisèle sensed Perret’s embarrassment. He told her that he’d found evidence that Dominique had been giving her sleeping pills, mixed into her drinks, so that men could rape her. “Do you think this is plausible?” he asked.

She began crying. “It’s not possible,” she said.

He showed her photographs that he’d found on her husband’s memory cards and computer, which had been confiscated after he was caught at the supermarket. “Do you recognize the female wearing a garter belt, lying on the bed and appearing to be asleep?” he asked.

“Yes, that’s me, it’s my bedroom,” she said. “I never sleep like that.” She was struck by how floppy her cheek was. She told Perret, “I don’t know

where I am anymore.”

He showed her another photo, of a man in her bedroom with graying hair and a tattoo. “Do you recognize this location?” he asked.

“Who is this guy?” she said. “I never wanted to have sex with him.”

When he mentioned a Skype username that her husband had used to communicate with her rapists, she said, “You’re speaking Chinese to me.”

Perret asked if she wanted to press charges. Her husband, he explained, had kept a list of more than fifty people in the past decade who’d raped her while she was unconscious. The thought of pressing charges hadn’t occurred to Gisèle, but she said yes.

An officer drove Gisèle home while Dominique stayed at the police station. “I got caught up in a vicious cycle,” he confessed. “I realized that, with sleeping pills, it was very easy to get what I wanted, which I couldn’t get otherwise, which was normal, because it wasn’t her way of life.” He said that he had ruined his family. He was disgusted with himself. “I had fantasies that gradually came true, and I wanted to take them further,” he said.

When Gisèle got home, she put a load of laundry into the washing machine. Then she asked her closest friend in Mazan to come over. As she waited, she hung Dominique’s boxers and pajamas on a clothesline in her garden. It was good that the sun was out, she thought—his clothes would dry quickly. She did some ironing and vacuumed the bedrooms.

The next morning, her three children—David, Caroline, and Florian—came from Paris to the police station to meet with Perret, who filled them in on his investigation. As Gisèle drove with them back to Mazan, she felt relieved that there was leftover pumpkin soup in the refrigerator that she could serve for dinner. But her children were not interested in sitting down for a meal. Caroline, who was forty-one and a communications manager, said that the house suddenly looked uglier and older, and she no longer liked the smell. She and her brothers started going through her father’s drawers, where they discovered unpaid bills. A few hours later, Perret called Caroline and asked

her to return to the station. He realized that he'd recognized her face. At the station, an officer showed her two photographs of her asleep in bed. In both pictures, she was lying on her side, her underwear exposed. "It should be noted that Mme. Caroline Pelicot is shaking and informs us that she feels very ill," the officer wrote. "Let us suspend the meeting."

When Caroline returned to the house, she later wrote, her mother looked up at her "casually, as if I'd just come back from a pleasant walk." David, the oldest child, who works in marketing, had always credited his father with giving him "a good education, values, a backbone." He told me, "I decided very quickly to erase this man from my memory." He and Florian put Dominique's belongings in trash bags, and drove to the dump. They made ten trips. Caroline destroyed framed photographs and art on the walls, as well as a trunk of family photo albums. "I think my mother resented me for that—for being in that kind of frenzy," Caroline said later. Gisèle remembers telling Caroline, "Don't break everything, please. There are things I'd like to keep." Of all her children, Caroline was the one that Gisèle struggled with the most. "She's one of those highly strung people who love and lose their temper in the same breath," Gisèle writes in her new memoir, "A Hymn to Life." "She seems to have been filled since childhood with a feeling of insecurity that I have never really understood or been able to soothe."

As a child, Caroline considered her father "more motherly than my mother," she said. She described him as a "dad who listened, who came to see me in my room, who sat on the edge of my bed and said, 'But, Caroline, you can't say that—you can't behave like that.' " He helped all three of his children with their homework, played soccer with them, and cooked for the family. After Caroline had her own child, she and her husband, Pierre, spent a few weeks every summer with her parents. In the evenings, they drank cocktails and played Trivial Pursuit and sometimes stayed up until 1 A.M. talking. "I adored this man," Pierre said later. Florian's wife, Aurore, was similarly struck by the family's rapport. "I remember telling my husband that they were U.F.O.s," she said. "I, who came from a complicated family with taboos, arrived in a loving, demonstrative family. For me, it was a bit like the ideal family."

Caroline didn't want to spend the night alone; she asked her mother to sleep in the guest bedroom with her. "Would it have made things easier if I had

snuggled up to my daughter, if we had stayed up all night talking?" Gisèle writes. But she felt an urgent need to be alone, in her own room—"the scene of rape, but still my bed." In the morning, they discussed the two photos of Caroline, who thought she may have also been raped. "Though I understood her suspicions," Gisèle writes, "I couldn't let them become certainties." When she asked Caroline if she was sure that the woman in the pictures was her, Caroline felt that her mother didn't believe her.



The three children decided that their mother could no longer live in the house. After spending three days cleaning it out, they all took a train to Paris; Gisèle was to stay with her children, taking turns at each of their homes. David remembers looking at his mother at the train station and realizing that, "of her former life, all that remained was a suitcase and her dog." Gisèle felt like a twenty-year-old girl. "I understood that they wanted to erase that whole part of their lives," she told me. "But, if the last fifty years of my life were taken away from me, it would be very difficult for me to continue to live."

"You have to know where you come from to know where you're headed," Dominique wrote, nine years before his arrest, in a thirty-page autobiography that he titled "With My Own Troubles." He gave copies to Gisèle and his children. "I think of the day when I'll no longer be here, and

my family will learn about my past, which will undoubtedly help them grow in the love and shared values that I've tried to pass on to them," he wrote.

The autobiography was written in a jolly tone ("Life in Paris for a 'country bumpkin' is no piece of cake, believe me"), with an emphasis on the joys of soccer. But Dominique also described his father as "authoritarian," a "wolf," and a "predator lurking in the shadows," and his mother as "too submissive and unable to leave." He devoted several passages to a "bad arrival" in the family—the adoption of a child named Nicole, who had lived in foster homes. His father "took advantage of the situation to satisfy his needs with what he had at his disposal," Dominique wrote. After Dominique's mother died, his father and Nicole, who was then in her early twenties, began sharing a bedroom: "I understand that a man can have needs, but not in this way." Each time he explored a dark subject, though, he wrapped it up quickly—"But let's move on" or "That's life." The narrative ends when he meets Gisèle: "The rest will be easy for us. We were happy and had many children, as the saying goes." The last words of the memoir are "THANK YOU, LIFE."

Dominique had been an electrician and then a real-estate agent, but he was often out of work and short on money. Gisèle started her career as a secretary at France's main power company and was repeatedly promoted; she was surprised to eventually find herself in an executive position, supporting her family. She cared more about style and culture than Dominique did—when she took him to "Madama Butterfly," he was bored for three hours—but they shared a sense of humor. "There was a lot of irony," Caroline said. "Whatever happened in our family life, we could still laugh about it." They held parties for friends in their basement, which had a disco ball hanging from the ceiling. "I never saw him leer at a woman," Caroline said, of her father. "He never made inappropriate, out-of-line jokes."



When Gisèle and Dominique were having sex, Gisèle writes, he occasionally called her “my bitch.” The erotic cliché struck her as absurd. When he asked her to get a Brazilian wax, she said no. She would have been happy to just rest her head on his chest at night, but he preferred to have sex, and she settled into it, about five times a month. Sometimes she even felt desire. Once, in a department store in Paris, she had to choose between two different pairs of underwear, because she could only afford one. Without her realizing it, Dominique stole the pair she’d left behind, slipping it into his pocket, but a security guard caught him. Gisèle said that the salesperson was touched by the gesture, telling her, “Madame, you mustn’t be cross with your husband.”

One of Gisèle’s closest friends had been a colleague nine years her junior, a single woman named Pascale, who often went on vacation with the Pelicots. Pascale considered Dominique “very helpful, friendly, and fun-loving.” Eventually, she said, he began hitting on her; once, on vacation, when she was alone, crying about a breakup, he embraced her and said, “I’ve been dreaming about this for so long.” At work, Pascale tried to confide in Gisèle, telling her, “You don’t know who you’re living with. You put him on a pedestal.” But Gisèle didn’t ask Pascale what she meant. She couldn’t tolerate the suggestion. She stopped acknowledging Pascale when they passed in the hallway. “I suffered greatly from this breakup,” Pascale said.

Now, after spending several weeks living with Florian, Gisèle called Pascale, with whom she hadn't spoken in two decades, and told her what had happened. Pascale invited her to spend the weekend at her house. They stayed up until five in the morning talking. "We picked up where we left off, as if we had only been apart for a day," Gisèle told me. She wanted to know what Pascale had been trying to tell her years earlier—she thought that it might foretell Dominique's crimes. But all Pascale had was an ordinary story of a "cheating husband playing footsie with his wife's younger friend," as Gisèle put it. Her children felt alienated when she tried to remind them that they'd had a good childhood, and Gisèle was comforted that, for Pascale, positive memories of the Pelicots still felt alive. "To her, we were a model couple," she told me.

Six weeks after Dominique's arrest, Gisèle met with an investigative magistrate, Gwenola Journot, who would be interviewing everyone involved in the case. Gisèle referred to Dominique as "my husband" before stopping herself. "No," she said. "I can't say 'my husband' anymore." She started calling him "the other one" or "he." She was in the process of getting a divorce. "The saddest thing is that I thought we were happy," she said.

Gisèle had no memories of being raped. But, after she and Dominique moved to Mazan, she'd begun having a recurring dream, which now took on new significance. "I was at our gate, on the terrace, and I saw two officers," she told me. "I approached them and asked them what they wanted, and they told me it was about a complaint concerning a woman and Monsieur Pelicot. I didn't understand this dream. So maybe my subconscious was giving me an answer, but I didn't grasp it."

She told Journot, "The puzzle has fallen into place." Once, she explained, Dominique had handed her a beer that seemed to have a green tinge. She thought that he should return it to the store, but instead he immediately poured it down the sink. Another time, shortly after their move, she noticed a bleach-like stain on her new pair of yellow cotton pants. "I thought to myself, This is strange, because I have an excellent memory, and here I was, unable to remember what had happened the night before," she said to Journot. She had asked Dominique, teasingly, "You wouldn't have drugged me by any chance, would you?" He started crying, and she apologized.

Sometimes days would pass, and Gisèle couldn't remember whom she had talked to or what she had done. She had been nine years old when her mother, who had a brain tumor, died. "When I had these periods of absence," she told me, "I thought that I had the same illness as my mother, and that I could also just vanish." Her father, a professional soldier, had remarried, to a cold woman who said things like "Life's a shit sandwich, and you take a little bite of it every day." Gisèle remembered her mother smiling as she died, and Gisèle took care to live that way, too: cheerful even when doomed. Her father never appeared to recover from his grief, and her older brother fell into depression. But Gisèle described herself as a "steadfast tin soldier of joy."

She had seen three neurologists about the memory lapses, with Dominique accompanying her, but they couldn't determine what was wrong. They seemed to view her, Gisèle thought, as just another old lady in decline. "All three told me the same thing," she said to Journot. "'You have an anxious disposition.'" One of Dominique's brothers, Joël, a doctor who had been the mayor of his town, concluded that she was fatigued from all the time she spent taking care of her grandchildren in Paris. She went there any time they had a school vacation. Joël compared her to a vacuum-cleaner bag stuffed to capacity. "They reassured me with the vacuum cleaner," she explained. (Joël declined to comment.)

Caroline chose a lawyer for the family, Caty Richard, who was known for her commitment to victims of sexual violence. She read Gisèle and Caroline transcripts of the interrogations of Dominique and the other rapists. They were being arrested in waves of about ten at a time. Dominique had met many of them on Coco, a French messaging site, in a chat room called Without Her Knowledge. At his instruction, they often parked their cars at a school about three hundred feet from the house. They abstained from smoking or wearing cologne; they warmed their hands on a radiator or in hot water and undressed in the laundry room. They left their clothes on the porch so that they could leave quickly if Gisèle woke up. After the rapes, Dominique washed Gisèle and changed her back into her pajamas. "In this way, he erases the traces of his misdeeds and returns to his original position of idealizing his partner," a court psychiatrist wrote.

Gisèle received the information passively. “Say something!” she remembers Caroline yelling. “Why don’t you say something?” Gisèle writes that Richard advised her, “Pretend you’re suffering. It’ll do her good.” Richard denied using those words, but she did try to help Gisèle and Caroline hear each other, because “they had opposite ways of coping,” she said.

“Keep going, hanging on, putting on a brave face was all I knew how to do, and it was what I wished for my daughter too,” Gisèle recalled. But Caroline found her mother’s approach alienating—a “protection mechanism for her,” she wrote later, “but one I won’t be able to tolerate.”

“In everyone’s eyes, Madame Gisèle Pelicot seemed fulfilled and happy in her marriage,” a psychologist named Marianne Douteau concluded. Another psychologist wrote that Gisèle was “perfectly normal,” though easily influenced. The psychologist cited the fact that, when he handed her a blank sheet of paper and asked her to sign it, she did—an instruction that most people do not follow, he said. But Dominique rejected the suggestion that Gisèle was submissive. He likened her to “a reed—someone who bends but doesn’t break.”

The experts assigned to the case didn’t seem to know what to make of Dominique’s psychology. He “radiated happiness when his family gathered around him,” Douteau wrote. Describing his rigidity and his trouble holding a job, she observed that he “resembles his father in many ways.” But he seemed to resist the thought that he had replicated his parents’ marriage. “During our interview, every anecdote about his father was an opportunity for him to repeat, like a mantra, that he had sworn not to be like his father,” Douteau wrote.

Two psychiatrists reasoned that Dominique’s crimes were possible because he was “splitting.” “This split allows two contradictory personalities to coexist without conflict,” one wrote. “When M. Pelicot operates in one mode, he is unaware of the other.” The second psychiatrist proposed that Gisèle had not sensed Dominique’s other side because “we split with the splitter, so to speak.” We cordon off the parts of our lives that don’t fit the story we believe we are living.

Whether or not a split explained Dominique's crimes, it seemed to carry over into the family, dividing them, too. Each member ended up with a different version of what had been real. "I admit to everything," Dominique had said, shortly after being arrested. "The only thing that shocks me a little —my daughter," he said. "The photos you showed me—the photos mean nothing to me. I never touched my daughter, never."

Caroline thought that one of the photos had been taken at her parents' old apartment outside Paris, before the move to Mazan, but she wasn't sure about the other picture. At first, Dominique told Journot, the magistrate, that he didn't remember taking the photos. His explanation was disjointed. He remarked that his daughter was the "spitting image of her mother," and then said, "She looks very young to me compared to the allegations against me today."

When Journot asked Gisèle what she made of Dominique's denials about Caroline, she responded, "I don't have the answer. I don't have the answer for her."

In another interview, when Journot raised the subject again, Gisèle said, "As a mother, my personal conviction is that my daughter was not drugged or abused. That is my personal conviction. I am convinced of it. I have discussed it with her, but she insists." She added, "When you look at my photos and hers, there's no comparison." Gisèle appeared essentially dead in the photos, completely limp, but she thought that Caroline's arms were drawn together as if she were sleeping in the fetal position. They both recalled basic facts about the pictures differently: Gisèle characterized the photos as almost too dark to see, whereas Caroline described a "bedside lamp lighting the scene."

"Mom and I are becoming distant," Caroline wrote in December, 2020, in a journal that she later published as a memoir, "I'll Never Call Him Dad Again." "It's inconceivable for her that I, too, might have been one of my father's victims." She understood that it was too painful for her mother to contemplate incest, but "I do nonetheless resent the fact that she won't even consider the possibility and take the time to listen to my anger and pain." (Caroline declined an interview with me, saying, "It is really too emotional.")

Dominique was charged with invading Caroline's privacy by disseminating pictures of her to other men, an allegation he did not contest, but Journot did not find enough evidence to indict him for drugging or raping his daughter. Caroline had not had blackouts or memory loss. Gisèle tried to reassure her that the absence of evidence was a good thing. But, Gisèle wrote, "reassuring her now meant betraying her."

The rest of the family also began to sift through the past for overlooked clues. Florian, the youngest, told me that, as a child, "I couldn't figure out why I wasn't very comfortable in my father's presence. I wonder if, deep down, I sensed that other side of him, indirectly." A pianist and a standup comedian, Florian had always felt much closer to his mother. "When I tried to have deep discussions with him about psychology and things like that, he always sidestepped a little," he said. He noticed that his father warded off introspection by using the phrase "Don't cut the shit into four pieces."



Florian's wife, Aurore, told Journot that, years earlier, she had overheard Dominique asking his grandson Nathan, one of David's children, to play doctor with him. "This sentence from my father-in-law struck me, but I didn't dare talk about it," she said. At the time, Aurore was bringing charges of sexual abuse against her own grandfather, a police officer, who was eventually convicted. "I told myself that just because I was going through

this myself didn't mean I had to see evil everywhere," she said. "I thought that my perception might be biased by what I was going through personally."

After Dominique's arrest, Nathan, who was fourteen, began having a recurring nightmare about being sexually assaulted by his grandfather in a car. "For a month, I didn't say anything, but after a while I couldn't take it anymore," he said to me. "I went to see my mother, who told me what Aurore said about the doctor game." His parents took him to a therapist who specialized in applied kinesiology, a kind of bodywork popular in France, and he started to recall fragments of memories of being abused by Dominique. "Everything happened between my body and the therapist," he said. "I was thinking about the questions she was asking me, but I wasn't answering verbally. My body spoke." Having learned that they couldn't trust their impressions of their lives, the family turned to a method that bypassed conscious reasoning.

Recovering repressed memories through therapy is an unreliable way of getting at the truth, but Dominique's crimes had shifted the threshold for belief. In her memoir, Gisèle recalls that, one night at a family dinner, Nathan brought up the recurring nightmare. Gisèle assured Nathan that a dream is not a memory. She didn't think he should dwell on a scene that might not be real. "I wanted him to move forward, to stay afloat," she writes. David abruptly cut off the conversation.

In October, 2021, a friend called Gisèle to warn her that her case had been picked up by *Le Nouveau Détective*, a French tabloid. The cover of the magazine had a yellow banner with the words "*THE WORST CASE EVER REVEALED?*" Gisèle was referred to by a pseudonym. "I had a very strange reaction, because they were talking about me, but I felt like they were talking about someone else," she told Journot. She was horrified to "hear the defense lawyers or certain comments in the press saying that I must have realized something, that I must have been pretending to be asleep. And that's very hurtful. I was lucky that I wasn't alone, that my friends were there all the time, calling me constantly."

Caroline had a vacation house on Île de Ré, an island off the west coast of France. To escape the attention, Gisèle decided to rent the house from

Caroline. She didn't know anyone on the island. By then, she had lived with David for three months and Florian for four months, and the arrangements were becoming increasingly untenable. "Their lives were continuing, while mine no longer was," she told me.

Gisèle put her maiden name, Guillou, on the house's mailbox. It was the first time she had lived on her own. Tourist season had ended, and the island was nearly deserted. Gisèle spent much of her time "walking—walking to get it all out of my system," she said. She covered six miles each day, often with her bulldog, Lancôme.

She found a therapist on the island who specialized in trauma. But, when she told her about being raped by dozens of people, she could sense that the therapist thought that she was lying. Finally, Gisèle told her, "Google 'Mazan,' you'll see." After the therapist saw the headlines, Gisèle assured her that, though it had been painful, everything would be O.K. in the end. She smiled. She could tell that the therapist was confused. "When I came back for a second consultation, she was so intrigued that she asked me to tell her about my childhood," Gisèle told me. "She wanted to understand why I was still standing."

During her walks, Gisèle began meeting other people on the island. She was reluctant to move away from safe conversational territory—the breed and age of their dogs, or where on the island they lived. When people asked about her past, she was evasive. As she became closer to one couple, Angèle and Fred, she used the metaphor that she had been "struck head-on by a high-speed train" to explain how she had ended up on the island alone. It was the same phrase she'd used shortly after Dominique's arrest, when Journot had asked how she felt about her husband. Her new friends didn't ask for details. Of Gisèle's ability to attract other people, Florian said, "She's a bit like the sun."



For Christmas that year, Caroline and her family wanted the house back for a week. Caroline “asked me to make myself scarce,” Gisèle writes. She looked for a hotel or a mobile home or even a campsite, but everything was booked. “I found myself with nowhere to go,” she writes. Angèle and Fred eventually offered her their own house—they were away and said that she could take care of their cat—and Gisèle spent Christmas alone, eating cheese and toast. It’s one of the most devastating passages of the book: she passes over her daughter’s rejection without comment. Her relationship with David had also frayed; he hadn’t spoken to her in six months. When I asked about her solitude that Christmas, though, she recast it as a necessary blow. “I needed it, because, when you feel that sad, you don’t want to expose yourself,” she said. “So that solitude was a bit like my friend. It was a way of being.”

“Gisèle’s doing well,” Dominique’s older sister, Geneviève, wrote him, shortly after Gisèle moved to the island. “You’re lucky, she only wants to hold on to the good memories with you.” The letter was added to the case file, and Caroline, who spent hours reading the records, was struck by the characterization of her mom. “I couldn’t agree less,” she writes in her memoir. “My mother just wants to hang on to whatever remnants of her previous life she can still grasp.”

A year after Gisèle moved to the island, officers discovered that Dominique's DNA matched blood that had been collected after an attempted rape, from 1999, that had never been solved. A twenty-year-old real-estate agent who uses the pseudonym Marion had taken a man to view an apartment on the outskirts of Paris. When she showed him one of the bedrooms, he tied her hands behind her back with a cord and covered her mouth with a cloth soaked in a sedative substance. As he removed her clothes, Marion fought back and ran into a closet; she remained locked inside until the man finally left.

Dominique denied any knowledge of the crime. But, when the police told him that his DNA had been found on Marion's shoe, he asked to pause the interview. "It is indeed me," he said, when the meeting resumed. But he claimed that it was his decision not to rape Marion. "I had a block thinking that it could be my daughter," he said. Marion and Caroline were the same age.

Marion's assault had been linked with a second cold case, from 1991, that the police believed may have been committed by the same person. This one also involved a young real-estate agent showing a man an apartment in Paris. She was raped and strangled to death, and the smell of ether lingered in the apartment. Dominique denied being involved, and this time there was no DNA. The police had mishandled the case, losing evidence. Nevertheless, Dominique was indicted for both crimes.

Gisèle told the officers reinvestigating the cases that she'd never seen unexplained scratches or bruises on her husband. She remembered two evenings, which she believed were in the nineties, when Dominique had come home crying. He told her he'd lost his job, but now she wondered if he was actually upset because he had just assaulted or murdered someone. She'd tried to cheer him up by baking *gratin dauphinois*, a cheesy potato dish.

After being interviewed about the cases, Gisèle called Pascale, to go over her memories again. Gisèle said that she wished Dominique had confided in her about his urges, because she might have helped him or found him a therapist. In her early thirties, she'd had an affair with a colleague, and she wondered if the crimes had stemmed from Dominique's sense of

abandonment. After finding out, he climbed onto train tracks running over a bridge and almost jumped. The colleague had been “a younger version of me,” Dominique later told a psychiatrist. Pascale interrupted Gisèle, to try to make her understand that what had happened exceeded their marriage. “This was no longer the tragic love story of Gisèle and Dominique,” Gisèle writes.

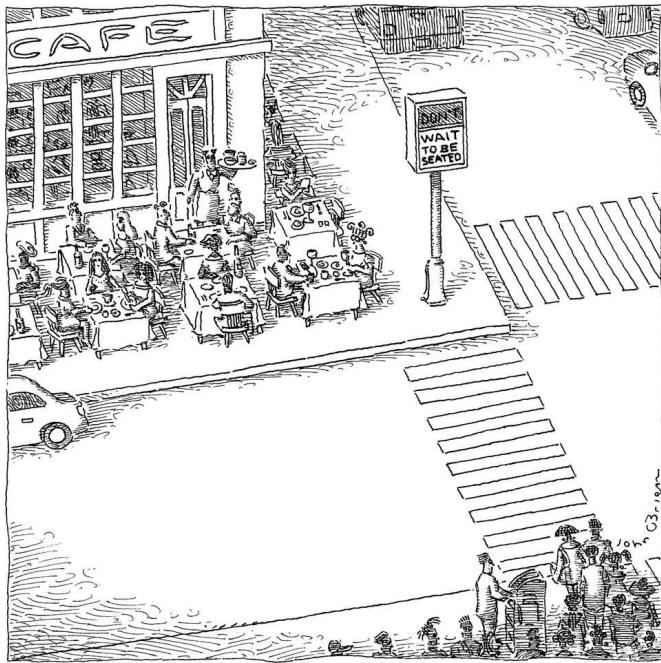
In Dominique’s telling, though, that story still persisted. “I was nothing before her,” he told Journot. “She made me become someone.” His attorney, Béatrice Zavarro, said that the younger rapists who’d come to his home had become a kind of “sublimating entity”—a way to magnify himself as he aged. “History repeats itself,” Dominique wrote Zavarro in a letter. He had not gone to his father’s funeral, and he knew his children would not go to his. He, too, had tried to get rid of every photo of his father. “I have done no better than the one I hated,” he wrote.

A few weeks after learning about the cold cases, Gisèle watched Richard, her lawyer, discuss her case on a cable-television show called “True Crime Tales.” She was distressed by her lawyer’s tone, which she found coarse. By then, she was living in a small house on the island which was lent to her by new friends, who lived in a larger place on the property. Gisèle felt uncomfortable with how Richard enlisted the case in service of “the great battle between women and men,” she writes. Although Caroline had a legal right to the case file, Gisèle was angry at Richard for letting her spend hours with it, looking at images of her mother’s rapes. After the TV appearance, Gisèle told me, “I couldn’t stand it. I told myself I couldn’t go through with it.” She fired Richard, without a backup plan. She considered going to trial without a lawyer.

One of Gisèle’s neighbors connected her with an attorney named Antoine Camus, who typically handled corporate litigation and white-collar crime. “I was supposed to find someone new for her, but after talking to her I proposed myself,” Camus told me. He asked a friend, Stéphane Babonneau, who had experience with sex crimes, to join him; their work would be funded through legal aid. On his first video call with Gisèle, Babonneau was disoriented by her apparent psychological wellness. “It was as if the magnitude of what she had been through did not appear at all,” he said. Trauma often leaves people feeling like spectators to the harms done to them, but for Gisèle, who had been unconscious, her trauma occupied an

even more elusive category of experience. She knew that there were videos of her being raped, but she didn't want to construct new memories by watching them. "It is beyond my strength," she had told Perret.

A few months after hiring the new lawyers, Gisèle went out with friends to a restaurant under a large tent where there was live music and dancing. She was seated next to a man named Jean-Loup, a retired flight attendant for Air France. He had a bulldog, too. Her friends had secretly planned to set them up. "I knew a little bit about Gisèle's story—I had seen a small article in *Le Monde*—but I didn't ask her any questions," Jean-Loup told me. "We talked about everything else. I told her about my life with Bénédicte," his wife, who had died nine months earlier. "I was still mourning."



Their first date was to see the opera "Carmen" on the island, and they kissed as they said goodbye. "I was light-headed with happiness," Gisèle writes. "I needed to love again. I wasn't afraid." She also describes the first night they slept together: "We didn't even eat. We couldn't wait." The evening was "gentle, punctuated by stifled giggles." Gisèle was seventy, and Jean-Loup was the third man she'd slept with in her life. He had two adult children; they didn't tell their families they were seeing each other for the first few months. "There was something amusing, even a bit thrilling, in the way we

kept our relationship secret, as if we were teenagers and our lives were just beginning,” she writes.

In her rendering, Jean-Loup struggled more with the idea of a new relationship than she did. He had panic attacks and told her, “I feel like I’m cheating on Bénédicte.” But Gisèle appeared to feel an almost metaphysical certainty. In Jean-Loup, she saw confirmation that her story of herself was intact. He had “emerged from a place far from this island: from a formative scene of my childhood, the source of my deepest pain,” she writes. “Jean-Loup was the savior, filling the empty space . . . the abyss.”

Earlier in the book, Gisèle describes her first night with Dominique in the same register. His presence was “a sign, a sign from Maman that she was watching over me,” she writes. “We were lovers and we were twins. We would always be together; our suffering behind us.” Dominique, in his own autobiography, recounts his search for love in similar terms: “I was filling up the void of my loneliness.”

Victims of sexual violence in France have the right to a closed hearing, and Gisèle told Journot that she wanted her trial “held entirely behind closed doors.” The police had determined that at least seventy-two men had assaulted her, but they were able to identify only fifty-three suspects, including Dominique, and two of them had died. The group would be tried in court together. “For my mental health, it seems obvious to me that I should refrain from making any comments, even to the press,” she said to Journot. She intended to be “as discreet as possible.”

To prepare Gisèle for the trial, her lawyers showed her pictures of the courtroom in Avignon where the hearings would be held. She had hoped that Pascale could sit next to her, but Babonneau explained that, because the trial would be closed, she could not have a friend in the room. The defendants would sit in rows, taking up three-quarters of the courtroom, and she would sit about three feet away.

Gisèle had avoided reading her case file, but in early 2024 her lawyers suggested that she confront the evidence by reviewing the writ of indictment, which was four hundred pages long. By then, she was living with Jean-Loup, and he printed out two copies. He read the indictment at the

same time, in a different room. Gisèle, who read with a highlighter, noted that one of the rapes had taken place on her sixty-sixth birthday, another on New Year's Eve, when she and Dominique had planned a quiet night at home. She knew one of the men from the neighborhood. He had always seemed friendly and polite. "I would see him at the bakery," Gisèle told Journot, "and never imagined that he was raping me."

She was not the sort of person to use terms like "sexism." She had never read "The Second Sex," by Simone de Beauvoir, which was published three years before she was born. When she heard other women talk about the fight for birth control or abortion rights, she didn't "really grasp what this conflict between men and women was all about," she writes. But in her conversations with Journot she had become more attuned to injustice. When Journot relayed that one defendant was claiming she was Dominique's willing accomplice, Gisèle said, "I'm ready to confront him without a problem," adding, "You tell me he was born in 1984. And it doesn't bother him coming to rape a grandmother?" When she learned that Dominique had a previous arrest for filming up women's skirts—he'd been caught in 2010, and she had never been notified—she told Journot, "This is a case of failure to assist a person in danger, and I find it absolutely shocking." Dominique's punishment had been a hundred-euro fine.



Gisèle wondered whether, by keeping the trial closed, she was protecting the defendants, whose behavior would never be fully known. A private trial would also mean spending weeks in a room, with few witnesses, with dozens of men who had raped her. “Alone with them,” she writes. “Locked in with them.” One day, she went for a long walk through the woods and on the beach, and when she returned she told Jean-Loup, who was setting the table for lunch, that she had changed her mind: she wanted an open trial. “I said, ‘I’m with you,’ ” Jean-Loup told me. “I started from the principle of supporting her, whatever happens.”

With Jean-Loup, Gisèle spent hours rehearsing what she would say in court. “I was in the role of the judge,” he told me. There was so much emotional pressure that “sometimes we laughed,” he said. “We had to let off steam. We tried to make fun out of it.” In Gisèle’s book, she considers the idea that the open hearing felt within reach because she had aged out of sexual visibility. “Maybe the shame lifts once you hit seventy and no one looks at you any more,” she writes. She also wondered if she felt brave because she was happy and in love.

The trial began on September 2, 2024. Gisèle and Jean-Loup rented a house ten miles from the courthouse, large enough for her three children and their families. Caroline had always pushed for the hearings to be public, and, in the months leading up to the trial, she and David became close with their mother again. (Florian had been in steady contact with her.) “They were again whole, though less than before, of course,” Babonneau told me.

Gisèle recalled that, as Dominique entered the courtroom on the first day of the trial, he caught her eye. To Caroline, it seemed that her father “wanted to draw an invisible line to my mother from the glass box where he was sitting.” He had spent the past four years reading more than three hundred books, many of them classic works of French literature. On graph paper, in pencil, he listed the author’s name, the title, the date of publication, and its prizes. Before the trial, he had told Journot that he was eager to take responsibility—“but I’ve never touched a child,” he repeated. “I can’t wait to go to trial to confirm the truth for my children, for my family.”

At the trial, he admitted to all the charges—“I am a rapist, like those in this room,” he said. (Because most French trials are not officially transcribed, I

have drawn from contemporaneous court reporting, much of it by Marion Dubreuil, Juliette Campion, and a few other young female French journalists who were there almost every day for four months.)

Nearly all the other defendants denied committing a crime. “As long as the man is there, giving me instructions, it’s not rape,” a construction supervisor said. A truck driver proposed that “once a woman is wet, it means she’s not saying no.” A gardener explained that he had penetrated Gisèle “out of politeness, to reciprocate the hospitality of the host.”

While the defendants shirked responsibility, some of their wives tried to take the blame. One woman said that, owing to a complicated pregnancy, she’d refused to have sex with her husband. “The tragedy must have occurred at that time,” she offered.

Another wife said that she had stopped sleeping with her husband after her mother got ill. “It’s not because you refused sexual relations with your husband that he finds himself in this dock today,” Babonneau tried to assure her, at Gisèle’s prompting.

“It’s not because I refused just once,” the woman said, “but for a very long time.”

On the fifth day of the trial, Caroline told the court that she was certain she’d been drugged like her mother. Her husband, Pierre, testified that he’d never seen Caroline sleep in the position in which she appeared in the photos. “For me, the question is not how Caroline, my wife, was drugged,” he said. “It’s why.”

Dominique responded to Pierre: “I only ask that you believe one thing. I have never, ever, ever touched my daughter or my grandchildren.” Caroline remembers her father’s hand trembling. “I take responsibility for the rest,” he said.

A psychologist testified that, when he evaluated Caroline, he had urged her not to become mired in a “relentless quest for knowledge,” because there “will always be doubts, shadows.” Caroline, however, felt that she could get answers from the trial. “ ‘He won’t leave me in pain’—I really believed

that,” she said. She felt that her mother had the power to persuade him to confess.

But, when a lawyer for one of the defendants asked Gisèle what she thought of her daughter’s accusations, she said only, “I’m not ruling anything out after seeing the photos of Caroline asleep. You cannot rule anything out.” Later, when a lawyer asked again, she responded, “I prefer not to answer that question.” Caroline stood up and left the courtroom. David followed her.

“I had never felt pain like that before—never with such intensity as during those few suspended minutes, in front of the smug gazes of most of the defense lawyers,” Caroline writes in a second memoir, published after the trial. “I was her only daughter,” she continues. “She should not have let go of my hand.”

On the roads leading to the courthouse, feminist collectives posted collages and posters on the walls:

GISÈLE MASTERFUL
AND INSPIRING

THEY RAPE
BECAUSE THEY DO NOT RESPECT WOMEN
BECAUSE THEY TAKE PLEASURE IN DOMINATION

At a parish in Avignon, at Sunday Mass, a priest prayed for “all those who silently relive their own suffering through Madame Pelicot.” Women carried signs reading “We Are All Gisèle.” As Gisèle walked into the lobby of the courthouse each morning, women applauded and handed her bouquets of flowers.

Journalists praised her elegance. “Her impeccable bob,” a reporter for *Le Monde* observed. “The elegance of a flowing dress with a midnight-blue print and the twist of camel suede ankle boots. A lively body, a graceful and supple gait, a calm voice.” Another article admired her “nose that points to the moon.” The more attention reporters paid to her clothes, the more care Gisèle took with them. “It was a way of restoring, through my presence, the body that the rapes sought to destroy,” she told me. She kept her relationship

with Jean-Loup a secret, to avoid creating a distraction, but he came to the trial every day, often sitting a few rows behind her or on the defendants' side of the room.

The trial was seen as a referendum on the relations between men and women, but the question of incest drew comparatively little notice. Each week, the court heard testimony from five to seven defendants. Around a third of them said that they'd been sexually abused as children; some had never previously spoken about the experience. As a child, one defendant had slept with his shoes on and kept his windows open so that he could escape when his father came to sexually assault him. When his lawyer asked him how his childhood was, he replied, "Very good." The lawyer clarified, "He lied to me out of shame."

The trial also forced into the open the suspected abuse of Dominique's adopted sister. "I could have, I should have done something, but what?" he had written in his autobiography. "Call the police? To perhaps push my mother even further into misery?"

When his brother Joël testified that their father was not as menacing as Dominique had claimed, Dominique said, "I accuse my brother of having covered for my father for years over the incest against Nicole." He went on, "The first one who ruined the family was our father. I take responsibility for it, and I will pay. But our father never paid."

In "The Cradle of Domination," the French anthropologist Dorothée Dussy argues that incest is not a closed scene that involves only the victim and the perpetrator but a practice embedded within a family for generations. "Does the practice of incest function like a sport?" Dussy writes. "If you often played soccer with your brother when you were little, playing with him two or three times a week throughout your childhood, would you encourage your sons to play soccer?" The game may have been violent and humiliating, she writes, but it is woven into your understanding of how to be close with another person. "Will soccer have been so important in building your relationship with your brother that it will subconsciously influence what you pass on to your sons?"

Dussy, who attended the trial with a group of colleagues, was struck by how many taboos the public could absorb, and yet, she said, in the courtroom as well as in much of the trial coverage, “the injunction to remain silent about incest” persisted: “Dominique could admit to so much, but not this—not sexualizing the children.”

In October, when the trial was in its eighth week, Caroline shared on Instagram that she had insomnia and was going to a clinic to rest and recover. “My siblings and I are living through a true tsunami that we don’t allow ourselves to talk about, out of respect for our mother,” she wrote. “I have decided to break my silence, above all so that people don’t think I’m a pseudo ‘wonder woman.’ Far from it. . . .”

When Caroline returned, in November, for the final weeks of the trial, she said that the case had made her feel invisible. “Right away I knew I was a victim of Dominique Pelicot, too, but I only thought about one thing—my mother—and not myself,” she said in court. “My mother was raped, yes, under the influence of drugs, yes. The only difference between my mother and me is that in her case there is proof.”

In her memoir, Gisèle writes that Caroline’s repetition of “yes” felt like a blade: “She was cutting her pain from mine, setting the two in opposition.”

When David gave his final statement, he told Dominique, “If you still have a little humanity, tell the truth about what you did to my sister.” He also asked what Dominique had done to his son, Nathan, who had filed a complaint of sexual assault, which was eventually dismissed.

“Nothing!” Dominique said.

“My sister is fighting a battle,” David went on. “And I want to tell her that we will always be there for her.” He said, “For me, this trial—and I hope you won’t hold it against me, Mom, because you are the main victim—is the trial of an entire family.”

Florian took the stand next and said, “I believe Caroline, just as I believe Nathan, without the slightest doubt.” He also said he wasn’t sure that Dominique was really his father. He had been born around the time that

Gisèle was having her affair, which lasted three years. “I don’t look like my brother and sister,” he said. “And I was probably the one who had the least in common with my father.”

Camus, one of Gisèle’s lawyers, asked Florian if he thought that his mother’s affair—and the possibility that he was an illegitimate son—were connected to his father’s crimes, perhaps inducing in Dominique some sort of displaced drive for revenge. Florian turned to his father. “Am I the motive?” he asked.

“Absolutely not,” Dominique said.

When Gisèle spoke, she pushed back on David’s framing of the issues at stake. “This is not a trial of family affairs, but that of Monsieur Pelicot and the fifty other people behind me,” she said.

In his closing statement, Babonneau acknowledged the family rupture that had become palpable in the courtroom. “To those who wonder about the repercussions of rape committed within a family, I say, Look at the Pelicot family.” They had been “confronted with the impossible dilemma,” he said. “How to make suffering coexist.”

Louise Colcombet, a reporter for *Le Parisien* who has published a graphic novel about the trial, told me, “People started asking, ‘Who is the good victim? Is it Gisèle or Caroline?’” In the popular imagination, it seemed that Caroline was unsettling what had become an inspirational narrative about dignity and truth. Colcombet felt that question itself revealed “what incest does to a family.”

The case was decided by a panel of five judges, and they found all the defendants guilty. Fifty were sentenced to prison terms of between three and fifteen years; Dominique received twenty, the maximum punishment. In his final statement, he praised Gisèle’s courage. “I have an inner shame,” he said, “a shell that I created, because without a shell you die.” (The two cold cases from the nineties have not yet gone to trial.)

A few of the defendants seemed transformed. Three said that they had given up sex. An I.T. specialist quoted a phrase that Gisèle had used at the start of

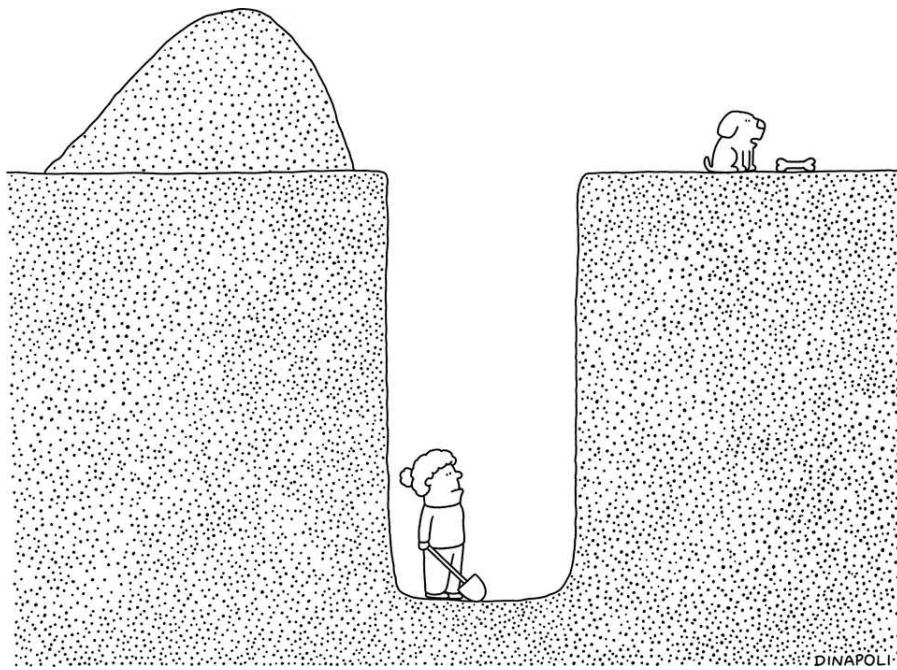
the trial: “Shame will have to change sides.” “I was your tormenter—I need that to be heard, to be said,” he told her. “I take your shame upon myself, Madame!”

Three months after the trial ended, Caroline filed a new police complaint. She accused Dominique of drugging and raping her, citing details that had not been discussed at trial, including an erased folder on her father’s computer called “my naked daughter” and Skype exchanges in which he referred to his daughter being “trapped.” (Dominique did not respond to a request for comment on the complaint.) On the same day, she published her account of the trial, “Pour Que l’On Se Souvienne” (“So That We Remember”), which hasn’t been translated into English. In her first book, she had disowned her father; in this one, she seems to be testing the possibility of doing the same to her mother. She refers to her as both “mom” and “Gisèle,” at one point calling her “his wife.”

The next month, *Time* named Gisèle one of the hundred most influential people in the world. Not long afterward, she was named a knight of the Légion d’Honneur, France’s highest civic honor. Queen Camilla wrote her a letter of praise, and there was a petition, signed by nearly two hundred thousand people, to award her the Nobel Peace Prize. Caroline and David stopped speaking to her. “Our mother knows our traumas very well, but she doesn’t react when she sees her own daughter suffering in court,” David told me. “So we can talk about dignity, we can talk about armor or protection, but in any case I still experienced things alongside my sister that were extremely difficult to live with, namely, her lack of recognition.” David’s son, Nathan, who is twenty, hasn’t seen Gisèle or spoken with her since the trial. “It’s true that it’s been complicated, but she has my phone number,” he said.

Caroline had founded a charity devoted to supporting victims of drug-facilitated violence, and, as she gave interviews about the charity and her second memoir, she became increasingly vocal about her sense of betrayal. In a radio interview last March, she described how her mother didn’t have the “psychological and emotional capacity to recognize” incest: “It’s not that she doesn’t want to, but she can’t.” By August, she was less understanding. “She did not fulfill her contract with me,” she told the *Telegraph*. “You

remain a mother until you die, no matter the trials and tribulations, but she did not.”



Perhaps there had always been some disagreement about the terms of that contract—Caroline, whose emotions had always been close to the surface, wanted a kind of nurturing that Gisèle couldn’t readily give. Such tension may be enough to doom any relationship, but, after the revelation of Dominique’s crimes, it took on new weight, as if two versions of feminism were clashing. Instead of being there for maternal consolation, ready to believe and affirm, Gisèle prioritized her own emotional integrity, becoming a triumphant figure of reclaimed agency for the world. On a French podcast last year, Caroline reflected on a similar realignment in her sense of identity: her advocacy work had “shifted the balance” in her availability to her son. “It’s not that I feel less like a mother,” she said, “but I need to fulfill myself in other ways. I can’t explain it, but I think that I had such a hard time . . . breaking free from this paternal image—it’s insurmountable.” Her son was the most important person in her life, she said, but “everything can’t be limited to that for me, because I know how much it hurts when it ends.”

Florian stayed close with his mother, talking to her almost every day. He tried to be the link between Gisèle and his siblings, but he said that eventually David and Caroline cut off contact with him, too. “They asked

me to choose: Are you with your mother or with us?" he said. "And you can't ask me to choose. It's unnatural." (David said that he did not see it in these terms.)

Florian is now waiting for judicial authorization for a paternity test, a process that he expects will take a year. "From a psychological point of view, things would more easily align for me in relation to the feelings I've had since I was a little boy," he told me when I met him at his house, in Brive-la-Gaillarde, a town in southwest France. I assumed that Florian might think of the paternity test as an escape hatch, a release from his genetic inheritance. Caroline and David now called their father Dominique or "that man," but Florian, who actually had a way out, still called him Dad. He didn't think that the news would bring him relief, because "he will always be my father," Florian said. "He's the one who loved and cared for me. That's it."

Gisèle began work on her book three months after the trial ended. Judith Perrignon, a journalist and a novelist who has helped several prominent French figures write their memoirs, made several trips to Île de Ré, staying at Gisèle's house as they talked through her memories. When Perrignon told her friends that she was going back to Île de Ré, she said, they would wish her good luck in a grave tone, as if she were undertaking a dark and gruelling journey. She corrected them, laughing: "No, it's nice. It's nice." Gisèle was buoyant, generous, and fun.

"A Hymn to Life" was completed in nine months and is being published simultaneously in twenty-two languages. To promote the book, Gisèle met with roughly two journalists every weekday for three weeks. I met her, at her agent's office in Paris, on the third day of her press schedule. She looked radiant. Jean-Loup, a tanned, handsome man wearing a tweed blazer with elbow patches, was sitting beside her, carrying a shopping bag from Gerard Darel, a Parisian designer brand. He had a journal with notes on the timing of her appointments. He got up and kissed her goodbye.

When the trial began, Gisèle appeared to be a well-groomed, tasteful older lady. Now she had the bearing of a movie star. She wore tall, sleek, black leather boots, a checkered skirt, and two gold necklaces of different lengths. She sat very still and answered all my questions graciously, at a remove. At

one point, she remarked, “I think anger and hatred destroy everything. I prefer to remain dignified and keep my distance. That’s just the way I am, really.” The only time she seemed more at ease was when I asked her about her stepmother, the one family member in her book about whom she expresses uncomplicated anger. She depicts a figure reminiscent of the stepmother in “Hansel and Gretel”—possessive of her husband, disdainful of his children. “She took the tree but not the fruit,” she said, laughing.

After the conversation, we went to lunch with Jean-Loup, who had been sitting in the lobby during our interview. As Gisèle entered the restaurant, a woman at a table mouthed to the person next to her, “It’s Gisèle!” Another person tried to secretly take a photo.

I asked Jean-Loup if he had been intimidated when he’d met Gisèle, because of her “baggage,” as one could call it. He said, “I don’t know what happened, but—”

“There’s a connection,” Gisèle said, putting her index fingers together like a tent.

“We didn’t even ask ourselves the question,” he said.

“It was obvious,” Gisèle said.

“It was obvious that we should build something together,” he agreed. He added, “If I met her today, I wouldn’t dare approach her. Luckily, I knew her before.”

As the trial had progressed, Gisèle became bolder in the way she framed the case and her desire to “change our patriarchal, sexist society,” as she had put it on the day of the verdict. I asked Jean-Loup if the trial had changed his vocabulary, too. “I hang on to her every word,” he said. “I completely agree with her. We’re both on the same page.” She looked at him and tenderly laughed.



Jean-Loup told me, tearing up, “For me, the best part of her book is at the end of the last chapter, when she tells the whole world that she loves me.”

Gisèle pulled his arm closer and kissed his hand. “You’re with me,” she said. “He’s my duet.”

They had recently been on a trip to Brazil, and after her book tour they were going to Tahiti with friends. I found the phrase “living her best life” sneaking, confusingly, into my head. What has a century of psychological theory taught us if not to be suspicious of happiness in the wake of trauma? But all those theories now seemed sort of miserly.

Gisèle told me that, in December, she and Caroline had taken steps toward reconciling. “I think we both needed to distance ourselves to perhaps heal in different ways,” she said. There had been a phone conversation before Christmas, and another on Caroline’s birthday, in January. As the publication date approached, they began talking every day. But David and Florian spoke of the reconciliation tentatively, as something necessary but maybe not possible, especially now that Gisèle—the “ultimate victim,” as Babonneau put it in court—was becoming even more of a public symbol.

Gisèle’s children had not yet read the memoir, and they were not interviewed for it. Perrignon told me that Gisèle hoped the book might repair her

relationships with them. In the memoir, Gisèle writes that the photos of Caroline reveal an “unbearable incestuous gaze”—a phrase that reads like a new offering to her daughter—and expresses sorrow that, without proof, Caroline is forced to live in a state of doubt. She also acknowledges that her psychological defenses must have registered to Caroline as a lack of concern. “I wanted to help her now, but I didn’t know what to do or how to reach her,” she writes. “I embraced silence, she demanded noise.”

In their memoirs, both women describe the moment when they left the courthouse after the verdict. Gisèle was escorted by police officers and surrounded by women chanting her name. A banner on a wall outside the courthouse read “Merci Gisèle.” It is theoretically a triumphant moment, but both mother and daughter seem to recognize that the public has rewarded only one form of surviving. As Gisèle got into a car with Jean-Loup and her lawyers, she writes, “I lost sight of my children and grandchildren in the tussle.” Caroline watched them get into the car. “My brothers and I stayed on the sidewalk and walked alone, dejected and silent,” she writes. ♦

Profiles

James Talarico Puts His Faith in Texas Voters

The Senate candidate believes that Democrats can win by appealing to higher values. Can he succeed in the age of Trump?

By Tad Friend

February 23, 2026



After the 8:30 A.M. service at the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, Senior Pastor Amos Disasa brought two worshippers to his office for a prearranged chat. One was Mike Rawlings, the city's glad-handing former mayor. The other was a visitor, James Talarico, who's running for Senate. A thirty-six-year-old state representative from Austin, Talarico has a novel platform for a progressive Democrat: the New Testament. Though he has spent seven years in the Texas House, he has the bearing of a young minister, and much of the training; he is on leave from the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, with a year of class work to go. His framing of politics as a sacrament has attracted two million followers on Instagram. When he delivers an aphorism in his deep, soothing voice—"The

closest thing we have to the Kingdom of Heaven is a multiracial, multicultural democracy”—it’s civic A.S.M.R. for anyone sick of Donald Trump. In one analysis of social-media engagement among Democratic officials, Talarico trailed only Kamala Harris and Barack Obama.

The men settled into armchairs and leaned in to get acquainted. Disasa, a soft-spoken Ethiopian immigrant, asked Talarico, “What kind of welcome are you getting from evangelicals?” White evangelicals make up about a quarter of the Texas electorate, and in 2024 nearly ninety per cent of them voted for Trump.

Talarico blinked and widened his eyes, gauging the room. “We think we can make real headway with *Christians*,” he said. “Evangelicals . . .” He shrugged.

Rawlings asked about his sabbatical from seminary: “You’re putting being ordained on hold? God’s gonna wait?”

“This is where I’m being called.”

Rawlings rattled off several Black pastors who could help. Then he clasped his hands and said, “Help me understand your strategy.”

Talarico’s message, and his medium, are clear. On Instagram, he likes to say, “The biggest divide in our country is not left versus right, it’s top versus bottom. Billionaires want us looking left and right at each other so that we’re not looking up at them.” Like Pete Buttigieg, he thrives on Fox News. Last summer, when Trump directed a gerrymander in Texas, Talarico appeared on Fox and flummoxed the host by asking, “If Republican policies are popular, why do they need to redraw these maps?”

Electoral strategy is harder. Texas last elected a Democratic senator in 1988, and the state is so firmly in the grip of *MAGA* legislators that its elementary-school curriculum permits treating Bible stories as historical fact. Talarico began his answer to Rawlings by noting that, late last summer, he was thirty points behind his opponent in the primary, the former congressman Colin Allred. Then, in early November, a new poll “shocked all of us. We’re ahead by six per cent.”

Rawlings raised a hand and said, “I care about that—but I don’t care about that. Your job is to beat Ken Paxton.” Paxton, a cartoonishly nefarious Trump ally, is the state’s attorney general. He somehow survived a sixteen-article impeachment for a rich gumbo of alleged malfeasance, including persuading a donor to hire a woman with whom he was having an extramarital affair and retaliating against whistle-blowers on his staff. He is nonetheless favored to win the Republican primary over the four-term senator John Cornyn, who has distinguished himself chiefly by serving four terms. “Everyone talks about getting out the Democratic base, getting young people to the polls—”

“Yes—” Talarico said, nodding.

“We’ve been trying that for fifty years!” Rawlings said.

“Sure, yep—”

“I just care about winning.”

“We *have* to win,” Talarico said. “Democracy is withering on the vine.”



“I wouldn’t even use the word ‘Democrat.’ I’d just say, ‘I’m a Texan who can beat Ken Paxton!’ ”

“That’s great advice.”

Rawlings’s tutorial zeal seemed to derive equally from the existential stakes of the race and the candidate’s evident need of guidance. Talarico, clean-cut, clean-shaven, and wearing one of his three white J. C. Penney dress shirts, looked like he’d just finished his paper route and was eager to shovel the church’s walk. During the ten-o’clock service, he greeted two dozen parishioners who lined up to meet him. Rawlings shook his head at how long Talarico took with each baby proffered for approval. “He hasn’t learned to maximize his touches,” he said. “But he’s authentic.”

Talarico told me later that he didn’t intend to take Rawlings’s advice about positioning: “I’m not a huge fan of being *against* someone. Ken Paxton is a symptom, not the disease, and so is Donald Trump—they are the products of a broken system. A campaign based on love is more durable than one based on fear.”

On the trail, Talarico invokes his mother, Tamara, as love incarnate. When he was seven weeks old, Tamara left his father, an abusive alcoholic, and moved into an empty room at a residential hotel where she worked as a sales assistant. She was determined to raise her son in a healthier environment; Talarico’s applause line is “My mom showed me that true love doesn’t tolerate abuse.” Yet even Tamara is mystified by her son’s relentless urge to repair. “I’ll tell Jimmy I’m annoyed at one or both of my sisters, and he’ll always start with ‘You have much more in common than you have differences,’ ” she told me. “We’re regular people—we’re judgy and icky. And he’s so reasonable. He won’t trash-talk. And that’s very annoying, because some people *need* trash-talking.”

After a rally in Wichita Falls—hard-right terrain—Talarico and four members of his campaign staff were driving south, workshopping themes for a talk the following night. Talarico fills the Notes app on his phone with quotations from such theologians as Richard Rohr, Dorothy Day, and Gustavo Gutiérrez, along with his own ideas, and he and his aides sift it for usable nuggets. “Is there a ‘Love is strong’ riff?” Talarico wondered. “ ‘Hate doesn’t lower anyone’s electricity bill?’ ” He has a knack for love-and-hate antitheses: “Christian nationalists walk around with a mouth full of Scripture

and a heart full of hate.” It’s this rhetorical gift which made Obama call him a “really talented young man.”

“We’ve never done ‘What if Jesus went to the U.S. Senate?’ ” Antonio Esparza, who runs Talarico’s social media, said.

“ ‘For I was hungry and you cut my food stamps,’ ” Talarico said, recalling a line from a draft.

Esparza was having second thoughts. “The whole thing is about weeping, though,” he said. “It’s not fire.”

Talarico laughed and said, “The whole *campaign* is about weeping!” His blood-sugar alarm went off; in his first campaign, in 2018, he canvassed the length of his district on foot, felt so woozy that he went to the hospital, and discovered that he has diabetes. A staffer noted that it was time to take insulin, but he said, “It’s fine,” and went on thinking. He tends to ignore urgent beeps—from his glucose monitor, his gas gauge, his alarm clock—because he dislikes being rushed. His staff often has to yank him out of his ranch house in Austin to get on the road.

Talarico is remarkably consistent onstage, but in private his affect fluctuates. When he bolts Kraft Mac & Cheese without chewing because he enjoys the “liquid tubes” feeling of childhood, or when he gets defeated by airline luggage tags—“The sticky thing is complicated!”—he resembles Dennis the Menace. More often, though, he calls to mind Robert Caro, as when he passed by Dealey Plaza, in Dallas, and gave staffers a disquisition on the aftermath of J.F.K.’s assassination. (“It’s why the Dallas Cowboys becoming ‘America’s team’ and the show ‘Dallas’ were so important—Dallas had to shake the cloud that had hung over it.”)

In the car, J. T. Ennis, Talarico’s press secretary, looked up from his phone to announce, “Dems in the Senate are caving on the government shutdown.” It had been going on for forty days, in a standoff over health care.

“Democrats always do this!” Talarico said. “If you’re serious about the danger of authoritarian rule, then why capitulate?” As his team began drafting a statement, he continued, “We would have had a few more weeks

of pain—which I know is very easy for us to say and very difficult for everyone to endure—but we had to provoke a conflict in order to heal a conflict. Trump is smart enough to know that it would have hurt him to have Thanksgiving air travel ruined.”

They eventually agreed on a single disdainful sentence: “Any ‘deal’ that kicks 1.7 million Texans off their health insurance isn’t compromise; it’s surrender.”

Talarico, still hot, suggested, “Let’s just say, ‘This is why everyone hates the Democratic Party.’”

Everyone cried “No!” in unison and cracked up.

He added, softly, “It’s true, though.”

Texas is nearly as multifarious as Texans claim. Its thirty-two million residents inhabit two time zones, seven cultural regions, and twenty media markets. It has the third most Asian Americans of any state, the second most Hispanics, and the most Blacks. It contains eleven “world’s largest” roadside attractions (including the largest rattlesnake and patio chair) and by far the most miles of interstate highway. State Highway 130 has a stretch with a speed limit of eighty-five miles an hour, the highest in the country; the night the road opened, three cars crashed into feral hogs.

Political observers struggle to handicap races here. “It’s folly for anyone to say they know what works to win, because everything is so broken,” Gina Hinojosa, the presumptive Democratic nominee for governor, told me. The Rio Grande Valley, a predominantly Hispanic region on the Mexican border, voted for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential primary, Beto O’Rourke in the 2018 Senate race, and Donald Trump in 2024. Voters don’t select a political party when they register, and many sit elections out; in 2024, Texas’s turnout rate trailed every state but Arkansas’s. In great part, this is because Republican legislators have made it exceedingly difficult to vote. Texas generally forbids automatic, same-day, and online registration, and it places severe limits on voting by mail.

Democrats often console themselves by saying, “Texas isn’t a red state or a blue state—it’s a non-voting state.” There are three problems with this maxim. First, every time ballots are counted, Texas *is* a red state; in 2024, Trump won there by fourteen points. Second, when turnout rises, it tends to favor Republican candidates. And third, after years of gerrymandering and Republican consolidation of power, the Democratic turnout machine is exceedingly rickety. The state Party has a new chairman, a thirty-six-year-old progressive named Kendall Scudder, who describes his election to the post as “a Hail Mary.” He told me, “More than sixty per cent of our nine thousand precincts don’t have a Democratic precinct chair, and the bottom twenty precincts for turnout in the last election were blue ones. You can’t put a sack of flour in the oven and make biscuits.”

The recurrent hope—in Texas and elsewhere—is that Republican extremism will finally alienate enough moderates to flip a seat. Tens of millions of dollars have flooded into the state to support Democrats such as O’Rourke, who narrowly lost to Ted Cruz in 2018, and Colin Allred, who lost to Cruz less narrowly in 2024. The coming elections offer promising indicators: the President is highly unpopular, and there is a Democrat in every race on the ballot for the first time since 1974. But are there still persuadable moderates out there? Allred told me, “People are telling us in election after election that they think the system is rigged against them, and Democrats have been responding, ‘No, this is the best economy in the world.’ You do need to be a moderate Texan, but now it also has to be ‘I’m going to go break some of these molds that are holding you back.’”

Democratic strategists argue variously that the key to winning is shaving Republican margins in rural areas, or keeping the Anglo vote below sixty per cent, or focussing on Harris County, home to Houston and nearly a fifth of the state’s voters. Katherine Fischer, the executive director of the Texas Majority *PAC*, said, “It’s all monkeys on keyboards trying to get to fifty per cent plus one vote.” Some activists, resigned to losing elections, are aiming merely to rebuild the Party and narrow the gap.

Chuck Schumer, the Democratic leader, recently laid out a path to a Senate majority: flipping seats in Alaska, Maine, North Carolina, and Ohio. Texas was left out. Schumer’s grasp of generational dynamics is increasingly in question, but there are sensible reasons for caution. “Texas is expensive,”

Sam Cornale, who until last year served as C.E.O. of the D.N.C., told me; the committee began the year in debt. “It’s been leaving us at the altar for a long time. And ‘National Dems coming into Texas to take a Senate seat’—the Republican attack ad writes itself.”

Some observers argue that successful campaigns in Texas have to be local, based on neighborly appeal. Yet the stakes are inherently national. When the 2030 census reapportions the Electoral College, Texas is expected to gain four votes, raising its total to forty-four of the necessary two hundred and seventy, while the “blue wall” states will likely lose as many as eleven. As Scudder said, “By 2032, if you’re not winning Texas, you’re not going to have a Democratic President anymore. So you better figure it the fuck out!”

In May, Beto O’Rourke convened a Zoom meeting with three leading Texas Democrats, hoping to assemble a statewide slate. He believed that he’d fallen short in 2018 in part because the Democrats didn’t have strong candidates for governor, lieutenant governor, and attorney general. Now he was weighing another run, and he thought they could all help one another.

On the Zoom, Joaquin Castro, the respected congressman from San Antonio, said that he was also considering the Senate, but would be willing to try for attorney general. Colin Allred—ex-congressman, former N.F.L. linebacker, and all-around model of decency—said that he was definitely planning a Senate campaign.

Talarico, the junior member of the group, was seen as a potential gubernatorial candidate who could distract Greg Abbott, the powerful incumbent. As one person familiar with the discussion said, “I don’t know if it was *exactly* like ‘Here’s our sacrificial Talarico lamb for governor’—but pretty much.” Instead, Talarico argued that his youth and his legislative experience made him better equipped to be a senator. “I told them the fact that I was new, and different, and had no D.C. connection was a huge advantage,” he recalled. “They were all retreads—which I said lovingly.” He added that he offered the sharpest contrast with Ken Paxton, having studied his misdeeds during the impeachment proceedings and sparred with him last summer, when Paxton filed a lawsuit to remove him and twelve other Democrats from their seats. (Talarico tweeted, “Come and take it”—the legendary Texan reply to the Mexican Army’s request to return a loaned

cannon.) “I told them that I have flaws, too: I don’t have the infrastructure, the name I.D. But I have the *fewest* flaws.”

O’Rourke was nonplussed. “I think the world of James,” he said recently. “I told him, ‘If you end up being the guy who runs for Senate against the Republican machine, you will want friends on that ticket.’” Instead, “James came in, like, ‘I don’t care what you guys are doing with your little huddle. Fuck all y’all, I’m doing this.’ He blew everything up in his excitement to make the case for himself.” O’Rourke called Castro afterward and said, “What the fuck?” But he also told me, “You’re not going to win in this game unless you’re really fucking confident.”



Talarico declared his candidacy after Labor Day, and tried strenuously to run a positive race, even declining to distinguish his policies from Allred’s. But it was apparent that he wouldn’t get much help from the Party or from independent PACs. Someone close to his campaign told me, “Ninety-seven per cent of this is going it alone.”

Some of Talarico’s early videos owed a debt to other politicians, including one from the State Fair in which he wore a Texas-flag shirt and explained that tariffs were ruining everything: “These deep-fried Oreos cost fourteen dollars. They used to cost six.” Talarico acknowledges borrowing from food-

price explainers by Zohran Mamdani (halal carts) and the Michigan senatorial candidate Mallory McMorrow (game-day snacks). “You do take inspiration from your peers,” he said. “But the cover is rarely as good as the original.” He soon learned to assert himself. Gina Hinojosa, his deputy campaign manager (no relation to the gubernatorial candidate), told me, “All the D.C. consultants in the world can tell James, ‘Just say, ‘Groceries, groceries, groceries,’ ’ and he’ll say, ‘No, it’s ‘Healing, healing, healing.’ ’ ”

Talarico has weaknesses as a campaigner. His ability to faultlessly memorize speeches occasionally makes them feel canned. (“Introducing yourself thirty million times can get a little monotonous,” he admits.) He sometimes sounds like a graduate student, as when he informed the legislature, “Modern science obviously recognizes that there are many more than two biological sexes. In fact, there are six.” And his eagerness to connect the dots, to explain that bad thing A is happening because of underlying bad thing B, makes him reluctant to answer a yes-or-no question with a yes or a no.

In conversation, though, his tractor beam is strong. Andrew Mamo, a consultant who prepped Talarico for Joe Rogan’s podcast in July, said, “I told him, ‘Here’s how you can get Rogan to go to the stories you want to tell, your greatest hits—the insulin walk, your bill that prevented police from working with reality shows.’ ” James said, ‘I would love to actually listen to the guy and see where we agree.’ ” Rogan began the show in his customary posture of sleepy truculence. Then, sensing that his guest was curious and receptive, he gradually began to explain his own beliefs. By the end, Rogan said, “You need to run for President.”

In November, Talarico was scheduled to be the final speaker at the Dallas County Democrats’ annual Johnson-Jordan Dinner, named for L.B.J. and Barbara Jordan. But line dances got danced, liquor got drunk, and the run of show got scrambled. Illinois’s governor, J. B. Pritzker, on hand to receive a ceremonial cowboy hat, ended up delivering a Presentially curious stump speech. Nearly all the many, many other speakers went long, as people in the audience poked sadly at their overdone steaks. Talarico, who’d stuck to his allotted six minutes, said, “That was the deadest room I’ve ever spoken to.” He wryly quoted Will Rogers: “I am not a member of any organized political party. I’m a Democrat.”

In the end, the liberal firebrand Jasmine Crockett closed the show, rallying the remains of the crowd by declaring, “I need y’all to understand that our fight is bigger than party. I need y’all to understand that people are relying on us to literally survive.” Four weeks later, Crockett declared her candidacy for the Senate.

A forty-four-year-old former public defender who’s in her second term in the U.S. House, Crockett is candid, stylish, and funny. She heaps fluent scorn on her opponents, with zingers that she calls Crockett Clapbacks (and has sold printed on T-shirts). During a committee hearing, when Marjorie Taylor Greene told her, “I think your fake eyelashes are messing up what you’re reading,” Crockett fired back with a reference to Greene’s “bleach-blond, bad-built, butch body.” She has called Trump “Putin’s ho” and Greg Abbott, who uses a wheelchair, “Governor Hot Wheels.”

Before Crockett announced, she phoned Allred to inform him. Allred, facing an expensive and newly complicated race, dropped out to run for Congress again. Talarico had spoken with Crockett last summer to make sure that she didn’t want to run; if she did, he told me, he probably would not have. A week before her announcement, she asked if he’d run for governor instead. “I told her that my friend Gina is already running for governor, and I would not do that to her at the last minute,” he said, adding evenly, “That’s the standard I hold myself to.”

Both Cornyn and Trump called Crockett’s decision “a gift,” and Speaker Mike Johnson termed it “one of the greatest things that’s happened to the Republican Party.” The politics site *NOTUS* reported that the Republicans’ Senate campaign arm had texted Democratic voters, urging them to tell Crockett to run. The theory was that she was so controversial she’d be easy to beat.

Democrats seemed to disagree. The week that Crockett announced, a statewide poll showed her leading Talarico by eight points. A contingent of his endorsers switched to Crockett, and for weeks his campaign seemed stuck, stunned. Mamo, the consultant, said, “It feels like the video-game trope where you fight the first boss and win—and there’s a bigger boss on the next level to fight.”

Talarico believes that, because the Texas primary comes early, on March 3rd, and because the state is so important to the electoral map, “the results of this race will determine the course of the Democratic Party.” The problem for the Party is that two of its more promising young politicians are competing for a single spot. Chris Coons, the senior senator from Delaware, told me, “It’s really tragic that two incredibly talented candidates with national profiles are in a primary together.”

Crockett and Talarico take similar positions on most issues; it’s everything else about them that forms a contrast. Crockett is relaxed and improvisational. Her campaign videos range from karaoke jams to Crockett Confessionals—extended clips in which she talks confidently about the issues of the day. When someone at a campaign stop in McAllen shouted, “Fuck ICE!,” she called back, “Fuck ICE! I like this crowd!”

Though Crockett’s intent differs from Trump’s—he punches down, and she usually punches up—she shares his main-character energy. Critics resurfaced a 2024 *Vanity Fair* profile in which she said that Hispanics who supported Trump’s border policy had “almost like a slave mentality.” Her full remarks were more nuanced, but rather than clarifying her views she gave the bluntest possible rationale for not doing so: “Donald Trump said he grabbed people by the pussy.” A person familiar with Crockett’s thinking explained, “Decorum and propriety are no longer a priority for Democratic voters.”

Talarico is focussed not on Trump but on the system that permitted his rise: “We’re trying to explore ‘What would a politics built around love look like—not in a trite way, but if you truly believe that every single person, including Donald Trump, is made in the image of God?’” Senator Coons said, “The question underlying this race is ‘Are we fundamentally about cruelty, or compassion?’ I personally respond to the tug on the heartstrings of James Talarico, but my gut sense is that, while James fits better with Texas, Jasmine fits better with the moment.”

In November, Talarico told me, “My staff wants a boring race. They don’t want Jasmine to jump in. I want it to be exciting—bring it on!” A week after Crockett brought it on, he looked drained and apprehensive. “Jasmine is Colin on steroids, Colin with a lot more charisma—no offense to Colin,” he

said. “She has social-media prowess, and she’s a passionate public speaker. A lot of our advantages are now matched. We had an asteroid hit our campaign.”

A few months after Tamara left her abusive boyfriend, she met a sales manager named Mark Talarico, who married her and later adopted James. Talarico believes that without Mark’s steady influence, and the guidance of his public-school teachers, he might have ended up like his birth father, “someone whose wild spirit was taken as delinquency.” He told me, “In sixth grade, I was in detention a lot for talking back, talking on the bus, being disruptive. If I thought a rule was stupid, I would say so. So I was kind of a little shit.” He laughed. “I have some of that tendency still—a complicated relationship with authority.”

In seventh grade, seeking to get out of class, he signed up for the school play, “A Christmas Carol.” He got the bit part of Turkey Boy. “I guess I had a loud voice, and people responded,” he said. “A teacher told her class the next day, ‘You’ve got to see “A Christmas Carol” tonight, because Turkey Boy is really good.’ I thought, Wow! That ability to tell a story, even in three lines, translated later to choir, and debate, and the National Honor Society.”

After graduating from the University of Texas at Austin, Talarico put in two years with Teach for America, teaching language arts in a poor Latino area of San Antonio. His students sometimes sat on air-conditioners because there weren’t enough desks. One student, Justin, had been abandoned by his mother and kicked out of elementary school for threatening to stab a teacher. Talarico, recognizing a fellow-troublemaker, chatted with him during lunch and after school; they shared a wry sense of humor. “I got the sense that this was a kid who never liked a teacher, and I think he liked me—probably because I liked him,” he said. One day, Justin brought him a wrapped gift: a cup with a snowflake design which he’d bought at a Dollar Tree. “I was on top of the world—‘Who’s going to make the movie?’ ” Then the district eliminated the school’s therapist, who’d been counselling Justin, because of budget cuts mandated by the legislature. Justin started a fight, and Talarico watched helplessly as two coaches carried him out of school forever.



Before long, Talarico left the school, too; he got a master's from Harvard in education policy, then worked for a nonprofit. But the question of how he could help his former students stayed in his mind. In 2018, he met with his pastor, Jim Rigby, from St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, to discuss whether he should run for the legislature or perhaps pursue the ministry, a boyhood dream. Rigby was a formative influence; Talarico had soaked up his sermons and attended the church's Bible camp, where he created puppet shows featuring such characters as Awesome Possum and Reverend Skunk. "James wanted to know if he could be a person of integrity and also a politician," Rigby told me. "I said, 'If you go into the ministry, you'll have clarity, but you won't have power. If you go into politics, you'll have power but won't have clarity. You'll have to work a lot harder to distinguish good from evil.' " Nowadays, on Sunday mornings on the trail, Talarico often attends a local church and strolls around happily, eying the pulpit like a home buyer trying a listing on for size.

Talarico believed that if he applied his moral framework to politics he could make local headway against injustice, and wider salvation might follow. Seth Krasne, his campaign manager, argues that his progressive vision feels less unsettling because it comes wrapped in faith: "Religion is a non-scary way to push people into the future, because you're reminding them, 'We've made this kind of progress before.' "

Yet Talarico doesn't always comfort Christians. He often seems ready, in the spirit of Martin Luther, to nail ninety-five theses to the door of the nearest megachurch. He points out that, though the Bible makes no mention of abortion or gay marriage, it strongly discourages greed. And he argues that the obligation to love your neighbor extends to accepting your neighbor's faith. "Seth and I talk about how Judaism is Season 1 of the show, Christianity is Season 2, and Islam is Season 3," he told me. "I'm Season 2—the most violent season. My religion has done more damage to *both* of those religions than they've done to each other." His view that compassionate Hindus and atheists are more Christlike than some Christians is pilloried by the right; an R.N.C. spokesman recently called it "anti-Christian Christian shtick," adding, "There isn't a woke cause that he won't claim to find buried in the Bible." Evangelicals dismiss Talarico as a heretic for saying that their religion requires seeking common ground rather than high ground.

Talarico recently told me, "I'm being roasted by the Christian right today. There are 1.7 million views on Twitter of a clip where I talk about my faith. We're social animals, right? We care what other people think about us—politicians maybe more so. Most people now are never going to know me as a person." He laughed and said, "I'd like to debate all 1.7 million of them."

In Talarico's first campaign for the state legislature, he and a scrappy band of volunteers knocked on ninety-five thousand doors. He won a Trump district by some two thousand votes and took office as Texas's youngest state legislator. He soon passed laws to reduce insulin co-pays to twenty-five dollars, to allow importing cheap Canadian drugs, and to overhaul public-school spending. He worked with Republicans and amended his bills accordingly. He told me, "I'm always thinking, How would we build a coalition big enough to make whatever dream I'm talking about a reality? I am a politician in that way."

None of the Republican representatives I contacted would talk with me, perhaps fearing Governor Abbott's retribution, but three who had recently left the legislature spoke highly of Talarico. Ernest Bailes said, "Legislators on the extreme right may not like what James stands for, but they surely respect him."

It wasn't all comity. When Talarico got on the "back mike"—a microphone at the rear of the chamber which allows lawmakers to question a bill's author—Republicans would gather to stare him down, and Democrats would all but pull out bags of popcorn. He dissected the rationales behind a bill that mandated displaying the Ten Commandments in public schools and another that forbade students to cosplay as animals and use school-supplied litter boxes (a nonexistent problem raised by online conspiracy theorists). He grilled the chair of the House Committee on Public Education about a measure that would ban school-library books that violated community standards.

Talarico: Could "Romeo and Juliet" be banned because it mentions premarital sex?

Brad Buckley: There may be some, whether their own individual value system or their religious beliefs, that could believe that—

Talarico: If your answer is anything other than "Of course not," then that's a serious problem.

Buckley: I'm not advised on "Romeo and Juliet."

Talarico's colleagues called him "the baby-faced assassin," and videos of the exchanges were traded gleefully online. Yet nearly all the bills in question became law. In 2021, Talarico grew despondent. "It was the most destructive legislative session," he said. "There were bills that whitewashed Texas history, that allowed permitless open carry, that extended the abortion ban, and a voter-suppression bill aimed at Black voters."

To avoid passing the last bill, Democratic legislators took a "quorum break" and went to Washington. "That was when my antipathy toward national Democrats began," Talarico said. "They had majorities in both houses, but they couldn't muster the energy for a federal Voting Rights Act. I was very angry, very heartbroken, and thinking that maybe this American experiment of ours is not going to work." One rainy night, he walked up to the Lincoln Memorial, seeking reassurance. "On my way down, my legs flew out, and I landed on my back and couldn't breathe. I broke my thumb. I crawled to an Uber, and I decided that if I was going to continue in politics I needed to

balance myself out. So I applied to seminary”—which he could pursue while keeping his job, because the legislature meets for just a few months every two years.

It was on that trip that Talarico first reached a national audience. Booked by Fox News to talk about voting laws, he challenged the host, Pete Hegseth, to repudiate the network’s contention that voters who didn’t carry I.D. were threatening election integrity. Then he invited him to “tell your voters right now that Donald Trump lost the election in 2020.” Hegseth blustered, but Talarico stood firm: “Is this an uncomfortable question for you?” He was promptly invited on to other networks.

Talarico endured another period on Calvary when the legislature reconvened last spring. He’d led a bipartisan coalition against Abbott’s repeated efforts to provide vouchers for private or religious schooling—which would reduce the public-school budget. But Abbott and Trump called to browbeat wavering legislators, and by May their insistence had proved irresistible. “There was some yelling on the floor when our caucus began to see that victory wasn’t possible this time, and I took the brunt of it as the coach,” Talarico said. “They felt we didn’t need to keep going with amendments, that it was useless, but I said, ‘Every amendment is an opportunity to point out how bad this bill is.’ ”

Finally, Talarico left the floor for the chapel, despairing. “In Scripture, we feel comfortable with lamentations—Jesus cries out from the Cross, ‘Why have you forsaken me?’ ” he said. “It’s in those moments that I feel Jesus’ presence, like a wave of relief. I don’t have an older brother, but I imagine from reading books that it feels like having an older brother who calls you on your shit, who tells you, ‘It’s O.K., you can do this.’ And a few weeks later, on the same day that vouchers got signed into law by Greg Abbott, there were school-board elections across the state, and anti-education boards got thrown out. I felt that we’d won, to the extent that we’d made vouchers very unpopular in Texas.”

It was after the voucher episode that Talarico began telling colleagues he planned to run for Senate. “I ended up thinking my reasons for not running were selfish,” he said. “That I was burned out, that I loved seminary—the serenity, the live oaks, geeking out about theology.” I mentioned that two

Democratic colleagues told me they believed he was being guided by divine providence. He blushed and said, “I try to be in the flow of the universe, which for *New Yorker* readers may be a less creepy-sounding way to understand it than ‘God told me to run for office.’”

One chilly morning in mid-January, Talarico stood outside a DoubleTree hotel in downtown Austin, alongside a “*CORRUPTION*” sign with a red slash through it. Behind him was the state office building where Ken Paxton works. Talarico, succumbing to a little trash talk, slammed Paxton as “the most corrupt politician in America,” argued that the affordability crisis is a direct result of the corruption crisis, and detailed his program for expunging billionaire money from politics. His speech was aimed at five TV cameramen, two newspaper reporters, and a handful of local influencers. There was no one else there.

At Talarico’s campaign office afterward, the mood was light. Everyone loved Paxton’s reactive tweet: “He chose to pull this desperate stunt on the same day I secured a historic agreement, giving over 2 million eggs to Texas food banks.” Eggs? And that morning a poll from Emerson College had Talarico leading Crockett by nine points. She was trouncing him among Black voters, but he was winning with whites and Latinos. The poll was just a data point—subsequent polls had the race even or Crockett leading—but it sustained the team’s optimism.

Antonio Esparza showed Talarico a rough cut of a video from the Paxton event. Social media is the campaign’s first priority, ahead of press coverage and fund-raising: it reaches voters directly, and it spurs donations online.

Frowning, Talarico watched himself saying, “This is how we build a government of, by, and for the people.” Esparza rendered his verdict with a swiping gesture: “I scrolled.”

“Brutal,” Talarico said, and watched some more. “Let’s take out ‘We must.’ That’s a very politician thing to say.” Even as he cut, he lamented the necessity: “I love what we wrote, but everyone’s brain is broken.”

Gina Hinojosa came in and took a look. “Tying affordability to corruption is *good*,” she said. “Why did we lose it?”

“It took so long to get to the meat,” Talarico replied. Hinojosa looked reproachful. “I’m competing against the cute dog and the shocking accident!” he explained. “I’m worried about people scrolling past because it looks like a politician giving a speech.”

“That’s what you are,” Esparza said, matter-of-factly.

Crockett has built an ardent social-media following by presenting herself as a feisty avatar of resistance. Talarico often suggests that his opponents are more errant than evil, still capable of being redeemed through Sunday-school values and constitutional principle. Esparza said that, in 2023, the team had to decide between two posts for its first TikTok: “One was straight conflict, James back-miking Candy Noble”—the sponsor of the Ten Commandments bill—“and owning her. Everything social media loves. The other was a slow-burn cut of the same exchange that was longer, deeper, and more personal, about his own faith. The team voted, and I lost, so we put the longer one up—and it got six million views. That post spoke to so many people’s frustration about how the religious right has turned religion into an instrument of hate. And the *respectful* piece was huge. You could see he liked Candy Noble.”

Talarico told me, “A lot of Democrats are doing the conflict thing, and a lot are doing the ignore-the-conflict thing. But I think we’re the only ones doing ‘conflict plus heal the conflict.’ ” How much of that is predicated on nonviolence theory? “All of it,” he said. “Christianity and nonviolence are synonyms, in my book. God takes human form and is beaten and tortured and murdered—and he doesn’t respond with violence. It was probably the most famous act of nonviolence in history.”

A few days later, Hinojosa and J. T. Ennis, the press secretary, prepped Talarico for an endorsement-screening Zoom with the San Antonio *Express-News* and the Austin *American-Statesman*. It’s unclear whether such endorsements matter much anymore, but everyone has agreed to pretend that they do.

They ran through Israel, Venezuela, and ICE raids. Ennis considered what Talarico should do if asked about the differences between him and Crockett: “You could say, ‘Look, I encourage you to check our website, because I spell

out our positions very clearly, but I can't really speak to Jasmine's positions, because she hasn't laid any out yet.' ”

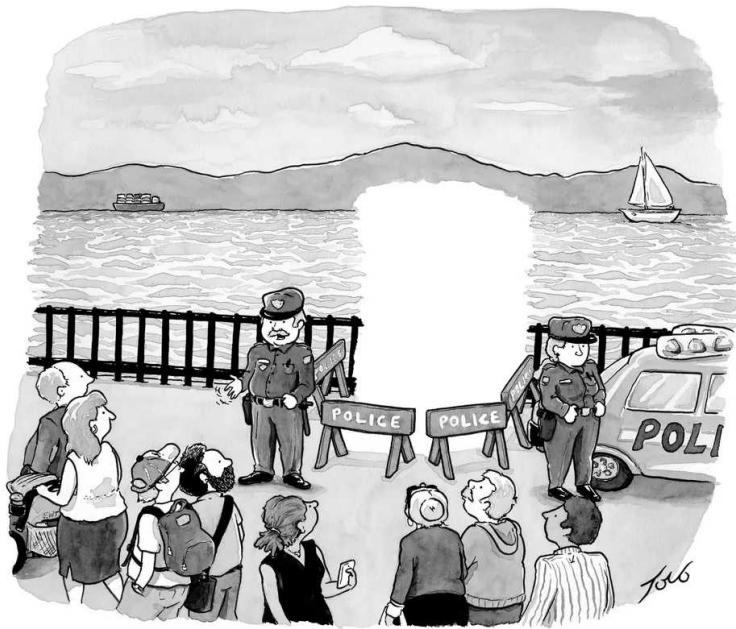
“Whoa!” Talarico said, laughing.

“Do it in your James Talarico way, but . . .”

“It's shady,” Talarico said. “How about more direct? ‘Jasmine and I share a lot of values. I would not have voted to send offensive weapons to Netanyahu. I'm the only candidate in the race who is not taking corporate PAC money. And, if you're looking for a specific policy, I would sign on to a congressional stock-trading ban.’ ”

As Talarico logged on to the Zoom, he amused his staff by muttering, as if cramming for a test, “Two million eggs, two million eggs.” When he was asked about the candidates’ differences, he gently stressed that, unlike Crockett, he’d flipped a Republican seat: “If you don’t win, you can’t help people.” *I’m actually electable.* “I say all that while respecting Congresswoman Crockett immensely,” he added. “I consider her a friend.”

Many of the state’s political operatives believe that Crockett would be a less viable candidate in the general election, but Talarico’s campaign has avoided making that argument directly. Instead, he posted a video that welcomed her to the race and reminded his supporters to “always treat Congresswoman Crockett with the utmost respect.”



When the comedians Bowen Yang and Matt Rogers recently discussed Crockett's chances on their podcast, "Las Culturistas," Rogers said, "Don't waste your money sending to Jasmine Crockett," and Yang said, "I must agree." Both men were swiftly accused of racism and sexism, and they apologized. Crockett told the *Washington Post*, "I really do think that the host said the quiet part out loud, which basically was: If a white man couldn't do it, then why would a Black woman even have the audacity to think that she could?"

The line between acknowledging bigotry and embodying it is blurry. A Democratic strategist told me, "Operatives don't want to be caught saying stuff like 'My fear is that a Black woman can't win in Texas.' So they say, 'She can't persuade, she can't drive urban turnout.'" Operatives—like voters—can succumb to a form of pragmatic bias: perceiving that other people may be less inclined to vote for a Black woman, they may withhold their own support. For his part, Talarico felt that he needed to work harder to overcome Black voters' skepticism of someone who, on the person-of-color spectrum, sits between a golf ball and cream cheese. "If we win this primary but we alienate Black voters in Texas, it's not a win," he told me. "There is no way to flip this seat without Black Texans—period, full stop."

In November, Talarico had gone to South Dallas to meet with Black leaders, including a prominent pastor and the president of the Black Chamber of Commerce. They didn't love how he answered the first question, about why he cared about Black businesses (he opened with "I care about all businesses"), or the second, about how he'd invest in South Dallas ("I don't think anyone is looking for a handout—they're looking for a hand up"). Cimajie Best, a manager at Dallas Area Rapid Transit, looked around the table and asked, "Are his answers resonating with you?" They weren't.

Talarico asked the leaders for feedback, assuring them, "You won't hurt my feelings, I promise!" Leaning in, they told him to lose the "all businesses" language and to act like the puncher Black people need—no offense. ("You're good!") Talarico finds his audience as if he were twiddling a knob on an old car radio, his voice growing richer and deeper as he tunes in to the local station and begins to hum along.

Someone asked, "How do you get to that working-class white person that mathematically I know you need without demonizing Black people?" Talarico said that he'd built a coalition in his first race by "finding a new common enemy. I wish human beings didn't need a common enemy, but apparently we do. So let's just give them a better enemy than one of us." At a recent event, he continued, "a few people used the phrase 'welfare queens,' which feels like it's 1985, and I said, 'The real welfare queens are the fifty-five wealthiest corporations that don't pay a penny in federal taxes. It's the billionaires who are literally getting a tax writeoff for flying on a private jet.' That's not just a convenient political pivot—that is the actual enemy." A *Washington Post* analysis found that, since 2000, federal political giving by the wealthiest hundred Americans has risen a hundred and fortyfold; in 2024, more than eighty per cent of it went to Republicans. Talarico's first priority as a senator would be passing legislation to limit giving through *PACs* and super *PACs*; to forbid federal legislators to trade stocks; and to outlaw gerrymandering. "I don't mean to dehumanize anyone," he went on, "but being a billionaire is a voluntary class. If you don't want to be a billionaire, I have plenty of ideas for how to use that money!" Laughter rolled around the table.

Christian Manuel, a Black state legislator from Southeast Texas, told me, "The thing I love most about James is that he's not all 'I'm almost Black

because I went to the church barbecue.’ He’s fine being the white guy in the room. Sometimes it seems like he’s clueless about what it’s like to be Black or Hispanic—and then you see him two weeks later, and he’ll tell you what Black business leaders need, or what Asian women are concerned about, and it’s obvious that he was really listening.” Manuel made that observation in November. After Crockett announced her candidacy, he switched his endorsement to her.

As the campaign took shape, Crockett stumped in urban areas, trying to awaken and broaden the base; more than a million Texas Democrats who voted in 2020 stayed home in 2024. Someone familiar with her thinking told me, “The definition of swing voters is changing, from suburban moderates who’d swing between parties to young, urban, low-propensity voters who have swung between Trump and the couch. They’re potentially a blue ocean.” This approach relies heavily on a candidate’s charisma, but, as Crockett observed, “if there was anyone with a recipe—well, they would have already won.”

Talarico believed that the persuadable middle, some twenty per cent of the electorate, was preponderantly young and Latino. One of his showcase events was a rally in the Rio Grande Valley with the Tejano music star Bobby Pulido, who’s running for Congress.

He still hoped for a broader coalition. In January, he and his aides headed down Highway 290 to Houston, to “say hello” at a Black Methodist church. As they brainstormed his talk, Talarico said, “I think we should do an M.L.K. thing.” The holiday was two days away. “A lot of people, me included, are angry that M.L.K. Day gets so sanitized. Everybody who supports the secret police force”—ICE—“will have their office tweet out the obligatory King quote. He’s become the civic Santa Claus.” (Ken Paxton’s office issued a press release declaring that it was fulfilling King’s vision by targeting D.E.I. initiatives.)

Esparza said, “Do you want to tie in ‘Love is not weak’? I’m hearing from so many people who are worried that you’re not a fighter.” They’d auditioned that theme at two rallies, but it was long and messy—four minutes, rather than a ninety-second chunk that would plug neatly into his

stump speech. “And is it weird to be a white boy in a Black church talking about M.L.K.?”

As Talarico thought that over, he asked the driver to pull into a Chevron; his fund-raising team wanted him to make a video. He stood near an overflowing dumpster, backlit by a low winter sun filtering through a thicket of hackberry and live oak. Miming holding out his phone, he said, “Seeing this beautiful sunset inspires me to make a fund-raising video.” He tried a few other takes, riffing, “I’m here at the fucking gas station”; “I hope you’ll support this dumpster fire of a campaign”—being the unruly kid on the bus.

Talarico hates everything about fund-raising. Schmoozing wealthy litigators over salmon *gougères* is not his element; at home, he subsists on ramen. He told me that he especially hates provoking unfounded panic: “ ‘If you don’t donate now, I don’t know what we’re going to do.’ ” I observed that he’d recently made a video about the “tough decisions” his campaign faced. “Those videos perform twice as well,” he said. “There’s a reason I’m compromising my soul. I even get mad at people out there: ‘Why does this gimmick work on you?’ I’ve told the team we can never lie, so they’ve avoided the ‘triple match’ if we haven’t gotten someone to triple match, and the ‘We’re drowning.’ But ‘John Cornyn outraised us’? We did that because it’s true—even if it’s not my biggest concern right now. So it’s *disingenuous and manipulative*, but not false.” He chuckled, darkly. By mid-January, the campaign had raised \$14.5 million, its goal for the entire primary.

The two candidates’ only encounter on the same stage, a debate sponsored by the A.F.L.-C.I.O., was strikingly temperate. Talarico and Crockett avoided clashing, focussing instead on making their own case. “I was very proud of how it went,” he told me afterward. In early February, his campaign was outspending hers on TV and digital ads by seventeen to one. Crockett’s campaign, relying on name recognition, was far less visible. Talarico said, “I feel like Muhammad Ali is having an off night, and I’m surprised and happy about that.”

Then a TikTok influencer named Morgan Thompson posted a description of an off-the-record meeting with Talarico, in which she’d expressed her fear that his campaign wasn’t prioritizing Black concerns. She said that Talarico

told her, about Crockett, “I signed up to run against a mediocre Black man, not a formidable and intelligent Black woman.”

Her claim might have languished there—Thompson also expressed suspicions that Talarico’s campaign was responsible for deleting her Instagram account—but Colin Allred saw her post and blew his stack. He released a video in which he said, “We’re tired of folks using praise for Black women to mask criticism for Black men,” and argued that, while Talarico portrayed himself as “saving religion for the Democratic Party,” Raphael Warnock, the Black Baptist preacher and Georgia senator, was already doing that. “You’re not saying anything unique,” he said. “You’re just saying it looking like you do.”

His fiery post made news. In a statement, Talarico said that Thompson had mischaracterized his remark: “I described Congressman Allred’s method of campaigning as mediocre—but his life and service are not. I would never attack him on the basis of race.” He told me, “The whole thing is pretty hurtful on a bunch of levels. But mostly with Colin, because he didn’t call me”—to ask what really happened—“before he took to the internet.”

Crockett responded with a medley of observations. She told the Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*, “Have I ever experienced Mr. Talarico say anything like this? Absolutely not.” She added that she hoped “we can focus on the real concerns.” But she told other reporters that Talarico’s statement confirmed Thompson’s account: “Basically, it’s all been agreed it was said.” (“The opposite,” Talarico told me.)

A well-known Texas legislator said, “The whole thing felt very junior varsity, very ‘Nobody’s ready for prime time.’” Talarico had the same concern: “I talked with a few people”—Democratic elders—“about ‘How do we keep this from spiralling out of control?’ Because we have a real shot to win in November. This is *doable*. And they said, ‘It’s three more weeks. Put your head down and get through it.’”

Last week, Talarico caught a break: Stephen Colbert interviewed him for his show. On that night’s broadcast, Colbert announced that CBS’s lawyers, bowing to inhibitory new F.C.C. guidelines on political interviews, had resisted airing the segment, so it would run online. As Colbert hyped the

censorship controversy, the clip attracted more than eighty-five million views. In the interview, the crowd applauded as Talarico argued that right-wingers were “baptizing their partisanship and calling that Christianity,” and broke into cheers when he said, “I think Donald Trump is worried that we’re about to flip Texas.”

For Talarico, though, even winning the primary wasn’t a certainty. Before he left Houston, we had dinner at an Italian place and spoke about the tension between politics and other vital matters, such as his self-image. “I have to be proud of my life,” he said. “And I’d much rather be a member of St. Andrew’s than a U.S. senator.” But, I said, you’ve also declared that you *must* win this election to help preserve our democracy. “Yes,” he said, slowly, “that’s absolutely true, too. Sometimes it feels like those beliefs are in conflict, but I think the stances we can be proud of—that we wouldn’t put out dirt on an opponent if we had it or change positions to win votes—are also the stances that will help us win.”

I suggested that, if the Devil wanted to tempt Talarico, he’d present a way to win by only mildly besmirching himself (a foolproof fund-raising scheme, or a super *PAC* that did all the dirty work). The Devil would argue that helping flip the Senate would enable him to improve the lives of three hundred and forty million Americans. He would argue, in other words, that a politician ought to practice politics. “The temptation story in the wilderness is exactly that—offering Jesus all the kingdoms of the world,” Talarico said. “And it would be tempting, because I value the cause so highly. But the central belief in my faith is that the means *are* the ends.” He took a sip of red wine. “If we lose, it would feel not great. But—but!—it’s the belief in the Resurrection, right? The belief that something beautiful would come out of this loss.”

Talarico sees his Senate run as preparation for the ministry. I came to wonder whether he might be what seminarians call a “tentmaker”—someone whose calling lies outside the walls of the Church, like the Apostle Paul, who made tents to support himself. “I think James’s speeches are coming from a deeper place than he realizes,” Jim Rigby, the St. Andrew’s pastor, told me. “In a rally, when James stands up for people and principles, that’s as spiritual as anything in the Church.”

Talarico disagreed. “If you put your faith in a politician, that’s just asking for disappointment.” If he wins, he intends to serve two terms at most. “Power, fame, wealth—they’re like radiation,” he said. “You should wear a hazmat suit, as if you’re going into Chernobyl. You go in, you do your job, and you get out as quickly as you can and go shower.”

Wouldn’t the Devil suggest that two terms won’t be sufficient to fix a country this broken? “I believe we’re at a moment of transition at the end of the Trump era,” Talarico said. “The pendulum swings, and dog-eat-dog periods lead to periods of community—the Gilded Age leads to the Progressive Era, and so on. I believe that we’re part of a movement that will push the country back to service and honesty and compassion.” He grinned boyishly, imagining it. “And then, of course, selfishness and greed and hate and division will probably come back. But I’m hoping we can defeat it for our round, and then I can go back to a small life.” ♦

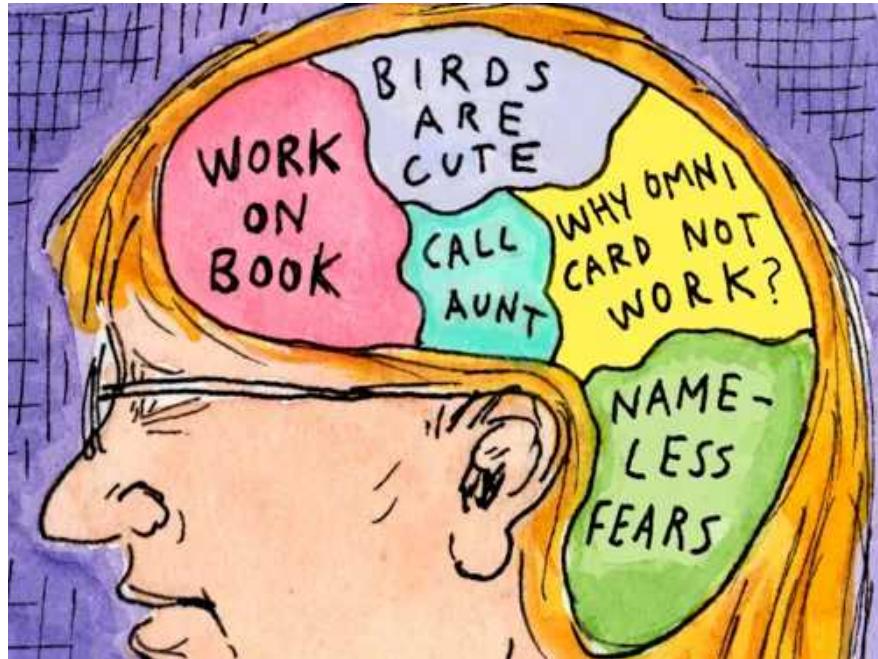
Sketchbook

Enlightenment

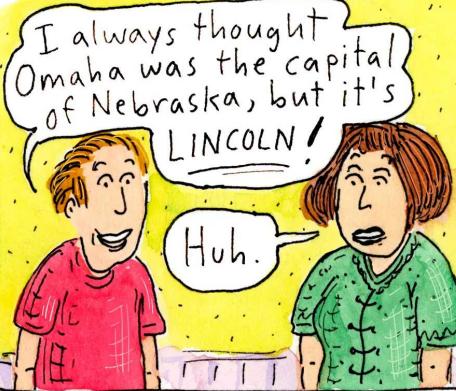
Until last week, I believed that “fullback,” “halfback,” and “quarterback” were terms that referred to players’ sizes.

By Roz Chast

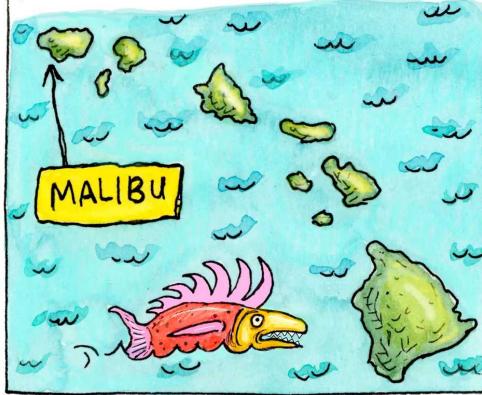
February 23, 2026



Most misconceptions are neutral or just plain dumb, but not all.



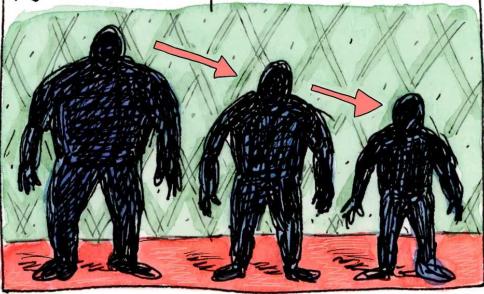
For example, for most of my life, I thought Malibu was in Hawaii.



And my husband thought Baskin-Robbins was "Basket of Robins" throughout his childhood.



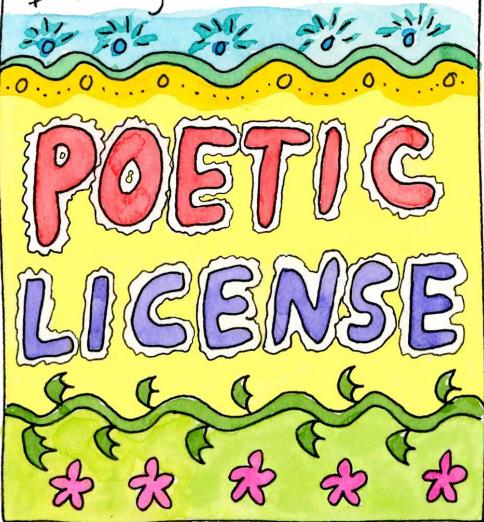
Until last week, I believed that "fullback," "halfback," and "quarterback" were terms that referred to players' sizes.



I wasn't NUTS. I knew the quarterback wasn't literally a quarter the size of a full-back. Just that he was, like, TWO SIZES DOWN.



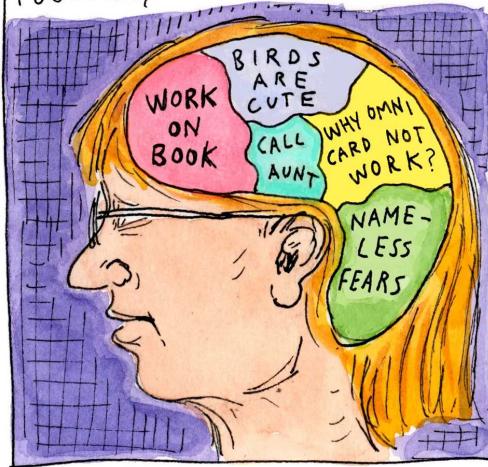
I thought of it as



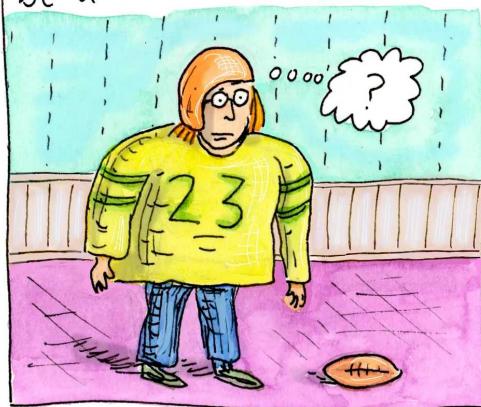
My husband tried to explain what the terms really meant.



But I don't care about football, so I didn't listen.



If I liked football and took lessons, maybe I could be a one-sixteenth back.



R.Chr

Shouts & Murmurs

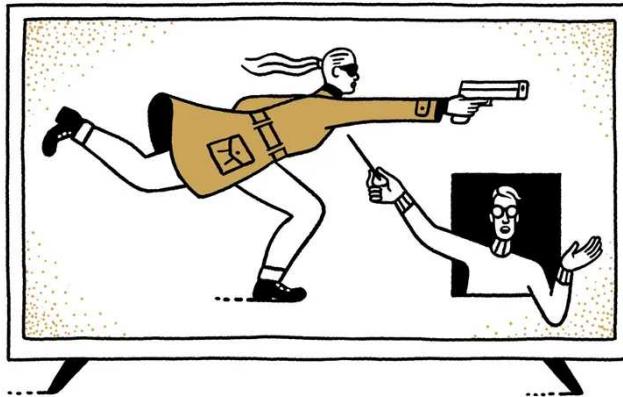
- [Say It Again: A Treatment](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Say It Again: A Treatment

By John Kenney

February 23, 2026



Matt Damon says Netflix wants plots reiterated “three or four times in the dialogue” for phone-distracted viewers.

—*The Hollywood Reporter*.

Fade in on an establishing shot of Gare du Nord in Paris (which is in France). We then cut to a platform inside the station. People hustle by. We move in on a couple, early thirties, Desmond and Clara. They wear nametags so that we know this.

CLARA: Say it.

DESMOND: The fountain at Saint-Sulpice. One week. Midnight.

CLARA: Good. And if I’m not there . . .

DESMOND: You'll be there.

CLARA: And where am I going?

DESMOND: To London.

CLARA: And why am I going to London?

DESMOND: Because it's a nice city?

CLARA: No. Because I'm an American spy and I have to find a Russian double agent posing as M.I.6.

DESMOND: Whoa. Slow down. That was a lot. Who are you again?

CLARA: I'm a spy.

DESMOND: And who do you work for?

CLARA: I work for C.I.A.

DESMOND: I'm a spy, too, aren't I?

CLARA: Yes. But your cover is working in marketing at soft-drink company.

DESMOND: We have a new low-calorie energy drink launching soon. Too-Matcha-Papaya. I named it.

CLARA: Stop talking. Just remember. Fountain. Saint-Sulpice. One week. Midnight.

DESMOND: I'll be there. Just quickly, though. Is there any chance we could do it earlier? Midnight's kind of late.

CLARA: Seriously, what the fuck, Desmond?

DESMOND: I'm attracted to you but can't admit it.

CLARA: I'm not attracted to you.

DESMOND: O.K. then.

A train whistle is heard. Clara runs to board the train. Desmond exits the station and gets in a cab.

DESMOND (to driver): My friend is going to London. She's a spy. She has to find a Russian double agent at M.I.6.

CAB DRIVER: Cool. Where to?

Flashback of Clara's entire life in roughly one minute. Smiling as a child. Sledding on a snowy hill. Her parents' execution by a Russian gang. An idyllic college campus. Playing school soccer. Her teammates' execution by a Russian gang. Moving to New York. Going to a party. Everyone at the party being killed by a Russian gang. Training at Langley. Then back to present day. Establishing shot of London.

A TITLE: London. England. Where M.I.6 is located. The "M.I." stands for "Military Intelligence." It's where spies work. And where Clara is going to find a double agent. Look. There she is now. You remember her.

Clara walks into M.I.6, but, as she does so, she turns to camera and mouths, "I'm Clara the spy." She also smiles and does a raised-eyebrow thing, like, "Can you believe this shit?"

Cut to an office overlooking the Thames, which is a river in London, which is the capital of England. A man looks out the window as Clara enters, his back to her.

MARTIN: Chanel No. 5.

CLARA: No, it's Clara.

The man is Martin, and as he turns we see that he is very handsome and does not look like a double agent, but he is.

MARTIN: I meant your perfume. You smell like my nana.

CLARA: Oh. Thank you.

MARTIN: So. You took the train from Paris.

CLARA: Yes.

MARTIN: And your parents were murdered by a Russian gang.

CLARA: Yes, they were.

MARTIN: O.K. then. Well. I'd like to give you the chance to go after them. But know that it's dangerous. And it might lead to surprising discoveries.

CLARA: Like what?

MARTIN: I had nothing to do with it.

Martin hands her an address.

MARTIN: I just handed you an address here in London. That's where the Russians are, in a safe house not far from here. Maybe go kill them.

CLARA: O.K. You and I had sex once.

MARTIN: I know that. I was there.

CLARA: Let's not let the sex we had interfere with this assignment to kill the Russians here in London.

MARTIN: We won't. We're professionals. God, you're pretty. Let's have sex.

They kiss and have sex. Later, in bed . . .

MARTIN: I'm not a double agent.

CLARA: I never said you were.

MARTIN: Good. Then it's settled.

CLARA: I'm going to go kill the Russians at the address you gave me.

MARTIN: Thanks.

Exterior shot of a town house in Mayfair. Inside, tough-looking Russians speak in Russian, saying things like “Is fun to kill!,” which is subtitled, and then laugh and toast with vodka. These guys love killing, and also vodka.

Clara bursts through a window and kills them all.

CLARA: That’s for my parents and my soccer team and those people at that party.

Clara turns to see Martin aiming a gun at her.

MARTIN: Remember when I said that I wasn’t a double agent?

CLARA: Yes.

MARTIN: I was lying.

CLARA: So you’re a double agent.

MARTIN: That’s what I’m saying, yes.

CLARA: And you’re going to kill me.

MARTIN: Basically, yes. Because I’m a Russian double agent.

They stare at each other.

CLARA: You think you can pull the trigger faster than I can reach into my bag, which is by my feet, and find my gun amid the other stuff in the bag and aim it at you and fire?

MARTIN: I do . . .

Clara quickly kneels, going through her bag, removing lip balm, tissues, a half-eaten bagel, her phone, Werther’s candies, and, finally, her gun.

MARTIN: You make me laugh . . .

Except in the time it took Clara to do all that, Martin has spaced out. Clara shoots Martin, and he falls dead. Well, almost dead.

CLARA: I just shot you dead.

MARTIN: I can't believe you just shot me dead.

We might cut to the fountain at Saint-Sulpice. But we might not, as that was mentioned a long time ago and no one will remember. But if we were to cut to the fountain at Saint-Sulpice, where Desmond waits alone . . .

CLARA: You waited.

DESMOND: You told me to earlier. Although I was just about to leave.

CLARA: Thank you.

DESMOND: Did you find and kill the double agent?

CLARA: Yes. I shot him. And I cleaned out my Birkin bag.

DESMOND: Cool. We had an amazing launch for the new drink.

CLARA: I'm happy for you.

DESMOND: Let's have sex.

They laugh because it's a stupid idea.

Note: Throughout, we may employ a stage manager, not unlike in "Our Town," to describe precisely what's happening. ♦

Fiction

- Something Familiar

Fiction

Something Familiar

By Mary Gaitskill

February 22, 2026



She arrived at J.F.K. just past midnight after a four-hour flight delay. Her mind was blurry and her heart felt like a deep crater with something lurking at the bottom of it. It was her first trip to New York in more than a decade. She had come back to attend a memorial for a formerly close friend, Carley, with whom she had shared a life that was now alien to her.

Though the airport was well appointed and maintained, it appeared nonetheless on the ragged edge. Barely present workers dragged garbage bins, arranged displays of crappy snacks, and wiped counters with slow, heavy movements. Travellers sat slumped staring at phones or snoozed under their coats. It took forever for the bags to roll onto the relentlessly coruscating belt. In large cities, she preferred old-school taxis to apps, and at least the line was short; the driver energetically swung her bag into the trunk with his large arm and welcomed her to New York.

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

He was a big man who looked to be about sixty, comfortably rooted in his station of muscle and fat. His sloped shoulders suggested bodily power that was sleepy and sly; his large head and dark, badly cut hair amplified the weight and solidity of him, but his lips were sensitive and a little slack, as if yearning for something he'd been long deprived of.

She noticed all of this in a flash; she had developed the habit of fast, detailed observation in her previous life, when her ability to read someone's physical affect helped her to know if she was safe with that person. Or not.

Also noticed: he had what she guessed was a St. Christopher medal hanging from the rearview; he didn't use a G.P.S.

When she remarked on the latter, he said, "I've lived here all my life. I've been driving for nearly thirty years, on and off. I don't need a machine to tell me anything."

He spoke with a Queens accent and a blurting boyish delivery that, somewhere in her, rang some muffled bell. She smiled and said, "That's great."

He nodded into the mirror, showing his eyes. "Better to use my brain," he said. "I know things the machine doesn't know." She murmured in agreement, then entered the hotel address on her phone just in case.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Mary Gaitskill read "Something Familiar."](#)

Moving faster now, they drove into a maze of monstrous complexes and overpasses—through chaotic fields of battered trailers, snarled fencing, jumbles of orange traffic cones and barrels, concrete berms, puzzling sites of stunned obsolescence, structures that could not remember what they had been for—then onto the highway, that zone of signage and speed which felt to her like a suspension of place and time.

"So, where'd you fly in from?" he asked.

"The Bay Area," she said. "Marin County."

Again, he showed his eyes in the mirror and said, “Where’s that?”

“Near San Francisco. Kind of like a suburb?”

“Oh,” he said. “That’s cool. At least you’re not in San Francisco. It sounds like a war zone—with all the crazy homeless people and drugs . . .”

“I wouldn’t call it a war zone. Yeah, there’s homeless people, but mostly they’re not going to bother you. You just have to pay attention to what’s around you.”

He nodded, his big head canted subtly toward her. “I get it. Same here in places. But it sounds worse there.” He glanced in the mirror again, as if assessing her.

“I’m not sure,” she said. “I used to live here, for, like, twenty years. It was back in the eighties. There were a lot of drugs and homeless people.”

“Yeah,” he said, “it was bad then. Giuliani really cleaned it up, but of course he’s gone.” Eyes in the mirror: “But you’re not *from* here.”

“No. I moved here from Kentucky.”

“That’s a big move! Why’d you come here?”

“To . . . I guess to make it. To do something I couldn’t do in Kentucky.”

“What?” His voice nice, a little teasing. “What did you do?”

What did she do? Her past appeared before her in rushed images, like a low-budget music video from the eighties. The camera of memory panned over random smiling faces, bright and young in the darkness, spangled with jewelry and gaudy makeup; people walking in a trance of fantasy, of glamour, haughty and dressed in cheap clothes tricked up to look . . . to look like . . . the dancing, snatches of music, joyful melancholy. She felt it deeply, like a drug:

And I try to get through
And I try to talk to you

But there's something stopping me from getting through

There had been a lot of drugs, free, or almost free. She remembered somebody had once offered to give her and Carley coke if they would just pull up their shirts and kiss each other, so they did, holding hands, laughing, crossing a threshold together, dancing to her favorite song: "Nowhere girl, you're living in a dream . . ."

"I wanted to write for magazines," she said. "Women's magazines, the fun ones, the fashion ones that also did real articles."

"Oh," he said, and his voice approved. Again she heard that subtle bell. "How did that work out?"

"It was hard, really hard. When I finally got a job, it was an assistant position that didn't pay enough to live on. I had to do other work, too."

He nodded vigorously. "That's how it goes when you're starting out," he said. "I've done a lot myself. Worked in a print shop, a garage, delivered newspapers for a while. I liked driving a cab the best because of the independence—my dad used to drive, and when he retired he passed his medallion to me, so I'm free and clear. I could cash it in and retire anytime. But I like to keep active. And I like meeting people—some people."

"I did a lot of things, too," she said.

Nude art model (poorly paid), waitress (she got fired), hostess (she wasn't charming enough), whore (bingo). That was another threshold she'd crossed with Carley; they had both started at the same place, a "house," rather than outcall, which they'd agreed was too dangerous. They did it on an emergency basis, off and on for maybe five years. Neither took it seriously; it seemed of a piece with the pleasing artifice of clubs and magazines, an almost comical piece, more real and more absurd than dating. And safer, actually, on an emotional level; none of the men she met there could really hurt her.

"So did you do what you wanted? Did you write for the magazines?"

“Yeah,” she said. “Eventually, I worked my way up. It was fun for a while. I even interviewed some movie stars, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Sharon Stone—”

“Wow!”

Once they were rooted enough in their “real” lives—the magazine work for her, and some fiction publications in small magazines for Carley—they stopped “tricking.” It was an oddly nostalgic bond between them, but they rarely spoke of it in the increasing distance of their adult years, when their exchanges were naturally given over to news of marriages, births, careers that surged and subsided like love, and illnesses and losses communicated first by phone, then in texts, and finally via public posts. But the night before she boarded the plane she had dreamed of that time: there was a secret passage between the brightly lit cubicles and frenetic layout boards of some composite editorial office that was also a bar, and a warren of bedrooms where naked men lay expectantly—a passage she traversed with shy exuberance, holding a plastic cup of liquor from the office/bar.

“You don’t even have an accent,” he said.

“What?” She blinked as light from somewhere streamed disorientingly across her face.

“A Southern accent. You said Kentucky?”

“Oh, yeah. People don’t really have that kind of accent in Louisville. It’s a cosmopolitan city.”

“Too bad,” he said. “I like it when people sound like where they’re from. Some people from Queens try to sound like they’re not from there, but I’d never do that. If anything, I’m proud of it.”

“You should be,” she said, insincerely and yet with genuine feeling for his pride. Plus the persistent *ping* of something familiar—what was it? She looked out the window at the landscape just visible beyond the sound barriers: tenaciously squatting homes, vast, anonymous complexes, self-storage, auto-body-repair shops, and decrepit strip malls, hotels, and billboards, one of which jarringly declared “I Was Hurt In NYC.” Oh, she

thought. Of course. *Of course.* That guy. Same build, Queens accent, probably Italian. He'd been young, much younger than the usual client— younger even than she was, almost a boy. He was big, strong, and crudely put together, with a layer of sensual fat that softened his muscularity and gave his size a vulnerable aspect. He had a huge erection but he kept saying that he didn't want sex. He wanted to respect her. He wanted to take her out as a girlfriend. "No," she said. "I can't do that."

"So what do you do now?" the driver asked. "You married, you have kids?"

"I'm retired. I'm married, but we don't have kids. I married late." He was silent a long beat. She asked, "What about you?"

"I'm the opposite. I have two kids, but to be honest I can't say I really have a wife. I'm legally still married, but . . . I don't even know where she is. For years now. I love my kids, though. They turned out fantastic. Worth all the . . . mess."

"That sounds hard."

"It wasn't just hard. It was tragic."

"Stop! You can't really want a date with a . . . you know. This isn't the place to ask a girl out!"

"Yeah, I know! But you don't gotta be a 'you know.' As soon as I saw you, I thought, She doesn't belong here. I'd like to talk to her, go out."

"Thank you," she said. "But—"

"Give me a chance. I won't treat you like a whore. I'll be good to you, I promise."

"If I met you some other way it would be different," she lied. "But—"

"It was love at first sight. At least for me. She seemed so sweet! But, for her, it was just about a green card."

"Where did you meet her?"

“At my brother’s wedding. She was working behind the drinks table, pouring the wine. But she was the most beautiful woman there. Dominican, just got here. Full of beans and vinegar. I stood there and talked to her all night. She didn’t have much English, but it didn’t matter.”

They entered a tunnel—she didn’t remember which one—heavy and deep but also bright and hypnotic with its symmetry of shapes, a dreamish blur of lights, green, blue, white, sudden feverish red, its lulling sound distortion, natural comb filtering that subtly affected the muscles of her heart: some frequencies amplified, others cancelled out.

“Are you scared of me? Don’t be. I’m not a bad guy. I don’t want just sex. I want something real.”

“Why did you come here, then?”

Or maybe she hadn’t said that. She didn’t remember what she’d said, only that it had gone on for the whole hour, and that he’d said, “I’m lonely,” and “Please,” and “Give me a chance.” And that, in the end, she’d given him a fake number and yet another fake name. Why had she done that? Maybe because she’d held him and tried to comfort him and, after that, it was impossible not to enter more deeply into the pretend.



“She turned out to be not so sweet. We both had tempers and we fought too much. And then she developed a drinking problem—I mean, bottles hidden under the sink, sloppy in front of the kids, burnt dinner, no dinner. Even worse things.” He shook his head. “Disgusting.”

Had she said, “I’m lonely, too”? She might have. It would have been her idea of nice. It would also have been true.

“Finally I threw her out. Told her she could come back when she cleaned up. And she did, but then the drinking started again, rinse, repeat. Thank God for my sisters—they helped me raise the kids. Thank God for the kids.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Why? It’s not your fault.”

At the end of that day she’d quit. Because she’d felt bad and also because of what she thought might happen. Which did happen. A few days after the incident, the woman who managed the place called her and asked, “What went on between you and that big *gavone*? ” The guy had come in asking for her; they’d told him she’d left so he’d picked another girl and gone into a room with her. They immediately came back out, the man holding the woman in front of him with a knife at her throat. “Tell me where that bitch is,” he said, “or I’ll cut this bitch.” They were able to talk him down, and no one got hurt but—

“Look,” the driver said. “The moon.” They’d emerged from the tunnel and before them shone a luminous, nearly full moon. “It’s a gibbous moon,” he said. “I think.”

“How do you know?”

“You’re surprised I know?”

“Well, most people don’t. I don’t.”

“I don’t know for sure. But my son got into astronomy when he was in, like, fifth grade? I even got him a telescope.” He pointed out the windshield. “That looks waxing gibbous to me.”

•

They rode in silence for some blocks.

Looking at the moon, she said, “It’s like we’re in a garden.”

“Yeah.”

A strange night garden of worn buildings that gave the impression that they were falling down even as they stood erect. There were hoary restaurants hawking faux comfort, fancy shops under crude metal shutters, narrow doorways sheltering ragged heaps of person, blunt neon (“*DELI*,” “*GROCERY*”) filling the windows of tiny twenty-four-hour shops, refrigerated cases of bright-colored cans behind blurred-glass doors, blurred humans walking out, clutching bags of emergency junk food.

She turned away and pored through her phone, looking at texts from her husband and messages about the gathering the next day, her pictures of Carley as a happy wife, a proud mom, a proud survivor, brave and joyful in her yard full of flowers. Carley young and bold, her large, lambent eyes lined with black, her dark hair still lush and animal-thick, her full lips set in an expression of stubborn will. Years after she’d left New York while Carley stayed, Carley used to call her drunk and cry about what a failure she was, how she’d never fully been herself, so no wonder she’d never fulfilled her potential as a fiction writer. “I have all these clothes and shoes I spent so much money on! And I never wore them even once!” she wailed. It was idiotic, spoiled, yet, in some strange way, it rang true. That strength of will so visible in her young face—she was probably right that it had never found authentic expression.

The car stopped. “This it?” the driver asked. Dazedly, she tapped her credit card to pay the fare and climbed from the car as he retrieved her bag and night traffic susurrated past. “It was nice talking,” he said and, with forthright eyes, put out his hand. Surprised, she took it, held it firmly, and said “Yes” and “Take care.”

•

He drove away thinking, *Interesting lady*, and then, *Why did I talk to her so much?* It was as if he'd wanted to explain himself, but why? He'd barely registered her looks, but her voice had pricked him in a way that he didn't get. It was funny, sometimes, how you could react to a person you'd never see again. Probably it was just boredom: he was tired, she was his last fare, and now he could go home. He drove on autopilot, scanning disconnected thoughts—clean the litter box, refill the water bowl, the cat's stiff tail with its little curl at the top (the cat belonged to his daughter; he had to call her in the morning), buy eggs, card game tomorrow, pay for his parking space—all the while more conscious than usual of the not-thoughts stirring underneath. There was a bad feeling there somewhere, trying to find him.

•

Brushing her teeth, she marvelled that she hadn't thought about that incident for decades.

It was so like a man! No lonely woman would seek out a male prostitute and try to get him to be her boyfriend! It was a little contemptible, almost funny. But sad, too. He must have been in real pain. Maybe he'd wanted a date for a special occasion. Maybe he'd told his friends, "I met a girl, wait till you see her, she's cute"—oh, God! The thought made her cover her heart with both hands. And the other girl, the girl he'd held the knife to. Because of *her* lie.

•

Why had he agreed to take care of the cat? The animal was nice enough, but it made a mess, and the place was already a mess. He'd put off the dishes, they'd piled up, and the toilet was going to hell. It was like the worse it got the harder it was to do anything about, and the cat box stinking up the whole room definitely made it worse. Still, he was happy that his daughter trusted him to care for the animal. He was glad that she was having a vacation (Grand Canyon, fiancé's dime) before starting her new job (office manager in a dental office—excellent). He liked that she stood up for him to her brother, his son who barely talked to him now. His son was always a mama's boy, ruined by her, thirty years old and still a spoiled baby, playing the boy-hero: *If you talk about her like that again, Papa, I swear I'll never come*

back here! He put his hands on the sink and braced himself, took a long look in the mirror. Lumpy McFatface—they'd called him that. His own father, even. Who treated his grandkids a thousand times better than he treated his own son.

•

When she called her husband, they talked about it; he assured her that it wasn't her fault. She hadn't made the guy do that. Of course she'd lied—what else could she have done? "Do you think you were afraid of him in the moment?" he asked. She said, "I don't know," but that wasn't true. She hadn't been afraid. She'd felt pity and misery and an impulse to make him feel better that she couldn't follow through with.

•

Why was he even thinking about this? Because he'd told that woman about his son liking astronomy? Because he'd wanted her to know that he'd got the boy a telescope, that he was a good dad? Stupid! The cat watched him as he bent over to clean its box, awkwardly transferring its turds to a plastic bag. It followed him to the kitchen, happy for the same dry stuff it ate over and over. He poured the nuggets into the dish, poured himself a shot of amaro, drank it, poured another. He ought to repaint the cabinets, he thought. They looked dirty.

Why was everything looking dirty? He tried to focus on the good things: his wonderful daughter, the grandchildren he'd surely have soon, his friends, his house, even his son, who was doing well, though he wasn't sure what exactly he was doing. Quietly, he said, "Forgive me, Jesus, for my negative thoughts. Allow Your healing hand to heal me. Touch my soul, touch my mind with Your wisdom. Jesus, You are Lord. Amen." O.K., better.

He carried the shot into the bedroom, turned on his sleep movie with the sound off; even though he couldn't hear it, the beautiful theme music rippled in his brain. His thoughts calmed and fell into soft pieces. He took off his clothes, neatly folding the shirt and pants. He drank the shot and swallowed his piss-no-more pill. He got comfortable in the bed and turned off the light. The familiar movie images bathed him: Dr. Z touches a window covered by

frost crystals that turn into daffodils, a field of them. Birch trees, a cabin. Smiling, Dr. Z looks around, remembering. Inside a daffodil, a beautiful woman appears. . . . It was schlock but it worked. His eyes glazed and gradually closed as the dark not-thoughts rolled over him again.

•

There *had* been something else she could do. Other than lie. There was always something else you could do. Why had she been in that situation to start with? There was need, yes; the city was so expensive, and sometimes she could barely make the rent. Carley was in the same position, poor Carley calling from a pay phone after she'd been fired from yet another typing job, saying, "I'm going to have to do it again—can you go with me?"

But it wasn't just about need; there was a kind of defiance, too. The idea—no, the *feeling*—that you could do what you'd always been told was the most shameful and despised thing, and you could do it in your own way, you could acknowledge the despised thing, love it; you could make it beautiful, even. It was *yours*, after all, to do what you wanted with. *You*, and not some fucked-up society, got to say what it was. A song from that time blared in her head:

We can't afford to be innocent.
Stand up and face the enemy

A ballad of feminine defiance with an unmistakable strand of defeat folded in, a strand that somehow made it more powerful. "We will be invincible!" A dumb song, a fun song. What a weird time. She thought of that big angry boy; she thought of the woman he had threatened with a knife. She thought, I'm sorry, then got into bed.

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A woman walks away from him, proud and snooty. Who is she? Not his wife. His wife is crying in the corner, collapsed on the floor, drunk and bleeding from her nose and mouth. He wants to comfort her, but his son blocks the way, only six but somehow huge. This makes it look like he is the bad guy, but he didn't mean to do it. He begs them to understand and to help him, but

the bitch keeps walking away, swinging her snooty ass. She's the one who made this happen. She made him need something that he could never have. She treated him like a piece of garbage. He wants to kill her, smash her face until it's a pulp of flesh and bone. But he can't get at her, so he grabs another bitch, some poor random whore who's just standing there. He beats her, though he doesn't want to. She sobs and pleads, and he says, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," but he can't stop. There is a surge of music, as if this were a show where the same thing always has to happen.

Rage and confusion like twin demons shoved him from sleep. Heart hammering, bladder bursting, he sat up. Something shameful felt very near, almost on top of him. And the piss-prevention pill wasn't working; half awake, he stumbled out of bed and went to relieve himself. That was better. Still, when the cat rubbed on him, he wanted to grab it and throw it against the wall; as if it knew, it moved away. What was going on? Still standing there, he prayed, "My God, I am sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all of my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all . . ." He was too agitated to continue. He went back to bed and focussed on the screen. Well, this was actually a little funny. It was the part where Dr. Z gimped after Lara as she walks down the street. He is hobbled by his sick heart, and she is too far away; he can't walk properly or make himself heard. She just keeps going, her back perfectly straight. Dr. Z's face twists in pain; he collapses and dies of love. People come running.

He sighed and turned the thing off. Maybe he'd dreamed about the woman walking away because he'd unconsciously known this part of the movie was coming up? He tried again: "I detest all of my sins because of Thy just punishments but most of all because they offend Thee, my God, who is all good and deserving of my love." He sat for a moment, breathing more evenly. The subway ran in the distance. He said, "From my heart, I am sorry I hurt her. I'm sorry for anyone I hurt. Please, Lord, forgive me." He did not understand his urge to pray. It was only a dream. Still, he felt relief. "I firmly resolve with the help of Your grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin." Which, amen, would be easy now. He was old and didn't feel the needs of the body in the way he used to. Or of the heart. Which was sad, but maybe for the best. Calmed, he lay down and covered himself. The cat jumped up onto the bed and lay with him. Eventually, he returned to sleep. ♦

The Critics

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Why the World Cup Can Feel Like War

Soccer stadiums can be dominated by violence, tribalism, chauvinism, and near-religious fervor, animated by the memory of old hostilities and the power of ritual.

By Ian Buruma

February 23, 2026



Have a look at a photograph taken this past December in the Kennedy Center. There is Donald Trump, grinning from ear to ear, with a flashy gold medal around his neck. In front of him is a large, phallic gold (or perhaps gilded) trophy depicting hands holding up the globe (or perhaps a soccer ball). It was Trump's very own "*FIFA Peace Prize*." Beside him, clapping his hands, stands Gianni Infantino, the president of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (*FIFA*), organizer of this year's World Cup soccer tournament in North America.

Infantino, a lanky Italian-Swiss man with a ready grin, especially in the presence of autocrats, had publicly lobbied for Trump to win the Nobel Peace Prize last fall. And so, when that didn't happen, he improvised a *FIFA* equivalent, with a medal to go with it. Trump will doubtless claim this year's tournament as his own, and *FIFA* will not stand in his way.

Infantino's gesture might strike people unacquainted with World Cup history as shamelessly fawning. But *FIFA*'s historical mission has been to squeeze as much money as possible out of global soccer competitions. Bribing officials, milking national economies, and cozying up to corrupt politicians and dictators have long been essential features of the enterprise.

It wasn't always like that. *FIFA* was founded by a number of European countries in 1904 and came into its own in the nineteen-twenties under the presidency of Jules Rimet. Rimet, a devout French Catholic, harbored lofty ambitions: to unite the world through sports, uplift the poor, and rise above sordid politics. And yet the 1934 World Cup in Italy was turned into a spectacle of adoration for the Fascist dictator Mussolini. In 1938, the Austrian soccer team dissolved after Hitler's Germany annexed its country, and the German players greeted the stands with Nazi salutes.

A pattern was set. In 1973, *FIFA* inspected Chile's national stadium, in Santiago, shortly after thousands of people had been detained and tortured there by General Augusto Pinochet's soldiers. Its report concluded that "the grass on the pitch is in perfect condition." In 1978, the tournament, held in Argentina, was an opportunity for the odious military junta to bask in soccer glory. Large sums of cash, lavish gifts, and other assorted inducements helped deliver the tournament to [Vladimir Putin](#)'s Russia in 2018, four years after the invasion of Crimea, and, in 2022, to Qatar, where poorly paid foreign laborers risked—and sometimes lost—their lives building vast new stadiums under a blistering sun.

Infantino's predecessor, another Swiss operator, Sepp Blatter, was particularly skilled at the darker arts of soccer politics. Blatter has always denied such accusations. But, as Simon Kuper explains in his highly engaging "[World Cup Fever: A Soccer Journey in Nine Tournaments](#)" (Pegasus), Blatter "kept power by funneling chunks of *FIFA*'s income to national and continental football barons. . . . Corruption was Blatter's

system. He made sure that the people around him were corrupted. If anyone dared challenge him, then *FIFA*'s ethics machinery—which he controlled—would reveal the challenger's wrongdoing.” So what's an ad-hoc “*FIFA* Peace Prize” in light of World Cup history?

For all the federation's failings, Kuper remains a passionate follower of World Cup soccer. He has attended nine of the tournaments, held every four years in different parts of the globe. His book is based on the notes he took while rushing from match to match and staying at hotels, from Tokyo to Donetsk, that all somehow looked the same. The resulting chronicle, organized around those excursions, is also an essay about history, national cultures, and politics. Kuper's first World Cup was in 1978, which he watched on TV as an eight-year-old. The last in his chronological account of games, and the countries where they took place, was the one in Qatar. The winner that year was Argentina. The runner-up was France; Croatia placed third. The men in the V.I.P. seats were Arab billionaires. “The World Cup,” Kuper observes, “is a vision of an alternative international hierarchy, in which the US is an also-ran and China doesn't even figure.”

Kuper clearly takes a dim view of *FIFA*. So why his soccer madness? “Many people love the World Cup despite the football,” he writes. I think I know what he means. In 1978, I got up early in Tokyo to watch my home team, the Netherlands, lose the final to Argentina in Buenos Aires while the generals slapped their knees in delight. Ten years later, I was up even earlier in my Hong Kong apartment to watch the Netherlands beat Germany in the semifinal of the European Championship. That weekend, more people celebrated in the streets of Amsterdam than on the day of liberation from Nazi occupation in May, 1945. We had beaten the Germans—finally! All this had much to do with memories of the war. But it was also bound up with a more recent humiliation: defeat by West Germany in the 1974 World Cup final. The Dutch team, led by the great [Johan Cruyff](#), had been cast as long-haired, freedom-loving, antiauthoritarian rock stars, while the Germans were disdained as robotic, we-follow-orders thugs. It was a grotesque caricature, but that didn't change how we felt.

I say “we,” a pronoun I usually shun. But, as I believe Arthur Koestler once remarked, there is nationalism, and then there is football nationalism, the latter being much more deeply felt. Koestler, a British citizen raised in

Budapest, remained a Hungarian soccer nationalist all his life. I was born and raised in the Netherlands, and though I left in 1975, I confess to being a staunch Dutch soccer chauvinist.

So is Simon Kuper. Born in Uganda to South African Jewish parents, raised and educated in the Netherlands and in Britain, and now a French citizen, Kuper—like Koestler, and like me—is someone Stalin might have called a “rootless cosmopolitan.” But he is an ardent supporter of the Dutch national team, whose players wear the orange colors of the Dutch royal house. He loves their free-flowing style. Kuper was, however, only four years old when his adopted team was defeated by Germany in 1974. His take on that loss is that the Dutch didn’t really mind, because, with their beautiful attacking game, they had been the moral victors. Actually, no, people did mind, deeply. To be beaten by the krauts felt like the Second World War all over again.

A stocky ex-soccer player named Rinus Michels was the Dutch coach at the time. He liked to claim that “football is something like war.” A touch hyperbolic, perhaps, but in contrast to many other sports—tennis, say, or swimming—soccer does tend to stir up primitive tribal instincts. The flag-waving, the face paint, the pugnacious songs, the banners, the bellicose taunts at the opponents, the arms flung out in unison foster a collective spirit that can turn violent at times. It also has a quasi-religious aspect. After a big international game, I once saw fans in the street kneeling on the flag of their victorious team with their arms outstretched and their heads banging the ground, like religious fanatics.

Baseball and American football doubtless inspire feelings of mad intensity as well. But the frenzy of soccer fans has resulted in an actual war. This happened in 1969, when the so-called Soccer War broke out between El Salvador and Honduras. Tensions had already been running high, over borders and other issues, but a World Cup qualifying game in Mexico (won by El Salvador) pushed the two nations over the edge.

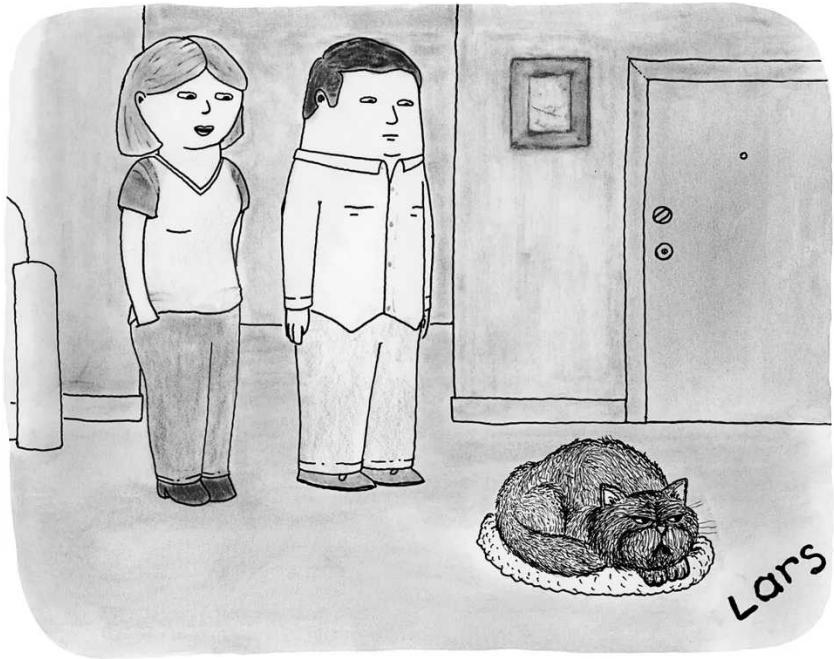
Perhaps the nearest thing in U.S. sporting history to a political confrontation was the rematch, in 1938, of the boxers Joe Louis and Max Schmeling. The fight was touted by the Nazis as a would-be demonstration of “Aryan” racial superiority. Louis, “the Brown Bomber,” had lost the first bout, in 1936.

Two years later, Louis beat Schmeling in the first round. “I knew I had to get Schmeling good,” he later wrote. “I had my own personal reasons, and the whole damned country was depending on me.” (Schmeling may have been the Nazis’ great white hope, but he wasn’t a bad man. He refused to join the Nazi Party, and he and Louis became good friends.)

Still, Americans have no memories of foreign invasions that can be displaced onto athletic contests. To get the flavor of the kind of resentments I mean, think of the ice-hockey game in Stockholm between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, in March, 1969, seven months after Soviet tanks crushed the Prague Spring. The Czechs refused to shake hands with their opponents on the ice. When they triumphed, after fighting like hell, Prague exploded in riotous celebrations. Vengeance was sweet that night.

There is another difference. In the U.S., hand-on-heart, support-our-veterans, flag-waving patriotism is widely regarded as legitimate, even laudable. In much of Europe, by contrast, the chauvinism that had fuelled two devastating World Wars rendered such displays largely taboo after Hitler’s defeat. The British, having escaped German occupation, could still indulge in military pomp; elsewhere in Western Europe, martial pride and overt patriotism were distasteful reminders of a dark past. European unification was meant, chiefly, to put all that behind them. Peace and prosperity were the goals.

This was particularly true, for obvious reasons, in the Federal Republic of Germany. And yet football nationalism could not be entirely repressed even there. Kuper recounts “the miracle of Bern,” when the West German team beat the formidable Hungarians in the 1954 World Cup final in Bern, Switzerland. The humiliation of wartime defeat could be forgotten in that delicious moment of victory on the soccer field. Popular feeling was expressed in the phrase “*Wir sind wieder wer!*”—“We’re somebody again!” Peco Bauwens, the president of the German Football Association, celebrated the victory in a Munich beer hall (of all places), praising the German players for showing what “a healthy German, who is loyal to his country, can achieve” and even extolling “the Führer Principle.”



Kuper's point is that Bauwens, in his boorish way, had "grasped a new truth: after 1945, football had started to replace war in Europe as a source of national pride." What was shunned in other public venues found an outlet in soccer stadiums. That was where historical wrongs could be ritually avenged and raw nationalism celebrated, sometimes in a carnival spirit—Dutch fans in orange bearing models of fat yellow cheeses on their heads, French fans holding up live roosters (*le coq gaulois*), Scots in kilts, English fans dressed up like King Arthur's knights—and sometimes in a more brutal fashion.

English soccer hooligans were especially feared. Trashing foreign towns was a common form of aggression in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. It was as though bored young Englishmen, nostalgic for their fathers' Churchillian spirit, wanted to fight the war all over again. In matches against German teams, England's supporters mimicked Second World War fighter planes and sang the theme song of "The Dam Busters," a popular movie about a raid over Germany in 1943.

Club teams can be at least as tribal as national ones, often more so. In Scotland, the rivalry between the Rangers (Protestant) and Celtic F.C. (Catholic) once resembled a religious war. In cities such as London and Amsterdam, soccer clubs were long associated with particular ethnic or religious communities, varying by neighborhood. These identities often

outlived any connection to social reality. Jews were once heavily represented among the North London supporters of Tottenham Hotspur, and Spurs remain “the Yids” to hostile fans of other English clubs. It scarcely matters that neither the Spurs nor any other major English club ever fielded more than a handful of Jews. Ajax, in Amsterdam, has acquired a similar reputation, prompting rival fans to chant the most offensive antisemitic slurs imaginable, often invoking gas. Ajax supporters have responded by waving Israeli flags, even though many of their players are of African, Moroccan, or even Japanese descent.

Kuper, as a man who has lived in many different countries, writes well about the cultures and foibles of soccer teams and their fans. A journalist for the *Financial Times*, he is one of the best sportswriters in the English language today. But he does more than analyze the skills of different squads and players (though he does this superbly); he uses his expertise to explain cultural differences, too.

Reporting on the World Cup from Japan, in 2002, he notes—quite rightly—that Japanese sports fans are disciplined and well behaved. Their comportment only heightened the anxiety when Japan, hardly a traditional soccer nation, was chosen to host the tournament: English hooligans were expected to descend. I was there, too, reporting for a London newspaper, and watching the English fans was indeed a strange experience. On the train to the stadium in Sapporo, Japanese commuters sat in visible confusion as burly Englishmen in T-shirts pounded on the windows and bellowed songs opposing the Irish Republican Army. I was bewildered as well—anti-I.R.A. chants in Sapporo?—but there was no actual violence.

Why are Japanese crowds so docile? Kuper suggests that, where English hooliganism represents a grotesque form of nostalgia, postwar Japanese civility is a pose predicated on collective amnesia about wartime atrocities. Yet Japanese crowds were well behaved long before 1945. War memories are not the issue here. Kuper is on surer ground in South Africa, where his blend of sociopolitical analysis and sports reporting is at its best. The country he knew as a child was poisoned by apartheid, and it was also sports-mad. Money and resources flowed almost entirely to sports favored by whites—cricket and rugby—while soccer was left mostly to Black South Africans, playing in substandard, ramshackle stadiums in squalid townships.

They played with great panache nonetheless, and the game acquired a special importance. As Kuper explains, “Any non-white South African aspiring to power before about 1990 couldn’t find it in politics. So non-white power-seekers (almost all of them men) often became either clergymen or football officials.” His great-uncle Leo, who was a sociologist and a prominent anti-apartheid activist, observed, “Political energy, denied any other expression, is projected on the Football Association.”

Black South African soccer developed its own clubs, its own superstars, and its own rough-and-ready style. When South Africa was chosen to host the World Cup in 2010—the first African nation to receive this dubious distinction—hopes ran high that the national economy, and the Black majority, would benefit. Local businesses would flourish; the game beloved by Black South Africans would finally be played on proper pitches in modern stadiums.

None of this came to pass. Gigantic stadiums were built, but largely in white neighborhoods. Money that might have been directed toward poor Black communities was instead sunk into what became white elephants, so to speak. *FIFA*’s official sponsors profited handsomely, while local businesses were barred from mentioning the World Cup. As Kuper writes, “Almost all the hotels, shopping malls and official ‘fan parks’—along with the tens of thousands of security guards protecting the visitors—were in overwhelmingly white neighborhoods. The organisers didn’t want people wandering off in search of the other South Africas.” After the circus moved on, Black South African soccer remained mired in neglect, while cricket and rugby continued to thrive. Kuper’s verdict is as terse as it is just: “The federation’s screwing of South Africa became a parable for centuries of screwing of Africans by whites.”

And yet it would be a mistake to see *FIFA* simply as a bastion of white European hegemony. In the twenty-first century, professional soccer has changed in several important ways. Memories of the Second World War have faded enough that most fans no longer bristle at a German victory. After watching Germany defeat Poland at home in 2006, Kuper reflected, “I’m Jewish. I studied German history. I grew up despising the German football team. But sitting on that balcony, drinking German beer, when Oliver Neuville scored their last-minute winner, I almost cheered.”

I feel the same way. Besides, the German team, like many others in Europe, has become conspicuously multiethnic, with players of Turkish, Polish, Arab, or African descent. The players for the Dutch and French national teams are now largely from nonwhite immigrant backgrounds. Spain's most exciting young player is Lamine Yamal, whose mother is from Equatorial Guinea and whose father is Moroccan. One reason for the rise of nonwhite European players is familiar enough: sports and show business remain among the few routes to fame and immense riches for poor minorities. The other is structural. Professional soccer has become a vast international corporate enterprise.

The biggest stars from South America, East Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa, and the Maghreb are recruited by the richest European clubs. A top English team such as Manchester City fields only a handful of English players; Liverpool's leading star is Egyptian. Foreigners and immigrants dominate clubs like Paris Saint-Germain and Bayern Munich as well. Élite players, wherever they are born, are traded among these clubs for enormous sums. They are multimillionaires, often fluent in several languages. If top-level soccer is now played by something like rootless cosmopolitans, it's financed by billionaires who are no longer primarily European. Paris Saint-Germain is owned by a Qatari investment group; Manchester City by Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed al-Nahyan, of Abu Dhabi; Newcastle United by a Saudi sovereign fund. Arsenal belongs to an American billionaire, Stan Kroenke, and Inter Milan has recently passed from Chinese to American ownership.

The effect on the World Cup has been profound. *FIFA* was always corrupt, but it has grown more so. As Kuper puts it, "Qatari royals, just like Vladimir Putin, could hand out fortunes without asking anyone's permission, whereas western leaders were hamstrung by rules and voters." That imbalance explains how the tournament ended up in Russia in 2018 and in Qatar in 2022. Saudi Arabia is set to host it in 2034.

During the tournament in Russia, Kuper describes Putin as having "settled down in his VIP box, chatting and laughing with his companions, [Mohammed bin Salman](#) ('MBS') and *FIFA* president Gianni Infantino." What unfolded, he suggests, was a tableau of a new, non-Western world order, reinforced by the names circling the pitch on the advertising boards: Gazprom, Qatar Airways, South Korea's Kia Motors.

The game itself has changed, too. Club teams, stocked with the world's best players, are now vastly superior to national teams. The more interesting consequence of soccer's corporatization, however, has been its effect on the fans. One might have expected that, as clubs shed their ties to nation, city, or ethnic and religious communities, the old identitarian passions would fade. Skills could still be admired, but the flag-waving, face-painting, arm-thrusting, chanting, singing, and taunting might reasonably have seemed destined for extinction. That is not what happened. Clubs coached by foreigners and staffed largely by foreign players continue to inspire the same fanatical loyalties as ever. Old rivalries—between the North and the South of England, between Madrid and Barcelona, between districts of London—persist, regardless of who happens to be wearing the colors. At the same time, this endurance suggests that tribal feeling is more supple than blood-and-soil types imagine. People will cheer for their team without much concern for where the players come from.

What is true of club soccer has increasingly become true of national teams as well. Violence in European soccer has subsided; English hooligans now seem almost quaint. The fact that tickets for major matches cost more than the best seats in an opera house may help explain this. But there could be a more unsettling reason. Soccer nationalism has become largely carnivalesque—a giant costume party, a jokey, theatrical form of chauvinism. Fading historical memory may be part of the story. As Kuper observes, after the Germans charmed spectators in 2006, when it became acceptable to like the old enemies, soccer “has stopped being war. All that was sweet, but it took some of the spice out of World Cups.”

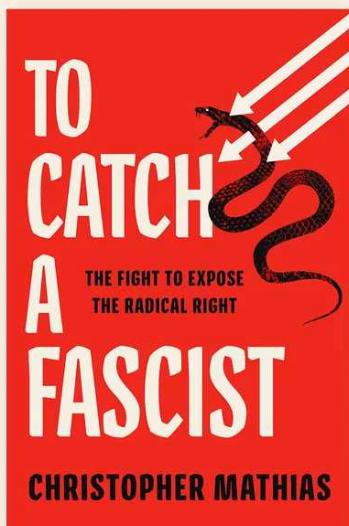
The darker tribal emotions never disappeared, though. With the rise of right-wing populism on both sides of the Atlantic, the hatred, racism, and xenophobia once confined to soccer stadiums have migrated into the political mainstream. A right-wing British politician once lamented to me that the warrior spirit had drained from the nation's youth. When I lightly reminded him of English soccer hooligans, he replied, in all seriousness, that this was indeed “a resource to be tapped.” International soccer can now be watched in comfort and safety, if one can afford the ticket prices. But the brutishness has merely relocated, to places far more dangerous. ♦

Books

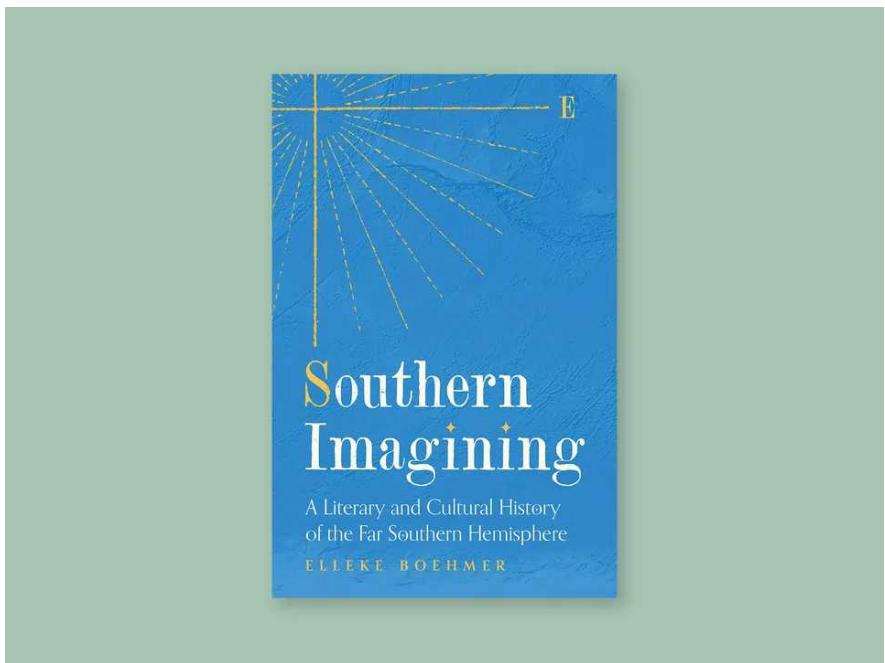
Briefly Noted

“To Catch a Fascist,” “Southern Imagining,” “Good People,” and “Every One Still Here.”

February 23, 2026

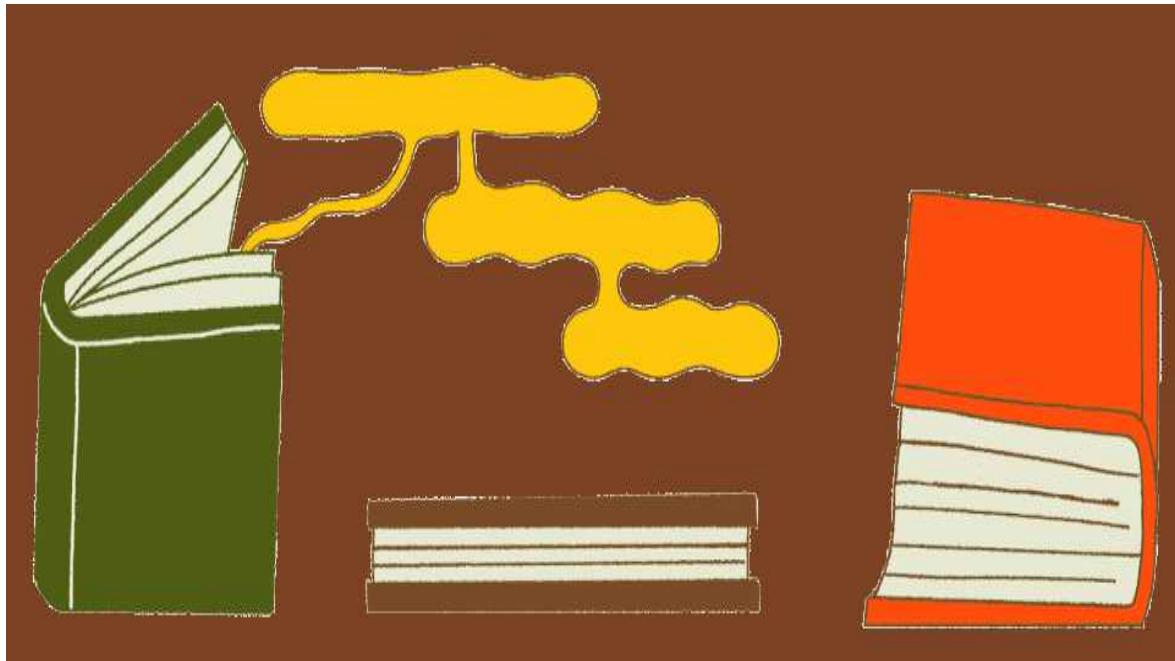


To Catch a Fascist, by Christopher Mathias (Atria). This absorbing book documents attempts by activists who are part of the Antifa movement to expose and sabotage far-right-wing groups. Mathias, a seasoned journalist who has long covered the far right, shows how activists variously confront and infiltrate such groups and reveal their members to the public. These campaigns rely on the notion that being found to be part of a white-supremacist group has social costs, like the loss of a job. But, as a former member of Patriot Front, a fascist organization, tells Mathias, the rise of figures such as Donald Trump could be taken to indicate that, in the U.S., “there’s almost already no stigma” around white nationalism.

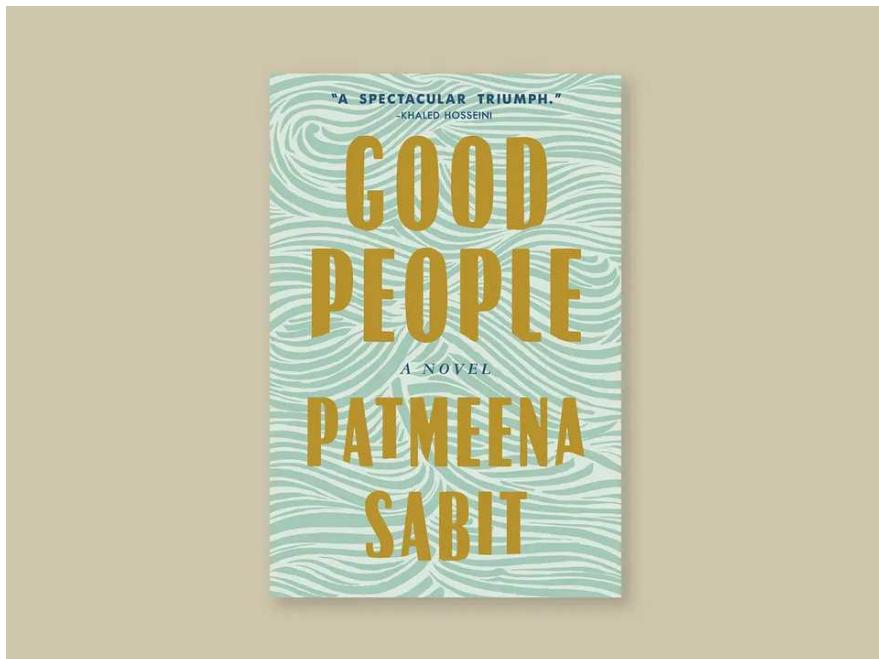


Southern Imagining, by Elleke Boehmer (Princeton). A lyrical study of global literature, this book, by a professor at Oxford, seeks to explore “what it is to inhabit the far south of our planet in the mind.” A section on pre-modern Polynesian knowledge traditions reveals a world view dominated by a profound awareness of water and stars; other portions, on twenty-first-century fiction from Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, highlight a shared concern with environmental fragility and the ways in which land, ocean, and living beings continually intersect. The theme of exploitation runs through many of the works under consideration, such as the Aboriginal Australian writer Alexis Wright’s novel “Carpentaria,” in which a mining corporation descends on a largely Indigenous town.

What We're Reading



Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



[**Good People**](#), by Patmeena Sabit (Crown). This devastating début novel takes the form of an oral history about a tragedy that shatters a family. At its

heart is a couple who arrived in the U.S. in the late nineteen-nineties as refugees from Afghanistan. They prospered, and brought up four children in an affluent suburb in Virginia. Rotating testimonies from people they know—family friends, a cousin, lawyers—offer theories about what led to the novel’s central catastrophe. Once the nature of the tragedy has been revealed, the book transforms into an intimate study of an Afghan immigrant community forced to reevaluate what it means to raise children in America. One friend says, “The money wasn’t the issue. . . . It was about one thing and one thing only: *They forgot who they were.*”



Every One Still Here, by Liadan Ní Chuinn (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The stories in this début collection grapple with the Troubles, in part through an accretion of charged moments: cars are hijacked; people protest a museum’s display of human remains. The names of Northern Irish civilians killed by British armed forces are listed, accompanied by frank descriptions of their deaths, for ten pages. Ní Chuinn maps tense ideas onto a strikingly varied cast of characters. As sharp details accrue stealthily in the author’s subdued prose, the effect is one of chilling recognition. The Troubles, which ended in 1998, the year Ní Chuinn was born, sing the same plain and painful tune as our present.

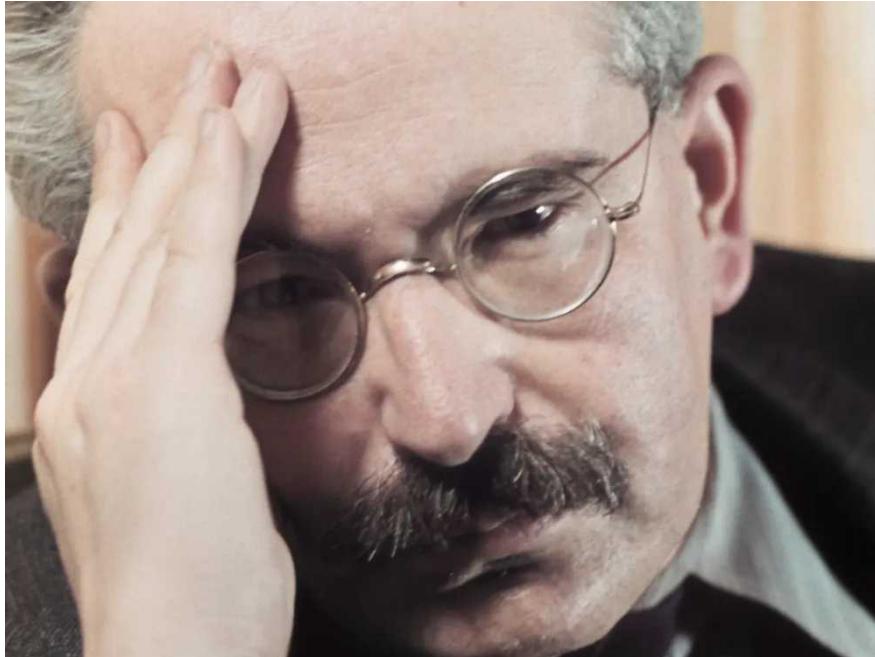
Books

What Walter Benjamin Knew

A new biography of the Berlin-born philosopher emphasizes his combination of stubborn unworldliness and startling prescience.

By Anahid Nersessian

February 23, 2026



Shortly after Germany invaded Poland, on September 1, 1939, France declared all German nationals living within its borders and between the ages of seventeen and fifty to be enemy aliens. Along with thousands of other men—including Austrians, Hungarians, Czechs, and Slovaks—the Berlin-born philosopher and literary critic Walter Benjamin, then forty-seven years old, was interned in the Stade de Colombes, an arena outside of Paris that had served as the main stadium for the 1924 Summer Olympics.

Conditions were miserable. The prisoners' valuables were seized as they entered, and they were given nothing to eat but bread and tins of pork-liver pâté. Rain soaked through the straw on which they slept. Large open barrels served as toilets. "Since there was almost no water to wash with," Hans

Sahl, a friend and fellow-prisoner of Benjamin's, would say later, "the pâté clung to our faces and hair and penetrated every pore."

Ten days passed before the men were transferred to a prison camp in central France, where Benjamin gave lectures in exchange for Gauloises cigarettes. In a lean-to on the floor next to a staircase, he held editorial meetings for the purpose of establishing a literary journal. For Sahl, Benjamin's stubborn commitment to the life of the mind—his belief that humanism could counter crimes against humanity—was its own kind of tragedy. "Never," Sahl wrote, "have I been so conscious of the painful failure of a method, which in sympathetic unworldly innocence thought it possible to 'change' reality, but which remained only an interpretation, limping behind."

When Benjamin was released, two and a half months later, he went back to Paris, renewed his reader's card for the Bibliothèque Nationale, and brushed off friends who urged him to escape to the United States; he insisted that he had to finish his second book, on the French poet [Charles Baudelaire](#). (It would "not suffer being neglected," he explained, "even to ensure the survival of its author.") After France fell to Hitler, in June, 1940, he made a desperate attempt to flee to Portugal, crossing the Pyrenees on foot despite severe asthma and a weak heart. He arrived in Spain only to find that he could not enter without an exit visa from the French government. That night, under arrest in a local hotel, he took an overdose of morphine tablets and died the next morning.

Given the circumstances of his death, Benjamin, who was raised in a mostly secular Jewish household, might easily be made a symbol of "the long and troubled history of German Jewry," Peter E. Gordon writes—a cautionary tale of failed assimilation and bookish naïveté. But, in "[Walter Benjamin: The Pearl Diver](#)," a short, serene volume published in Yale University Press's Jewish Lives series, Gordon avoids treating his subject in such allegorical terms, in part because Benjamin always resisted conscription into a story larger than his own. Despite being a Marxist, he never joined the Communist Party, and, though he described himself as a person who "sees Jewish values everywhere and works for them," he consistently rejected political Zionism and its nation-building ambitions. He was, as Hannah Arendt put it in this magazine, in 1968, stubbornly "sui generis."

The Benjamin who emerges from Gordon's book is a sympathetic but often aggravating figure, the quintessential absent-minded professor who fumbles his romances, never works a real job, and, though he clearly recognizes the existential threat of Nazism, buries his head in his books as everything falls down around him. For all his apparent unworldliness, he was a stunningly prescient theorist of popular media, not to mention a prose stylist of exceptional beauty and vigor, whose name has attained a cult status on university campuses. (When I was in graduate school, a professor once asked a group of us doctoral students if we knew we were allowed to read things not written by Walter Benjamin.) Though he remained obscure in his own lifetime, those who knew his work recognized its power. On hearing of Benjamin's death, Bertolt Brecht reportedly declared it the first real loss Hitler had dealt to German literature.

Walter Bendix Schönflies Benjamin was born on July 15, 1892, the eldest of three children in an upper-middle-class family. His father, an art-and-antiques dealer, came from a long line of Rhineland merchants; his relatives on his mother's side had made their money in agriculture. Their house was in Berlin's Westend, not far from the Tiergarten, the large park that houses the Berlin Zoo. A frail child, Benjamin was predisposed toward a certain passivity. In his memoir, "[Berlin Childhood Around 1900](#)," he suggests that his chronic ill health was "the source of something in me that others call patience but in truth does not resemble a virtue at all: the inclination to see everything I care about approach me from a distance, the way the hours approached my sickbed." (Later, this tendency would make women seem, to the adult Benjamin, "all the more beautiful the longer and more confidently" he had to wait for them.)

Like many German teen-agers in the years before the First World War, Benjamin was influenced by a youth movement referred to as the Wandervogel, or "wandering bird." As Gordon says, the Wandervogel was not a single organization but, rather, "a broad spectrum of clubs and societies that flourished during the first decades of the twentieth century, uniting both young men and women with the promise of cultural and spiritual renewal." It was through the movement that Benjamin made some of his closest friends, including Gershom (né Gerhard) Scholem, who first spotted Benjamin debating members of the Jung Juda, a Zionist youth group, at a gathering at a café in 1913. Scholem noted Benjamin's awkwardness—"He

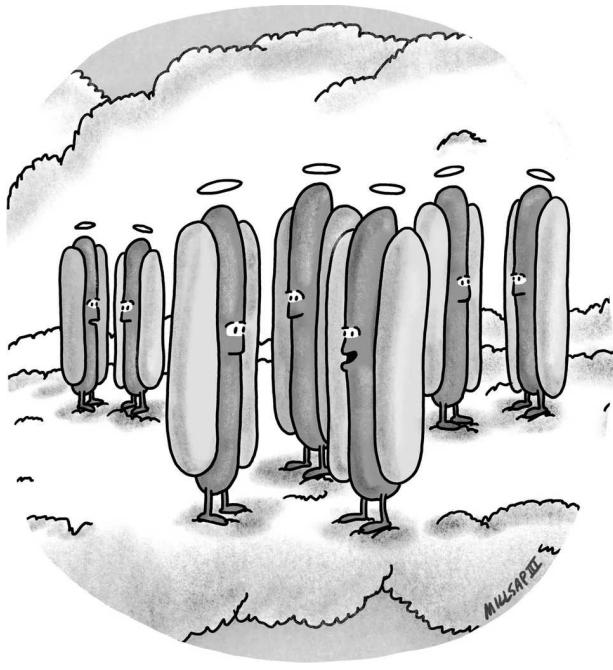
delivered his absolutely letter-perfect speech with great intensity to an upper corner of the ceiling, at which he stared the whole time”—but also his brilliance. The speech was so impressive, Scholem admitted, that “I do not recall the rejoinder made by the Zionists.”

Scholem, at the time a student of philosophy and mathematics, would become the first professor of Jewish mysticism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. His friendship with Benjamin forms the through line of Gordon’s biography, with good reason: their published correspondence comes to more than three hundred pages. Scholem was one of Benjamin’s most significant interlocutors, a thinker who, in his own words, “walked the fine line between religion and nihilism.” It was from Scholem that Benjamin absorbed the messianic strain that characterizes his political writing, fraught as it is with themes of apocalypse, divine violence, and unexpected but inevitable redemption. In the final paragraph of “[Theses on the Philosophy of History](#)”—an essay from 1940 that quotes Scholem’s gloss on Paul Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus”—Benjamin observes that since Jews are prohibited by the Torah from fortune-telling and divination, they have a uniquely urgent relationship to the present. “Every second of time,” he writes, is “the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”

As close as they were, Scholem and Benjamin remained at odds over Scholem’s enthusiasm for the Zionist project. After Scholem immigrated to Palestine, in the nineteen-twenties, he spent the next decade and a half urging Benjamin to follow suit, insisting that his friend attempt what he called “a true confrontation with Judaism.” Benjamin would entertain these plans at best vaguely, declaring his readiness to travel and then finding reasons to stay in Europe. Gordon chalks up this foot-dragging to Benjamin’s dislike for programmatic thought, and to a corresponding desire for European Jews to adopt an internationalist orientation that might diffuse their contributions to thought and culture around the globe. But Benjamin also had serious objections to Zionism’s “racial ideology,” which, he told Scholem, resembled “vulgar anti-Semitism” in its insistence that “the gentile’s hatred of the Jew is physiologically substantiated on the basis of instinct and race”—that Jewishness, in other words, is a biological category superseding all kinds of national or political belonging.

Benjamin's own intellectual disposition was expansively humanist while being rooted in the literary traditions of Germany and France. Between 1912 and 1919, he studied literature and philosophy at the Universities of Freiburg, Berlin, and Munich before earning his Ph.D. from the University of Bern, in Switzerland. His doctoral dissertation was titled "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," and his postdoctoral thesis, a passport to an academic career, was on German Baroque theatre. "[The Origin of German Tragic Drama](#)" was presented to the University of Frankfurt in 1925 and rejected by its faculty that same year, on the ground that it was incomprehensible (more precisely, Benjamin was told to withdraw his submission). Shut out of a teaching job and cut off financially by his father, he found work translating Proust and began writing short pieces for journals and magazines. During the next decade, he would come to exemplify a new kind of criticism, aimed at an audience of literate laypeople and marked by the application of left-wing political thought to the analysis of both high and popular culture, from Marx to Mickey Mouse.

Before the late eighteenth century, few would think to write an essay unpacking the hidden meaning of a novel or painting, let alone suggest that works of art might have ideological agendas or biases. Art was good if it was well executed and managed to entertain without being coarse, immoral, or sacrilegious. As Benjamin argued in his dissertation, it was writers such as Friedrich Schlegel who, around 1800, first began to consider aesthetic objects as capacious and mercurial entities, whose true contents could be revealed only through sustained scrutiny. For them, an art work became a "medium of reflection," no longer simply a mirror of the world but a tool for understanding things about history, society, and politics, as well as about more familiar matters of the human heart. As for criticism, it was both a means to discover what the art object had to say and an extension of the object itself.



Although he aspired to be “the foremost critic of German literature,” Benjamin’s real talent was for grasping the richness and complexity of vernacular culture, not just the new media of photography and film but also the ephemera of consumer society. In 1928, he published “[One-Way Street](#),” a collection of aphoristic meditations on objects such as gloves (“All disgust is originally disgust at touching”) and numbered lists of epigrams (“I. Books and harlots can be taken to bed. II. Books and harlots interweave time”). Elliptical and fragmentary, “One-Way Street” is, Benjamin said, an homage to the “inconspicuous forms” of urban life taken in by the flâneur, the man who strolls aimlessly about a city covered with “leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards,” whose pithy, highly evocative, and sometimes surreal style Benjamin borrowed as his own.

From 1927 to 1933, he worked as a radio broadcaster, writing and recording programs for stations in Berlin and Frankfurt; in a little less than six years, he produced roughly ninety episodes on topics including robber bandits in old Germany, E. T. A. Hoffmann, children’s toys, the Bastille, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, postage-stamp fraud, and dogs. No audio recordings survive, but transcripts reveal a playful sensibility and a fondness for sensuous detail, as when, in an episode on the market halls of Berlin, Benjamin describes their damp stone floors feeling “like the cold and slippery bottom of the ocean.” Although many of these broadcasts were

aimed at children, it didn't stop Benjamin from lacing them with political content. In an episode on the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, he compared the flood waters to those "raging elements of human cruelty" represented by the Ku Klux Klan.

That episode aired on March 23, 1932. Almost exactly one year later, forty-six days after Hitler seized power, Benjamin fled Germany for Paris, and travelled on to Ibiza, then an obscure and impoverished island, where he spent the next several months. Paris, he wrote to Scholem, had become inhospitable. "The Parisians are saying 'les émigrés sont pires que les boches'"—the immigrants are worse than the Krauts—"and that should give you an accurate idea of the kind of society that awaits one there."

Benjamin nonetheless did return to Paris, in October, 1933. There, he became newly close to Brecht, whom he had met years earlier in Berlin. It was under Brecht's influence, Gordon suggests, that Benjamin found himself drawn decisively toward Marxist thought, and to the belief that "in a society riven by class conflict, art must be enlisted in the struggle for liberation." The proof is Benjamin's best-known piece of writing, an essay called "[The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction](#)" (or, more pontifically, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," a closer translation of its German title). Drafted around 1935 and revised several times before Benjamin's death, it is a monumental and dizzyingly prophetic analysis of the fate of art once it has become an infinitely replicable mass-media product.

Before the advent of photography, if you wanted to see the "Mona Lisa," you had to go to a museum. Now the painting is everywhere—or, rather, its image is. We find the "Mona Lisa" in books, and on posters, T-shirts, and iPhone cases, and we can see it at any time by searching on Google. These copies bear no trace of what Benjamin terms the "aura" of the original, a quasi-mystical quality that comes from being the only "Mona Lisa" in the world. Meanwhile, as anyone who's pushed through crowds of tourists to catch a glimpse of the real "Mona Lisa" will know, the painting itself seems to have lost much of what must once have been its overwhelming aesthetic power. We have simply seen it too many times.

What about film, an art form that is nothing *but* reproduction, a “series of mountable episodes” pieced together from a supply of interchangeable images? Unlike the “Mona Lisa,” a movie exists wherever it’s projected; it is not an object but a travelling circus of shadows and light. Film, Benjamin argues, has no aura at all, and therefore represents a total “liquidation” of traditional notions of cultural value. As it dismantles old ideas about what art is, it creates a new kind of spectator: someone who encounters the work of art collectively, in a theatre with others, and who pays a more slack, casual attention to it than he would to a Renaissance painting.

We watch movies in a state of distraction: spacing out, getting up to use the bathroom, and, now, checking our phones. For Benjamin, this dreamy, inattentive attitude is full of political promise, for if we can be emancipated from a servile, awestruck relation to works of art, perhaps we can also be emancipated from a servile, awestruck relation to the state. It was a daring, perhaps even difficult, conclusion for Benjamin, an inveterate collector of old and precious objects, to draw—that believing in progress meant submitting to the destruction of the past, of its cherished relics and ways of seeing. And yet, as he saw it, being a leftist all but required this paradoxical relationship to historical preservation and change. The alternative to the left making use of the medium was unthinkable: the inherent populism of film, with its accessibility, affordability, and mainstream appeal, would lead to its co-option by fascists. There were signs, as Benjamin was writing, that this had already occurred. The same year that he began his essay, Leni Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will” premiered at Berlin’s Ufa-Palast am Zoo, a movie theatre not far from Benjamin’s childhood home.

Fascism excels at turning popular culture to its own ends, and at getting humanity to view “its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.” The response, Benjamin says, is to politicize art—to make work that trains its audience to think critically about social life. This requires developing aesthetic techniques capable of translating complex ideas into images, sounds, gestures, and narrative and poetic forms; it also requires making art that draws attention to its own artifice, so that we are always conscious of the real world outside. “One-Way Street,” with its clipped, cryptic, strangely juxtaposed chapters, is one of Benjamin’s early attempts to adopt montage—the practice of editing disparate film images into a single sequence—as a literary style. His unfinished masterpiece, “Das Passagen-

Werk,” or, in English, “[The Arcades Project](#),” was meant to perfect the method.

“The Arcades Project,” a lavish, not terribly well-organized collection of notes, quotations, personal reflections, and theoretical musings compiled over thirteen years, is Benjamin’s dossier of research into the shopping arcades of Paris, built primarily in the first part of the nineteenth century and largely demolished during Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s radical restructuring of the city, between 1853 and 1870. Benjamin was fascinated by these covered passages, remnants of the early days of modern commodity culture, when the arcade felt like “a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.” In the obsolete advertisements that used to line the walls of the arcades, in their promises of beautiful clothes, perfect hair, magical toys, state-of-the-art buildings, technological innovations, holidays in exotic locales, and medicines to cure everything, he saw traces of the “collective dream energy” of society, of our human longing for a utopian future lying just beyond this difficult present. The montage of prose fragments that makes up “The Arcades Project” is designed to conjure an image of that future, to be the form “wherein what has been”—in German *das Gewesene*, or “that which once was”—“comes together in a flash with the now [*das Jetzt*] to form a constellation” showing what might yet be. It’s not entirely clear how this was meant to happen, but the sheer amplitude of the manuscript, which comes to more than a thousand pages, implies that Benjamin’s insistent rush of words and thoughts might propel us into a kind of visionary state, much like the one he entered when he wandered the streets of Paris or pored over his collections of keepsakes.

When Benjamin walked over the Pyrenees, stumbling and wheezing, he carried with him a large briefcase said to contain a manuscript. There has long been speculation that the pages were a new, perhaps more complete version of “The Arcades Project,” but no one knows for sure: the briefcase disappeared after Benjamin’s death, and no significant work has ever been found. His companions, though, remembered it well. Lisa Fittko, who guided Benjamin to the Spanish border, later recalled that he would under no circumstances “let himself be parted from his ballast,” and so, “for better or worse, we had to drag that monstrosity over the mountains.” “It is more important than I am,” Benjamin told Fittko, “more important than myself.”

Arendt ruefully described Benjamin, her old friend from Berlin, as having “a sleepwalker’s precision,” ever bumbling into trouble and misfortune. It was, she suggests, just like him to achieve fame only posthumously, when it would be both “uncommercial and unprofitable.” It was also like him to embody the sort of tragic idealism that would lead a person, physically weak and on the run from a genocidal regime, to risk his safety and comfort for a manuscript. And yet, it is this very combination of stubbornness and fragility, melancholy and valor that has turned Benjamin into a secular saint, enhancing his reputation no less than his vast and beautifully heterogeneous body of work, which is itself its own Parisian arcade, bearing up with elegance under ruin and despair.

“There is no document of civilization,” Benjamin wrote in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” Every masterpiece is part of human history, and there has never been a moment in human history when people were not suffering terribly, needlessly. Benjamin knew this when he refused to leave Paris without finishing his book, and he knew it when he carried his briefcase over the Pyrenees—when he was too weak to walk and had to be dragged by his companions, who took turns holding the bag. He seemed to believe, all the same, that to abandon his work meant giving in to what fascism wanted for him: an existence so devoid of value and meaning that it would be indistinguishable from death. He held on to his briefcase not until it was too late but because it was too late. When the barbarians are past the gate, there is nothing to do but stand your ground. ♦

The Art World

The Haunting Talent of Noah Davis

The artist, who died young, conjured the breadth of life's moods with a rare economy.

By Zachary Fine

February 23, 2026



Noah Davis died when he was thirty-two. It's a strange, in-between age in the history of painting. Basquiat and Schiele left us in their twenties; Kahlo made it to forty-seven; O'Keeffe to ninety-eight. I didn't think much of the difference until I saw the survey of Davis's work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where all his best paintings seem to sit somewhere in the middle of life and in the middle of everything. The work is light and dark, solid and liquid, empty and busy, earnest and tongue in cheek. At times, Davis is a masterly nocturne painter, in the vein of Whistler and Henry Ossawa Tanner; at others, his world is medicinally clear and well lit, like that of a Thomas Eakins. Don't be surprised if you leave the show feeling both healed and brokenhearted.



Curated by Wells Fray-Smith and Eleanor Nairne, the exhibition is on its final stop after touring through Potsdam, London, and Los Angeles. What makes it so affecting are the enthusiastic lurches in Davis's style, as he spots one shimmering possibility for his art and then darts to another. In total, he left behind more than four hundred paintings, drawings, sculptures, and collages, and also founded, with his wife, Karon Davis, a cultural institution in Los Angeles called the Underground Museum. Like an earlier generation of Black artists in L.A., such as Charles White and Betye Saar, who responded to the exclusions of the art world by exhibiting work in churches, community centers, local businesses, and homes, Davis wanted the Underground to bring museum-calibre art to people in its immediate vicinity, in the neighborhood of Arlington Heights. The Philadelphia show has an ample selection of Davis's paintings but also includes a mini-installation from the Underground, where Davis remade some minimalist and post-minimalist hits—Dan Flavin's fluorescent lights, Robert Smithson's pile of dirt looking at itself in a mirror, Jeff Koons's vacuums in a vitrine—and called the exhibit “Imitation of Wealth” (2013). That allusive smirk may seem unrelated to his approach as a painter, but it's not. Art history was always alive for him.



The show opens with Davis's early work, some of which is precisely that. Looking at reproductions, I'd been eager to see "40 Acres and a Unicorn" (2007)—a twist on Reconstruction's failed promise of "forty acres and a mule"—but, on closer inspection, its fidgety modelling of a man's face revealed an important caveat to Davis's skill, which is that he wasn't a portraitist. What's a delight, though, are the rival tendencies on display in the first room. You can see a lunge toward van Gogh in the thick, swirling brushwork of "Mary Jane" (2008), and an out-of-left-field gesture in "Nobody" (2008), where Davis does a riff on a Malevich square, in purple. Then there's a little thunderclap of originality: "Bad Boy for Life" (2007). Squeezed into a room with candy-striped wallpaper, a woman raises her arm to strike a boy on her lap. The first thing you'll notice is her mouth. She doesn't have one. The body horror turns absurd when you see that the child is dressed like a naughty jockey, wearing a gold suit and leather riding boots. The painting could be about the transmission of violence across generations, but it has all of the moral weight of a circus tent. Like much of Davis's best work, it creates ambivalence through a specific stylistic trick: arranging blurred or roughly painted figures on a crisply delineated ground. The people always seem to be both of this world and the next.

The year 2008 was a hinge in Davis's life. He fell in love with his future wife, Karon; had his first solo exhibition, at the Roberts & Tilton gallery, in

L.A.; and was the youngest painter chosen for a major exhibition of the Rubell Family Collection which featured thirty Black artists, including stars such as David Hammons, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and Kara Walker. Davis felt uneasy about the strictures of “Black artist” as a category, but was thrilled about the invitation. “For a while, I thought I was being put in a box,” he said. “But it’s probably the most glamorous box I’ve ever been in.” Growing up in Seattle, his first eureka moment with art was seeing Walker’s cutout silhouettes. Now he was in a show with her.

By the following year, Davis had a discernible style. Playing solid blocks of color against thin or runny paint, he could turn the surface of a painting into its emotional core. In “The Architect” (2009), a portrait of the L.A. architect Paul Revere Williams, a glacier of light blue swallows Williams’s face and drips onto the model of a building, which fans out in a ziggurat of blocks and triangles. Williams was the first Black member of the American Institute of Architects; he had to learn how to draw upside down, because white clients didn’t like sitting next to him. The psychological chill sent through the painting by the drip work isn’t unlike Edvard Munch’s “The Sick Child” (1885-86), where the streaks cast over the scene imply the painter’s own tears. That’s what an active surface can do. My favorite example in the show is “The Year of the Coxswain” (2009), in which a group of rowers in singlets carry a boat across the picture plane, slicing it in two. There’s a lone trumpeter to the side, wearing a black tunic and looking like Death. Note all of the variations in texture. The boat is as dry and yellow as a crumpet, but the paint elsewhere runs in long tendrils, or swirls into the swampy alluvial ground. In Davis’s work, runny paint has a way of acquitting objects of their permanence. Here, it gives the impression that the rowers are pallbearers and the boat is a coffin. A painting of morning calisthenics turns into an elegy.



Walking through the show, I noticed that my attention kept swimming toward the blues and greens of Davis's pools, lakes, and rivers. They're hypnotizing—particularly those in his “1975” series, a sequence based on a cache of his mother’s high-school photographs from Chicago. In “1975 (8)” (2013), we’re floating in the air near a municipal pool. A boy in swim trunks launches at a diagonal into the water, which is just a block of teal. (Think Hockney’s “A Bigger Splash.”) Especially striking is Davis’s choice to drain the soles of the boy’s feet of color, while filling the pool with it. The painting makes dozens of little feints like this, giving and taking away. Davis is a curious sort of colorist, using a limited palette that works overtime in the production of moods. His painting “The Missing Link 4” (2013) doubles as a mini-thesis on his materials, as he turns the windows of a Mies van der Rohe high-rise in Detroit into rows of little paint swatches with some of his favorite colors: skin tones, grays and blacks, and bright open-sky blues. It’s not beautiful or soothing, per se, but it cuts right to the essence of things. Bodies, buildings, and air.

At the end of the show is a small annex with just three untitled paintings, all done in July, 2015, a month before Davis died, of cancer. If we didn’t know that, the paintings would look different. But we do. Now they read like three studies of disappearance. In one, there’s a body lying on the ground, with a patina of mint-green paint over the surface—a sign of decay. In another, two

women on a couch, exhausted, sit next to a third person, whose waist has been abolished with a slash of dripping gray paint. The work that disturbs the most is of a translucent man. He has an obscured, purplish face, a little roundel for an ear, and flecks of white, like stars, in his body. Standing hunched, almost neckless, he extends his arm to open a door that isn't there. Behind him, his shadow is impossibly small, not much larger than a dishrag. You can feel it, heightened by the solid ground and the decisive colors of the wall: he's about to evanesce. ♦

On Television

The Quad God and American Reckoning at the Olympics

The skater Ilia Malinin, the snowboarder Chloe Kim, and the Norwegian biathlete Sturla Holm Lægreid are a few of the athletes who battled it out at the Winter Games.

By Vinson Cunningham

February 21, 2026



There's an American figure skater named Ilia Malinin, now perhaps better known, thanks to the brisk exposure of this year's Winter Olympics, by his self-bestowed nickname—the Quad God. He's from a town whose name straddles the Old World and the New: Vienna, Virginia. The kid's only twenty-one years old. He's got a mane of blond hair, blue eyes set close together under a dark brow, and a free, wild way of leaping, as if catapulted from the ice. Before the Winter Games began, in early February, he'd already won a world championship and a handful of other accolades. And so he was a favorite to win gold, both as a solo act and in the free-skate segment of the U.S. team event.

But competition sometimes stymies talent. That's why we undergo the increasingly hunterly process of watching—tracking the events in Milan and Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, on NBC and Peacock, streaming the highlights of a number of snowy sports—instead of accepting each sure-sounding prediction as a *fait accompli*. On February 13th, for his free skate, Malinin glided out onto the ice wearing a sheer shirt with sequins studded in the shape of a blooming flame; the sleeves flowed past his wrists and sheathed both of his hands, like a pair of stockings masquerading as mittens. Before his music began, a voice boomed over the rink's speakers: "The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing."

Away he went, with his usual slick velocity. Every four years, I have to learn again what a "quad flip" is. Malinin swept himself up into one—an efficient, twisting spiral just above the surface of the ice. He looked good. But then, trying a quadruple axel—a maneuver once considered impossible by the sport's aristocracy—something wobbled in his mechanics, and he made only one rotation. His left leg flailed a bit in the air. Another mistake came shortly after. Malinin stuck a double loop instead of a quadruple, groupings of four now evading him at every turn. "We don't usually see Ilia make mistakes like this," a commentator said. You could see Malinin sigh, trying to shake his nerves.

But on his next big jump he took a spill. The crowd, still cheering, sounded slightly hollow. What was going on? Before the routine ended, Malinin fell again, as if eager to confirm that, yes, his moment of glory had become a real disaster. The Olympics, with their nationalistic gloss, lend themselves to symbolic readings. And, sure, it was hard to watch the anguish on Malinin's face after he'd finished and not think of the country whose flag he'd come to represent—young, vigorous, heedlessly unfearful, and now flaming out suddenly, plummeting down the rankings. Malinin ended the event in eighth place.

Of course, it wasn't just Malinin whose performance tugged my attention away from Italy and toward America. A handful of athletes from the States have spoken up, less in righteous indignation than in baffled concern, about American politics these days. The curler Rich Ruohonen—who, when he's not winning tournaments, works as a personal-injury lawyer—spoke at a press conference about ICE's outrageous behavior in Minneapolis. "I'm

proud to be here to represent Team U.S.A., and to represent our country,” he said. “But we’d be remiss if we didn’t at least mention what’s going on in Minnesota and what a tough time it’s been for everybody. This stuff is going on right around where we live.” Looking like he might cry, he stopped to issue a few jagged breaths before he went on. “I am a lawyer,” he said, “and we do have—we have a constitution, and it allows us freedom of the press, freedom of speech, protects us from unreasonable searches and seizures, and makes it that we have to have probable cause to be pulled over. And what’s happening in Minnesota is wrong.”

It was a startling thing, this impromptu civics lesson, offered in the middle of an international sporting occasion. The Olympic organizers have gone to great and sometimes absurd pains to excise political messaging from the Games. The Haitian team was made to remove an image of Toussaint Louverture from its uniforms, which reproduced a portrait by the celebrated artist Edouard Duval-Carrié. The eighteenth-century revolutionary’s horse remained, riderless, backgrounded by bright-green leaves and a tangy blue sky. The Ukrainian skeleton racer Vladyslav Heraskevych was disqualified from his event for wearing a black-and-white helmet depicting athletes killed in Russia’s war of aggression against his homeland.

But the Americans couldn’t totally suppress their sour mood. Hunter Hess, a skier, made a useful distinction between the flag stitched onto his clothes and the vision of his country that lives in his heart and mind. “Just because I wear the flag doesn’t mean I represent everything that’s going on in the U.S.,” he said. Donald Trump responded on Truth Social: “U.S. Olympic Skier, Hunter Hess, a real Loser, says he doesn’t represent his Country in the current Winter Olympics. If that’s the case, he shouldn’t have tried out for the Team, and it’s too bad he’s on it.”

As if attempting to display all this tumult on the slopes, the forty-one-year-old skier Lindsey Vonn crashed violently after her pole hooked a gate during the women’s downhill race. Only nine days prior, she’d torn her A.C.L. The pride it had taken to race anyway felt like an echo—or a symptom—of the national character. Her legs bent horribly, as if in flight, one from the other. Even over the broadcast, you could hear her howl.

Sometimes the national angle on the proceedings had a happier slant. Take the case of Francesca Lollobrigida, the thirty-five-year-old Italian speed skater who won gold in the women's three-thousand-metre and five-thousand-metre races. In the three thousand, you could see the home-town crowd—its delight at her presence, its hope for her victory—urging her forward in the final third of the race. She'd started out aggressively, and it seemed like her energy should have been about to wane. Instead, she surged. After she won, she searched the crowd for her cute young son, Tommaso. She'd done it for him, for the nation.

Winter sports appear to flow naturally from the landscapes that act as their settings. The existence of a steep slope, lost in powder, seems to cry out for a reckless ski jump or a series of ramp-enhanced snowboard tricks. Hockey and speed skating and figure skating all point to the reality of the pond—frozen over, sturdy enough to hold a human body. Even the bobsled, that vehicle for the death wishes of puppyish youths, has a kind of intuitive connection to the fear and the thrill we feel while gliding or slipping on the ice. Cross-country skiers, heaving and snotting, look like packs of unusually fit travellers, perhaps chasing down a warm meal to curb the fatal chill of a long winter.

This illusion of the “natural”—more than the thrill of one event or another—is what makes the Winter Olympics pleasurable to watch. The season's sports look like they require too much money and too much time for the average person to learn, much less master. The American snowboarder Chloe Kim, that alpine Hells Angel: How does she do it? I watched her spin in the air more times than I could count, landing in the middle of a parabolic curve of the board. To follow her body as she flings it skyward is to draw many invisible squiggles with your mind—a kind of retinal graffiti across the natural majesty of the mountain.

Johannes Høsflot Klæbo, a cross-country skier from Norway, shucked his way uphill at a pace that seemed impossible; later, it was confirmed that he'd been hauling ass up a hill at the pace of a sub-six-minute mile. Almost every time somebody in that sport crosses the finish line, they immediately crumple, gasping, to the ground. They look like they're about to give up the ghost, which makes sense in a way that the endeavor itself really doesn't.

Klæbo's rabid climb was almost sinister, a Newtonian affront against gravity and the native difficulty of hills.

Laurence Fournier Beaudry and Guillaume Cizeron, a French ice-dancing duo, beat an American team made up of Madison Chock and Evan Bates. The victory was controversial; many onlookers thought the judges had robbed the Americans. The French insisted that their routine had a high level of difficulty and that they had been rewarded justly. Having no grounding in the aesthetics or the hierarchies of the sport, I couldn't really tell what the fuss was about. I'll admit that I enjoyed the French duo more, simply because of the confident elegance with which they'd taken their positions. They moved in swanning semicircles around the rink, making bold eye contact with onlookers, offering a foretaste of their uncanny coördination with each other even before their bodies had commenced their true engagement. Their elegance looked to me like an easy comfort with—a surrender to—the antifriction of the ice.

Long bouts of exposure to the wild sometimes drive men crazy. You know the archetype—frozen beard and frantic eyes, a raving, paranoid quality of speech. Maybe this explains the bizarre case of the Norwegian biathlete Sturla Holm Lægreid. After nabbing a bronze medal in the twenty-kilometre biathlon, Lægreid took an interview that quickly became a tearful monologue, not about his sport but about personal matters. Six months ago, he said, he'd met the love of his life. Three months later, amid the chaos of new love and the strictures of training for the Olympics, he'd found time to cheat on his object of affection. "I made my biggest mistake," he said, choking on tears.

"Sport has come second these last few days," he said. (Was this a parenthetical excuse for coming in third?) "My only way to solve it is to tell everything and put everything on the table and hope that she can still love me," he continued. "I have nothing to lose."

Nothing but his dignity—and the privacy of his already wounded beloved. In the space of a few minutes, Lægreid had managed to make not only the biathlon but the entirety of the Olympics about himself. I felt a pang of sympathy for the guy. He reminded me of an American. ♦

Musical Events

Vocal Resistance at the New York Festival of Song

The event's theme: Fugitives.

By Alex Ross

February 23, 2026



When is it time to flee an incipient police state and go into exile? If you are lucky, you will receive an unmistakable sign. In the spring of 1933, not long after Hitler assumed power in Germany, the brilliant cabaret songwriter Friedrich Hollaender and his wife, the artist Hedi Schoop, were returning to Berlin after a trip to London when, arriving at their residence, they saw Schoop's mother at a window signalling that they should not enter. Soon afterward, at a bar around the corner, she told them that the Gestapo was searching their apartment. The couple drove off, with Hollaender hiding under a coat, and boarded a train to Paris. A few weeks later, the modernist composer Arnold Schoenberg, who had lost his professorship at the Prussian Academy of Arts after antisemitic measures went into effect, got a telegram

from his brother-in-law, Rudolf Kolisch, that read “Change of air on account of asthma urgently recommended.” Schoenberg, too, hurriedly left for Paris.

Hollaender and Schoenberg were among the German, Austrian, and Czech composers featured on a program titled “Fugitives,” which the New York Festival of Song, or *NYFOS*, recently presented at Merkin Hall. All were Jewish, and their fates were as disparate as their styles. Hollaender, who had found fame writing songs for Marlene Dietrich in “The Blue Angel,” thrived in Hollywood. Schoenberg became a vastly influential teacher at U.S.C. and U.C.L.A. Kurt Weill had hits on Broadway. But the magisterial opera composer Franz Schreker was shattered by the events of 1933 and died of a stroke the following year. Alexander Zemlinsky, another significant force in German-language opera, arrived in New York in 1938, hoped in vain for a production at the Met of his work, and died in 1942. Bleaker still are the stories of those who waited too long to leave or lacked the resources to do so. Viktor Ullmann and Hans Krása were murdered in Auschwitz. Many others perished before they had a chance to make their names.

I was especially haunted by the case of Georg Jokl, one of two musical brothers—the other was Otto—who were born in Vienna in the eighteen-nineties. Otto studied with Alban Berg and won notice as a composer, conductor, and music publisher; he later found steady employment in New York. Georg worked mainly as a pianist, often accompanying singers in recital. He arrived in New York in 1938 and largely vanished; one of his few publications was “4 Progressing Pieces for Piano.” His death, in 1954, at the age of fifty-seven, went unnoticed. *NYFOS* featured one of the few surviving traces of Jokl’s existence—a meltingly lovely, lullaby-like song titled “Abendlied” (“Evening Song”), which resembles a message in a bottle from a decimated world.

The pianist Steven Blier, who co-founded *NYFOS* in 1988 and remains its artistic director, is one of the most imaginative programmers in classical music, his myriad interests bursting the courtly confines of the vocal recital. He has placed Schubert alongside the Beatles, Poulenc alongside Sondheim; he has dabbled in ragtime, blues, tango, and samba. In a recently published memoir, “From Ear to Ear,” he explains that when he is planning an event he spends countless hours pondering and rearranging potential items until they form a “lyric architecture”—an underlying narrative that emerges with each

successive song. “Fugitives” is exceptionally strong in this regard: it documents a fundamental transformation in the nature of songwriting while demonstrating continuities in the personalities of the composers under consideration.

We began in the world that was—in the humid atmosphere of fin-de-siècle Vienna, from which Zemlinsky, Schreker, and Schoenberg emerged. In a program note, Blier wrote that the “Fugitives” concept was inspired by Zemlinsky’s “Meeraugen,” or “Sea Eyes,” which tells of a “person staring into the roiling abyss of the ocean.” You had the feeling, as the evening went on, that the crushing realities of twentieth-century history—war, revolution, inflation, the Depression, Fascism—made such refined aestheticism untenable and forced composers onto other paths. But *NYFOS* imposes no stylistic ideologies, and if, in 1939, Ullmann felt compelled to dive back into Straussian late Romanticism, Blier sees nothing contradictory in the gesture.

When a recital ranges from “Meeraugen” to Kurt Weill’s “Buddy on the Nightshift,” by way of Krása’s atonal Five Lieder and Hanns Eisler’s Brecht setting “The Landscape of Exile,” singers of extreme versatility are required. The duo on hand for “Fugitives”—the mezzo Kate Lindsey, a veteran of the series, and the baritone Gregory Feldmann, a new addition—met the challenge. The pianist and vocal coach Bénédicte Jourdois, *NYFOS*’s associate artistic director, assisted with the accompaniments and with the stage patter, of which there is always a fair amount. Blier is a strong personality, as his entertainingly candid book reveals, but he is a genial host, and also a knowledgeable one. If he dominates the party, you don’t want to leave.

Feldmann, a relatively recent Juilliard graduate, showed his Lieder-singing chops in the Viennese fare, his tone robust, his diction crisp. He could have brought a sharper edge to political songs by Eisler and Weill—the latter’s “Caesar’s Death” needs more of a snarl to make its anti-Fascist allegory clear—but he shifted effortlessly into Broadway belting in “Love Song,” from Weill’s “Love Life.” Erich Wolfgang Korngold’s “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” a radiant song by a composer who did so well in Hollywood that classical snobs wrote him off, benefitted from a plush timbre. Feldmann learned all this esoteric repertory in just a week (after

Justin Austin dropped out on account of illness), making his achievement somewhat heroic.

Lindsey came on the musical scene as a sweet-voiced Mozart mezzo and has grown into a fearless singing actor. Although her German diction lacked bite, especially in the cabaret-style material, she has an inherent ability to inhabit and project a song. Daringly, she took on Hollaender's "Black Market," which was written for the mighty Dietrich: it comes from Billy Wilder's 1948 film "A Foreign Affair," an acidulous political comedy set in occupied Germany. Lindsey didn't impersonate the original—as Blier pointed out, she actually sang the notes, rather than a Dietrich-like approximation of them—but she did throw in a few smokily accented phrasings. More important, she and Blier together caught the unscrupulous sophistication of the scenario, for which Hollaender supplied both words and music:

Powdered milk for bikes.
Souls for Lucky Strikes.
Got some broken-down ideals? Like wedding rings?
Sh-h-h! Tiptoe. Trade your things.

During his American period, Hollaender worked with such lyricists as Leo Robin and Frank Loesser, but as a wordsmith he equalled any of them, and over time he mastered English well enough that he could replicate the mordant virtuosity of his German numbers. ("Get the Men out of the Reichstag" and "The Jews Are to Blame for Everything" are two classics.) *NYFOS* did a service by celebrating this often overlooked songwriting genius, whose wit was as lethal as his melodies were lithe.

Fiercest of all was Lindsey's rendition of Weill's "Wie lange noch?" ("How much longer?"), which was written in 1944 and broadcast into Germany for psychological-warfare purposes. The tune comes from Weill's French-language torch song "Je ne t'aime pas." The émigré satirist Walter Mehring inserted a new text that retains a torchy vibe—this is ostensibly a complaint against a lying lover—but implicitly urges resistance against Hitler: "I believed you, I had gone mad / From all your talk, your vows." The title phrase alludes to Cicero's denunciation of a would-be dictator: "How much

longer, O Catiline, will you abuse our patience?" The airing of the song had no apparent effect: the madness went on until Hitler was dead. ♦

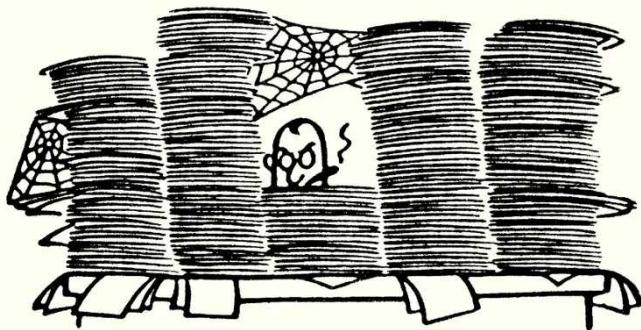
Poems

- [Slender Offering](#)
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Slender Offering

By Lucie Brock-Broido

February 23, 2026



Everything has its dwindling.
Everything was dwindling.

The old elegance of my heart became as small
As a coffin carved for a scarab which lived

Three thousand years ago and died of sun
And scalpel, supernatural, but musical.

Half a life ago, when there were blizzards,
We would steal milk from the chimera's young.

Such small unnatural selections as we are.

The love of me—impossible as a boat made of the orchids
Of Numidia which you keep cased in a bottle

Blown in the shape
Of certain kindnesses.

Things rust. No evidence of birds; no evidence of flight.
I am glad I will not be here when the world is warm.

—*Lucie Brock-Broido (1956-2018)*

The Tomb Attendant Contemplates His Own Death

By Matthew Shenoda

February 23, 2026



Though I've never uttered the name *pharaoh*
I knew he was there

ordering and stacking our life in some way.
It bothered me little as I attended to my duties,

fed my children, intoned my hopes to the Most High
striving for an alabaster heart.

But something nagged at me
as I swept the corners of his future,

knelt and watched the adornment build itself
into an umbrella of everlasting.

Like a crescent boat
forever pulled from the shore

in the shadowed gleam
of the long long water.

I revelled in the brightness of the pigments
and curve of the steady hand.

The careful placement of words that make histories
meant to carry us beyond the hold of our days.

What is it to keep these traditions
to show ourselves to the gathering of witnesses.

What if I wish for the tomb door closed
sequestered inside it with nothing

to lay my body still in that dusty silence,
to say never shall these gates be opened,

to take with me all that I was and became,
to share it with no one who is left on the other side of that stone wall?

There are and have been
sorrows greater than mine

and joys, I imagine, too.
Though who knows the inner heart

beyond the song that the mouth sings?
In the small call of the bird

my peace is made like a braided mat
still like a palm filled with sand

to be left in the quiet
in the cool stone days.

This is drawn from “Holdings.”

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, February 18, 2026](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, February 18, 2026

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Erik Agard

February 18, 2026



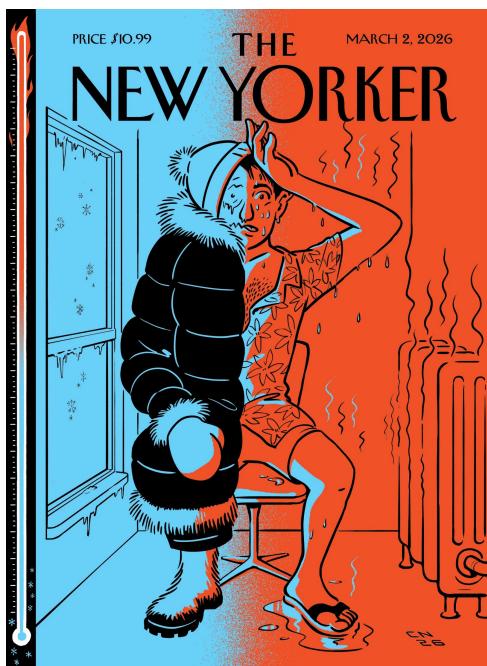


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