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# WORKER



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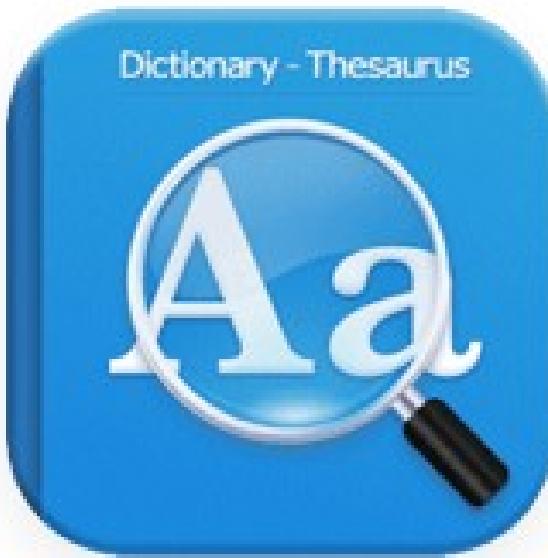
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# Goings On

- [Richard Move Channels Martha Graham](#)
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Going On

# Richard Move Channels Martha Graham

Also: idiosyncratic bookstores, a retrospective for Vaginal Davis, the new Springsteen movie, and more.

By Hilton Als, Dan Stahl, Brian Seibert, Zoë Hopkins, Sheldon Pearce, Richard Brody, Helen Shaw, Rachel Syme

October 24, 2025



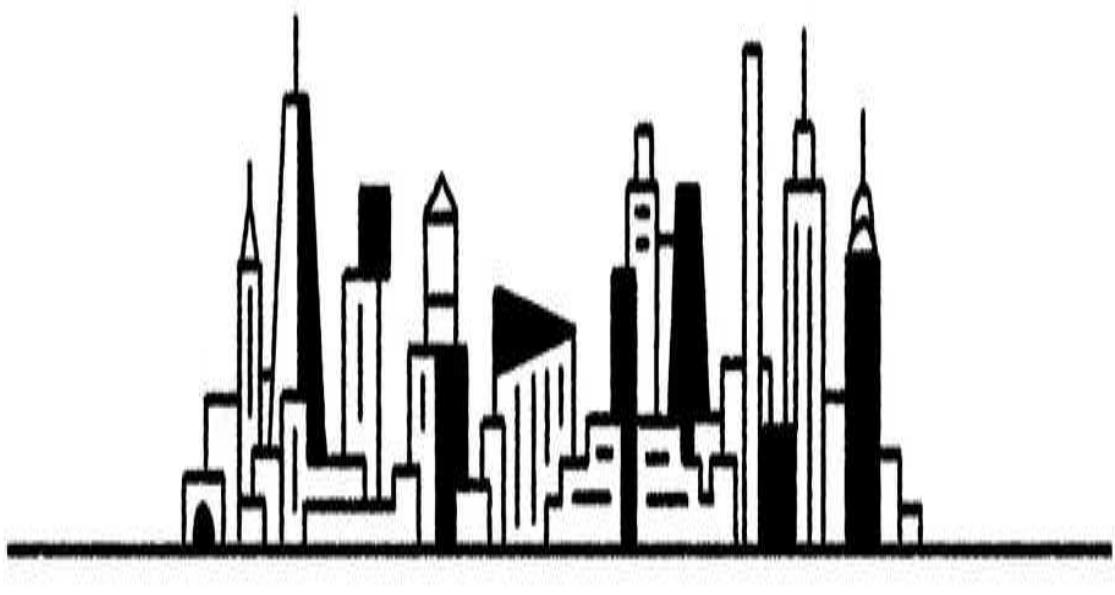
**One of the great pleasures** of going to clubs in the nineteen-eighties and nineties—back when now defunct venues like the Clit Club and the Pyramid Club and Jackie 60 had live performance—was what you could find on a night out. Aside from a temporary love, or a new friend, you could easily stumble upon fabulous stage shows that were presented with such seriousness, often, that you wondered if—while watching the amazing Duelling Bankheads, for instance, or so many people who got up so brilliantly as Stevie Nicks on the Night of 1000 Stevies—you were high on the entertainment, or on dancing with your chosen community, or just amazed by what New York had to offer by way of creativity. Looking back, I

can see that, for me at least, it was the combination of all three elements together that gave such hope about Manhattan's ability to foster noncommercial glamour, and to support young performers who were trying things out and seeing what stuck.



The shows I loved the most were at Jackie 60, spearheaded by the irreplaceable Chi Chi Valenti and Johnny Dynell, the resident d.j. Among a host of unforgettable performers was the great **Richard Move**, whose channelling of Martha Graham in all her glory—from “Lamentation” to “Clytemnestra”—was further enhanced by the interviews that Move, as Graham, conducted onstage. Move’s work was that not of a satirist but of a believer, of a terrific dancer who inhabited Graham’s genius. That melding of fact and fiction, truth and spectacle, will be on display in **“Martha@BAM—the 1963 Interview,”** at [BAM Fisher Fishman Space](#), Oct. 28-Nov. 1, as part of the Next Wave Festival. The show re-creates an interview that Graham gave at the 92nd Street Y with the dance critic Walter Terry, played by Lisa Kron. You just know that Move—having lived with Martha so long, and with such love—will take us to places with their artistry and Graham-fuelled dreams that we couldn’t even imagine.—*Hilton Als*

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## About Town

Broadway

1906. Father is off to the North Pole with Admiral Peary. Leaving New York Harbor, he passes a ship teeming with immigrants, including the Jewish Tateh and his daughter. Back home in New Rochelle, Mother takes in an indigent Black woman and her baby; the woman's pianist lover soon comes calling in a Model T. So swirls the melting-pot plot of Stephen Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens, and Terrence McNally's 1996 musical "**Ragtime**," adapted from E. L. Doctorow's impressionistic 1975 novel about the dawn of twentieth-century America. Lear deBessonet's kinetic revival conjures the churn of the times and their emotional reality. Over a century later, that reality—hope, horror, dizzying uncertainty about the future—hasn't gotten any less American.—*Dan Stahl ([Beaumont](#); through Jan. 4.)*

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Dance

As the **Paul Taylor Dance Company** returns to Lincoln Center for another three-week season, it offers the novelty of three premières. Two are by its resident choreographers, Lauren Lovette and Robert Battle: hers a hyperactive love letter to her A.D.H.D.; his, a loving appreciation of jazz and spirituals. Another, by the former Alvin Ailey star Hope Boykin, is about love itself. But the reason to go remains the Taylor repertory, including the return of “Speaking in Tongues” (1988), a disturbing fever dream about charismatic Christianity, and the fiftieth anniversary of Taylor’s most popular work and the most approachable of masterpieces, “Esplanade.”—*Brian Seibert ([David H. Koch Theatre](#); Nov. 4-23.)*

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Art



There's nothing like the name **Vaginal Davis** to announce the artist's fiery irreverence. In five decades of performance, filmmaking, writing, and life as a self-proclaimed “Blacktress,” Davis has been constantly remaking a name for herself as a doyenne of subversive, queer artist-activist scenes. Davis's retrospective, “Magnificent Product,” is a romp through all that blossoms from her unique predilection for mixing saccharine pop with hardcore, salacious punk: erotic poetry, ads for “Club Sucker,” TVs screening drag performances in overcrowded L.A. basements. The pièce de résistance is

“The Wicked Pavilion: Tween Bedroom,” saturated with all the glitter and enchantment of a teen-age girl’s bedroom. But then the eye catches a giant phallus on the bed, which, after spending some time in Davis’s head, doesn’t look entirely out of place.—*Zoë Hopkins* ([MOMA PS1](#); through March 2.)

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Jazz

In recent years, the pianist Vijay Iyer and the drummer Tyshawn Sorey, defining composers and leaders of contemporary jazz, have become one of its most formidable pairings. Sorey, winner of the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for Music, first joined forces with Iyer, a MacArthur Fellow, on a record in 2003, and their collaborations include stunning albums with the bassist Linda May Han Oh (“Uneasy,” “Compassion”) and stints with the saxophonist Steve Lehman, in the trio Fieldwork (reunited for the September LP “Thereupon”). Iyer and Sorey team up again for a run of shows as the **Vijay Iyer Quartet**, in concert with the trumpeter Adam O’Farrill and the bassist Yunior Terry.—*Sheldon Pearce* ([Village Vanguard](#); Nov. 4-9.)

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Movies



The tightly focussed bio-pic “**Springsteen: Deliver Me from Nowhere**,” starring Jeremy Allen White, depicts serious aspects of Bruce Springsteen’s life, which the writer and director Scott Cooper treats earnestly if superficially. The story follows the making of Springsteen’s 1982 album “Nebraska,” which he recorded in his New Jersey bedroom as a demo before deciding to release it as-is; his manager (Jeremy Strong) supports him amid opposition from his record label. The movie confronts Springsteen’s emotional troubles—his struggles with depression and his ambivalent romance with a local woman (Odessa Young). Flashbacks of childhood conflicts with his father (Stephen Graham) are portrayed in stereotypically sullen black-and-white, but Cooper’s rushed and vague approach to the story is more effective as celebration and promotion than as dramatic exploration.

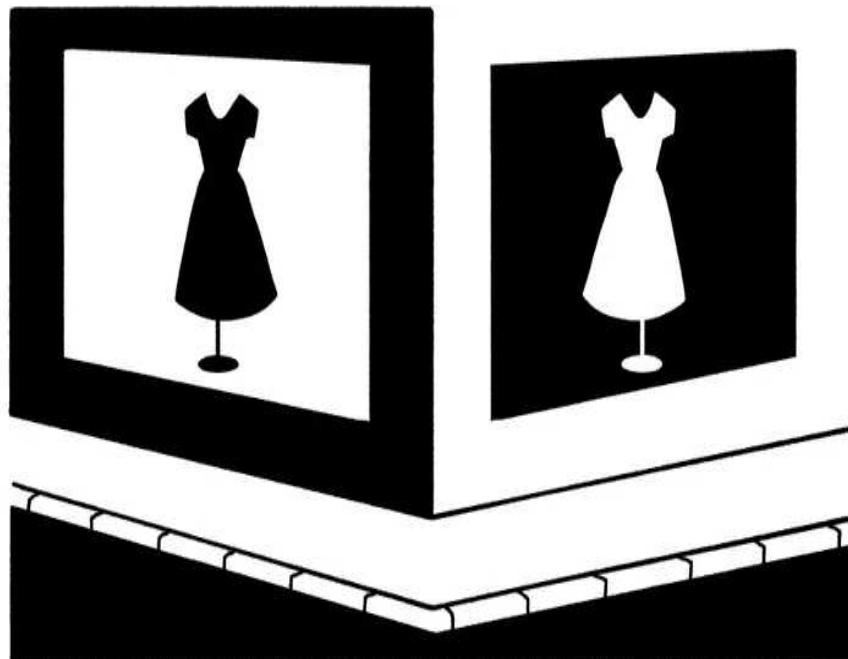
—Richard Brody (*In wide release.*)

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Off Broadway

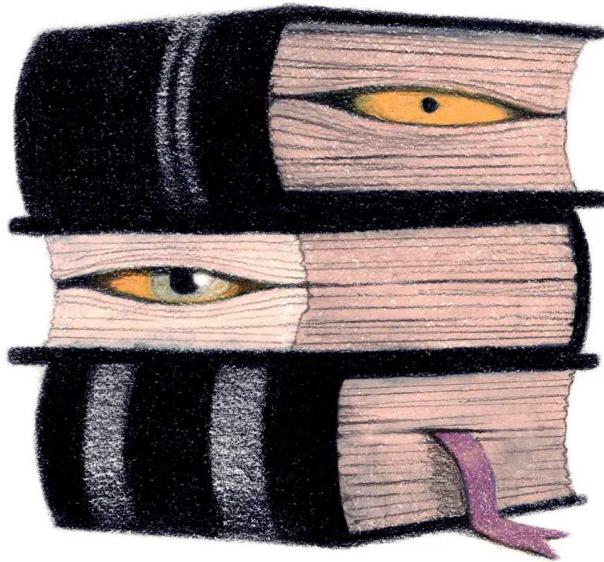
Brandon Kyle Goodman’s rambunctious, sexually frank show “**Heaux Church**,” directed by Lisa Owaki Bierman, is part modified religious service—Goodman delivers a sermon on self-love; audience members shake tambourines in approval—and part queer-friendly sex-ed talk. (The show’s warm, vulnerable attitude, and Goodman’s fondness for a snuggly cardigan, recall Mr. Rogers, though I don’t think Mr. Rogers ever demonstrated proper oral-sex technique on a glazed doughnut.) Goodman is not alone onstage—the d.j. Ari Grooves stands at a turntable, and several singing puppets, such as Floppy the purple penis, visit often. But Goodman *is* alone in one crucial way: they tell us about their estrangement from their born-again mother, a still painful loss which has clearly galvanized Goodman’s own loving ministry.—Helen Shaw ([Ars Nova](#); through Nov. 8.)

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## On and Off the Avenue

*Rachel Syme on a new spate of genre-focussed bookstores.*



The New York City shopping scene is nothing if not cyclical; trends have a sneaky way of slinking back, even after being declared dead for decades. For

example, the city is currently seeing a notable spike in independent bookstores catering to idiosyncratic tastes—but this is not a new phenomenon. New York has always been a place where eclectic literature has found eager customers. There was Murder Ink, on the Upper West Side, devoted to mysteries, and the Oscar Wilde Bookshop, in Greenwich Village, which specialized in L.G.B.T.Q. material. There was Djuna Books, on Tenth Street, and Womanbooks, on West Ninety-second Street, both of which carried feminist texts, and the National Memorial African Bookstore, in Harlem, founded by the civil-rights activist Lewis H. Michaux, in 1932, which touted one of the most significant collections of Black literature in the country. These spots are all gone, but now, due in part to the rise of #BookTok, where genre fiction often goes viral, booksellers are once again getting more targeted in their approach. In Park Slope, there's [\*\*The Ripped Bodice\*\*](#), a romance bookstore, founded by sisters Lea and Bea Koch. It opened in 2023 and has been packed ever since. In Bed-Stuy, Tiffany Dockery, a former Google employee, recently opened [\*\*Gladys Books and Wine\*\*](#), which focusses on books by Black women. And, just in time for Halloween, [\*\*The Twisted Spine\*\*](#), New York's first bookstore dedicated purely to horror, has opened its doors in Williamsburg. The store's owners, Lauren Komer and Jason Mellow, raised over forty thousand dollars in a crowdfunding campaign to open the space, which has a distinctly goth vibe, with black-painted walls, a glowing electric fireplace, and a coffee bar that serves lattes in skull-shaped mugs—plus books in dozens of creepy categories, from "Slashers" to "Haunted Houses." Long live the oddball bookstore.

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## What to Watch

*Richard Brody on the French New Wave.*

Richard Linklater's "[\*\*Nouvelle Vague\*\*](#)," dramatizing the making of Jean-Luc Godard's "Breathless," in 1959, is also a group portrait. The French New Wave was, above all, a gathering of passionate young filmmakers who self-consciously embraced movies as art and, in doing so, turned cinema into an art of youth. That's why, in the nineteen-sixties, the New Wave became an inspiration to filmmakers worldwide and put movies at the center of cultural life. Here are some of the (streamable) masterworks that helped to do so.

**“The 400 Blows”**: François Truffaut’s first feature, from 1959, is a tender and furious—and largely autobiographical—story about a vulnerable, passionately artistic youth. The cruelties and pieties of school, the distracted inadequacy of parents, the alienating remoteness of official culture add up to a world in which, for young Truffaut, the movies were more than a substitute—they saved him.

**“Chronicle of a Summer”**: The New Wave often filmed fiction with documentary-like methods, but rarely made documentaries. The documentarian Jean Rouch and the sociologist Edgar Morin turned in-the-street reporting both reflexive and creative with this 1960 investigation of whether Parisians consider themselves happy. The results expose the emotional price of French colonialism and of repressed memories of the Second World War.



**“Cléo from 5 to 7”**: Agnès Varda’s first feature, “La Pointe Courte,” from 1955, was New Wave before the term was coined; her second, shot in 1961, joined the movement in full swing. It’s a bouncy yet melancholic drama of a singer who lives a whole life in microcosm—through music (by Michel Legrand), movies, romance—during a two-hour wait for biopsy results.

**“Adieu Philippine”:** Jacques Rozier shot his first feature in 1961, capturing the freewheeling spirit of youth and its uneasy bond with the world of employment. He flaunts a self-aware modernity in the story of a young man who, biding his time before military service in the Algerian war, works on TV broadcasts and flirts his way into enthusiastic Parisian adventures and a rock-and-roll romp through the countryside.

**“A Married Woman”:** Jean-Luc Godard launched his career with “Breathless,” his take on gangster movies; here is his 1964 version of another Hollywood genre, the so-called women’s picture. It’s a romantic drama of the eternal triangle, which he treats like the essence of modernism —a scintillating collage of startlingly erotic scenes, daringly playful cinematography, political discussions, advertising imagery, and classic theatre.

And, as a bonus, “**The Bakery Girl of Monceau**”: Éric Rohmer, the New Wave’s elder statesman, found his voice as the dialectical analyst of youth and love with this 1962 short film.

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#### P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *Marisa Meltzer loves French diaper cream*
- *If the Louvre heist got you in the mood*
- *Sex with the neighbors*

# Yo-Yo Ma on What Our Descendants Will Inherit

The celebrated cellist, who has a new show on WNYC, discusses three books that have shaped his thinking on the world his generation will leave behind.

October 15, 2025

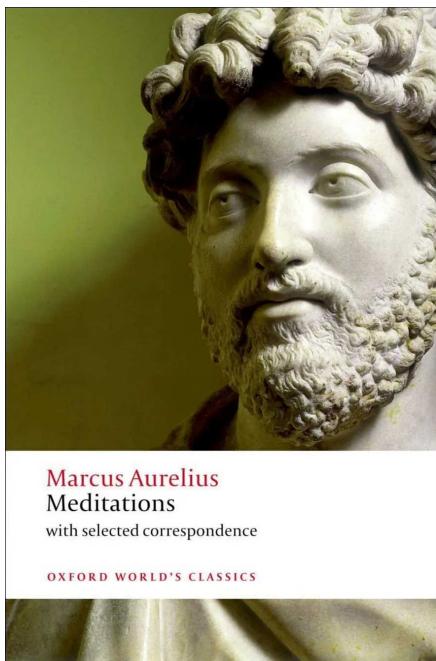


Earlier this month, the celebrated cellist [Yo-Yo Ma](#) turned seventy—an occasion that led him to reflect on not just his own past but also the planet's future. In a letter to fans, he wrote, "Today, I am worried. In the year 2100, my youngest grandchild will be 76. She will be meeting a world I will not see. I wonder what the world will be like then?" Not long ago, Ma sent us recommendations for three books that have contributed to his thinking on this theme—books that interrogate timeless aspects of human nature, our complex relationships to one another, and our entanglement with the natural world. (He explores some of these subjects on his newest podcast, "[Our Common Nature](#)," which premiered on WNYC last week.) Each book, he

shows, offers a different kind of guidance on how to cultivate a better world for our descendants.

## Meditations

by *Marcus Aurelius*



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

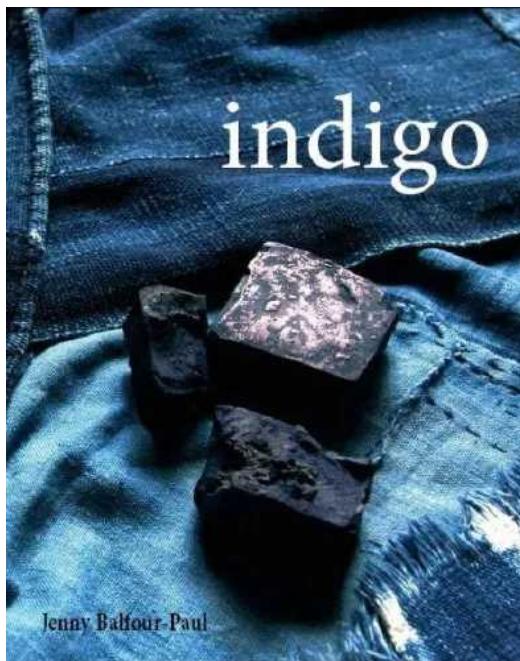
I'm drawn to Marcus Aurelius these days because reading him focusses my thinking, aligns my priorities, and reminds me that there are certain human values that endure across millennia—that trying to practice the virtues of wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance is the best hope I have to lead a balanced life in our impermanent, ever-changing world.

“Meditations” was written as a private journal, not meant for public consumption. It is made up of Marcus Aurelius’s advice to himself, produced perhaps as an antidote to being constantly surrounded by and subjected to the temptation and corruption of life as Emperor. It’s a reminder to look within ourselves for purpose and meaning. Marcus Aurelius believed that happiness comes from the inside, that it derives from cultivating dignity

and compassion rather than from external success. I feel this is precisely the kind of humanism that society is missing today.

## Indigo

by Jenny Balfour-Paul



[Amazon](#)

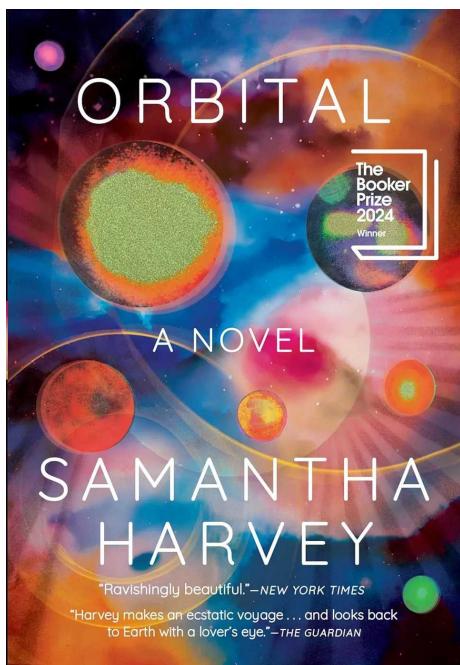
When I was in school, the subjects I studied were compartmentalized in such a way that when I graduated, I didn't realize how interconnected the world was (and has always been). It has given me so much joy to discover those connections, and "Indigo" provided many such revelations—learning how a plant became a dye, how a dye became a color desired all over the world, and how that color changed habits, built economies, and spurred artistic creation. Even today, the denim your jeans are made from might be spun from cotton grown in Asia, its name derived from the French city where blue serge fabric originated ("de Nîmes"), dyed with indigo that was once worth more than its weight in gold. This simple fabric is present throughout world history, from Biblical times to today, from India to Africa, the Middle East, Europe, Asia, South America. "Indigo" gave me insight into a dynamic that has become like a mantra for me: that if you look deeply enough at any

object, any story, any song—no matter how familiar—you will find the world.

Reading “Indigo” inspired me to work with New York Public Schools to create a program for sixth graders which would help them see some of the interconnections that it took me so many years to discover, equipping them with a sense of the many threads that link people, cultures, centuries, continents, humans, and nature. In the program, my colleagues and I worked with students to grow indigo, make dye, and then create wearable items. It was one of the hardest and most rewarding times of my life.

## Orbital

by Samantha Harvey



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

It takes real virtuosity to write across shifting scales and perspectives, as Harvey does in this novel. One moment, the Earth is Mother Earth, giver of life; in the next, it is just a tiny blue dot. In the same way, Harvey sends the reader lurching from the mundane to the life-altering—a failed attempt to heat up garlic results in the space-station cabin reeking for weeks; an

astronaut reels after learning of their mother's sudden death. The reader's concern moves from the survival of the six astronauts to the cell cultures in their onboard lab, which, by one calculus (they may yield lifesaving scientific advancements), could be considered more valuable than the lives of the six astronauts.

"Orbital" gives me hope. I feel that, today, we need this kind of encompassing vision—one that understands the smallest detail and the biggest picture, that can move effortlessly between analysis and empathy, that acknowledges the individual and the planet at the same time, and that recognizes humans as part of nature and our survival as inseparable from the health of the Earth.

# The Talk of the Town

- [Why Trump Tore Down the East Wing](#)
- [Daniel Denvir Digs Zohran Mamdani](#)
- [Betsy Aidem, Working Woman](#)
- [Rachel Dratch Gets Metaphysical on Her Woo-Woo Podcast](#)
- [Rendez-Vous Chez Moi](#)

Comment

# Why Trump Tore Down the East Wing

The act of destruction is precisely the point: a kind of performance piece meant to display Trump's arbitrary power over the Presidency, including its physical seat.

By Adam Gopnik

October 25, 2025



The surprise and shock that so many people have registered at the photographs of Donald Trump's destruction of the East Wing of the White House—soon to be replaced by his own ostentatious and overscaled ballroom—is itself, in a way, surprising and shocking. On the long list of Trumpian depredations, the rushed demolition might seem a relatively minor offense. After months marked by corruption, violence, and the open perversion of law, to gasp in outrage at the loss of a few tons of masonry and mortar might seem oddly misjudged.

And yet it isn't. We are creatures of symbols, and our architecture tells us who we are. John Ruskin, the greatest of architectural critics, observed that a nation writes its history in many books, but that the book of its buildings is

the most enduring. The faith in order and proportion embodied in the Alhambra, the romance of modernity caught in the Eiffel Tower’s lattice of iron—these are not ideas imposed on buildings but ideals that the buildings themselves express, more lastingly than words can. Among them, not least, is the modest, egoless ideal of democratic tradition captured so perfectly in such American monuments as the Lincoln Memorial, which shows not a hero but a man, seated, in grave contemplation.

The same restrained values of democracy have always marked the White House—a stately house, but not an imperial one. It is “the people’s house,” but it has also, historically, been a family house, with family quarters and a family scale. It’s a little place, by the standards of monarchy, and blessedly so: fitting for a democracy in which even the biggest boss is there for a brief time, and at the people’s pleasure. As Ronald Reagan said, after a victory more decisive than Trump could ever dream of, the President is merely a temporary resident, holding the keys for a fixed term. That was the beauty of it.

The East Wing has never been a place of grandeur. The structure as we knew it was built in the anxious years of the Second World War. It was Franklin Roosevelt’s attempt to regularize a jumble of service spaces and, not incidentally, to carve out a secure refuge beneath them. But it quickly became a center of quiet power. Eleanor Roosevelt hosted women journalists there. Two decades later, Jacqueline Kennedy presided over a different kind of transformation from the same offices, founding the White House Historical Association. The wing’s very plainness came to symbolize the functional modesty of democratic government: a space for staff, not spectacle; for the sustaining rituals of civic life, not the exhibition of personal glory.

All of that is now gone. The act of destruction is precisely the point: a kind of performance piece meant to display Trump’s arbitrary power over the Presidency, including its physical seat. He asks permission of no one, destroys what he wants, when he wants. As many have noted, one of Trump’s earliest public acts, having promised the Metropolitan Museum of Art the beautiful limestone reliefs from the façade of the old Bonwit Teller building, was to jackhammer them to dust in a fit of impatience.

Trump apologists say that earlier Presidents altered the White House, too. Didn't Jimmy Carter install solar panels? Didn't George H. W. Bush build a horseshoe pit? Didn't Barack Obama put in a basketball court? What's the fuss? And, anyway, who but élitists would object to a big ballroom that looks like the banquet hall of a third-rate casino? Who decides what's decorous and what's vulgar? Even the White House Historical Association, with a caution that has become typical of this dark time, confines itself to stating that it has been allowed to make a digital record of what's being destroyed—as though that were a defense, rather than an epitaph.

This, of course, is the standard line of Trump apologetics: some obvious outrage is identified, and defenders immediately scour history for an earlier, vaguely similar act by a President who actually respected the Constitution. It's a form of mismatched matching. If Trump blows up boats with unknown men aboard—well, didn't Obama use drones against alleged terrorists? (Yes, but within a process designed, however imperfectly, to preserve a chain of command and a vestige of due process.) If Trump posts a video featuring himself as the combat pilot he never was, dropping excrement on peaceful protesters—well, didn't Lyndon Johnson swear at his aides from his seat on the john? What's the fuss? The jabs and insults of earlier Presidents, though, however rough, stayed within the bounds of democratic discourse, the basic rule being that the other side also gets to make its case. Even Richard Nixon sought out student protesters one early morning—at the Lincoln Memorial—and tried to understand what drove them.

So it was with the White House. Earlier alterations were made incrementally, and only after much deliberation. When Harry Truman added a not very grand balcony to the Executive Residence, the move was controversial, but the construction was overseen by a bipartisan commission. By contrast, the new project—bankrolled by Big Tech firms and crypto moguls—is one of excess and self-advertisement. The difference between the Truman balcony and the Trump ballroom is all the difference in the world. It is a difference of process and procedure—two words so essential to the rule of law and equality, yet doomed always to seem feeble beside the orgiastic showcase of power.

That is the rhetorical fragility of liberal democracy: its reliance on rules rather than on rage. If the White House must be remade, let there be a plan;

let it be debated; let the financing be transparent and free of kickbacks and corruption. It isn't complicated, and it's the very principle at the heart of the American Revolution: following rules is not weakness. It is the breaking of them that is the indulgence of insecure tyrants, who feel most alive in acts of real and symbolic violence.

Architecture embodies values; it is not merely a receptacle of them. Simple proportions and human-scale spaces don't just suggest the spirit of a democratic nation. They *are* that spirit in three dimensions, with doors and windows. Reverence for the past, and reluctance to destroy until the risks of destruction are fully known, is not timidity but wisdom, in architecture as in life. To conserve, after all, is the essence of conservatism. The shock that images of the destruction provoke—the grief so many have felt—is not an overreaction to the loss of a beloved building. It is a recognition of something deeper: the central values of democracy being demolished before our eyes. Now we do not only sense it. We see it. ♦

Partisans

# Daniel Denvir Digs Zohran Mamdani

The host of the socialist podcast “The Dig” says that Mamdani has the charisma of Barack Obama, with better politics. But is the left really ready for his mayorship?

By Andrew Marantz

October 27, 2025



A few days after [Zohran Mamdani](#)’s upstart victory in the Democratic mayoral primary, in June, a podcast called “The Dig” released an episode titled “How Zohran Won.” “Socialists are on the precipice of controlling one of the most powerful posts in the country,” the host, Daniel Denvir, said. “And this isn’t just about New York. Liberal voters are shifting left—and fast.”

Had it been on CBS News or “Morning Joe,” this line might have been delivered with skepticism or ambivalence. On [Fox News](#), it would have been a call to arms. But on “The Dig,” a socialist podcast affiliated with *Jacobin* magazine, it was cause for celebration. The election, Denvir said, had put him “in a more profound state of political ecstasy than I can recall being in

since I first joined the American left, as a teen-ager in the late nineties.” He called Mamdani “truly a generational political talent—an [Obama](#)-tier political communicator, but with good politics, unlike Obama.”

Denvir is forty-two years old and lives in Providence, where he co-chairs a leftist political organization and records “The Dig” from his garage. The other day, he took an Amtrak to Penn Station and a subway up to Washington Heights, for a Mamdani rally in the ornate United Palace theatre. Denvir wore a Henley and a graying beard and had a wheeled suitcase in tow, which was causing a problem with security. Jack Gross, a friend of Denvir’s and the editor of a leftist publication called *Phenomenal World*, offered to stash the bag in the trunk of his Camry.

“I’m mortified that you’re doing this for me,” Denvir said, passing him the suitcase.

Gross, with a grin, said, “Hey, this is solidarity in action.”

Denvir wasn’t on the press list, but he talked to a volunteer behind a folding table (“‘The Dig’? D-I-G?”) and was waved in. He stopped at the bar to buy an overpriced Modelo, then made his way through the lobby. A few people recognized him, and a few more recognized him after they heard his voice. “‘Thawra’ was so amazing,” a woman in a hijab said, referring to a “mini-series on Arab radicalisms” that Denvir released last year.

“I tried to keep it to one or two episodes, I swear,” Denvir replied. It ended up being sixteen, plus three epilogues—more than forty hours in total.

“The Dig” is not mass entertainment. Episodes are long and unapologetically academic—for listeners who want to “jump into the deep end of left politics,” as Denvir puts it. (The *Guardian* once called him “a socialist Terry Gross.”) He has interviewed nearly every star intellectual on the left, as well as [Bernie Sanders](#) and [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) (twice each). The politicians may or may not have time to listen, but their staffers certainly do. “Within my world—leftist organizers, lapsed academics, or political-campaign staff, all of which I am—the show is incredibly influential,” Andrew Epstein, Mamdani’s creative director, said.

Denvir is friendly with the podcasters of the so-called dirtbag left, but unlike them, he said, “I don’t crack a lot of jokes on the show. I keep it pretty structured.” Even “How Zohran Won,” a relatively loose episode featuring two organizers from the [Democratic Socialists of America](#), started with a characteristically nerdy question about how the “social-democratic order” of post-LaGuardia New York was “smashed by neoliberalism” in the seventies. One of the guests from that episode, Gustavo Gordillo, approached Denvir in the theatre lobby, and they hugged. Gordillo wore a D.S.A. button, and he carried a rally sign bearing the slogan of the evening: “Our Time Has Come.”

Denvir found his seat, and the lights dimmed. Ever the commentator, he whispered live assessments of each speaker; he gave higher marks to the city councilman Chi Ossé (“He’s talking in terms of a ‘we,’ broadly conceived”) than to Representative Nydia Velázquez, who spoke about Mamdani’s personal narrative. (Even in his chitchat, Denvir uses words like “conjunction” and “effectuate.”) When Natasha Cloud, a player for the New York Liberty, said “Free Palestine,” Denvir gave her a standing ovation. He also applauded the New York attorney general, [Letitia James](#), who has been targeted for political prosecution by the [Trump](#) Administration. Compared with himself, he said between sips of beer, “she’s a centrist liberal, but we have to figure out how to work with liberals if we want to wield any real power.”

After the rally, Denvir, Gordillo, and a few other D.S.A. organizers headed to a friend’s nearby rooftop. “As soon as Zohran does literally anything as mayor, the left is going to be furious at him,” Denvir said, pulling his retrieved suitcase. “A socialist running the N.Y.P.D.? That’s a dilemma we’ve never faced before. We have to criticize him, but we also can’t just say, ‘He’s a sellout for not immediately abolishing the police.’ Actually dealing with these contradictions—that’s the left growing up.” ♦

The Boards

# Betsy Aidem, Working Woman

The actress stars in “Liberation,” a play about feminist consciousness-raising, set in 1970. At the New York Historical, she zeroes in on the roots of the show’s nude scene.

By Rachel Syme

October 27, 2025



The sixty-eight-year-old theatre actress Betsy Aidem is a self-described “research junkie.” When she starred as Lady Bird Johnson in the 2014 Broadway play “All the Way,” about [Lyndon B. Johnson](#)’s efforts to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, she read all four of [Robert Caro](#)’s Johnson biographies, each as dense as a poundcake. To prepare for her recent Tony-nominated role as a French Jewish matriarch in Joshua Harmon’s “[A Prayer for the French Republic](#),” she flew to Paris just to see the building where Harmon’s grandparents had hidden during the Nazi occupation.

“Sometimes I get so into the research that someone literally has to stage an intervention,” she said the other day, standing in the [New York Historical](#), where she’d gone to get her latest fix—fuel for her role in Bess Wohl’s

“Liberation,” on Broadway. The play, a bighearted ensemble piece, set predominantly in small-town Ohio in 1970, centers on a feminist “consciousness raising” group that meets in a rec-center gymnasium. Aidem plays Margie, an empty-nester housewife with a wry sense of humor and a talent for making cheese balls, whose oafish husband never helps with chores. To prepare, she read Clara Bingham’s 2024 oral history, “The Movement,” about feminist crusaders of the sixties and seventies, but she wanted to get her hands on some primary materials.

She made her way to the museum’s second-floor library, where she joined Anna Danziger Halperin, the director of the Historical’s Center for Women’s History. Aidem, who has the eclectic style of a woman who knows her way around a craft fair (paisley blouse, shaggy Mongolian-lamb coat, a tangle of beaded necklaces), was led to a table covered with women’s-lib ephemera. “Second-wave-feminist history is my main academic focus,” Halperin said. “So a lot of these things I already had sitting around my office.” Aidem loved a set of “working women” paper dolls from 1974, which included a postal employee, a doctor, and a construction worker. Her eyes lit on a 1978 issue of *Working Mother* magazine, with the cover line “Time for Yourself: How to Save, Buy It, and Make It (Without Feeling Guilty).”

“Oof,” she said, with a sigh. “I feel that.” Aidem has a thirty-three-year-old son, Sam. “From the time Sam was about a year and a half, I was a single parent,” she said. “I had to take a break from theatre, because being gone at night so much wasn’t viable. But at some point I just began schlepping him with me to tech rehearsals.”

Halperin showed Aidem a photograph of a protest at the 1968 Miss America pageant, where activists placed a “Freedom Trash Can” on the Atlantic City boardwalk and filled it with various feminine trappings, from corsets to high heels. “This is where the phrase ‘bra burning’ comes from,” Halperin said. “Though they didn’t actually burn any bras, because they didn’t have a permit.”

“I remember that!” Aidem said, and told a story about being the first girl at her temple to be bat mitzvahed, in 1970. “I gave a speech about how I was so happy that I was able to have an opportunity that was not afforded to girls, and, when I finished, a couple colleagues of my dad’s came up to me

and were, like, ‘What are you going to do next? Burn your bra?’ I was thirteen, and thinking, Why is this creepy guy asking me about my underwear?”

Aidem grew up in Phoenix, the daughter of a surgeon and a homemaker, both Republicans. When she was fifteen, a friend took her to a march supporting Cesar Chavez’s hunger strike for farmworkers. “[Joan Baez](#) sang,” she said. “I learned to chant ‘*Sí se puede*,’ and I’ve been a Democrat ever since.” She moved to Manhattan in 1976, to study acting at N.Y.U. “Back then, there was no criteria for getting in,” she said. “If you had a needle sticking out of your right arm and a check in your left hand, they took the check.” Aidem has appeared in ninety plays, but Hollywood has never tempted her. “I suppose I have a latent fear of ubiquity,” she said.

She looked at a pamphlet produced by the radical New York women’s group Redstockings. “They sometimes met in the nude, you know,” she said. “Liberation” draws on this; it includes a fifteen-minute naked scene. Initially, Aidem felt nervous about being so exposed. “First, we all went around and talked about our insecurities,” she said. “Then we did it semi-clothed, then we did it with the curtains drawn. Now, for all of us, it feels like the easiest scene in the play.”

“Liberation” deals with the way that the movement fragmented over time. Aidem had a thought about that topic: “I always say, Why are you drawing lines in the sand? They’re bombing the beach!” She attended a recent No Kings protest and noted that most of her fellow-marchers were her age. “That was the tradition of my generation,” she said. “You got out in the street.” [Gloria Steinem](#) saw “Liberation” and went backstage afterward. Aidem said, “Somebody asked her, ‘Do you think it’s still worth it to protest?’ She just said, ‘Hell yeah! And, besides, it’s fun.’” ♦

Dept. of Seeing

# Rachel Dratch Gets Metaphysical on Her Woo-Woo Podcast

Psychics predicted when the “S.N.L.” alum would have a child. Will a stop at Amy Poehler’s go-to crystal shop further clarify the future?

By Dan Greene

October 27, 2025



The realm of the “woo-woo” is, by nature, ineffable. There are spirits and “The Secret,” Reiki and reincarnation. Even when you host a podcast called “Woo Woo,” as the comedian and actor Rachel Dratch does, the subject might be easiest to define in self-defense. “Anything that, when you talk about it, you have to preface with, like, ‘Look, I don’t want to get all woo-woo,’ ” she said the other day. “That’s my little litmus test.”

Dratch, who wore an all-navy outfit with a small bird-pendant necklace, was exploring Stick Stone & Bone, a West Village boutique that hawks woo-woo wares: gems, jewelry, incense. Nose-ringed clientele browsed quietly; jazzy piano twinkled softly from above. The shop had been recommended by [Amy](#)

[Poehler](#), Dratch's close friend and podcast guest. On the show, Dratch and her co-host, Irene Bremis, a comedian and Dratch's high-school pal, are regaled by familiar faces' woo-woo tales: [Tina Fey](#)'s spooky Jersey vacation town, Will Forte's Ouija high jinks, [Gloria Steinem](#) on the intuition of the oppressed. Dratch said that Poehler is, generally, "the ultimate skeptic" of woo-woo-ness.

In early episodes, Dratch professed a wariness of her own. It has since waned. "The more stories I hear, the more open I become," she said. "There's no cost to it." It's also a practical approach. "If a guest tells their story, I don't want to step in and be, like, 'Well, that was probably just the wind,'" she said. "For the sake of the pod, we often believe that nothing has a scientific explanation." Her father, she noted, was a radiologist. "I want to put a little disclaimer, like: I'm a person of science!" she added. "But we sort of walk the line, I guess."

She eyed shelves displaying sage sticks and evil-eye paraphernalia. Her own woo-woo experiences, she said, have been few but formative. Almost a decade ago, on a group jaunt celebrating her former "[Saturday Night Live](#)" castmate Ana Gasteyer's birthday, a tarot reader grimly, and correctly, told Dratch that she'd lose a family member within six months. "There's the dark side of getting a reading," Dratch said. "It has to be someone that you know isn't going to wreck your girls' trip."

A psychic reading on Dratch's forty-third birthday went better: in the next six months, she would meet someone, the soothsayer declared, and they would have a child. "I was, like, Eh, I bet she says that to a lot of ladies," Dratch recalled. Four months later, at an East Village dive, a man chatted her up; within a year and a half, they had a son, Eli. (This inspired the title of her 2012 memoir, "*Girl Walks Into a Bar*.") She had known that, in her forties, a pregnancy could be fragile. The prediction reassured her. "I just had this feeling, like, Oh, I'm gonna have this baby," Dratch said. "It was the prophecy."

Crystals, for Dratch, were terra nova. She approached the counter, where a woman wearing an obelisk necklace presided. "Is the idea that certain crystals hold certain energies?" Dratch asked.

“Yes, because they’re composed of different elements,” the woman explained. “On the Mohs Hardness Scale, you could piezoelectrically test it.” Dratch nodded.

Over years of dinner-party chatter, she collected a trove of others’ unexplained experiences: apparitions in old hotels, successful manifestations. Two years of podcasting has necessitated a restocking. “When we started, I had all these stories stored up,” Dratch said. “Now at every party I’m, like”—she adopted a frenzied, wide-eyed mien—“Have you seen a ghost?! Ever see a light flicker?!”

She plucked a jagged chunk of blue calcite. A label said that it eases congestion. “I’m getting over a cold,” she said. Next, she read about the powers of an amber-colored cuboid called Iceland spar calcite: “ ‘Useful in achieving weight loss?’ O.K., we gotta check this out.” She then picked up a smooth stone called citrine. “This has a good feel to it,” she said, and read its label. “Creativity? Imagination? I need that,” she said. “Supports weight loss! Whoa, this is amazing.”

Dratch plopped her basket of crystals on the counter. “It’s my new weight-loss program,” she said.

The cashier rang her up (the haul cost around forty dollars), and noted that the store has been patronized by members of the Yankees, as well as the singer Sam Smith. “They’re so lovely,” the cashier said of the latter. “They literally took one of our huge ones”—she gestured toward a three-foot-tall cluster of amethyst—“under their arm, just like that.”

On the sidewalk, Dratch reviewed her selections. The blue calcite, she said, purports to aid astral projection, a form of out-of-body travel; a podcast guest once recounted an anecdote about someone who claimed to have visited Jupiter’s moons. “Not that *I’ve* ever achieved that,” she said. She held up her bag of goods. “Well, now *I’ve* got *this*. ” ♦

Paris Postcard

# Rendez-Vous Chez Moi

When the Louvre is unexpectedly closed, just call Where Should I Go?, an itinerary-planning service that grants your Parisian-vacation wishes. How about a houseparty?

By Lauren Collins

October 27, 2025



Sure, Paris is a moveable feast, a banquet of memories to be savored for a lifetime, but Hemingway's metaphor may serve as little more than a tease for the Paris visitor who battles long lines, shows up when the Louvre is closed, encounters indifferent locals, and just generally fails to find the party.

The frequency of such experiences led Linda Solanki and Jérémie Colin to found Where Should I Go?, a company that creates custom itineraries, promising to serve up a Paris that is “loud and chaotic and snobbish and warm and exciting and simply wonderful as soon as you step away from the tourist sites.” They’ve done vegan Paris and occult Paris, romantic Paris and rainy Paris, and arranged for a superfan of the French TV series “The

Bureau” to meet one of the show’s producers. “We just had a client who was really into needlecraft,” Solanki said. (They sent her to a yarn shop called Lil Weasel, in the Passage du Grand-Cerf.) Yet she and Colin could not have anticipated an unusual request that they received, about a year ago, from two American customers: they wanted to attend a *soirée appart*—a Parisian houseparty.

“I have no clue how they got this idea,” Solanki recalled. Still, she and Colin delivered, scrounging up an invite to a friend of a friend’s Halloween festivities. The evening went smoothly; now Solanki and Colin occasionally offer a *soirée appart* add-on. The latest person to take them up on the idea was Eden Brill, a marketing manager and psychology student from Zurich. On a Saturday night, she sat with a glass of champagne in the garden of the Saint James Paris hotel, in the Sixteenth Arrondissement, where Solanki and Colin had suggested that she stop before the main event. “They floated the idea and I was down,” Brill said.

Brill had originally intended to visit Paris with her boyfriend, but he’d had to bail because of a business trip. She decided to come alone. “Personal development or whatever,” she said. She’d paid five hundred euros for her personalized Paris tour. “I was kind of, like, I just wanna party and shop,” she said.

The night before, per Solanki and Colin’s instructions, she’d dined at Brass, had a cocktail at Castor Club, and then proceeded to a club called Pamela. “Dress up (from edgy-cool to chic or even half naked anything goes) and don’t take it personally if the bouncers make you wait a bit,” the instructions had warned. She stayed out dancing until four in the morning. At the hotel, she was wearing tabi boots and a vintage Balmain blazer, which she’d bought at Iregular, the third stop on her shopping itinerary. “I’m excited to experience Paris in a way that’s a bit more intimate,” she said. “But I’m a little nervous about walking into an apartment where I don’t know anybody.” She added, “Linda said that there would be a lot of lawyers present, but that they’re fun lawyers.”

To the party! Brill jumped in a cab and headed to Boulevard Exelmans, where Solanki’s old neighbor Charlotte and her boyfriend, Marc, were hosting a get-together for *la rentrée*—a return to life at the end of the

summer holidays. The party started at eight, but Solanki had briefed Brill on local customs, saying, “Definitely don’t show up before 9pm.” (Solanki also noted that “a bottle of wine or other alcohol is always a welcome host gift” and that “Parisians usually bring what they plan on drinking themselves.”) Charlotte opened the door and welcomed Brill. “Help yourself to anything,” she said, gesturing to a sideboard bearing platters of breadsticks, crudités, figs, grapes, crackers, and an oozing Saint-Marcellin.



Near the snacks, a guest named Henri approached Brill. “How do you know Charlotte and Marc?” he asked, unaware that his icebreaker was about to yield a much more involved answer than “school” or “work.”

“Well . . .” she began.

Solanki and Colin had provided Brill with backup plans in case she found herself bored or feeling awkward, but the weird circumstances of her attendance as a quasi-crasher turned out to be great conversational fodder.

“I’ve met two lawyers so far,” Brill said. “Both very nice.”

The next morning, Brill provided a report on how her night had gone.

“Afterward, I ended up back at Pamela with some people from the party and had a fantastic time,” she replied. This time, they’d stayed out till five. ♦

# Reporting & Essays

- [Trump and the Presidency That Wouldn't Shut Up](#)
- [Inside the Data Centers That Train A.I. and Drain the Electrical Grid](#)
- [Some People Can't See Mental Images. The Consequences Are Profound](#)
- [Jennifer Lawrence Goes Dark](#)

Reflections

# Trump and the Presidency That Wouldn't Shut Up

His posts and rants are omnipresent, ugly, and unhinged. Don't look to history to make it make sense.

By Jill Lepore

October 27, 2025



The list of figures in American history with whom Donald J. Trump has been compared since he announced his bid for the Presidency a decade ago is longer than his trademark necktie, as red as a gash. It's taller than Trump Tower, gleaming like a blade. It has a higher turnover than his beleaguered first Cabinet. It includes even more goons, toadies, and peacocks than his current Administration. And yet the comparisons keep coming, in the daily papers, in the nightly podcasts, online, online, online. Is Trump more of a liar than Joseph McCarthy; is he slicker than Huey Long? Is he as mean-spirited as Father Charles Coughlin, more sinister than George Wallace? Is he as much of a fraud as P. T. Barnum, even more of an isolationist than

Charles Lindbergh? He is trickier than Richard (Tricky Dick) Nixon, but to what degree?

Trump plays this game, too. He loves it, and why not? It only ever helps him, inflates, magnifies, and amplifies him, the drumbeat deafening, ceaseless, *Trump, Trump, Trump*. He's Andrew Jackson (or is he more like Andrew Johnson?); he's Ronald Reagan. He thinks only Abraham Lincoln has been treated as unfairly as he has—or, no, "I believe I am treated worse." Shall we compare him to a summer's day?

Everything that has happened in the furor, disarray, and murderous violence of American politics over the past decade has led the commentariat to scramble for antecedents. That includes me. Is this unprecedented? This is the question journalists have been asking historians for a decade now. It arrives by text and voice mail. It arrives by post and e-mail. It knocks on the door and all but raps on the windowpane, tap, tap, tapping. I have been asked this question in the dog park, at the drugstore, in a hayfield, by my mailman, during a snowstorm, while knitting in my kitchen, and in every last blasted Zoom room. And historians—or most of us, anyway—answer, meekly, bleakly, dutifully, hauling out of the archives the disputed election of 1876, the 1970 [shooting at Kent State](#), the [parents'-rights movement of the nineteen-twenties](#), the impeachment of the Supreme Court Justice [Samuel Chase](#). Compared to *x*, Trump is *y*. But why? On the upcoming fifth anniversary of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, might it not be best, at this point, simply to stop? Very little in human history is altogether without precedent if you look at it long enough. And what of it? If U.S. history is a map, we are off the grid, over a cliff, lost at sea without a compass. Can anyone honestly maintain that the caning of Charles Sumner on the floor of the Senate, in 1856, or the shots fired by four Puerto Rican nationalists from the balcony of the Capitol, in 1954, offer meaningful points of comparison to the assassination of Charlie Kirk or the events of January 6th?

I don't mean to suggest that there's no reason to study history, to write and to read history. There's every reason, even more so in tempestuous times than in quieter ones. Learning to code turns out to have been a terrible call; how much more precious to have studied the past, the mystery of iniquity, the chaos of strife, the messy, gripping, blood-drenched record of yearning that is the twisted and magnificent course of human events. Nor do I mean to

suggest that this is the worst moment in the history of the United States. It is not. I mean only to warn that the false analogy offers false comfort. Analogies are tempting because they can be helpful, a flashlight on a moonless night. “The many uses of analogy,” the historian David Hackett Fischer wrote in a 1970 book called “[Historians’ Fallacies](#),” are “balanced by the mischief which arises from its abuse.” A flashlight is not the same as daylight. With a flashlight, you see only what you’re pointing it at, and yet, cheered by its warm glow, you might forget that you are, in fact, in the dark.

Peer into the dark. Earlier this fall, Trump reposted on Truth Social a four-minute news clip generated by A.I. The clip purported to be a segment from Lara Trump’s Fox News show, reporting on Trump’s announcement of the launch of “medbeds . . . designed to restore every citizen to full health and strength” at special hospitals about to open all over the country. Medbeds, which can cure all ailments and reverse aging, appear regularly in science fiction. (Think of the “biobeds” in the “Star Trek” sick bay.) They began featuring in online conspiracy theories in the early twenty-twenties; QAnoners claim that medbeds exist, and have existed for years, and that the rich and powerful use them (and that J.F.K. himself is on one, still alive), and that soon Trump will liberate them for use by the rest of us, as if Trump were Jesus opening the gates of Heaven and medbeds eternal life.

Take out your flashlight and ask the inevitable question: Is there any precedent for a President of the United States doing such a thing? Is American history any guide to understanding why Trump, or someone on his staff, posted (and soon afterward deleted) a fake video about a nonexistent news report concerning a fictional miracle cure, an episode whose political significance strikes me as asymptotically approaching zero?

The Framers of the Constitution did not expect the President to communicate directly with the public; they worried about what might happen if he did—and they did not, for all their foresight, anticipate social media, television, radio, or even the telegraph. They were also decidedly ambivalent about the office of the executive. Some of them wanted no President; some wanted something more like a prime minister; others wanted something closer to a king. They therefore left the description of the office vague. Since so little is specified, much of what Presidents do is improvisational. (Hence the dilemma constitutional originalists have in

supporting the current Administration's unitary-executive theory: unitary-executive theory is a fabrication, an act of make-believe, a medbed.) Nothing in the Constitution requires the President to speak to Congress or to the public. Neither the Inaugural Address nor the State of the Union is required by the Constitution, and the idea of the chief executive speaking directly to the public struck many eighteenth-century Americans as monarchical, not Presidential. "The Founding Fathers were concerned not to erect an executive branch that could become overwrought by constant appeals to the national rabble," the scholar Roderick P. Hart once wrote. The Constitution says nothing at all about how, or even whether, the President should communicate with the public, and, for the first century and a half of the nation's history, Presidents hardly ever did.

Yet, even though an unstated but widely held prohibition barred sitting Presidents from making speeches to the public (and those seeking the office from making campaign speeches), there were other ways to reach the citizenry. George Washington did not enjoy public speaking. Because of his dentures, made of a combination of elephant tusks, horse and cow teeth, and teeth pulled from the mouths of people he held as slaves, he found speaking for any length of time painful. He gave annual addresses to Congress in person starting in 1790 but otherwise mostly communicated with the public—and with Congress—via published letters, although in 1789, and again in 1791, he did tour parts of the country to speak about national unity. John Adams continued the practice of addressing Congress in person, but, in 1801, Thomas Jefferson, who hated public speaking even more than Washington did, decided to deliver his annual address to Congress in writing, a tradition that was upheld until Woodrow Wilson overturned it, in 1913. ("That would set them by their ears," Wilson reportedly said, about heading to the Capitol.)

Andrew Jackson, a man of the people, was keen to communicate with the public more directly, and, for a mouthpiece, he used a newspaper, the United States *Telegraph*. As [Tocqueville](#) put it, "Only a newspaper can put the same thought at the same time before a thousand readers." After the *Telegraph* started to favor Jackson's rival and Vice-President, John C. Calhoun, Jackson launched his own newspaper, the *Washington Globe*. In 1831, he used the *Globe* to announce that he planned to run for reelection: "We are permitted to say," the *Globe* duly reported, "that if it should be the will of

the Nation to call on the President to serve a second term in the chief Magistracy, he will not decline the summons.” Through the *Globe*, he also published such items as his veto message rejecting the rechartering of a national bank. Thus began what historians call the “Presidential newspaper.” James K. Polk, for instance, deployed the Washington *Daily Union*. The nineteenth-century press was partisan through and through, and so a paper as a Presidential mouthpiece—not unlike the role played by [Fox News](#) for Trump—made perfect sense. But this scheme was largely defeated, in 1861, by two developments: Congress established the Government Printing Office, and Lincoln preferred to get his message out by spreading stories to rival newspapers, which was deuced clever of him. Gradually, the press became less partisan. (By 1900, most dailies were nonpartisan.)

Even if early American Presidents had wanted to speak directly to the public, they would have found it exceedingly difficult, not to mention exhausting. But, with the rise of railroads, travelling to meet your constituents soon got easier. John Tyler went on a thirteen-day tour in 1843, during which he made seventeen speeches. Trump, of course, likes to make speeches, too, and for hours on end. But the likeness ends there because, to be clear, Tyler did not use the occasion to tout patent medicines. After the Civil War, Presidents travelled more, not least because they had to try to stitch the country back together. That meant, in particular, touring the South. In 1878, Rutherford B. Hayes went on a speaking tour, whereupon an account was published that included every word he said, titled “The President’s Tour South. A Triumphal March Through the ‘Solid South.’ Enthusiastic Reception of the President and Cabinet at All Points Along the Journey. Speeches, Sayings and Doings of Those Who Participated in the Ovation to the President.” And, still, he hawked neither gold coins with his face stamped on them nor silver ones.

They talked and they talked. In 2017, Trump’s first year in office, C-SPAN posted five hundred and three videos of him talking. Their content leaves me speechless. In a 2023 study, the political scientist Anne C. Pluta counted the number of words spoken to the American public by every U.S. President, from Washington to Trump. On average, no President spoke to the public more than a hundred times a year until William Howard Taft—whose annual average neared two hundred, and who, in 1911, gave three hundred and fifty speeches on a thirty-state tour. No one broke that record until J.F.K., who

may still be alive. Other big talkers: L.B.J. (more than three hundred) and Bill Clinton (more than seven hundred). None of these Presidents, however, sold steaks, contested an election, or fomented an insurrection.

Theodore Roosevelt added a pressroom to the White House. Wilson invented the press conference, but a good measure of how little interest reporters had in the President is that at an early one, in 1913, the first question was about Congress: “Can you tell us anything about currency legislation, Mr. President?” Eventually, Wilson stopped holding them. Warren G. Harding used the radio, but when he took office, in 1921, hardly anyone had one. And when he went on a speaking tour, in 1923, the need to stand in front of a microphone, so that his speeches could also broadcast on the radio, really cramped his style. “Silent Cal” Coolidge belied his nickname; he loved talking on the radio and did it about once a month. In 1927, his radio audience, as the *Times* reported, was the size of the entire population of the United States in 1865. But no one mastered the medium like F.D.R., with his fireside chats, which he started on March 12, 1933. (“I want to talk a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking,” he began.) In his wheelchair, he would have been unable to tour the country the way his predecessors had. For F.D.R., radio was not an option; it was the only option.

F.D.R. was called “the radio President.” Ike was “the TV President,” especially after a heart attack in 1955 made campaign travel for him, too, essentially impossible. Nixon was generally bad on television, except for a live speech in 1952, given from a studio designed to look like an ordinary living room, that addressed allegations about a campaign slush fund. He said that he’d come on national television to make a complete financial disclosure, something “unprecedented in the history of American politics,” and yes, he admitted, he’d accepted a gift, namely, a black-and-white spaniel named Checkers that a man in Texas had sent as a present for Nixon’s two young daughters. “I just want to say this, right now,” he said, “that regardless of what they say about it, we’re gonna keep it.”

For Kennedy, the technological leap was aviation, or at least Air Force One, a modified Boeing 707 that he commissioned in 1962. Ronald Reagan was “the six-o’clock President,” the founder of “the prime-time Presidency.” But [Walter Cronkite](#) retired in 1981, the year Reagan took office, and, during the

Great Communicator's two terms in office, major news outlets, chiefly in the form of cable television, became partisan all over again. Reagan was the last American President to reliably and regularly address a national audience, rather than a targeted one. Network-television news coverage of American Presidents fell off with him, hitting bottom with Obama before rising again with Trump in 2016.

A lot of people just don't find Presidents very interesting, a position with which I deeply sympathize. Bill Clinton, sensing American indifference, used the media in a way that no earlier President could or would have, favoring entertainment outlets, like "Larry King Live" and ESPN, over network news. He discussed whether he preferred boxers to briefs on MTV (where he sat for four interviews). *Esquire* ran a [cover story](#), headlined "The Last Will and Testament of William Jefferson Clinton," that featured his views on Barbra Streisand, Diet Coke, and his dog, Buddy. "He is the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution," *Esquire* declared. "He is the American flag . . . McDonald's, stealth fighters, and Satan; a late-night joke, Elvis, and God." Clinton made the Presidency about his personality; his critics made it about his character. There was little difference between the two. Clinton's affairs and the allegations against him made him the butt of late-night-TV comics. "An exhaustive study of the jokes on late night television reveals that Clinton stands alone," one historian wrote, in a study that, notably, predated Trump.

Yet it was Obama who can best be said to have inaugurated what the scholars Joshua M. Scacco and Kevin Coe have called the "ubiquitous Presidency." Beginning in the Obama years, the President became inescapable, appearing seemingly everywhere and all the time. Obama's was, after all, the "Between Two Ferns" Presidency. If the Presidency became ubiquitous, it had a lot to do with the press's growing fascination with Presidential power—which had the unhappy effect of amplifying it. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the number of doorstop biographies of American Presidents skyrocketed. So did books about "Presidential communication." Network news spent less time on Presidents; cable news and cable-news websites spent far more. So, beginning with Obama, did magazines, including this one. The ubiquitous President became not only a personality but a celebrity, two preconditions for demagoguery.

With so much more being said and written about American Presidents, and American Presidents speaking to and writing for the public so much more than ever before (if you count tweeting as writing), the Presidency became more intimate, and not only because of the underwear. Disclosure, Scacco and Coe argue, became the coin of the realm. On @POTUS, Obama described himself as “Dad, husband, and 44th President of the United States.” He tweeted about Michelle and the girls, and about the Cubs. He did not, however, tweet about miracle cures.

Trump is ubiquitous and has been since June of 2015, when he descended that golden escalator and waved at the assembled cameras. He has rarely been Presidential, except insofar as he has redefined the word. He thinks that being Presidential is dumb. “I’ve always said I can be more Presidential than any President in history, except for Honest Abe Lincoln when he’s wearing the hat,” he said at a rally in Dallas in 2019. “That’s tough, that’s tough, that’s a tough one to beat. No, it’s much easier—being Presidential is easy. All you have to do is act like a stiff.” He stood straight, closed and opened his eyes, stepped slightly back from the podium, straightened his jacket, held up his hand, and spoke solemnly: “Ladies and gentlemen of Texas, it is a great honor to be with you this evening.” All he needed was the hat, and the press handed it to him.

Historians will need to account for Trump when, as Gerald Ford said when he succeeded Nixon, “our long national nightmare is over.” Analogies won’t help them. Because nothing in American history anticipates or explains the way Trump speaks to his supporters at his rallies—or his use of Twitter, between 2015 and 2021, and Truth Social, beginning in 2022. He riffs; he cusses; he dodges; he weaves; he raises money; he spreads lies. He is lurid and profane. He targets his political opponents, threatening them with prosecution, prison, and execution. He is the world’s most outspoken troll, and its most dangerous. He posts day and night, about everything from taco bowls to possible ceasefires. He is getting worse. In his second term, he has posted three times as often as he did during his first. Tonally, nearly everything he posts is unhinged, even when it’s a simple endorsement or amplification of a policy, like tariffs:

*THIS WILL BE THE GOLDEN AGE OF AMERICA! WILL THERE BE SOME PAIN? YES, MAYBE (AND MAYBE NOT!). BUT WE WILL*

*MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, AND IT WILL ALL BE WORTH THE PRICE THAT MUST BE PAID. WE ARE A COUNTRY THAT IS NOW BEING RUN WITH COMMON SENSE – AND THE RESULTS WILL BE SPECTACULAR!!!*

Most of the rest is pure nonsense. A sizable percentage consists of outright lies and, especially, false or unsubstantiated accusations. Since so much that Trump has posted has been, at the very best, deceptive, it's hardly surprising that he likes deep fakes. He's posted A.I.-generated photographs of himself as the Pope, as a Jedi knight, as Superman, and videos of himself doing everything from wrestling to praying. (*The Atlantic*'s Charlie Warzel has [suggested](#) that this has become a partisan aesthetic: "The G.O.P. is becoming the party of A.I. slop.") He adores conspiracy theories. A 2024 *Times* study of Trump's more than fifty-six hundred posts and reposts (in the bizarro lexicon of Truth Social, these are "Truths" and "Retruths") over six months found that more than three hundred "described both a false, secretive plot against Mr. Trump or the American people and a specific entity supposedly responsible for it," and another four hundred "used language to refer to conspiracy theories but did not spell out the full theory on their own."

None of this is Presidential, any more than it's precedented. It is, instead, pestilential. If the Constitution had said more about the Presidency—if the Framers hadn't expected that the office would be, especially relative to Congress, so inconsequential—much that Trump has posted would surely be considered unconstitutional. Is any of this like Nixon, in 1968, appearing on "Laugh-In," or Reagan, in 1983, on "The Merv Griffin Show," or Clinton on MTV, or Obama tweeting about the Chicago Bulls? It is not. We are off the map.

American history is a flashlight. Lately, it's a flashlight whose battery has died. Any analogy to this Presidency can be found only in the history of other countries, in the whims and cruelties and fantasies and insanities of the tyrants of antiquity, tin-pot dictators, Latin American caudillos, and modern strongmen. Nero, Stalin, Kim Jong Il. Call the historians who write about those guys, please.

But what about the daylight? In the daylight, Trump's communication with the public looks different.

In the daylight, it's not hard to see why some number of Americans believe that medbeds exist and that the rich are keeping them to themselves. In the grotesquely gilded twenty-first century, the rich use all kinds of fancy goop and goo and intricately engineered machines and impossibly priced services that allow them to live longer and look better while everyone else gets stiff and sick and grows old and dies miserably, as anyone who has ever watched "The White Lotus" or spent a night in the emergency room of a rural hospital knows from close and painful observation. Impoverished, homeless veterans wander legless on the streets and the children of the poor die in understaffed clinics awaiting treatment that never comes while the rich get treated in glistening spas and have their butts waxed by people who have been trafficked into the country and live twenty-three to a room with no running water. It's not just first class, second class, third class. It's not even just platinum, gold, titanium. It's private jets, personal trainers, in-home chefs, Ozempic-face, liposuction, private fittings, bespoke medical care, the whole glass onion. This past spring, while releasing a new House report on health, education, labor, and pensions, Senator Bernie Sanders said, "In America today, the bottom fifty per cent of our population can expect to live seven years shorter lives than the top one per cent. Even worse, Americans who live in working-class, rural counties can expect to die ten years younger than people who live in wealthier neighborhoods across the country."

True, it makes no sense whatsoever to believe that Trump will be the one to end the rich's monopoly on excellent health and bottomless self-indulgence in the domain of "wellness and healing." He is among the many forces driving this dismal state of affairs. But believing that medbeds exist isn't that crazy. There is a conspiracy. It's a very public and not remotely secret plot to deprive middle- and lower-income Americans of decent health care, one that's led by congressional Republicans and contested, unsuccessfully, by congressional Democrats to the point of shutting down the entire federal government, at a cost of still more suffering.

Medbeds are not coming soon to a hospital near you. But they do exist. In 2022, a company called Tesla BioHealing (no relation to the Tesla automotive company) began opening MedBed Centers, converted motels that offer a "new wave of scientific healing" and promise patients "improvements in their wellbeing even after only an hour of resting on a Tesla MedBed." On the company's website, you can click on a link that says

“Looking for Medbeds?” The company also offers an Anti-Aging Pet Bed for seven hundred and fifty dollars. Maybe Nixon kept Checkers, his daughters’ beloved spotted spaniel, longer than anyone ever knew. He might be thumping his tail right now, on a dog bed by J.F.K.’s side. ♦

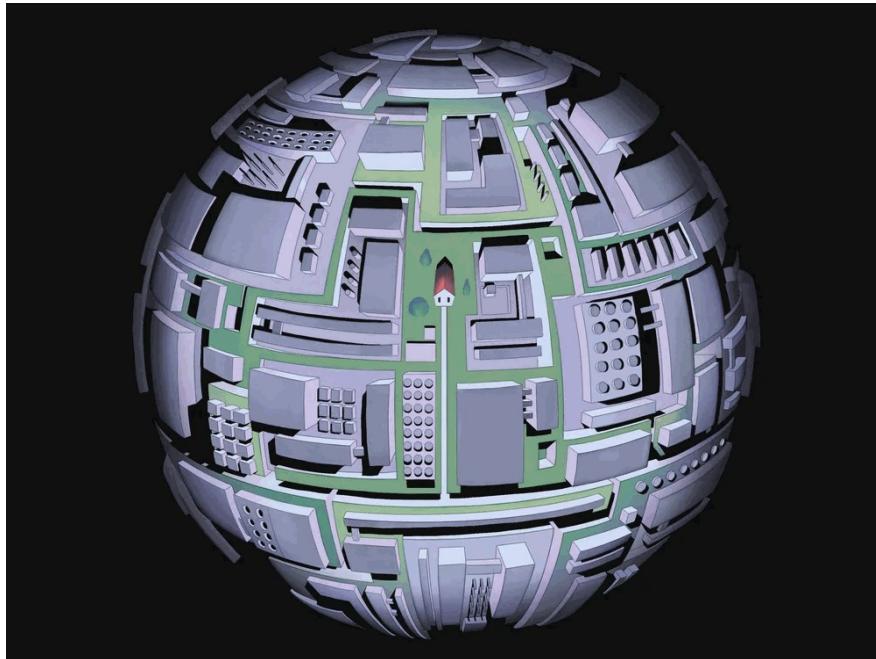
Brave New World Dept.

# Inside the Data Centers That Train A.I. and Drain the Electrical Grid

A data center, which can use as much electricity as Philadelphia, is the new American factory, creating the future and propping up the economy. How long can this last?

By Stephen Witt

October 27, 2025



Drive in almost any direction from almost any American city, and soon enough you'll arrive at a data center—a giant white box rising from graded earth, flanked by generators and fenced like a prison yard. Data centers for artificial intelligence are the new American factory. Packed with computing equipment, they absorb information and emit A.I. Since the launch of ChatGPT, in 2022, they have begun to multiply at an astonishing rate. “I do guess that a lot of the world gets covered in data centers over time,” Sam Altman, the C.E.O. of OpenAI, recently said.

The leading independent operator of A.I. data centers in the United States is CoreWeave, which was founded eight years ago, as a casual experiment. In 2017, traders at a middling New York hedge fund decided to begin mining cryptocurrency, which they used as the entry fee for their fantasy-football league. To mine the crypto, they bought a graphics-processing unit, a powerful microchip made by the company Nvidia. The G.P.U. was marketed to video gamers, but Nvidia offered software that turned it into a low-budget supercomputer. “It was so successful, from a return-of-capital perspective, that we started scaling it,” Brian Venturo, one of CoreWeave’s co-founders, told me. “If you make your money back in, like, five days, you want to do that a lot.”

Within a year, the traders had quit the hedge-fund business and bought several thousand G.P.U.s, which they ran from Venturo’s grandfather’s garage, in New Jersey. After the cryptocurrency market crashed in 2018, CoreWeave acquired more microchips from insolvent miners. Before long, the firm had built a platform that allowed outside customers to access the G.P.U.s. Then, in 2022, Venturo came upon Stable Diffusion, an image-generation A.I. He fed the A.I. descriptions of different scenes, and it returned accurate, beautiful illustrations. “This is going to enrapture the entire world,” Venturo remembers thinking.

Stable Diffusion had been trained on Nvidia equipment that was similar to CoreWeave’s. Venturo and his co-founders sensed the business opportunity of a lifetime. CoreWeave raised a hundred million dollars, and used almost all of it to buy Nvidia hardware. Soon, Jensen Huang, Nvidia’s C.E.O., arranged a meeting with the group. “He spent about ten minutes making fun of me for being from New Jersey,” Venturo said. But in time Nvidia bought a portion of the company. By the middle of 2022, CoreWeave was running a new kind of business, connecting A.I. developers with warehouses full of Nvidia equipment.

Modern data-center construction began in the nineties, with the arrival of the commercial internet. Data centers hosted websites, coördinated e-mail, processed payments, and streamed video and music. Amazon was particularly aggressive about building data centers—so many were constructed in Loudoun County, Virginia, that the area became known as Data Center Alley. Even before the A.I. boom, data centers were profitable;

in some years, Amazon’s web-services division earned more than the company’s retail operation, on a fraction of the sales.

But the arrival of Nvidia’s G.P.U.s and the onset of large-scale A.I. training transformed the data-center business. ChatGPT launched in November, 2022, and exploded in popularity. “The world goes bananas,” Venturo said. Microsoft partnered with OpenAI to provide the data-center capacity that ChatGPT needed to function. When Microsoft couldn’t keep up with the demand, it turned to CoreWeave.

Working with Nvidia hardware has become a status symbol—a sign that one is serious about A.I. Talking with engineers about the equipment, I was reminded of the time I saw a snaking line of young men standing in the cold to buy sneakers from the streetwear brand Supreme.

Earlier this year, CoreWeave went public. Venturo and his co-founders are now billionaires. The company owns several hundred thousand G.P.U.s, and its platform trains models for Meta and other leading labs, in addition to OpenAI.

This summer, I visited a CoreWeave facility on the outskirts of Las Vegas. The building, a large warehouse, was surrounded by a thick fence and dotted at regular intervals with security cameras. I went through a turnstile, where I was greeted by a security guard wearing a bulletproof vest and a holstered Taser. After surrendering my phone, I took two lime-green earplugs from a dispenser and entered the facility.

I was joined by three CoreWeave engineers, geeks who had adapted to hyper-scale capitalism as Darwin’s finches had to the Galápagos Islands. Jacob Yundt, from corporate, was lean and eloquent, with a swooping part in his hair. Christopher Conley, an enthusiastic explainer with sunglasses and a beard, oversaw the hardware. Sean Anderson, a seven-foot-tall former college-basketball center, wore a shirt that read “*MOAR NODES*.”

The nodes in question were shallow trays of computing equipment, each weighing around seventy pounds and holding four water-cooled G.P.U.s along with an array of additional gear. Eighteen of these trays are stacked, then connected with cables to a control unit, to form the Nvidia GB300

computing rack, which is a little taller than a refrigerator and costs a few million dollars. In a busy year, a typical rack will use more electricity than a hundred homes. Dozens of them stretched into the distance.

CoreWeave keeps its racks in white metal cabinets, to help them stay cool and to dampen noise. Conley unlatched a door to show me a rack in action, and I was buffeted with air. The noise was unholy, as if I'd opened a broom closet and found an active jet engine inside. I watched the blinking lights and the spinning of the fans. "Tinnitus is an occupational hazard," Conley shouted at me.

I looked around. There were hundreds of identical cabinets in the facility. Above us was a metal catwalk, lined with power distributors for the computing equipment. I thought of monks in cloisters, soldiers in barracks, prisoners in cells. What type of person voluntarily worked in such a place, I wondered. "I was told by H.R. that I can't ask this kind of question anymore, but I like to hire people that can endure a lot of pain," Yundt later said. "Endurance athletes, that sort of thing."

CoreWeave wouldn't tell me which customer was using its technology that day, although Yundt suggested that the training run we were witnessing was a modest one. He began to detail the configuration of the rack. Unable to hear what he was saying, I nodded sagely, as if in a conversation at a night club. Even with the plugs in, my ears were starting to ring, and I was developing a headache. Yundt turned to me. "Sometimes a customer will tie up this entire place for weeks at a time," he shouted. His parted hair began to flap in the fan exhaust. "We call those 'hero runs.' "

CoreWeave's hardware can train an A.I. from scratch to completion. Software developers, typically at a workstation in Silicon Valley, upload to the data center a file of numbers known as "weights" and a vast array of training data, which might be text or images or medical records or, really, anything at all. In their initial configuration, the weights are random, and the A.I. has no capabilities.

The A.I. is then exposed to a slice of the training data, and asked to offer a prediction about what should ensue—the next few letters in a sentence, say. An untrained A.I. will invariably get this prediction wrong, but at least it

will learn what *not* to do. The weights must be modified to absorb this new piece of information. The math is unwieldy, and is especially dependent on an operation known as matrix multiplication.

“Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in the world for ugly mathematics,” the mathematician G. H. Hardy wrote, in 1940. But matrix multiplication, to which our civilization is now devoting so many of its marginal resources, has all the elegance of a man hammering a nail into a board. It is possessed of neither beauty nor symmetry: in fact, in matrix multiplication,  $a$  times  $b$  is not the same as  $b$  times  $a$ . As the matrices increase in size, the arithmetic requires great computational power to solve. The latest large language models can involve about a trillion individual weights. A weeks-long hero run for such a model can use tens of thousands of G.P.U.s and require ten trillion trillion operations, which is more than the number of observable stars in the universe.

Data centers must coöperate with local electric utilities to manage these training runs. The water coursing above CoreWeave’s microchips enters at room temperature but leaves warmer than a hot bath. It is cooled in a storage tank before being recycled into the system. The temperature, humidity, and particulate count of the air inside the room are also carefully monitored. “Condensation is our enemy,” Conley said, gravely.

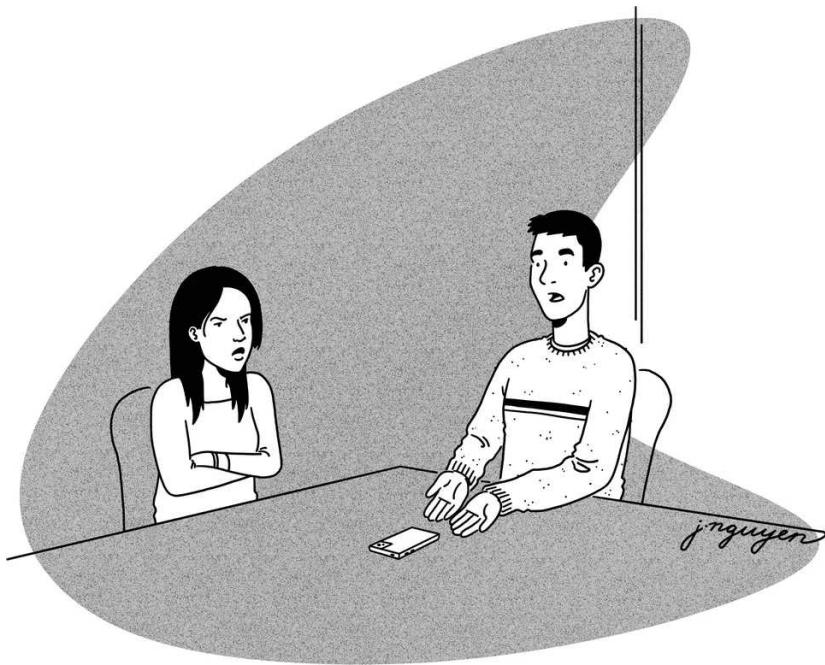
All these microchips, all this electricity, all these fans, all this money, all these data, all these water-cooling pumps and cables—all of it is there to tune the weights, this little file of numbers, which is small enough to fit on an external hard drive. A great deal depends on this well-tempered collection of synthetic neurons. The money spent to develop it, and others like it, represents one of the largest deployments of capital in human history.

When the finished product is ready, clones of the weights are distributed to data centers around the country, where they can be accessed through the internet, a process known as “inference.” Users ask questions, prompting the A.I. to produce individual units of intelligence called “tokens.” A token might be a small square of pixels or a fragment of a word. To write a college term paper, an A.I. might produce about five thousand tokens, consuming enough electricity to run a microwave oven at full power for about three

minutes. As A.I. fields increasingly complex requests—for video, for audio, for therapy—the need for computing power will increase many times over.

Multiply that by the more than eight hundred million people who use ChatGPT every week, and the data-center explosion makes sense. ChatGPT is now more popular than Wikipedia; young people refer to it as “Chat,” which has come to signify A.I. in the way that “Google” signifies internet search. I spoke to a data-center executive with Microsoft who thinks that we will demand A.I. constantly in the future, just as we demand the internet or electricity, and that current data-center construction may be insufficient. “I am more concerned that we are underbuilding rather than overbuilding,” the executive said.

Microsoft is one of the dominant operators of data centers, and this business has become the primary driver of growth for the American economy. Although the company still makes operating systems and office software, it is investors’ excitement about data centers that has propelled Microsoft to around a four-trillion-dollar valuation, making it the world’s second most valuable firm. Nvidia, which makes microchips that Microsoft uses, is No. 1.



It is difficult to get inside a Microsoft data center, for the same reason that it is difficult to get inside Fort Knox. The A.I.s under development in these

facilities are worth a fortune. “Traditionally, when you want to steal something that’s worth an insane amount of money, it’s, like, ‘Back up the truck,’ ” Peter Salanki, the chief technology officer of CoreWeave, told me. “Here, you have somebody get in with a thumb drive, and it can fit the entirety of OpenAI’s I.P. on it.”

But this fall, after what felt like two hundred phone calls, I was invited to tour an enormous Microsoft data-center campus under construction. I agreed to take no photographs, to leave my phone outside, to limit what I described of the interior, and not to reveal where in the United States the facility was situated. In September, I took a long drive to the middle of nowhere. The data center was surrounded by farmland, and at least three other companies were building data centers in the area. The fields were crisscrossed by a tangle of wires from high-voltage electric towers, and large, hideous boxes were popping up everywhere.

The exterior of the site did not display any Microsoft branding—or any signage at all. Behind a fence, and past several vehicle checkpoints, the campus was a spacious expanse of nothing, except for one corner, which was populated by a row of numbered sheds. The sheds were white, narrow, tall, and several football fields in length; they reminded me of the livestock barns I visited as a child at the Minnesota State Fair. Flanking each shed was a row of diesel generators and industrial air-conditioners.

At the time of my visit, there were five sheds, and the plan called for roughly ten. There were construction vehicles everywhere: cherry pickers, earthmovers, trucks carrying spools of cable. Someone had done a bit of landscaping in front of the shed I was visiting, and a few small plants grew in the shade.

Inside, I met with Judy Priest and Steve Solomon, both Microsoft executives; they have spent their professional lives managing warehouse-size computers. Priest, an electrical engineer, is a graduate of M.I.T., with high, sculpted eyebrows and wild blond hair. Solomon, a mechanical engineer, responded to my questions with long, technical monologues. Both seemed thrilled to participate in the new industrial revolution. Priest excitedly described a recent medical visit, after which she’d been sent an A.I.-assisted summary of her conversation with her doctor. Solomon, who’d

been having trouble with his stereo, had taken a picture of the connections in the back and uploaded it to Chat. The A.I., he told me, had returned seven possible troubleshooting solutions. Here his voice took on a slight intonation, which I took to mean that he was expressing an emotion. “No. 3 worked,” he said.

After donning a pair of steel-toed boots and watching a PowerPoint presentation, I passed through a security checkpoint and into the inner sanctum. The facility was quieter, tidier, and more spacious than the CoreWeave center. Hundreds of identical blinking banks of servers and computing equipment, attached to cooling stations and humming noisily, took up much of the floor. Zip-tied bundles ran along the ceiling: wires for electricity, cables for data, pipes for water and air. The cables connected to a larger bundle of cable, which linked with the other sheds, allowing all of them to act as a single, unified computer. Across all five sheds, the area dedicated to computing was the equivalent of twenty football fields.

Priest explained that an advanced training run could tie up the entire system for a month. I stood with a technician at a control center, monitoring the electrical draw. We watched as the power spiked—the computer was processing training data. Then it receded—now it was writing the results to the file. These pulses repeated as the A.I. moved from one checkpoint to the next. Somewhere inside the building, the model was improving. Somewhere inside the building, the computer was learning how to think.

Leaving the data center, I found myself desperate for human contact. A half mile down the road, the top of a grain silo peeked out from behind a data-center construction site. I drove through a landscape of gray buildings, irrigation canals, power lines, and verdant fields before arriving at a dusty yard crowded with tractors and pickup trucks. There, I found a fourth-generation alfalfa farmer wearing bluejeans, a plaid shirt, and a baseball cap with a tanker truck embroidered on it.

The farmer gestured to the power lines cutting through his field, which the local utility had installed in the nineteen-forties. “We always considered those things a liability,” he said. “We thought they depressed the value of the land.” But now, he said, access to a power substation was worth a fortune—one of his neighbors claimed that he had sold a plot of farmland to a data-

center developer for more than a million dollars an acre, more than the farm would return in a lifetime. Piece by piece, the farmer said, his family was doing the same.

There was a new data center to the north of the farm, and another under construction to the east. Microsoft's sprawling facility dominated the horizon; it sat on a patch of dirt his family had worked since 1979. He told me that he was planning on moving out soon—the surroundings felt unfit for agriculture, or even for human life.

I asked the farmer if he had noticed any environmental effects from living next to the data centers. The impact on the water supply, he told me, was negligible. "Honestly, we probably use more water than they do," he said. (Training a state-of-the-art A.I. requires less water than is used on a square mile of farmland in a year.) Power is a different story: the farmer said that the local utility was set to hike rates for the third time in three years, with the most recent proposed hike being in the double digits. The biggest loss was the nutrient-rich topsoil, which his family had maintained with careful crop rotations. "Microsoft brought in an excavator and ripped it all out in a day!" he said, as if speaking of a lost heirloom. "Six to ten feet of it, all gone."

We watched as a yellow dog got up, walked in a small circle, then went back to sleep in the shade of a tree. Behind the tree, and dwarfing it, was a giant rectangular warehouse. I asked the farmer if he ever used A.I. "I use Claude," he said. "Google sucks now."

Data centers are beginning to put intense pressure on America's electrical grid. In 1999, Constellation Energy purchased the sole functioning reactor at Three Mile Island, and operated it for the next twenty years. In 2019, the company shut the reactor down, concluding that it was economically unviable. Bryan Hanson, the executive who oversees Constellation's nuclear-generation fleet, threw a farewell party for employees. "There was food there, but nobody ate it," he said. "The mood was like a funeral."

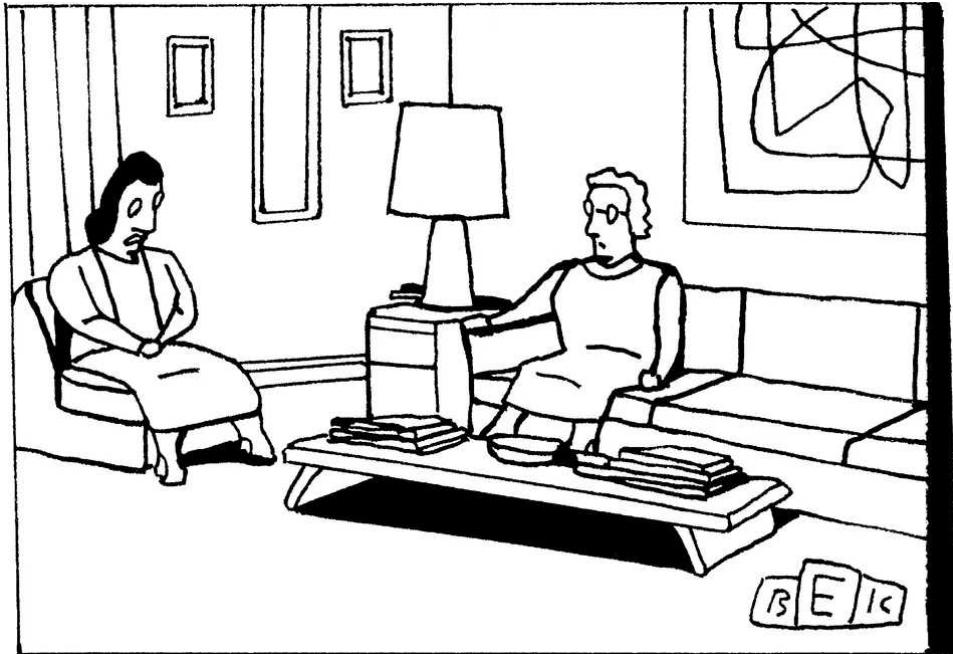
Parties may soon return to Three Mile Island. Constellation has announced that it will reopen the facility in 2027, rebranding it as the Crane Clean Energy Center. A large contract with Microsoft made the difference. "If you told me we'd be reopening this plant just eight years later, I never would

have believed you,” Hanson said. (The second reactor at the site, which released a cloud of radioactive gas into the atmosphere in 1979, will remain dormant.)

Energy executives such as Hanson have been bombarded by requests for more power. Data centers “are perhaps bigger, by an order of magnitude, than anything we’ve connected to the grid before,” he said. “If you think about the city of Philadelphia, its load is about one gigawatt. Now imagine adding one-gigawatt-sized data centers to the grid, and not just one, but multiples of them.”

When a data center comes online, retail customers usually help to foot the electric bill: American utilities sought almost thirty billion dollars in retail rate increases in the first half of 2025. This spring, utilities requested almost double the rate hikes from the same period a year earlier. An analysis by *Bloomberg* estimated that, in areas near data centers, wholesale electricity costs have risen by more than two hundred per cent in the past five years. And rates will probably continue to increase—power plants can’t produce nearly enough electricity to meet the demand. Eric Schmidt, the former C.E.O. of Google, has said that the U.S. must add ninety-two gigawatts of power to the national supply to meet data-center demand—some ninety-two Philadelphias. If there isn’t enough power, American A.I. developers might lose out to the Middle East and China, where enormous data-center projects are already under way.

Data centers must operate twenty-four hours a day to be economically viable. (The Microsoft facility I visited is permitted five minutes and fifteen seconds of unscheduled downtime per year.) Renewable energy sources like wind and solar, which depend on the weather, can currently meet only a fraction of this demand. Nuclear power won’t save us, either, at least not anytime soon; Hanson said that it would be years before any new large-scale nuclear reactors could be constructed in the U.S. With envy in his voice, he told me, “China is building twenty-six nuclear reactors.”



In the near term, new data centers will largely be powered by fossil fuels. Developers are purchasing land near natural-gas deposits such as the Marcellus Shale, a gigantic underground gas reservoir in Appalachia. In April, Homer City Redevelopment, a group based in Pennsylvania, announced that it intended to convert a mothballed coal plant outside Pittsburgh into the largest natural-gas power plant in the country, dedicated almost exclusively to data centers and capable of producing roughly four and a half gigawatts of electricity. According to an environmental nonprofit, the Homer City plant could release as much as four million pounds of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere every hour, about the same as four million idling cars.

The Earth is now warming at an estimated three-tenths of a degree Celsius per decade—roughly ten times faster than at the end of an ice age. After the last ice age ended, the oceans rose four hundred feet. Adding plants like Homer City—and scores more worldwide—will speed this catastrophic timeline. The Trump Administration has responded by restricting the use of the phrase “climate change” in government communications.

Data centers also cause local pollution. Elon Musk’s xAI has built a natural-gas-powered data center in Memphis, near the Black neighborhood of Boxtown. The area, which already had the highest rate of emergency-room

visits for asthma in Tennessee, saw levels of nitrogen dioxide, which exacerbates the condition, spike as much as nine per cent after the plant moved in. Wealthier areas have tried to block the construction of data centers. In November, 2024, voters in Warrenton, Virginia, a wealthy exurb of Washington, D.C., replaced town-council members who supported a new Amazon data center with an anti-development slate. (Ann Wheeler, a Democrat in a neighboring Virginia county who lost her seat over data centers, complained about what she called activists’ “*BANANA*” mind-set: Build Absolutely Nothing Anywhere Near Anyone.)

Data-center construction is projected to represent two to three per cent of U.S. gross domestic product in the coming years. In the nineteenth century, the building of the railroads contributed an estimated six per cent. Railroads transformed America and generated tremendous—if unevenly distributed—prosperity, but the frenzy also produced one of the largest speculative bubbles in history. The Panic of 1893 followed: unemployment soared, hundreds of banks went out of business, and a surge of populist sentiment destabilized the U.S. political environment.

The financier Jon Gray, the president of the alternative-asset manager Blackstone, brought up Ron Chernow’s biography of John D. Rockefeller, Sr. “Many of the railroads went bust!” he said. “You’re trying to avoid this problem, because you don’t know what the endgame looks like.” Blackstone has issued debt to build data centers; not wanting to be among those who go bust, Gray can hedge the risk by securing a fifteen-year lease agreement from a tech giant such as Microsoft or Amazon, which are some of the most creditworthy customers in existence. Blackstone typically won’t invest in a data center unless it has such a customer lined up. “It’s not like condos in Miami or Dubai,” Gray said.

The premise of continued data-center construction is that stuffing more Nvidia chips into the sheds will result in better A.I. So far, this has proved true: the latest generation of A.I. is the most capable ever produced. OpenAI’s GPT-5 can even build other, more primitive A.I.s. Still, it is not an immutable law that more chips equals more intelligence, and researchers are not entirely sure why this scaling effect even exists. “It’s an empirical question whether we will hit a brick wall,” the A.I. pioneer Demis Hassabis has said of scaling. “No one knows.”

It's also possible that a technological innovation might render hyper-scaling obsolete. Earlier this year, when DeepSeek, a Chinese company, unveiled what seemed to be a more efficient training paradigm for A.I., Nvidia's stock plummeted, wiping out almost six hundred billion dollars of value in a single day. (It has since recovered.)

Donald Trump has made the construction of data centers a national priority; it has become a kind of ritual for tech executives to announce new projects from the White House. But pandering to Trump might mean stretching the truth. At a White House dinner in September, Mark Zuckerberg said that Meta would spend six hundred billion dollars on data centers and related infrastructure in the next few years. With his microphone still live, Zuckerberg leaned toward Trump. "Sorry, I wasn't ready," he whispered. "I wasn't sure what number you wanted to go with." Kerry Person, who manages global data-center operations for Amazon, told me that electrical utilities were skeptical of some of the newer data-center developers filing requests for power. "If I look at the amount of demand that is in these queues, and I look at the amount of money that would be required to build that out, that amount of money does not exist," Person said.

A.I., for all its wondrous capabilities, may disappoint investors. It may prove to be an unprofitable commodity: Claude, Grok, Gemini, and ChatGPT all have similar capabilities, and technological innovations are quickly copied by competitors. The tech giants do not in fact have unlimited funds: as companies like Microsoft and Meta pour money into the data-center race, their reserves of cash are shrinking. Investors might have unrealistic expectations: the U.S. stock market is approaching valuation ratios last seen during the dot-com era, and the venture-capital market has grown frothy. "Investors don't usually give a team of six people a couple billion dollars with no product. It's rare, and that's happening today," Jeff Bezos recently said.

Then again, it could be that the hype is justified. Nvidia's C.E.O., Jensen Huang, whom I published a biography of recently, is a world-class computer scientist who is producing the microchips that make the A.I. age possible. "We used to get silicon every two years," Priest, the Microsoft engineer, said. "Now we get silicon every few months." Nvidia accounts for roughly eight per cent of the market capitalization of the S. & P. 500, the highest

concentration in any one stock in at least forty-five years. A lot is riding on Huang’s ability to keep producing better chips. If Americans want to retire comfortably, Nvidia has to succeed.

Water, power, and land are scarce resources, but the most valuable commodity for a data center, as the name suggests, is data. Claude trained on LibGen, a voluminous corpus of pirated e-books that can be downloaded by torrent. In September, Anthropic, the developer of Claude, agreed to pay one and a half billion dollars to the copyright holders of these books, or about three thousand dollars per infringement—the largest class-action copyright-infringement settlement in history. (I and others at this magazine are among the claimants.) Similar lawsuits against OpenAI and Nvidia are pending.

Microsoft does not know what its customers are uploading to its data centers—the data are proprietary. It is difficult to judge the scale of copyright infringement in the A.I. era, but my guess is that it makes Napster look like a mixtape swap. The modern approach to A.I. development has been to vacuum up any online data available—including audio, video, practically all published work in English, and more than three billion web pages—and let lawyers sort through the mess.

But there is now talk of a data shortage. There are thought to be about four hundred trillion words on the indexed internet, but, as the OpenAI co-founder Andrej Karpathy has noted, much of that is “total garbage.” High-quality text is harder to find. If trends continue, researchers say, A.I. developers could exhaust the usable supply of human text between 2026 and 2032. Since A.I. chatbots are recycling existing work, they rely on cliché, and their phrasing grows stale quickly. It’s difficult to get fresh, high-quality writing out of them—I have tried.

Priest, of Microsoft, told me that she wasn’t concerned about running out of data: there is a universe beyond text, and A.I. developers are just beginning to explore it. The next frontier is “world model” data, which will be used to train robots. Streams of video and spatial data will be fed into the data centers, which will be used to develop autonomous robots. Huang, of Nvidia, wants to be in this market, too, and last year appeared onstage with two mobile androids. In Los Angeles, I have paused behind driverless cars and recently stumbled into an autonomous delivery wagon, but it was on a

recent visit to Beijing that I began to understand what the robot revolution was going to look like.

Robots are everywhere in China. I saw them stocking shelves and cleaning floors at a mall. When I ordered food to my hotel room, it was delivered by a two-foot-tall wheeled robot in the shape of a trash can, with the voice of a child. I opened my door, nonplussed, to find it standing in front of me, decorated with an ersatz butler's outfit and chirping in Mandarin. A hatch on the front of the robot popped open, and a tray of noodles slid out. The machine chirped again. I took my food, the hatch closed, and the robot wheeled away. I stood there for a time, holding the tray, wondering if I would ever talk to a human again. ♦

Annals of Inquiry

# Some People Can't See Mental Images. The Consequences Are Profound

Research has linked the ability to visualize to a bewildering variety of human traits—how we experience trauma, hold grudges, and, above all, remember our lives.

By Larissa MacFarquhar

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When Nick Watkins was a child, he pasted articles about space exploration into scrapbooks and drew annotated diagrams of rockets. He knew this because, years later, he still had the scrapbooks, and took them to be evidence that he had been a happy child, although he didn't remember making them. When he was seven, in the summer of 1969, his father woke him up to watch the moon landing; it was the middle of the night where they lived, near Southampton, in England. He didn't remember this, either, but he'd been told that it happened. That Christmas, he and his brother were given matching space helmets. He knew that on Christmas morning the helmets had been waiting in the kitchen and that, on discovering his, he felt

joy, but this was not a memory, exactly. The knowledge seemed to him more personal than an ordinary fact, but he could not feel or picture what it had been like to be that boy in the kitchen.

When he was eight or nine, he read Arthur C. Clarke's novel "2001: A Space Odyssey" over and over. At the beginning of the book, aliens implant images of tool-using into the minds of man-apes. Near the end, the main character, David Bowman, spools backward through memories of his life:

Not only vision, but all the sense impressions, and all the emotions he had felt at the time, were racing past, more and more swiftly. His life was unreeling like a tape recorder playing back at ever-increasing speed. . . . Faces he had once loved, and had thought lost beyond recall, smiled at him.

To Nick, these events—the images in the minds of the man-apes, David Bowman's reliving of his life—were thrilling and otherworldly, with no connection to reality, brought about through the intervention of aliens, in distant, fictional worlds.

He became a physicist. He was drawn to statistical physics and quantum mechanics, whose concepts were best described in equations. The abstraction of these ideas suited him.

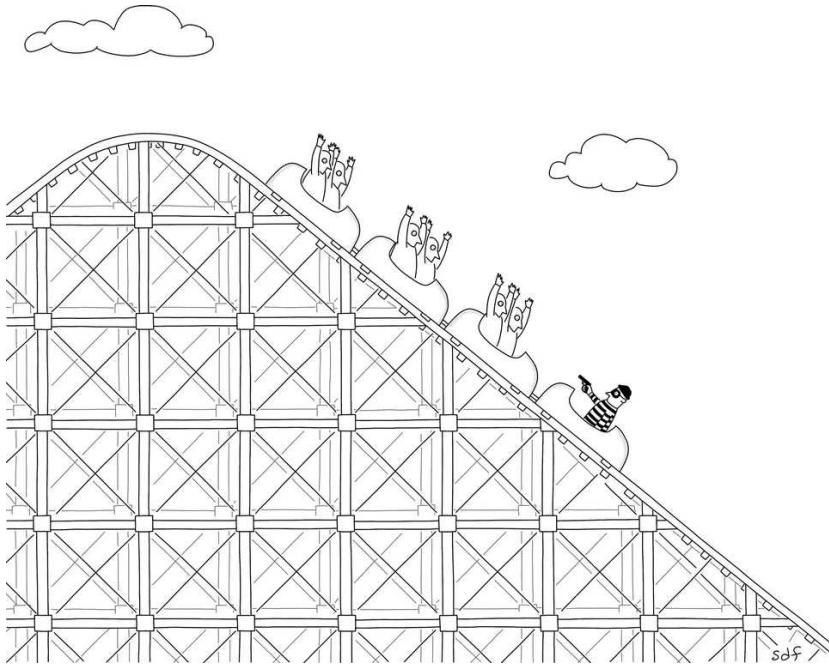
One morning in 1997, when he was thirty-five, he was sitting at breakfast, paging through the newspaper. He started to read an article by a columnist he admired, Michael Bywater. Time was an illusion, Bywater wrote, because you could roll it backward and relive it: "You choose a memory, focus on it, let the rest of the mind go blank, and wait." Bywater described particular memories of his own, not only the sight but the sound and feel of them—"the special *weight* of girls in autumn . . . when they lean against you as you walk along." For some reason, these sentences revealed all at once to Nick what in the whole course of his life he had not realized: that it was possible to see pictures in your mind and use those pictures to reexperience your past.

This was startling information. He knew, of course, that people talked about "picturing" or "visualizing," but he had always taken this to be just a

metaphorical way of saying “thinking.” Now it appeared that, in some incomprehensible sense, people meant these words *literally*. And then there was the notion of using those mental images to revisit a memory. It was an astonishing idea. Was it possible that this was a thing that people other than Bywater could do? Bywater had written about it quite casually, as though he took it for granted. Nick asked some people he knew, and all of them seemed to be able to do it.

He wondered whether there was something wrong with him—some kind of amnesia. He’d had no reason to worry about his memory before. He had a Ph.D. in physics; clearly his mind was functioning reasonably well. He knew the usual facts about his life—his parentage, the places he’d lived as a child, important things that had happened. It had never occurred to him that remembering could be more than that.

For many years, Nick would search for information about mental imagery, sporadically and alone. In the beginning, he did not yet know that his inability to visualize—this odd feature of his mind which appeared so insignificant that he hadn’t even noticed it for thirty-five years—would come to seem a central wellspring of his self. But then, in 2015, his condition was given a scientific name, aphantasia, and tens of thousands of people experienced the same shocked realization that he had. A flurry of research in the following decade would uncover associations between mental imagery and a bewildering variety of human traits and capacities: a propensity to hold grudges; autism; a vulnerability to trauma; emotional awareness; ways of making art and hearing music; memory of one’s life.



But this was all in the future. In 1997, as much as he interrogated his acquaintances, Nick did not find anyone like him. He couldn't be the only person who lacked this ability to visualize, he thought. Surely it was extremely unlikely that he was unique. But, until he encountered someone else, he had to admit that it was a working possibility.

He went online and started looking. Initially, he found only work from the nineteenth century. The first useful thing he came across was William James's book "Principles of Psychology." James referred to observations recorded in 1860 by Gustav Fechner, a German scientist and philosopher. Fechner had subjected his own "optical memory-pictures" to introspective scrutiny and deemed them weak and lacking:

With all my efforts, I cannot reproduce colours in the memory images of coloured objects. . . . I also never dream in colours, but all my experiences in dreams seem to me to proceed in a kind of twilight or night.

I can't hold the image steadily for even a short time, but in order to observe it for a longer time, I have to recreate it again and again.

What was very unexpected to me . . . is that it is easier for me to produce memory images . . . with open eyes than with closed eyes.

Fechner didn't pursue the subject, however, and it lay dormant until 1880, when it was taken up by Francis Galton, a British scientist who later became notorious as the father of eugenics. Galton, supposing that he could depend on scientists to give accurate answers, wrote to several of them with a query:

Think of some definite object—suppose it is your breakfast-table as you sat down to it this morning—and consider carefully the picture that rises before your mind's eye. . . . Is the image dim or fairly clear? . . . Are the colours of the china, of the toast, bread-crust, mustard, meat, parsley, or whatever may have been on the table, quite distinct and natural?

The responses he received were not at all what he had expected.

To my astonishment, I found that the great majority of the men of science to whom I first applied protested that mental imagery was unknown to them, and they looked on me as fanciful and fantastic in supposing that the words "mental imagery" really expressed what I believed everybody to suppose them to mean. . . . They had a mental deficiency of which they were unaware, and naturally enough supposed that those who were normally endowed, were romancing.

Finding this Galton study came as a relief to Nick. Now at least he knew that there had been other people lacking mental imagery who'd lived normal lives, so it wasn't a disease, or a symptom of a brain tumor. Galton had subsequently observed that women and children appeared to have more vivid imagery than the scientists did. "Scientific men as a class," he concluded, "have feeble powers of visual representation." Nick found this intriguing. Perhaps his own lack of imagery had somehow enhanced his scientific ability. He knew that there was, among some mathematicians, a kind of snobbery about images—a notion that, even in geometry, drawings were distractions from a purely analytical proof. But he also knew that there were any number of legends in the history of science of visions leading to discoveries. Einstein had visualized himself travelling alongside a beam of light, and this had led to his conception of relativity. The best-known instance that Nick was aware of was the German chemist August Kekulé, to whom the structure of the benzene ring had appeared in a dream:

Long rows . . . all twining and twisting in snake-like motion. . . . One of the snakes had seized hold of its own tail, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lightning I awoke; and . . . spent the rest of the night in working out the consequences of the hypothesis.

At one point, Nick came across a paper from 1909 that stressed the importance of distinguishing between voluntary imagery (the ability to call up mental pictures at will) and involuntary imagery. Sometimes people who couldn't call up images on purpose did experience them involuntarily—usually during migraines, or high, hallucinatory fevers, or in dreams, or the hypnagogic state just before sleep. This caught his attention because he was almost certain that he saw images in dreams, although he couldn't be sure, since nothing remained of the images after he woke. If he was right, and he did see images in sleep, then it was strange that he couldn't summon them at other times. Was he repressing them?

When he searched for scientific studies on imagery in the mid-twentieth century, he found very little. It seemed that the study of imagery had largely disappeared from scientific research from the nineteen-twenties to the fifties, owing in part to the dominance of behaviorism in America, which condemned inquiry into internal psychological states as unscientific. J. B. Watson, behaviorism's founder, repudiated the existence of mental imagery altogether:

What does a person mean when he closes his eyes or ears (figuratively speaking) and says, "I see the house where I was born, the trundle bed in my mother's room where I used to sleep—I can even see my mother as she comes to tuck me in and I can even hear her voice as she softly says good-night"? Touching, of course, but sheer bunk. We are merely dramatizing. The behaviorist finds no proof of imagery at all in this.

Later, researchers would debate whether Watson became a behaviorist because he had no internal imagery, or whether he actually had strong imagery but denied it because of "ideological blindness."

In the nineteen-seventies, Nick discovered, a few psychologists, liberated from mid-century behaviorist orthodoxy, had begun to explore imagery

again. A British psychologist named David Marks, for instance, developed the Vividness of Visual Imagery Questionnaire, which sought to measure a person's ability to picture not only a stationary object but also movement (the characteristic gait of a familiar person), change (the shifting color of the sky at sunrise), and degree of detail (the window of a shop you frequently go to). But the psychologists in the nineteen-seventies were interested in people with typical imagery. When Nick searched for studies on people like himself, he found nothing.

Sometime in the early two-thousands, Jim Campbell, a Scottish surveyor in his mid-sixties, made an appointment with a neurologist at the University of Edinburgh named Adam Zeman. Jim had recently had a cardiac procedure, and afterward he'd noticed that he could no longer picture anything in his head. Before the surgery, he used to put himself to sleep by visualizing his children and grandchildren; now he couldn't see anything at all.

Zeman had a general neurology practice—Parkinson's, M.S., dementia—but he had also been interested in consciousness since he was a student. He speculated that one of the things that made humans different from other primates was their ability to mentally project themselves into the past or future, or into worlds that were purely imaginary. So he was fascinated to encounter, in Jim, a syndrome he had never heard of before, which appeared to be an excision of just this species-defining ability. And yet Jim was clearly very much a human—wry, reserved, down to earth. His neurological, psychiatric, and cognitive tests were all normal. If Jim had not described his condition, Zeman would not have known there was anything unusual about him.

Even questions designed to evoke imagery—which is darker, grass or pine needles? Do squirrels have long or short tails?—Jim answered without hesitation. When Zeman asked him how he could answer without picturing these things, he said that he just knew. Zeman searched for recent scientific papers that could shed light on this strange condition but was unable to find anything useful. The case reminded him of blindsight—a rare phenomenon in which people who can't see behave as though they can, picking up objects and avoiding obstacles. Their eyes and brains can take in visual information, but the information doesn't rise to consciousness.

Zeman felt that Jim was not the sort of person who would make something like this up, but he wanted proof that his brain was functioning in an unusual manner. He recruited a control group of men of similar age and put them and Jim through cognitive tests in an MRI scanner. Here, he found the neurological correlate that he was looking for. Although Jim's brain responded normally to tests of recognition (being shown images of famous faces), when he was asked to *generate* a mental image the scanner showed only faint brain activity, compared with the brain activity in the control group. Instead, there was activation in areas of the frontal lobe that were typically activated in situations of cognitive effort or dissonance. Jim was trying, but failing.

In 2010, Zeman, along with several colleagues, published these findings in the journal *Neuropsychologia*, terming the syndrome "blind imagination." The science journalist Carl Zimmer noticed the study and wrote an article about it in *Discover* magazine. In the years that followed, a couple of dozen people contacted Zeman to tell him that they had the same condition, except they'd had it since birth. Zeman sent them questionnaires and tabulated their answers. At this point, he decided that lack of mental imagery was a valid syndrome that ought to have a name. After consulting with a classicist friend, he decided on "aphantasia," *phantasia* being defined by Aristotle as the ability to conjure an image in the imagination. In 2015, Zeman co-wrote a paper in *Cortex* describing the condition as it appeared in twenty-one subjects: "Lives without imagery—Congenital aphantasia."

An article about Zeman's second paper appeared in the *New York Times*, and, after that, e-mails poured in. Around seventeen thousand people contacted him. Most were congenital aphantasics, and most not only lacked visual imagery; they could not mentally call up sounds, either, or touch, or the sensation of movement. Many had difficulty recognizing faces. Many said that they had a family member who was aphantasic, too. Most said that they saw images in dreams. Zeman recruited colleagues to work with him, and together they tried to reply to every correspondent.

Some people who wrote had once had imagery but lost it. About half of these had lost it as a consequence of physical injury—stroke, meningitis, head trauma, suffocation. The other half attributed their loss to a psychiatric cause—depersonalization syndrome, depression. A few told him that they

thought they'd suppressed their capacity to visualize because traumatic memories had made imagery intolerable. Zeman learned that there had been a case in 1883, described by the French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, in which a man, Monsieur X, had lost his imagery; at the same time, the world suddenly appeared alien to him, and he became intensely anxious. "I observed a drastic change in my existence that obviously mirrored a remarkable change in my personality," Monsieur X wrote to Charcot. "Before, I used to be emotional, enthusiastic with a prolific imagination; today I am calm, cold and I lost my imagination." Another nineteenth-century French neurologist, Jules Cotard, described a patient whose loss of mental imagery was accompanied by what became known as Cotard's delusion, or walking-corpse syndrome—the belief that he was dead.



Zeman also received messages from people who appeared to have the opposite of aphantasia: they told him that their mental pictures were graphic and inescapable. There was evidently a spectrum of mental imagery, with aphantasia on one end and extraordinarily vivid imagery on the other and most people's experience somewhere in between. Zeman figured that the vivid extreme needed a name as well; he dubbed it hyperphantasia. It seemed that two or three per cent of people were aphantasic and somewhat more were hyperphantasic.

Many of his correspondents, he learned, had discovered their condition very recently, after reading about it or hearing it described on the radio. Their whole lives, they had heard people talk about picturing, and imagining, and counting sheep, and visualizing beaches, and seeing in the mind's eye, and assumed that all those idioms were only metaphors or colorful hyperbole. It was amazing how profoundly people could misunderstand one another, and assume that others didn't mean what they were saying—how minds could wrest sense out of things that made no sense.

Some said that they had a tantalizing feeling that images were somewhere in their minds, only just out of reach, like a word on the tip of their tongue. This sounded right to Zeman—the images must be stored in some way, since aphantasics were able to recognize things. In fact, it seemed that most aphantasics weren't hampered in their everyday functioning. They had good memories for facts and tasks. But many of them said that they remembered very little about their own lives.

Among the e-mails that Zeman received, there were, to his surprise, several from aphantasic professional artists. One of these was Sheri Paisley (at the time, Sheri Bakes), a painter in her forties who lived in Vancouver. When Sheri was young, she'd had imagery so vivid that she sometimes had difficulty distinguishing it from what was real. She painted intricate likenesses of people and animals; portraiture attracted her because she was interested in psychology. Then, when she was twenty-nine, she had a stroke, and lost her imagery altogether.

To her, the loss of imagery was a catastrophe. She felt as though her mind were a library that had burned down. She no longer saw herself as a person. Gradually, as she recovered from her stroke, she made her way back to painting, working very slowly. She switched from acrylic paints to oils because acrylics dried too fast. She found that her art had drastically changed. She no longer wanted to paint figuratively; she painted abstractions that looked like galaxies seen through a space telescope. She lost interest in psychology—she wanted to connect to the foundations of the universe.

Years later, she remembered that, one night at her parents' house, when she was still in art school, she had stayed up very late painting. She suddenly felt a strong presence behind her, and, even as she kept working, she felt the

presence ask her, What do you want? In her thoughts, she responded, I want to be a great painter, and I will do whatever I have to, except take drugs. Later, she thought, Well, that is what happened. My life is very hard, but my painting is so much better.

Sheri had been an artist before she lost her imagery, but there were others who had been aphantasic for as long as they could remember. Isabel Nolan, a well-known Irish artist, had recently discovered, in her forties, while reading about Zeman's work in *New Scientist*, that other people could see pictures in their heads:

There was an element of like—fuck! is the only way I can put it. Horrified and cheated. I still feel a bit cheated.

She wondered whether she had always been like this. When she was a child, her mother would occasionally go on business trips, and while she was away Isabel stayed with cousins who lived up the road. She remembered lying in bed one night at her cousins' house, thinking, What if Mam dies? I can't remember what she looks like. She was an anxious child, frightened of many things, but this particular thought stuck in her mind for years. Now she wondered how she could have been so upset at the thought that she couldn't picture her mother unless she'd had a notion, some vestigial memory, that such a thing was possible.

Her fear of things vanishing had not gone away. In fact, it had expanded, from her mother to everything. She had lived in Dublin almost all her life, although it would probably have been better for her career if she'd moved to London. As it turned out, it hadn't held her back—she would be representing Ireland in the Venice Biennale in 2026—but when she was younger she'd wondered if she was making a mistake. She thought that maybe she'd stayed because having the physical infrastructure of her past around helped her to remember it. For a long time, she had felt that everything around her was ephemeral, precarious, not to be relied on:

I was putting together a book in 2020, gathering about nine years of work and writing, and there was an awful lot of writing alluding to the fact of barely having a grasp on the world and how slippery it all is. I realized that my inability to recall things was really playing on my

mind, and that my connection to my social world felt insubstantial. I wrote a lot about how touch was important to me, and how making work was setting down little anchors that reminded me that the world does exist.

Surely this had something to do with not being able to picture anything when she wasn't looking at it.

The world does disappear completely when you close your eyes.

At a conference, she heard artists with vivid imagery say that they were often disappointed by their work because it could never match up to the glowing vision in their heads; she felt sorry for them. When she was working on something, she never knew how it would end up. Sometimes she started with an idea, like the cosmos; she liked to look at images of deep space and draw abstractions that resembled them. She thought a lot about subjective experience, but not her own experience in particular—more what it was like to be any human, wandering through the world. She didn't feel that her work was an extension or expression of herself, so she didn't mind criticism, or not being understood:

I don't think I have a very strong sense of self, and it's not something I'm super interested in.

Was this because of her aphantasia? If her mind were filled with pictures, would her self feel fuller, more robust? When people learned that they were aphantasic, they tended to wonder whether this or that aspect of themselves was due to their lack of imagery; sometimes it had nothing to do with it, but in this case it did—several studies had found that people with vivid imagery tended to be more inward, absorbed in the drift of their own minds.

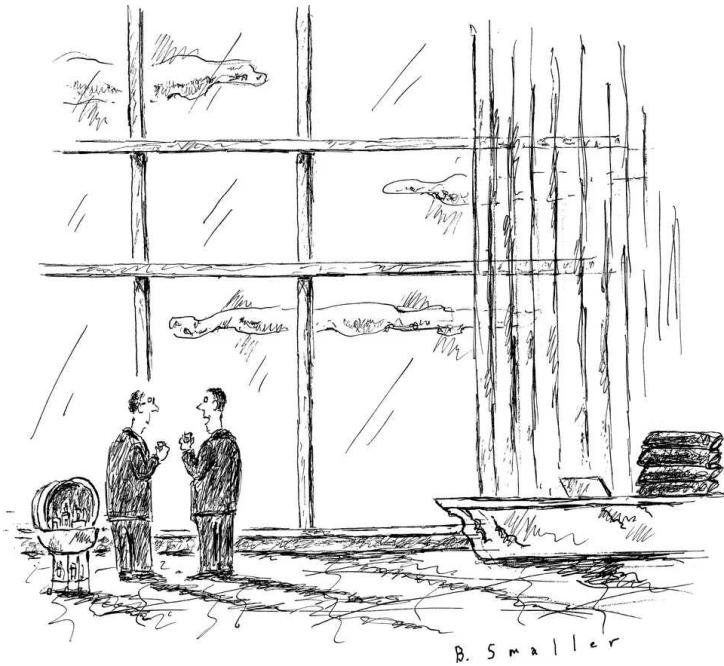
Someone had told Isabel about a British moral philosopher, Derek Parfit, who had no imagery. He had few memories and little connection to his past, although he felt strong emotions about people and ideas in the present. Parfit believed that a self was not a unique, distinct thing but a collection of shifting memories and thoughts which intersected with the memories and thoughts of others. Ultimately, he thought, selves were not important. What

mattered was the moral imperatives that drove everyone, or ought to—preventing suffering, the future welfare of humanity, the search for truth.

Isabel, like Parfit, remembered very little about her life. She kept boxes of souvenirs—ticket stubs, programs—but unless she looked at these things, or a friend reminded her, she didn't recall most of the places she'd visited or things she'd done. She imagined that this could be a problem in a relationship, if you didn't remember what you'd done together and the other person got upset and accused you of not caring, though fortunately she'd never been with someone like that. When she went out with friends who were full of stories, she'd worry that she wasn't entertaining enough; normally, she drew people out and got them talking so she didn't have to:

I don't really have a sense, with some friends—how well I know them. I've kind of forgotten. They'd be like, Oh, yeah, do you remember we went to the play that night? And sometimes I'd just pretend, I'd be like, Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I think when my relationships are continuous, it's much easier. You remember more because you're constantly re-exercising the memories of stuff that you did together—you know, the time we went to Cologne and got hammered and lost our cameras, blah, blah, blah.

It would be nice to remember all the funny stories that people told, but in the end she didn't mind too much. She could just sit there and bask in the pleasure of being with old friends. It was the feeling that was important; she didn't need to know what had happened years ago. In some ways, this made things easier—she mostly didn't remember arguments or bad feelings. She hoped that the significant moments in her life, good and bad, had left their imprint on her in some way, but it was impossible to know:



I feel like my past is kind of imaginary. I know what happened, but it doesn't feel like—I don't know. It's hard to know what having experiences means, because sometimes experiences that I have can leave one so quickly. . . . One can feel a little disconnected from your own past.

Clare Dudeney was an artist who worked in southeast London, in a warren of old factory buildings by the Thames. Against one wall of her studio was a wooden loom, above which large spools of cotton thread in a rainbow of colors were slotted on pegs. She made works in many media, all cornucopias of color: pieces of fabric dyed robin's-egg blue or pistachio or hazelnut or citrine and pasted into collages, some so long that you couldn't take them in at once and hung near open doors so that they rippled. She made murals of ceramic tiles painted with irregular shapes, like countries on a map, in powder-puff pink and celery and yellow and wheat; rectangular blocks of rough wood that she called woodcut paintings, with teal, red, cornflower, and lime pigment staining or filling the crevices and gouges of the surface; long clay worms, basket-woven and glazed—forest, mustard, chestnut—like ceramic macramé. She draped herself in colors, too: thick scarves and nubby sweaters that she knitted herself; geometric-patterned skirts.

In talking to a friend of hers, an aphantasic painter who was one of Zeman's research subjects, Clare had realized that she was the opposite—hyperphantasic. Her imagery was extraordinarily vivid. There was always so much going on inside her head, her mind skittering and careening about, that it was difficult to focus on what or who was actually in front of her. There were so many pictures and flashes of memory, and glimpses of things she thought were memory but wasn't sure, and scenarios real and imaginary, and schemes and speculations and notions and plans, a relentless flood of images and ideas continuously coursing through her mind. It was hard to get to sleep.

At one point, in an effort to slow the flood, she tried meditation. She went on a ten-day silent retreat, but she disliked it so much—too many rules, getting up far too early—that she rebelled. While sitting in a room with no pictures or stimulation of any kind, supposedly meditating, she decided to watch the first Harry Potter movie in her head. She wasn't able to recall all two hours of it, but watching what she remembered lasted for forty-five minutes. Then she did the same with the other seven films.

She tried not to expose herself to ugly or violent images because she knew they would stick in her mind for years. But even without a picture, if she even heard about violence her mind would produce one. Once, reading about someone undergoing surgery without anesthetic, she imagined it so graphically that she fainted. (In 2012, two Harvard psychologists published a study about visual imagery and moral judgment. They found that people with weak imagery tended to think more abstractly about moral questions and believe that good ends sometimes justified harmful means. But for people with strong imagery, the harmful means—injuries done to one person in order to save several others, say—formed such lurid pictures in their minds that they responded emotionally and rejected them.)

Even joyful images could turn on her. She'd had a cat that she loved; she was separated from her husband and living on her own, so she had spent more time with the cat than with any other creature. Then the cat died, and after his death she saw him everywhere—on the sofa, on the floor, on her bed, wherever he had been in life. She saw him so clearly that it was as though he were actually there in front of her. Her grief was made so much

worse by this relentless haunting that she began to feel as if she would not be able to cope.

Her father was a physicist and for many years the deputy director of the British Antarctic Survey. When Clare was a child, he promised that one day he would take her to Antarctica, and finally, when she was in her thirties, in 2013, he did. There, on the boat, she found herself looking at a landscape so wholly unfamiliar that her brain struggled to make sense of it. At times, it barely appeared to her like a landscape at all, more like an abstract surface, without reference or meaning. The place was vast, and there were no people. Snow and ice formed strange patterns on the surface of the sea. As they travelled, the terrain kept changing, so her sense of alien newness persisted. It was as if, for the first time, she was seeing not through the cluttered, obscuring scrim of her visual memories but directly, at the world itself. Just looking at it was so demanding that it occupied her whole mind, so that she wasn't thinking about anything else, she was just there. At the time, she was consulting on climate and sustainability issues, but after that trip she decided to become an artist.

Usually, her ideas for art works came not from anything external but from images in her head. For a while, she had made paintings based on her dreams. She kept a journal and a pen by the side of her bed so that she could describe what she'd dreamed the moment she woke. The more she wrote down her dreams, the more she remembered them; sometimes she would remember ten dreams in a single night. Eventually, the process began to fold in on itself—while she was still asleep, she'd begin to dream that she was taking notes on the dream, and planning how to draw what she saw.

When she thought about making a new piece, she often worked it out in her mind beforehand. Being hyperphantastic didn't mean only that your imagery was bright and sharp; it meant that you could manipulate your images at will, zooming in and out, cutting and pasting, flipping and mirroring, creating pictures from scratch, assembling and disassembling complicated objects. Even when she was trying to evoke the colors of a landscape at a certain time of day, she did it not from life but from memory.

She didn't know how common this was among artists, but there were some who she was fairly sure had worked from their imaginations rather than from

life. J. M. W. Turner, for instance, made rough sketches outdoors, but the seas and skies and light of his paintings all came from his head. There was an English portraitist working in the late eighteenth century whose prodigious powers of visualization had been described in a case study. The study didn't name the painter but said that he'd inherited most of the clients of Sir Joshua Reynolds after Reynolds's death, and had proceeded to take full advantage of this by painting three hundred portraits in a single year. The study's author, a British physician named A. L. Wigan, reported:

This would seem physically impossible, but the secret of his rapidity and of his astonishing success was this: He required but one sitting, and painted with miraculous facility. I myself saw him execute a kit-cat portrait of a gentleman well known to me, in little more than eight hours; it was minutely finished, and a most striking likeness. On asking him to explain it, he said, "When a sitter came, I looked at him attentively for half-an-hour, sketching from time to time on the canvass. I wanted no more—I put away my canvass, and took another sitter. When I wished to resume my first portrait, I took the man and set him in the chair, where I saw him as distinctly as if he had been before me in his own proper person—I may almost say more vividly. I looked from time to time at the imaginary figure, then worked with my pencil, then referred to the countenance, and so on, just as I should have done had the sitter been there—*when I looked at the chair I saw the man!*"

This painter's imagery was so lifelike, however, that he began to confuse his mind's pictures with reality, and succumbed to a mental illness that lasted thirty years.

Hyperphantasia often seemed to function as an emotional amplifier in mental illness—heightening hypomania, worsening depression, causing intrusive traumatic imagery in P.T.S.D. to be more realistic and disturbing. Reshanne Reeder, a neuroscientist at the University of Liverpool, began interviewing hyperphantasics in 2021 and found that many of them had a fantasy world that they could enter at will. But they were also prone to what she called maladaptive daydreaming. They might become so absorbed while on a walk that they would wander, not noticing their surroundings, and get lost. It was difficult for them to control their imaginations: once they pictured something, it was hard to get rid of it. It was so easy for

hyperphantasics to imagine scenes as lifelike as reality that they could later become unsure what had actually happened and what had not.

I can imagine my hand burning, to the point where it's painful. I've always been curious—if they put me in an fMRI, would that show up? That's one of the biggest problems in my life: when I feel something, is it real?

One hyperphantasic told a researcher that he had more than once walked into a wall because he had pictured a doorway.

Because their imaginative lives were so compelling, hyperphantasics tended to be inwardly focussed. This could mean that they were detached from reality, living in the remembered past and the imaginary future rather than in the actual present. But it could also mean that they were hyperaware of their internal reality, tuned in to the cues of their bodies and the shifts in their emotions. Some researchers hypothesized that the heightened awareness of these bodily and emotional signals were one reason that people with vivid imagery usually had strong memories of their pasts—these signals somehow helped to “anchor memories to the self.”

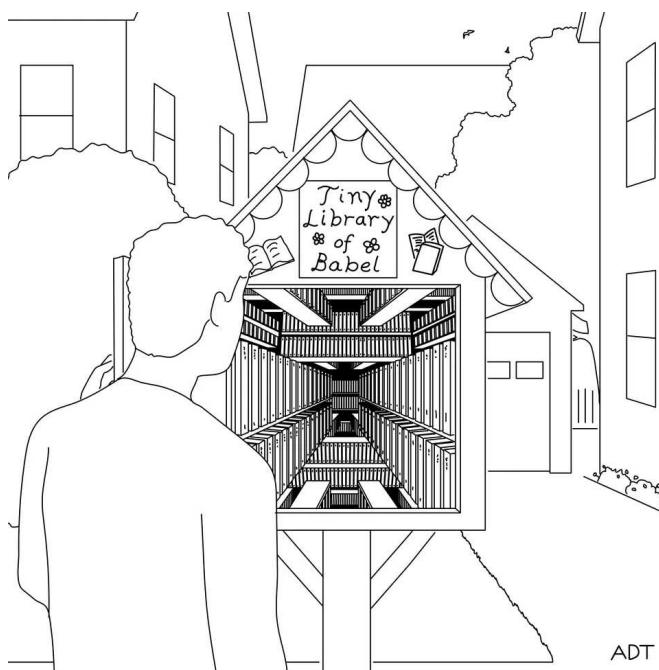
Hyperphantasics' memories could be exceptionally detailed.

Someone might mention something like Did you ever skateboard as a kid? And then I have to watch out for the avalanche of every skateboarding experience I ever had. It's like being in virtual reality and having a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree video of a thousand skateboarding experiences at the same time.

Memories might take on quasi-physical forms in their minds. They might picture sheaves of recollections, or files of information, sitting on shelves in a mental warehouse. They might envision lists of facts about a particular place pinned to that place on a vast and detailed mental map that they saw spread out before them, like a hologram.

Reeder had tested children's imagery and believed that most children were hyperphantasic. They had not yet undergone the synaptic pruning that took place in adolescence, so there were incalculably more neuronal connections

linking different parts of their brain, giving rise to fertile imagery. Then, as they grew older, the weaker connections were pruned away. Because the synapses that were pruned tended to be the ones that were used less, Reeder thought it was possible that the children who grew up to be hyperphantastic adults were those who kept on wanting to conjure up visual fantasy worlds, even as they grew older. Conversely, perhaps children who grew up to become typical imagers daydreamed less and less, becoming more interested in the real people and things around them. Maybe some children who loved to daydream were scolded, in school or at home, to pay attention, and maybe these children disciplined themselves to focus on the here and now and lost the ability to travel to the imaginary worlds they'd known when they were young.



Clare had not been discouraged from daydreaming as a child, and she had preferred it to the other common form of imaginative dissociation, reading. Daydreaming was more pleasurable for her because she had struggled to learn to read, and even once she knew how she'd found it slow going. When she received a diagnosis of dyslexia, as an adult, the tester told her that, rather than processing individual letters or sounds, she was memorizing pictures of whole words, which made it hard to recognize words in different fonts. Her visual sense was so overweening that reading was strenuous, because she was easily distracted by the squiggles and lines of the text.

Naturally, aphantasics usually had a very different experience of reading. Like most people, as they became absorbed, they stopped noticing the visual qualities of the words on the page, and, because their eyes were fully employed in reading, they also stopped noticing the visual world around them. But, because the words prompted no mental images, it was almost as if reading bypassed the visual world altogether and tunnelled directly into their minds.

Aphantasics might skip over descriptive passages in books—since description aroused no images in their minds, they found it dull—or, because of such passages, avoid fiction altogether. Some aphantasics found the movie versions of novels more compelling, since these supplied the pictures that they were unable to imagine. Of course, for people who did have imagery, seeing a book character in a movie was often unsettling—because they already had a sharp mental image of the character which didn't look like the actor, or because their image was vague but just particular enough that the actor looked wrong, or because their image was barely there at all and the physical solidity of the actor conflicted with that amorphousness.

Presumably, novelists who invented characters also had a variety of responses to seeing them instantiated in solid form. Jane Austen wrote a letter to her sister in 1813 in which she described going to an exhibition of paintings in London and searching for portraits that looked like Elizabeth Bennet and Jane Bingley, two main characters from “Pride and Prejudice.” To her delight, she'd seen “a small portrait of Mrs Bingley, excessively like her . . . exactly herself, size, shaped face, features & sweetness; there never was a greater likeness. She is dressed in a white gown, with green ornaments, which convinces me of what I had always supposed, that green was a favourite color with her.” Austen did not see Elizabeth at the exhibition but hoped, she told her sister, to find a painting of her somewhere in the future. “I dare say Mrs D.”—she wrote, Darcy being Elizabeth's married name—“will be in Yellow.”

One of the twenty or so congenital aphantasics who contacted Adam Zeman after his original 2010 paper was a Canadian man in his twenties, Tom Ebeyer. Ebeyer volunteered to participate in Zeman's studies, and, after Zeman published his 2015 *Cortex* paper on congenital aphantasia, Ebeyer was one of the participants quoted in the *Times* article about it. After that,

hundreds of aphantasics reached out to him on Facebook and LinkedIn. They asked him questions he didn't know the answers to: Does this mean I have a disability? Is there a cure?

Many of Ebeyer's correspondents felt shocked and isolated, as he had; he decided that what was needed was a online forum where aphantasics could go for information and community. He set up a website, the Aphantasia Network. He didn't want it to be a sad place where people commiserated with one another, however. There were good things about aphantasia, he believed, and he began to write uplifting posts pointing them out. In one, he argued that aphantasia was an advantage in abstract thinking. When prompted by the word "horse," a person with imagery would likely picture a particular horse—one they'd seen in life, perhaps, or in a painting. An aphantasic, on the other hand, focussed on the concept of a horse—on the abstract essence of horsemanship. Ebeyer published posts about famous people who had realized that they were aphantasic: Glen Keane, one of the leading Disney animators on "The Little Mermaid" and "Beauty and the Beast"; John Green, the author of "The Fault in Our Stars," whose books had sold more than fifty million copies; J. Craig Venter, the biologist who led the first team to sequence the human genome; Blake Ross, who co-created the Mozilla-Firefox web browser when he was nineteen.

Ebeyer also wanted the Aphantasia Network to be a place where aphantasics could find recent scientific research. For instance, estimating the strength of a person's imagery had been thoroughly subjective until Joel Pearson, a cognitive neuroscientist at the University of New South Wales, in Australia, devised tests to measure it more precisely. In a paper from 2022, Pearson reported that when people with imagery visualized a bright object their pupils contracted, as though they were seeing a bright object in real life, but the pupils of aphantasics imagining a bright object stayed the same. Another study of his had shown that, although aphantasics had the same fear response (sweating) as typical imagers to a frightening image shown on a screen, when exposed to a frightening story they barely responded at all.

Ebeyer kept in touch with Zeman and published bulletins about his research. Zeman had found that aphantasics could solve many problems that would seem to require imagery, such as counting the number of windows in their home. This, Zeman hypothesized, was due to the difference between object

imagery and spatial imagery. There were two streams of visual information in the brain that were, to a surprising degree, distinct from each other: one had to do with recognition of objects; the other, with guiding action through space. Aphantasics lacked object imagery, but they might have the kind of spatial imagery that would enable them to count windows. One aphantasic described his ability to do this as a kind of echolocation.

To Zeman, one of the most tantalizing promises of the study of mental imagery was the light it might shed on the neural correlates of consciousness. Connectivity in the brain seemed to be particularly important in both consciousness and aphantasia. fMRI studies had shown reduced connectivity in aphantasics, and Brian Levine, a neuropsychologist at the Baycrest Academy for Research and Education, in Toronto, had found that connectivity between the memory system and the visual-perceptual regions in the brain correlated to how well people remembered their lives. Many of the aphantasics who had written to Zeman identified themselves as autistic. Autism was thought to be a state of reduced long-range connectivity in the brain, so Zeman theorized that there could be a link. But autism had also been associated with thinking in pictures—Temple Grandin, for instance, the autistic writer and professor of animal science, described her autism that way—so clearly the link was not a simple one.

After creating the Aphantasia Network, Ebeyer received tens of thousands of messages from all over the world—Korea, Venezuela, Madagascar. He launched Aphantasia Network Japan, and made plans for a Spanish-language site. When the city of Rowlett, a suburb of Dallas, declared the world's first Aphantasia Awareness Day, on February 21, 2023, his site published a celebratory post. Once hyperphantasia began to be written about, he started to hear from hyperphantasics as well. When he wrote a post about how some people could “hear” music in their heads, or relive touch or tastes, most responses were from aphantasics amazed to learn that such things were possible. But one person wrote to him describing a kind of auditory hyperphantasia:

I can—and do—listen to entire classical works in my head. The longest continuous one was the entire Verdi requiem, listened to internally on a long-haul flight. The imagery is very detailed. I can summon up a work and identify the instruments playing in an orchestral texture, or the

registration being used in a particular organ piece. I can't turn it off though. It's in the background as I write (Schumann, third symphony, last movement). Sometimes a short passage will repeat endlessly, typically when I am stressed. And if I wake at night, it is usually with a short sequence of harmonies repeating themselves.

This past January, Zeman and others published a short article in *Cortex* clarifying that the definition of aphantasia encompassed people with weak imagery. Ebeyer wrote a post in response, wondering whether this inclusive definition risked diluting the experiences of those with total aphantasia, such as himself. Might it threaten the cohesion of the aphantasia community? Aphantasia, at this point, wasn't only a syndrome, after all—it was an identity.

In the course of his quest to learn about imagery, Nick Watkins, the physicist, came across an essay by Oliver Sacks. Sacks mentioned that he normally had almost no mental imagery but that, during a two-week period in his thirties when he'd been downing heroic quantities of amphetamines, he'd suddenly been able to retain images in his mind—though only images of things that he had just looked at. During that time, he also found it much more difficult to think in abstractions. When the drugs wore off, the images dissipated and his abstract thinking returned. This was an auspicious discovery, Nick thought, that you could somehow turn imagery on. He was certainly not going to take amphetamines himself—he was a pretty cautious person—especially if doing so might jeopardize his ability to think abstractly. But if amphetamines could work, maybe something else could, too.

He kept looking. He discovered that Aldous Huxley was aphantasic and that, in "The Doors of Perception," he had written that he was expecting mescaline to change this, even if only for a few hours. (It didn't.) Unsurprisingly, amid the recent research on psychedelics, this hope of arousing mental vision with drugs had been revived. In 2018, the *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* published a paper about an aphantasic man, S.E., who had taken ayahuasca and had an intensely emotional experience of visualizing, and then forgiving, his father, long dead, who had left him when he was very young. Afterward, S.E. was still able to see images, but only faintly. He and the paper's authors concluded that his aphantasia had likely

been psychological in origin, since it was resolved by his feeling that things between him and his father had been settled. Another paper, published in the same journal in 2025, described an autistic aphantasic woman in her mid-thirties who had eaten psilocybin truffles and experienced mental imagery for the first time. Her imagery persisted for many months, although it was not quite as vivid as during the trip itself.

Nick kept hoping that someone would find a way of stimulating imagery that didn't involve drugs. On the other hand, as he learned more about people with imagery, he was less inclined to envy them. At first, he had thought that having imagery would be like having a VCR, being able to play home movies whenever you felt wistful. But, reading more about it, he had learned that memories and images could break in on you, unbidden and uncontrollable, and not necessarily happy ones. Even if the imagery wasn't frightening, it would surely be a distraction. He had come to value the dark and quiet of his mind.

Nick knew that whenever Zeman talked about aphantasia he was at pains to emphasize that it was not a disorder, or even a bad thing. It was best described as an interesting variant in human experience, like synesthesia. Nick appreciated this about Zeman, and reckoned that it was probably the right thing to say, but he thought that, though aphantasia itself might be neutral, the memory loss that came with it was definitely a bad thing. Many others felt the same. At one point, Zeman had been contacted by an automotive engineer from Essex named Alan Kindle, who had realized that he was aphantasic while listening to a radio segment about the condition. This revelation affected him so strongly that he put together a book of interviews with aphantasics, identified just by their initials, to help others navigate the discovery. Some people he interviewed were unbothered—there was definitely a range of responses—but others saw it as a curse.

Many could remember very little about their lives, and even with the events they did remember they could not muster the feeling of what they'd been like. They knew that some things had made them happy and others had made them sad, but that knowledge was factual—it didn't evoke any emotions in the present.

M.L.: It leaves me as an outsider. As a viewer of life, not particularly a participant. I don't like holidays or sightseeing—what is the point? You go, you see things, you leave, and it is gone. Not a trace or a sensation remains.

The advantage of a bad memory was that aphantasics seemed to suffer less from regret, or shame, or resentment.

L.: I can easily move on, forget, not hold grudges, no living in the past, and no dreaming of the future. This is it! I can live in the NOW.

S.C.: I work for the emergency services, and I've spoken with my workmates about what they think the hardest part of the job is. They all said it is definitely reliving traumatic things they have seen. . . . It is for this reason that I am glad I can't visualize. When I go home, after having someone die in front of me, I go to bed, close my eyes, and see nothing but black for a minute. Then, I'm off in my dream world.



But this supposed advantage was just the silver lining of something pretty dark. When aphantasics recovered from bereavement, or breakups, or trauma, more quickly than others, they worried that they were overly detached or emotionally deficient. When they didn't see people regularly, even family, they tended not to think about them.

M.L.: I do not miss people when they are not there. My children and grandchildren are dear to me, in a muffled way. I am fiercely protective of them but am not bothered if they don't visit or call. . . . I think that leaves them feeling as if I don't love them at all. I do, but only when they are with me, when they go away they really cease to exist, except as a "story."

One of Kendle's interviewees was Melinda Utal, a hypnotherapist and a freelance writer from California. She had trouble recognizing people, including people she knew pretty well, so she tended to avoid social situations where she might hurt someone's feelings. When she first discovered that she was aphantasic, she called her father, who was in the early stages of Alzheimer's disease and living in a nursing home in Oregon. He had been a musician in big bands—he had toured with Bob Hope and played with Les Brown and his Band of Renown. She asked him whether he could imagine a scene in his head, and he said, Of course. I can imagine going into a concert hall. I see the wood on the walls, I see the seats, I know I'm going to sit at the back, because that's where you get the best sound. I can see the orchestra playing a symphony, I can hear all the different instruments, and I can stop it and go backward to wherever I want it to start up and hear it again. She explained to her father what aphantasia was, how she couldn't see images in her mind, or hear music, either. On the phone, her father started to cry. He said, But, Melinda, that's what makes us human.

Melinda had an extremely bad memory for her life, even for an aphantasic. She once had herself checked for dementia, but the doctor found nothing wrong. She had become aware when she was in second grade that she had a bad memory, after a friend pointed it out. In an effort to hold on to her memories, she started keeping a journal in elementary school, recording what she did almost every single day, and continued this practice for decades. When, in her sixties, she got divorced and moved into an apartment by herself, she thought it would be a good time to look through her journals and revisit her younger days. She opened one and began to sob because, to her horror, the words she had written meant nothing to her. The journals were useless. She read about things she had done and it was as though they had happened to someone else.

It was not just the distant past that she had lost—she was continuously aware of the present slipping away as soon as it happened. She had already forgotten what her two sons had been like when they were little, the feeling of holding them:

It's like, this is who they are, they were never anybody else, and that's like a knife in my chest.

Now her greatest fear was that, if she hadn't seen her sons in a while, she might forget them altogether:

I have had to accept that my life is like water flowing through my fingers. It's just experiences moving through my hand that I can't hold onto.

Although Nick had made his peace with his lack of imagery, he still grieved his inability to revisit his past. At one point, he came across the work of a Canadian psychologist, Endel Tulving, who, in the early nineteen-seventies, proposed that memory was not a single thing but two distinct systems: semantic memory, which consisted of general knowledge about the world, and episodic memory—recollection of experiences from your own life. Episodic memory, the sense of reliving the past, was, Tulving believed, unique to humans, and among the most astonishing products of evolution. This, Nick realized, was what he didn't have. Learning that he lacked a profound human ability—one that, he had to assume, regenerated and immeasurably deepened your connection to your past life and the people in it who were now gone, including yourself as a child—well, there was nothing good about it. He would have preferred not to know.

He wrote to Tulving, who told him about a study to be conducted by Brian Levine, the Baycrest neuropsychologist, who had been a colleague of his in Toronto. The study would investigate exceptionally poor autobiographical memory in healthy adults—people who did not have amnesia or dementia or brain injury or psychological trauma. Levine later named this syndrome “severely deficient autobiographical memory,” or *sdam*. Nick was accepted as a participant and travelled to Toronto. The study found that the participants’ experience of *sdam* could be objectively corroborated, using a variety of methods, by comparing them to a control group. fMRI, for

instance, showed reduced activation in the midline regions of their brains, an area normally associated with mental time travel.

Nick was surprised to hear that another participant in the study had described an even starker experience of episodic memory loss than his. She felt so detached from her past that the facts she knew about it felt to her no more personal than facts about someone else. He definitely didn't feel that way. The things he knew about his life felt more personal to him than facts he knew about physics, say, even though he couldn't inhabit them in the way that other people could. He realized that Tulving's binary schema, which categorized all memory as either episodic or semantic, was too simple. His own memories were somewhere in between. He remembered that on the day that his mother died, in 2003, his sister had phoned him to say that their mother was being admitted to the hospital; he had taken a train from Cambridge to London, and he had phoned an old friend to meet him in London because he was worried that, in his distress, he might go to the wrong station and miss the second train he needed to catch, but the friend helped him, and he got on the right train, and it was around Guy Fawkes Night, fireworks going off outside the train window, and then he got to the hospital and was there for a while, and then his mother died. He knew these things, and the idea of his mother dying aroused emotion in him, but he couldn't feel what it had been like to be in the train, or the hospital, and he could not remember his mother's face.

From an evolutionary point of view, he supposed, he had all the memory he needed: enough to know what and whom he had loved, and what he should try to avoid doing again. But to think about it that way was to miss what was most important—not the function of episodic memory but the experience of it. As he absorbed what it meant to lack episodic memory, he started wondering whether there were ways he could simulate it. He was attracted to the idea of video life-logging with wearable cameras—the footage would be a decent substitute for mental time travel. His childhood and early adulthood were lost to him, but if he started filming now he would be able to relive at least the last decade or two of his life.

On a trip to Pasadena, he went to the Apple Store and tried on a virtual-reality headset. This, he thought, must be what episodic memory is like. He knew it would probably be a long time before people accepted such

technologies, but perhaps one day wearable cameras would be recognized as prosthetics for people with *SDAM*, no more remarkable than glasses. Then again, film would be very different from memory. Like memory, it would be partial, but, unlike memory, it would be accurate. This, he suspected, might not necessarily be a good thing. There was something to be said for a degree of blurriness and uncertainty in recalling the past; it was helpful in forgiving other people, and yourself.

At some point, Nick became interested in the ideas of a British philosopher, Galen Strawson, who claimed to have no sense of himself as a continuously evolving being—a creature whose self consisted of a coherent story about accumulating memories and distinctive traits. Strawson was, for that reason, uninterested in his past. He acknowledged that his life had shaped him, but he believed that whether or not he consciously remembered it didn't matter to who he was now, any more than it mattered whether a musician playing a piece could call to mind a memory of each time he'd practiced: what mattered was how well he played. What was important, Strawson felt, was his life in the present. He liked to quote the third Earl of Shaftesbury, a British philosopher of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, who had felt the same way:

The metaphysicians . . . affirm that if memory be taken away, the self is lost. [But] what matter for memory? What have I to do with that part? If, *whilst I am*, I am but as I should be, what do I care more?

Nick wasn't sure he agreed with Strawson, and he certainly didn't feel, as Strawson did, that his memory of his own life was unimportant, but he found the argument somewhat comforting. He still longed to relive important moments in his life, but it was easier to think about this experience as just one of many he hadn't had, like paragliding, or visiting Peru, than as a void at the core of his self. Many people believed that their selves were made up largely of memories, and that the loss of those memories would be a self-ending catastrophe. But he knew now that there were also thousands of people like him, who had work and marriages and ideas and thwarted desires and good days and bad days and the rest of it. All they lacked was a past. ♦

## Profiles

# Jennifer Lawrence Goes Dark

She has been cast in maternal roles since her teens. Now, playing a mother for the first time since becoming one, she has chosen the part of a woman pushed past the edge of sanity.

By Jia Tolentino

October 27, 2025



The novel “Die, My Love,” by the Argentinean writer Ariana Harwicz, is narrated by a wife and new mother who is living in rural France and seems to be losing her mind. Motherhood has inserted an immersion blender into her psyche: lust, repulsion, pleasure, and doom swirl into a single mess. She calls herself a “sodomising rodent” with “bullet-wounds for eyes,” and thinks, “When I masturbate I desecrate crypts, and when I rock my baby I say amen, and when I smile I unplug an iron lung.” One night, standing in the cold, staring at her family through a sliding door, she thinks, “I’ll stop trying to draw blood from a stone. I’ll contain my madness, I’ll use the bathroom. I’ll put my baby to sleep, jerk off my man and postpone my rebellion in favor of a better life.” She’s joking.

Martin Scorsese saw a brief review of the novel in the *Guardian* some years ago and decided to pick up a copy. He found it to be a “powerful mosaic of the mind,” he told me recently. Scorsese is a member of a book club of sorts, with a few other filmmakers, who read with an eye toward adaptation. For “Die, My Love,” he imagined casting Jennifer Lawrence in the lead. He’d been amazed by her performance in Darren Aronofsky’s bewildering 2017 fantasia, “Mother!” In that surreal film—it’s like an allegory set inside an oil painting—Lawrence plays a woman living with her poet husband in an old farmhouse, which is gradually, then apocalyptically, invaded by strangers. “She really is feeling everything that’s happening, in what appears to be a dream of some kind,” Scorsese said.

He and Lawrence had discussed adaptations before. They considered “The Awakening,” Kate Chopin’s 1899 novel of female liberation, which ends with the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, walking into the sea. But that felt safe. “What’s the challenge?” Scorsese had thought. “Die, My Love” was like “The Awakening” if it began with Edna already underwater. “I said, ‘You know what? *This* is a challenge,’ ” he recalled telling Lawrence. “ ‘This is the kind of thing you should be doing. Go take a chance. Knock any sense of a comfortable character off the board and just go for it.’ ”

Lawrence became a star fifteen years ago, at age nineteen, with “Winter’s Bone,” a rural noir in which she plays a hardscrabble daughter of the Ozarks. She has since received four Oscar nominations, winning once, for “Silver Linings Playbook,” the first of three movies she filmed as David O. Russell’s muse. She anchored one of the century’s most durable movie franchises, “The Hunger Games,” playing the inadvertent hero Katniss Everdeen in an adaptation of Suzanne Collins’s Y.A. series about teen-agers who are forced into gladiatorial combat by a fascist government. For a time, she was the highest-paid actress in the world.

But her public image—as earthy and lowbrow as her movies were alternately fantastical and prestigious—has always threatened to overshadow what she does onscreen. She proved irresistible to the star-making machine: an Oscar contender who joked about butt plugs, a blonde from the Real America who could give Bacall in a ball gown but got famous for a movie in which she skins a squirrel. The idea of Jennifer Lawrence became almost a cultural fetish, the nation’s four-quadrant fantasy of a carefree, potty-

mouthing darling. The apex of her fame coincided with an era when people said “personal brand” without irony, and when converting a young woman’s identity into a product was not just the province of Hollywood but the basis upon which entire social-media platforms thrived.

Lawrence roughly fit the archetype of the cool girl, as it was famously characterized (by an unreliable psychopath) in “Gone Girl,” the Gillian Flynn novel: a “hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she’s hosting the world’s biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2.” In a *Rolling Stone* profile from 2012, Lawrence asks the reporter, “Are you hungry? Because I have a whole burger-fries-Budweiser fantasy going on.” The magazine proclaimed her the “coolest chick in Hollywood.” When she accepted her Oscar for Best Actress, in 2013, she tripped going up the stairs to the stage, and the public swooned. A year later, she tripped at the ceremony again, while walking the red carpet. Suddenly, to some, her persona seemed like an act.

She was in sixteen movies in six years, many of which were not as good as the work she did in them. (A *Globe and Mail* critic wrote, of her performance in an early-career horror flick, “She improves the script by transcending it, and steals the picture by abandoning it.”) Once or twice, as in the misbegotten space romance “Passengers”—Lawrence had to fall in, then out, then back in love with Chris Pratt, even after finding out that he’d more or less killed her—the movie brought the work down to its level. She has since slowed down, making about one film a year. She’s thirty-five now, out of the ingénue phase and at an age when women in Hollywood often get relegated to playing moms—making dinner in the background of someone else’s story.

Oddly, though, Lawrence has been regularly cast in maternal roles since her teens. In two early movies, “The Burning Plain” and “The Poker House,” she plays a teen-ager tasked with minding her younger siblings while a wayward mom engages in sexual congress. In “Winter’s Bone,” she tends not only to her siblings but to her mom. In “The Hunger Games,” too, she has an inert mother and a dead father and serves as protector and provider for other kids. Russell cast her as a widow (“Silver Linings Playbook”), a

histrionic mother (“American Hustle”), and a self-sacrificing mother of two (“Joy”), all before she turned twenty-five. And then there’s “Mother!” In that one, Lawrence gives birth onscreen only to watch a horde of grasping freaks eat her baby’s dismembered body. (She is basically playing the most faultless of all mothers, Mother Earth.)



Lawrence liked Scorsese’s idea, and put together an adaptation of “Die, My Love” with her production company. (Scorsese is credited as a producer on the film; next year, he’ll direct Lawrence and Leonardo DiCaprio in an adaptation of “What Happens at Night,” by Peter Cameron, which he read immediately after “Die, My Love.”) Lynne Ramsay, the mercurial Scottish filmmaker, signed on to direct, and Robert Pattinson took the part of the husband, called Jackson in the film. Lawrence’s character is named Grace; rural France has been replaced by Montana. The couple moves there while Grace is pregnant, and we briefly see them wild and free before the baby is born. Their relationship breaks down in the postpartum months, as Grace is driven well past the edge of sanity by isolation, sexual rejection, and the stuff of new motherhood—leaking nipples, laundry baskets, the sight of a man who’s been wearing the same disgusting fucking robe every single day. The film takes a shotgun to certain postpartum clichés: Grace doesn’t care about being a picture-perfect mother, and she’s not too touched-out for sex.

She walks around with dirty bare feet and keeps her baby up out of boredom and throws herself violently at Jackson, to no avail.

To different viewers, the movie might seem like a sideways romantic drama, a psychological thriller, or a very dark comedy. It is certainly, like Ramsay's other films—such as “We Need to Talk About Kevin,” which centers on a boy who goes on a killing spree, and his parents—a tone poem of sublimated misery. Lawrence’s previous film was the comedy “No Hard Feelings,” in which her character, a dirtbag Montauk townie paid to deflower the nerd son of out-to-lunch parents, drew closer to her public image than anything she’d done before. Now, in “Die My Love,” her role diverges from that persona more than ever. As Grace, she crawls through tall grass, clutching a butcher knife, and wanders under the predawn moonlight, desperate for someone to fuck her, or maybe to behead her. Her eyes yawn open, crackling with static. She vibrates with restlessness and fury. You can see the cognitive distance between her and reality increasing, inch by inch, in her face.

Lawrence has sat for dozens of magazine profiles since she was a teen-ager. She’s drunk cheap bourbon with reporters in her back yard and got in a sauna for scene and color. But she’s become more sparing with press in the past half decade. In late September, she and a publicist sat in a side room at Via Carota, an unflashy but impossibly in-demand celebrity-magnet restaurant in the West Village. I walked in and said hello. Lawrence confessed that, just before she left the house, her too-small mouth guard had got stuck in her mouth. “Can you imagine?” she said. “After ten years of being, like, ‘I used to be folksy, but everyone thought everything was a shtick,’ then I show up for my first day of this, like”—she did a Farrelly-brothers-style impression of clumsy, mouth-guard-wearing Jen. “I was, like, I will do *anything* to prevent this from happening. It would be like if I tripped and fell on my way into the room.”

Lawrence has a low voice and is beautiful in a manner that feels unstingy. She was dressed like the wealthy millennial mother that she is: a soft red cardigan over a white shirt, a white skirt with a black sweater around her waist, a gold pendant, black sandals. Her long, dark-blond bangs were a little messy. In person, as onscreen, she’s often very still; her face, with its rounded cheekbones and straight planes, will become marble-like and sculptural. Then everything rearranges in a swarm of sudden feeling.

“Every time I do an interview, I think, ‘I can’t do this to myself again,’ ” Lawrence told her fellow-actor Viola Davis a few years ago, adding, “I feel like I lose so much control over my craft when I have to do press for a movie.” I got the sense that, with me, she was trying to be careful. She seemed conscious of a lesson learned at peak fame: she doesn’t want to be the trick pony; she wants to be the rider holding the reins. Still, frequently, something unbridled would burst through. Soon after I sat down, Lawrence asked me if it was O.K. if she “vaped . . . constantly,” then noted that she’d have to stop in November, when she planned to get her boobs done. (Nicotine constricts blood vessels—bad for tissue healing.) Later, we discussed the cervical details of our respective childbirth experiences, and she cheerfully offered the phrase “huge vagina.”



When I mentioned going through old articles about her, she winced. “Oh, no,” she said. “So hyper. So embarrassing.” I said that it must have been self-alienating to have people demand and obsess over her genuine personality, and then to decide that it was fake. “Well, it is, or it was, my genuine personality, but it was also a defense mechanism,” she said. The pedestal of fame had felt treacherous and false: “And so it was a defense mechanism, to just be, like, ‘I’m not like that! I poop my pants every day!’ ” Lawrence had anticipated the turn in public opinion long before it happened, and rarely felt at ease. “I was young, I lived alone, I was being chased,” she

said. Paparazzi followed her when she drove around in Los Angeles; at night, adrenaline threw off her sleep. She had too many projects and was doing too much press, and she felt “*pissed*,” she said. “I look at those interviews, and that person is annoying. I get why seeing that person everywhere would be annoying. Ariana Grande’s impression of me on ‘S.N.L.’ was spot-on.” (“I’m just, like, a snackaholic,” Grande said, in 2016, on a “Celebrity Family Feud” sketch, sporting a tight dress and a perfectly groomed blond wig. “I mean, I love Pringles. If no one’s looking, I’ll eat, like, a whole can.”) But the backlash did make her life seem “uninhabitable,” Lawrence said. “I felt—I didn’t feel, I *was*, I think—rejected not for my movies, not for my politics, but for me, for my personality.”

It was six weeks after the birth of her first child when Scorsese’s name popped up on her phone. After listening to him describe “Die, My Love,” she ordered a copy and read it right away. “I wasn’t really having a bad postpartum,” she told me. “I had a worse postpartum with my second, but the first time the only thing I was at war with was the rest of the world.” Still, she responded to the protagonist’s loneliness, to the frankness of her insanity and her lack of control.

Lawrence co-founded her production company, in 2018, with a friend, Justine Ciarrocchi, whom she’s known since she was eighteen and just starting to become successful and Ciarrocchi was a twenty-year-old film student. “Die, My Love” felt to them like a Lynne Ramsay movie. Ramsay, whose début feature, “Ratcatcher,” follows a quiet Scottish boy turned accidental murderer, and whose most recent, “You Were Never Really Here,” stars Joaquin Phoenix as a traumatized hit man attempting to rescue a young girl, hadn’t made a movie in eight years. Lawrence and Ciarrocchi courted her via e-mail for months. “I had to find my own way into it,” Ramsay told me. “I saw it as a bit of a love story, a bit of a haunting, a bit about being stuck creatively.” (In the film, Grace is an aspiring novelist, though that detail strained credulity for this writer—we never see books in her house, for one thing.) Ramsay wanted the source of Grace’s agitation to maintain a degree of mystery: “Is it the isolation? Is it that they’re splitting up? Is it the sex?”

Ramsay wrote the script with a pair of playwrights, Enda Walsh and Alice Birch. When Pattinson came on board as Jackson, his presence changed the part. He “defended his role,” Lawrence said, and insisted that Jackson be a forceful and meaningful counterpart to his tornado of a wife. Pattinson saw his character as “a regular guy,” he told me, who may not understand Grace but who stubbornly holds on to his love for her. As an actor, he said, Lawrence “ends up drawing your own performance into areas that you had no idea you would go.” Ramsay had the two leads take interpretive-dance classes, which Pattinson called a “(sort of) fun humiliation ritual.” They shot the movie a year ago, in Calgary, when Lawrence was four months pregnant with her second child, something that made her a little nervous. “When you’re working, you’re manipulating your adrenals, you’re calling up a lot of emotions,” she said. Her husband and son came to stay with her on set. Pattinson was also a new parent, and he flew back to Los Angeles most weekends. In the book, the protagonist is distant from her child, bordering on abusive, but Lawrence and Pattinson found that they couldn’t abide that aspect of the story. In the movie, Grace and Jackson drink too many day beers and snipe at each other constantly, but they both love the baby.

“Maybe that was a mistake,” Lawrence said. “But, once Rob and I started doing our scenes together, I think it became more of a thing that a lot of postpartum women feel, where you’re not mad at your baby—you’re mad at your fucking husband, who can just go to the gym.” The script called for them to have a screaming match in the car with the baby in the back seat. “Rob and I were both, like, ‘We can’t.’ ” They had bonded with the twins who played their son—Lawrence held them a lot off camera, so that they would feel safe when she held them onscreen. (“*Those babies*,” Lawrence said, in a worshipful hush. “Victoria and Kennedy. The girls.”) Grace and Jackson had their fight alone, and Grace is never cruel to the child. “I think if there was a baby on my lap, I can’t hold her in a way that she’s not going to feel like I like her,” Lawrence said. “That would be so, so sad.”



Slightly to my dismay—I had never previously managed to secure a table at Via Carota—we weren’t eating. Lawrence was drinking water and vaping patiently. Her younger son was only six months old, and I could feel the invisible tether new mothers have to their infants: the rope tightening, the clock counting down. Later, she told me about the terrible postpartum anxiety she’d experienced with him. “I just thought every time he was sleeping he was dead,” she said. “I thought he cried because he didn’t like his life, or me, or his family. I thought I was doing everything wrong, and that I would ruin my children.” She took Zurzuvae, a recently developed drug, and it helped so quickly and significantly that she thinks all new moms should be briefed about it. She recounted a story about crying while asking ChatGPT a question about breastfeeding. “You’re doing the most amazing thing for your baby,” it had told her. “You’re such a loving mother.” That a robot would say that to her, she thought, called into question the sincerity of anyone else who did.

I found it interesting, I said, that she’d played self-sacrificial mothers and proto-mothers for a decade, and then, playing a mother for the first time after becoming one, she went for this character, who makes you worry that she’ll be too busy masturbating to notice the stroller drifting into the path of an oncoming car. Lawrence connected the choice to her own experience, and how it’s changed. She was acting full time by the age of fourteen, and

spending long stretches away from her family. “I was parenting myself in a lot of ways. And I think that, if I were to look at it now, I could say I’ve successfully mothered myself to the point that now I can even be a bad mother” onscreen, she said. “*Die My Love*” appealed to her in part because it offered her the chance to inhabit a character who acted on every impulse. “You walk past someone’s car and notice the keys are in it, and you get the thought, What if I just hopped in it and drove off?” she told me. With Grace, she could play someone who would actually do that, and who would maybe never come back.

Lawrence was a double surprise to her parents: she was conceived accidentally, and she was the first girl born into her father’s family in fifty years. She has two brothers, five and ten years older than she is. They grew up in a nice suburb of Louisville, Kentucky, where her father owned a construction company and her mother ran a summer camp on a family property. Their milieu was conservative and Christian: purity pledges, fear of going to Hell. By adolescence, Lawrence could no longer accept the idea that anyone who didn’t believe in the Christian God would be damned for eternity, but religious baggage stayed with her for years. “There was a Switchfoot song, ‘Dare You to Move,’ that I’d listen to whenever I had sexual guilt,” she told me. “I was, like, That’ll clean me right up.”

Reading comments from Lawrence’s parents in her early press clippings, I got the sense that they hadn’t known what to do with her. “She had places in her mind to go,” her mother said, in 2010. “She never fit in anywhere.” Lawrence was restless and emotional and obsessed with TV; she liked reading but wasn’t great at school. I mentioned to her the idea that parents—our own, and now us—develop narratives about their kids, and that those narratives shape the way the kids are treated. Lawrence thought about her experience as a daughter. “What was the story? I guess that I loved attention,” she said. “And my takeaway was, kind of, I don’t know how much they really like me, as a person.”

At the age of nine, Lawrence was in a church play about the Book of Jonah and stole the show as a prostitute from the sinful Assyrian city of Nineveh. But it wasn’t until a spring-break trip to New York with her mother, when she was fourteen, that Lawrence became sure that she wanted to act. A scout snapped a Polaroid of her in Washington Square Park and invited her to meet

with talent agencies that week. She read for a few commercials; when she got back home, she could think about nothing else. “I’d watch ‘Lizzie McGuire,’ and then I’d go and stand in front of the mirror and practice how I would do the lines,” she said. She returned to New York for the summer, chaperoned by her middle brother. She still remembers the dinner she had her first night back in the big city: honey-glazed boneless chicken wings from the Applebee’s in Times Square.

“We lived on Third Avenue and Twenty-third in this dilapidated, rat-infested place,” she recalled. “We would get plastic Solo cups from Duane Reade and try to make them last until they molded. I’d go on these go-sees, in these cattle calls with these beautiful, really well-dressed girls, and I’m in my TJ Maxx Kentucky clothes getting lost on the subway. I remember figuring out that, if I all of a sudden saw daylight, that meant I’d accidentally gone to Queens.”

She got some modelling and commercial work, then moved to Los Angeles, where life became more ad hoc. “There was always somebody with me—a teen-ager, my teen-age brother, my parents, whatever,” she said. “But there was a physical absence of a consistent parental figure.” Sometimes she would wear a collared shirt, a pleated skirt, and high socks and walk around Santa Monica, “because I just wanted random people on the street to assume I was in school.” She was lonely; she adopted odd accents when talking to strangers. “British, New Zealand,” she said, when I asked her which accents. “Can we cancel this profile?”

Lawrence auditioned for the roles of Bella Swan in “Twilight,” Lisbeth Salander in “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,” and Alice in Tim Burton’s “Alice in Wonderland” (putting her prized British accent to use, without success). She was cast as the “big-chested girl” in an ill-fated TV pilot called “Not Another High School Show.” Her father was ready to intervene and call off the acting experiment—then she got a big part as the sassy teen-age daughter on “The Bill Engvall Show,” a TBS sitcom so ephemeral that watching clips on YouTube feels like entering an alternate reality. “It was perfect,” Lawrence said, of the show’s utter lack of cultural resonance, “because I didn’t get pigeonholed, and I had a steady paycheck, which meant I could actually choose my roles.” The one she wanted was Ree, the lead in “Winter’s Bone,” which was being adapted, by the director Debra

Granik, from the novel by Daniel Woodrell. Lawrence's mother had read the book and thought it was perfect for her daughter. But, after a second audition, Lawrence was told that she was too pretty. She flew to New York on a red-eye and auditioned, uninvited, a third time, makeupless and dishevelled. She got the part just as the sitcom was cancelled.

Her performance as Ree is precise and full of integrity. "She doesn't care what you think of her," Gary Ross, who wrote and directed the first "Hunger Games" movie, said. Jodie Foster, who directed Lawrence in "The Beaver," the following year, told me, "She has a stillness that is really unusual, and an internal life that can't help but come out through her face, with no broadness at all—a little magic trick that she may not be aware of." Lawrence got her first Oscar nomination for the part, becoming, at the time, the second-youngest nominee ever for Best Actress.

Lawrence has had no formal acting training aside from after-school theatre classes in junior high—the last time she was in school of any kind. She considers getting an acting coach before most of her movies begin filming, she told me, but never goes through with it. There are limits to what she's willing to endure for the art. "If it ever came down to the point where, to make a part better, I had to lose a little bit of my sanity, I wouldn't do it," she once said. "I would just do comedies." She made an exception for "Mother!"; during one take, she hyperventilated so hard that she dislocated a rib. "That's when I learned I was never going to do that again," she told me. When filming "Die My Love," she abided by her preferred ritual of watching dumb TV each night and temporarily forgetting that she has to act again the next day.

I could understand leaving a role behind after a day wraps. But what happened, I asked, when Lawrence walked to her mark? How did she transform from a person who FaceTimes her toddler and texts indelicate jokes to her friends into Grace, a character so feral and lonely that she claws her fingernails into bleeding stubs? "I don't know," Lawrence said. "It's kind of a form of meditation. I get extremely focussed. I think it's about whatever the truth is behind the line that one is saying." She described "therapy sessions" with her directors, in which they deconstructed and analyzed her characters. "And then, when I go into this meditative state of being

extremely focussed on what the character is saying, all that information finds its way to the right spot.”

Lawrence has a live-wire quality as an actor. In “American Hustle,” tears erupt from her eyes in a manner that calls to mind a four-year-old; her complexion genuinely flushes onscreen when her emotions rise. “She just becomes it, like a child actor,” Emma Stone, who has known Lawrence since they were both in their early twenties, told me. “The circumstance around you is real. Be in it. That’s what everybody wishes they could do.”

David O. Russell has a reputation for being hard on actors—several of them, including George Clooney and Amy Adams, have detailed his antagonistic behavior on set—but Lawrence credits him with teaching her how to act. Or, more properly, with freeing her to accept her own process. “If anyone calls me who’s doing a movie with him and asks for advice, I tell them, ‘You gotta be loose as fuck. You’re wet clay. Let him mold you.’” She auditioned for “Silver Linings Playbook” on Skype from her parents’ house in Kentucky. “She was real and she was herself and she was the character all at the same time,” Russell told me. “Then she killed a giant spider in the bathroom behind her during the same Skype and returned to spontaneously demonstrate exactly how the spider died with all its extended limbs frozen together.” When they made the movie, which co-starred Bradley Cooper, Jacki Weaver, and Robert De Niro, Lawrence found herself “working with actors who were very prepared, who knew a lot of stuff that I didn’t know,” she said. “It wasn’t until later, when I read an interview where David said, ‘That’s what she does—she stays loose like an athlete,’ that I was, like, ‘Oh, O.K. So that’s O.K. Nobody’s mad at me.’”

Lawrence also resembles an athlete in her capacity to exhibit a specific sort of genius and then slide into generalities when a reporter asks her to describe how she does it. The novel “Die, My Love” is a hyper-detailed tapestry of the unnamed narrator’s every passing thought, but Grace, in the film, never articulates what she thinks or feels—all the desire and fury in her mind have to be communicated physically. When I noted this, Lawrence said, “That’s so interesting. I never realized that.”

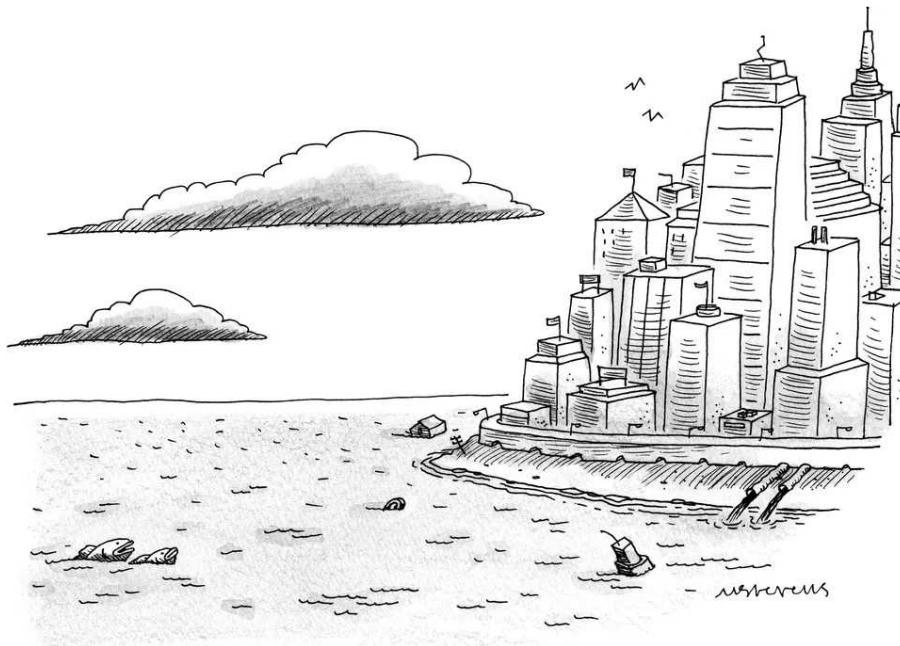
“It’s always mystified me,” Justine Ciarrocchi said, of her friend’s process. “It’s almost spiritual. Her fuel is empathy and abandon—if she’s too studied,

she can't drop in." Foster also saw a crucial unknowing quality in Lawrence's approach. "I frame it as somebody who has some great, almost ancestral emotional wounds, but who isn't a hundred per cent clear intellectually about what they are," she said. "She plays characters who aren't necessarily aware of their triggers, the psychology underpinning everything. She gives this magical, mesmerizing, deep performance that comes from a place I'm not sure she understands." Stone invoked a theatre adage: If an actor is onstage with a cat, who are you going to watch—the actor or the cat? "The audience would watch the cat," Stone explained, "because it's going to respond genuinely in the moment, while the actors are still acting. It's *that* quality. Jen's the cat."

Lawrence is well out of her I-poop-my-pants era, but she remains steadfastly self-deprecating. "I don't know why *anyone* likes me," I heard her say to a different reporter. This seemed like a tactical response to the adulation that gets thrown at her—"Do *you* like taking compliments?" she asked me—as well as a basic feature of socialized womanhood. ("I have to stop myself from asking my husband multiple times a day if he's mad at me," she said.) It's also a hangover from the period in her life when she still read the comments. ("There was one time, after I won the Oscar, that Justine and I couldn't stop laughing—this was when we could still laugh about it—because someone just wrote, 'She is a pig who should die.'")

I pointed out to Lawrence how often she mentions not wanting to make anyone mad. "I feel like I am driven by anxiety," she replied. "When I was a kid, I soothed my anxiety by trying to be good, trying to do the right thing, so that I wouldn't upset God or my parents." This shaped her into a person who wants to do right by others, she said; it was also one of the reasons that she made so many movies so quickly. "Working made me feel like nobody could be mad at me," she once told *Vanity Fair*. In 2018, she dropped her representation at Creative Artists Agency and took a break from acting. Soon afterward, she started her production company with Ciarrocchi. They called it Excellent Cadaver, after a Mafia term, *cadaveri eccellenti*, for a hit on a high-profile figure. "I think there was a part of me that just wanted to execute that part of me," Lawrence has said, alluding to her hyper, embarrassing (her words!) celebrity avatar.

It was also around this time that Lawrence met her husband, Cooke Maroney, an art dealer. She had mentioned her interest in buying a painting to her friend Gene Stupnitsky, a former writer on “The Office” who later directed Lawrence in “No Hard Feelings.” He told her to ask Maroney about it. “I was, like, ‘What kind of name is this? What do I call him?’ ” Lawrence said. Then Maroney invited her to a gallery show. “I had no idea he was hot or single, and I was, like, ‘Whoa.’ ” Maroney’s father had been the head of American paintings at Sotheby’s and Christie’s, but had taken an interest in organic dairy farming and moved the family to Vermont, where Maroney grew up. Her husband’s art expertise seems to have rubbed off a bit on Lawrence, who made an offhand reference to the photographer William Eggleston to describe Ramsay’s approach to visual framing. “I’ve learned a lot through osmosis,” she told me, “because, if I ask him about his day, the story is about art.” Maroney is also six feet five, which is useful for Lawrence: when they’re out together, his height draws people’s eyes away from her.



While they were dating, Lawrence developed a different relationship to being a public figure. She couldn’t bring a bodyguard to the bar to meet his friends and still act as if things were normal. But she found that it was relatively easy to be a famous person in New York: here, she can go to workout classes without being accosted. “Nobody gives a shit,” she said. “I

love this city.” (Nevertheless, stories circulate: a few years ago, I went to do karaoke at Sing Sing in the East Village, and a bartender told me that Lawrence had just been there the weekend before, with Adele. Lawrence confirmed this with a universal “remembering karaoke” grimace.)

Paparazzi regularly station themselves outside her town house downtown. Once she had kids, Lawrence decided to make herself an easy target. “It’s better than the cat-and-mouse thing where I’m going into garages and my eyes are darting around and I wonder if someone’s chasing me,” she said. “I realized that my kids would be aware of my energy, and that, if I was nervous and pissed when we left the house, they would feel that in their little bodies.” Now she goes out the front door, the paparazzi take pictures, and then they let her be for the rest of the day.

We were sitting at Happy Medium, a high-ceilinged art café near Chinatown where acrylic paints and small canvases had been laid out for us in an empty room. Lawrence had suggested that we paint portraits of each other for our second meetup—she had seen a couple do it on TikTok, as a date. I assured her that no whimsical activities were necessary for a story in a magazine that puts a diaeresis in the word “coöperate,” but she said that simply sitting and talking would be boring. She arrived with her assistant and no visible makeup; her publicist worked from her phone a few tables away. The whole activity was a bit conceptually distracting—slyly or otherwise, Lawrence had maneuvered me into producing a portrait of her in her presence. She groaned and giggled as we talked, occasionally muttering ominous words, such as “Voldemort” and “pug.” I suggested that this was an opportunity to channel her feelings about doing press into art, that she should feel free to do her worst. “You don’t look like this!” she yelped. Perhaps she was going to do something so weird that I would conclude—as she surely had, about fifteen years ago—that it was impossible to accurately convey what anyone was really like.

Because of the portrait, Lawrence’s expression, as we talked, swung back and forth between neutral and appalled. “It looks like your butt is your face and your legs are your hair,” she said. My own painting depicted a generic, pretty blonde, with a face less interesting than Lawrence’s. While I stared at it, I asked her about Botox and fillers. Even thirtysomethings these days are getting facelifts; not only celebrities but ordinary people with enough money

and vanity sometimes appear mysteriously but distinctly “refreshed.” Lawrence didn’t want to get fillers, she said, because they show on camera. She gets Botox, but she has to be able to use her forehead and to play people who don’t have access to celebrity dermatology. Mostly joking, I asked if she’d had the seemingly ubiquitous new style of facelift done. “No,” she said. “But, believe me, I’m gonna!”



I had been thinking about a fully nude fight scene in “No Hard Feelings,” which Lawrence filmed after having a child. I was postpartum when I watched it, and seeing her boobs filled me with envy, anger, and reverence. Why was she getting a boob job? “Everything bounced back, pretty much, after the first one,” she said. “Second one, nothing bounced back.” She has to be nude on camera again in the spring, one year postpartum, she told me. Would she be getting them done if she weren’t a famous actress? “Maybe I wouldn’t be hustling to the appointment in the same way,” she said. “But I think yes.”

Lawrence described herself to me as a naturally political person. The first time she voted, in 2008, she voted for John McCain, but her politics shifted left soon afterward; she became impassioned, in our conversations, when talking about income inequality and reproductive rights. (In her early twenties, Lawrence got pregnant, and miscarried before a planned abortion.)

In 2014, hundreds of private nude photos of female celebrities, including Lawrence, were leaked online. Lawrence's statement about the breach helped mark an end to the cultural upskirting of the previous decade, when young women were blamed, by default, when others sought their exposure. "It is not a scandal," she said at the time. "It is a sex crime. It is a sexual violation. It's disgusting. The law needs to be changed, and we need to change. Anybody who looked at those pictures, you're perpetuating a sexual offense. You should cower with shame."

In the past few years, Lawrence has produced two documentaries with *Excellent Cadaver*, winning a Peabody for the first, "Bread & Roses," which tracks the lives of women's-rights activists in Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in 2021. (Lawrence used her influence to help procure visas and relocate the women and their families.) The second, "Zurawski v Texas," centers on a woman who was denied an abortion at eighteen weeks and subsequently went into septic shock, permanently damaging her reproductive system.

Lawrence now wants to write and direct, starting with a comedy. She has a project in mind, a feature she developed with Kim Caramele, a producer and writer whom Lawrence met through Caramele's sister, Amy Schumer. The two are currently working on a second draft of the script.

I stepped out to use the bathroom and returned to find Lawrence laughing. "I texted Cooke a picture of my painting," she told me, "and he said, 'Are you being interviewed by a dog?'" She had been aiming for something like Pocahontas in the style of the contemporary American painter Elizabeth Peyton, she explained. I looked like a decapitated pug.

In May, at the Cannes Film Festival, *MUBI* acquired "Die My Love" for twenty-four million dollars. *MUBI* has built a catalogue of acclaimed indies ("The Substance," "Decision to Leave"), but it had never paid so much for a film, nor had any of its previous titles boasted the star power of actors such as Lawrence and Pattinson. There will be a full Oscar campaign. At the end of September, Lawrence flew to Spain for the San Sebastián International Film Festival, which would host a screening and give her the Donostia Award for lifetime achievement. She is the youngest person to receive the honor.

I landed in San Sebastián at about the same time Lawrence did, midmorning on a Thursday, when it was 2 A.M. in New York. A few hours later, I exited the hotel where she was staying. A small crowd had been waiting to catch a glimpse of her; they would be there, more or less, the entire weekend. Lawrence walked around metal barriers, signing autographs and smiling for selfies. Everywhere she went, people shouted her name. Black cars took her and her entourage—a stylist, an assistant, a publicist, hair and makeup people—to a photo call. She passed more pleading fans as she walked up a long concrete ramp to the Kursaal, a convention center designed by the Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, where the festival’s main events were held.

She was getting touch-ups in the greenroom when Ciarrocchi rushed in wearing a minidress and tall boots, worried that her legs weren’t gleaming. The two had to do a press conference together. They were roommates in Los Angeles for years and have a sisterly rapport. They braid each other’s hair when one of them is in crisis; they went for a 5 A.M. walk when Lawrence was in early labor, holding hands and looking at the moon. Lawrence squatted down to rub lotion on her friend’s legs. Ciarrocchi looked at her and said, “Who’s the talent now, bitch?”

In a small auditorium, questions in Spanish were simultaneously translated to earpieces. The festival, like many other recent cultural gatherings, was charged with a palpable tension about Gaza—just days before, three thousand pro-Palestine marchers had blocked the bridge leading to the Kursaal. *MUBI* had been criticized for accepting a hundred-million-dollar investment from Sequoia Capital, which is also the lead investor in the Israeli defense-tech startup Kela, a company founded in response to the Hamas attacks of October 7th. *MUBI*’s C.E.O. insisted that this did not make the company complicit in “the events occurring in Gaza,” and said that *MUBI* will create a fund for artists working in conflict zones or experiencing displacement.



A reporter began to ask a question on the topic when a moderator cut in. “We expressly indicated that this is not possible,” she said, and called on another reporter. Minutes earlier, Lawrence had spoken about freedom of expression being at risk in the United States. The next reporter noted that Lawrence was a mother, and presumably worried about the future. “You are just an actress in a festival, but outside here, just the other day, there was people protesting about the situation in Palestine,” he said. “Kids are dying.” The moderator tried to interrupt again, but Lawrence looked at the reporter, encouraging him to continue.

Lawrence told me afterward that she had noticed the reporter in the crowd earlier. “I could see something in his eyes—he was *scared*,” she said. “I felt that there was something he didn’t want to say, but had to.” She had prepared an answer for a question about Palestine, but she ended up being more frank than she’d planned. “I’m terrified,” she told the reporter. “It’s mortifying. What’s happening is no less than a genocide, and it’s unacceptable. I’m terrified for my children, for all of our children.” She said she wished that anything she said or did could fix things. “I just want people to stay focussed on who is responsible and the things they can do,” she added. Lawrence is appropriately skeptical about the utility of celebrities speaking about politics: she has endorsed politicians and seen how little it can move the needle; the performative and often hypocritical liberalism one

sometimes encounters in Hollywood has, if anything, helped push the country to the right (including, semi-secretly, plenty of celebrities). But Gaza may be an exception to the fruitlessness of celebrity opinion, given how wary many people are to speak candidly about it in public. By the next day, Lawrence's words had made dozens of headlines.

A few hours later, she and Ciarrocchi were in Lawrence's suite, getting dressed for the screening. "Take that jacket off, you look like a waiter," Lawrence yelled at Ciarrocchi, who was wearing a white button-down over a sheer black turtleneck. Ciarrocchi took the button-down off, tentatively. "Yes!" Lawrence said. "You have the tiniest fucking waist!" Lawrence was in an asymmetrical wool dress, open at the back, with a draped cutout on one side and the other cinched with a black leather belt. She rehearsed her acceptance speech for the award in the car, anxiously asking the driver how to pronounce Basque words. She had to remember not to lift her right arm, lest her boob instantly be exposed.

The Kursaal is designed as a pair of prisms, with translucent glass over gridded metal rising diagonally from the harbor. Exiting the vehicle felt like entering virtual reality: a floor of red carpet, a ceiling of white spotlights, a medieval throng of shrieking people arranged in endless outstretched walls. It was the campaign trail; it was the Hunger Games. The wattage of Lawrence's fame is startling to witness in person—she is a Julia Roberts-level star in a generation that has vanishingly few of them, a millennial A-lister who is not on social media and hasn't done TV since "The Bill Engvall Show." She made the lap smoothly, her smile caught by a dozen phone screens each half second. In the greenroom, she sat down and poured herself a large glass of white wine.

We moved to the auditorium, where a greatest-hits compilation of her film roles was played. She accepted the award, and then we were seated for the screening. The title card for "Die My Love" appears over a forest fire while heavy metal blasts. Ramsay's cinematographer, Seamus McGarvey, shot much of the movie on Ektachrome, getting what he called a "magnificent distortion of reality." Night scenes were shot during the day, with the film manually darkened; everything looks woozy, hyperreal. The sound design is itchy and buzzing. Ramsay described the movie's aspect ratio as "portrait

format,” and said she chose it because of the way that Lawrence’s image holds the camera: “I just felt like she was carrying the whole thing.”

The scenes in the book that Lawrence had responded to most strongly are between the protagonist and her mother-in-law, who tries to help but can’t. In the film, that role is played by Sissy Spacek, who gives the part an arresting gentleness; her arm, raised to support Grace, is like a bridge that’s already breaking. Grace often wears thin, billowing dresses—pregnancy clothes—and you can see, in some shots, a slight outline of Lawrence’s second-trimester bump.

The theatre gasped when Grace broke a mirror with her forehead. I thought of what Lawrence had told me she found most pleasurable about acting. “Even if I’m doing a really, really intense scene, if I’m very angry or very sad, it’s still an adrenaline rush,” she said. “And, when I wake up after a cut, none of it is actually happening to me, so I get to have the adrenaline, and the rush, without any of the consequences.”

“You get to double your life,” I said.

“Or cut it in half,” she replied.

There was a standing ovation, and Lawrence was hurried out into a small black-walled room. Her publicist told her quietly how to navigate the last screaming crowd of the night: walk alone down the stairs of the building, stop on the white mark, then continue to her car. “Do you need a moment?” a festival handler asked. “Are you scared?” Lawrence, surprised by the question, said no. ♦

## Takes

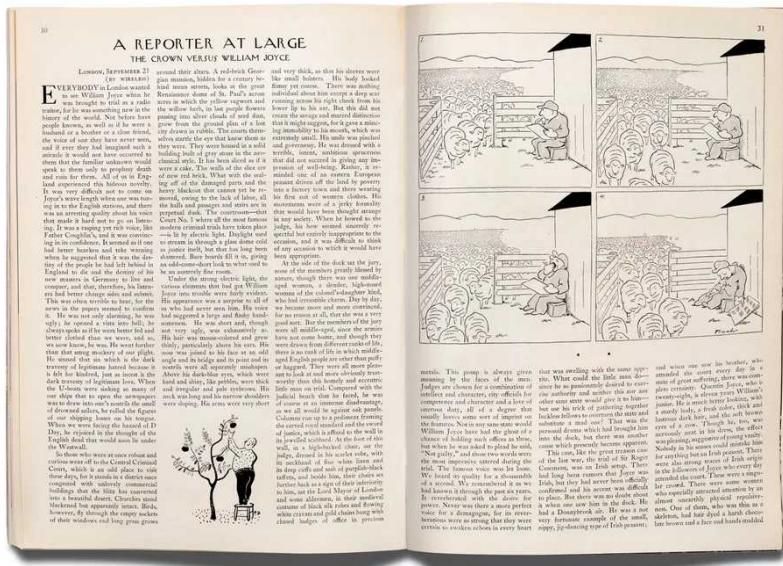
- [Gideon Lewis-Kraus on Rebecca West's "The Crown Versus William Joyce"](#)

Takes

# Gideon Lewis-Kraus on Rebecca West's "The Crown Versus William Joyce"

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus

October 26, 2025



The badge of maturity, for a literary genre, is the anxiety of influence—the compulsion felt by an aspiring writer to pee upon a fire hydrant that an earlier eminence once peed upon with distinction. Rebecca West, an unjustly neglected deity of “novelistic” reportage, would have approved of the vulgarity of this metaphor. In the 1941 masterpiece “Black Lamb and Grey Falcon,” where she micturated upon the fire hydrant of Yugoslavia for eleven hundred gloriously digressive pages, a “lavatory of the old Turkish kind” inspires an extended rumination on its dark dung hole.

The *New Yorker* writer Janet Malcolm, one of West’s greatest heirs, would never have dwelled on such crude terrain. But many of Malcolm’s preoccupations were recognizable as attempts to overcome the debt that she

owed her precursor. Legal conflicts—like the one at the heart of Malcolm’s “The Journalist and the Murderer”—make for a good example. West, who combined a psychoanalytic aversion to sentimentality with an anthropological curiosity, inspired a generation of writers to render courtroom proceedings as a civilized translation of a primordial rite. In 1946, her dispatch from Nuremberg began, “Those men who had wanted to kill me and my kind and who had nearly had their wish were to be told whether I and my kind were to kill them and why.” Vengeance might have underwritten a given trial’s stakes, but cases themselves were to be taken in as stylized performances. West treated trial coverage as a variant of drama criticism.

West reserved her most operatic appreciation for tragedies of betrayal—“the dark travesty of legitimate hatred because it is felt for kindred, just as incest is the dark travesty of legitimate love.” A year before Nuremberg, West chronicled the prosecution, in London, of William Joyce, alias Lord Haw-Haw. Joyce was a second-tier Fascist who had defected to Berlin to serve as a radio broadcaster for the Nazis’ English service. He was infamous in Britain for his bloodthirsty prophecies of German triumph.

The courthouse audience’s vexed relationship with Joyce was “something new in the history of the world”—a prototype of the parasocial. Joyce’s voice “had suggested a large and flashy handsomeness,” but his appearance broke the spell. “He was short and, though not very ugly, was exhaustively so,” with the look “of an eastern European peasant driven off the land by poverty into a factory town and there wearing his first suit of western clothes.” (Outdoing Malcolm in her icy dispassion, West was merciless with the poor jurors as well: “though they were drawn from different ranks of life, there is no rank of life in which middle-aged English people are other than puffy or haggard.”)

What ought to be West’s considerable legacy has been reduced to her wit, and she was hilariously unsparing in her treatment of Joyce as “flimsy yet coarse.” This, West was well aware, represented a crystallization of the attitude that inspired his original treason. Joyce’s youthful high-society aspirations had been dismissed, and the pain of this injury fed his populist resentment: “What could the little man do—since he so passionately desired to exercise authority and neither this nor any other sane state would give it to

him—but use his trick of gathering together luckless fellows to overturn the state and substitute a mad one?”

Rejected by the smart establishment, Joyce ingratiated himself with a counter-élite that might dignify his bitterness as political courage. His fantasy of status and purpose destined him for Berlin, which he believed could teach England a thing or two about old-fashioned martial valor. In some ways, he prefigured the toadying courtiers of our era’s New Right, who fawn over despots with the same pick-me devotion.

West found Joyce almost beneath contempt. The bureaucratic march toward his conviction was nevertheless “more terrible than any other case I have ever seen in which a death sentence was given.” Privately, she wrote, “I am consumed with pity for Joyce because it seems to me that he lived in a true hell.” The deadpan pathos of her report painted this hell as a shared reality. The despair that both created Joyce and attended his execution was universal: “Nobody in court felt any emotion when he knew that Joyce was going to die.” ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)

# Shouts & Murmurs

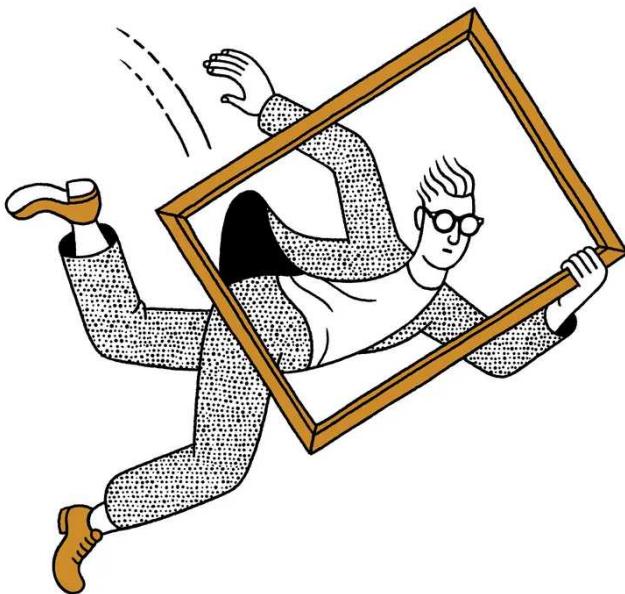
- [Performance Art](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

# Performance Art

By Paul Rudnick

October 27, 2025



But there are what he [the artist Terence Koh] calls his “secret performances.” . . . Examples include the time in 2009 when he had the activist and retired actress Bianca Jagger wrap him in bedsheets and push his corpselike form down the stairs of the art critic Sydney Picasso’s apartment building in Paris.

—*T Magazine, September 28, 2025.*

I, Walter LeFauve, am also a renowned performance artist, much in the manner of the gifted Mr. Koh. For example, I once had Tom Hanks wrap me in duct tape and lift me into the trunk of his car. He then blindfolded himself and drove down an especially potholed stretch of the Ventura Freeway. Afterward, Tom’s wife, Rita Wilson, poked my bruised and concussed body with a large fork and asked if I was “done.”

In 2001, I received a Ford Foundation grant, which I used to have Jennifer Aniston lock me in her kitchen pantry, call the police, and identify me as a stalker. When officers arrived, she told them that this wasn't a performance piece, but I later informed the federal-court judge that her denial was a "central aspect" of the piece. While serving my two-year sentence in a Westchester prison, I asked another inmate to watch "Friends" reruns with me, but he refused, claiming that watching the show had prompted him to kill his entire family.

In another early effort, I asked Marion Cotillard to scream obscenities at me in French while I imitated her Oscar-winning performance as Édith Piaf. She then shoved me out of her third-story window, but this was unrelated to the piece, which I titled "Marion Cotillard Cannot Take Even the Most Loving and Constructive Criticism."

A highlight of the piece that I performed at last year's Venice Biennale was Julia Roberts, Sydney Sweeney, and Austin Butler spraying my naked body with *I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!*, placing Triscuits over my eyes, and scattering pimento rosettes across my groin. Then they chained me to a pillar in Piazza San Marco, where pigeons attacked me. All three actors won Golden Lion awards, which they agreed were better than Golden Globes but were still not Daytime Emmys. This piece was called "Like Sydney Sweeney Will Ever Win a Daytime Emmy."

Another career peak occurred when Isabella Rossellini buried me beneath organic mulch in her Long Island garden and left me there over a long winter while she vacationed in Lake Como. By April, I had not only been offered a solo show at the Whitney but had lost the use of my right arm due to frostbite. Isabella completed the piece by composting the arm.

One of my most personal pieces involved the Fox News anchor Sean Hannity tying me to an office chair, shrieking that I was Antifa, and then sobbing that I was also his mother and he was sorry that he'd been such a disappointment. Judge Jeanine Pirro then asked if I had delivered her eight boxes of Chablis, but the ball gag prevented me from answering. Finally, Laura Ingraham accused me of being an illegal immigrant and wheeled me and my chair into the Fox lobby, where I was arrested and deported to Kayleigh McEnany's office. This piece later aired on "Dateline," after

Kayleigh claimed that I'd stolen five of her Labubus and her favorite Hello Kitty coin purse with the swastika.

The piece for which I was awarded my first Turner Prize had Taylor Swift zipping me into a garment bag and inviting fans onstage during her Eras Tour to kick me, telling them that I was her ex-boyfriend Jake Gyllenhaal. Taylor later hugged me and told me that I'd inspired a song on her album "The Life of a Showgirl" called "Kick You Out of Bed." When I asked Taylor if I could wrap myself in a shower curtain and attend her upcoming wedding, she said no—which led to my most recent piece, "People Think Taylor Is So Nice." ♦

# Fiction

- Outcomes

Fiction

# Outcomes

By Nathan Blum

October 26, 2025



On his first day back at Winslow College's climbing wall after the long winter break, Nolan checks the belay sign-up sheet and sees that someone named Heidi Lane has written her name in the seven-o'clock slot every weeknight for the entire month of January.

Sure enough, at seven exactly, a short, narrow-nosed girl with a shiny brown bob hustles in through the gym's double doors. She's wearing blue jeans and duck boots and fuzzy white earmuffs around her neck like headphones.

"I made a New Year's resolution," she says. "This is going to be my new thing."

"Some people find it hard to climb in jeans," Nolan says.

"I do everything in jeans."

“What else do you do?”

“Like, besides school? Nothing. That’s why I made this resolution.”

In the gear room, there’s a harness and a pair of climbing shoes meant for older children. They fit Heidi perfectly. While he tightens her waist strap, she lifts her elbows and stares right at him, unlike most new climbers, who tend to look up or off to the side.

“All right,” she says, waddling toward the wall. “How does this work?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re saying I just go. I just get on up there.”

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

“Some people try to stay on certain routes. That’s what those colored strips of tape are for, next to the holds. But, for now, maybe just use any holds you want. That’s called the all-you-can-eat buffet.”

She starts fast, faster than he would have advised, and with a kind of right-left rhythm. There’s something Spider-Mannish about it, and he wonders if maybe that’s what she’s thinking of.

She’s about twenty feet above him when her left hand slips from a crimp and she falls back. Distracted by his thoughts, he’s less ready for it than he should be. There’s some slack in the rope.

Her scream is surprisingly low-pitched, almost gruff. He clenches his bottom hand and braces himself. She drops about two feet before the rope goes taut and her shoulder smacks against the wall.

### **Podcast: The Writer’s Voice**

[Listen to Nathan Blum read “Outcomes.”](#)

A hot shame flushes through him as he watches her kick around for a foothold. It was a small error on his part, but he knows that first climbs are

important and there's a good chance she'll be looking for a new New Year's resolution.

"How do I get down?" she asks.

"I'm really sorry about that," he says.

"How do I get down?"

"You don't have to come down if you don't want. You can keep going up."

"I want to come down."

"All right. Just lean back and I'll lower you."

"No fucking way I'm leaning back."

He pulls the rope tighter with one hand and draws the slack through with the other.

"Feel that? I'm holding you."

"I don't even know you."

"I'm Nolan," he says. "I'm a freshman. I'm from around here."

"Like, Winslow the town?"

"China. One town over."

"I've seen signs for that," she says.

Finally, she sits back in her harness and removes her small, bony hands from the holds. He lowers her as steadily as he can.

Once her feet touch the ground, she stands completely still, facing the wall. She stays like that for a while.

When she turns to him she has a strange look on her face.

“That was my bad,” he says.

“No, this is good,” she says. “This is great. This is why I came. This is what it’s about.”

“That’s called a whipper. When you slam into the wall like that.”

She looks up at the little bell hanging from the ceiling. He looks up at it, too, because he doesn’t know where else to look.

“I have lived a very horizontal life,” she says.

He thinks about this for a moment. “I guess we all do.”

She walks toward him, dragging the rope behind her, and raises her arms. “Now take this shit off me,” she says.

He carries the equipment back into the gear room and takes his time spraying the shoes with deodorizer. He assumes she’ll be gone by the time he’s done.

Instead, she’s standing a few feet from the doorway, waiting for him.

“Do you know who’s belaying tomorrow night?” she asks.

“Me,” he says.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“Sounds good,” he says.

•

An hour later, Joe Rollo, whom everyone calls Trainer Joe, comes around to lock up. In the summers, Trainer Joe runs Winslow’s youth-sports camp, where Nolan has worked as a counsellor for the past three seasons. Before Nolan’s senior year in high school, Trainer Joe told him that if he got a scholarship to Winslow he’d approve him for the maximum number of work-study hours at the rec center, and he kept his word.

“Closing time,” Trainer Joe says. “I hereby order you to vacate the premises. Fail to comply and I’ll have to report you to the rec-center supervisor.”

Trainer Joe played defensive end at Orono. When they first met, Nolan was intimidated by the way Joe’s muscles bulged beneath his golf shirts. Then, one day, Nolan saw him put a Band-Aid on a little girl’s elbow. She had fallen on grass; there was no wound. Still, Trainer Joe deftly peeled the Band-Aid from its wrapper and smoothed it against her skin.

“Tell the supervisor to drive safe,” Nolan says. “That rain’s probably frozen by now.”

“I’ll be sure to let him know,” Trainer Joe says.

Soon it’s completely dark and the rec center is lit only by the murky green haze of the emergency lights. Nolan boulders around for a little while. When he feels himself getting tired, he drags the big blue bouldering mat into the gear room and closes the door behind him.

Instantly, he is plunged into total darkness. He fumbles around for the battery-powered lantern hanging from the nearest hook and turns it on. The room sways in the tinny, blanched light.

He drags the mat to the far corner of the room. Then he pulls the bungeed-up sleeping bag from its cubby and unrolls it and lays it out on the mat.

He has a bed in his dorm room, but it’s all the way across campus and his two roommates, who are both from Vermont, have turned the place into a kind of all-night weed-smoking den with an open-door policy. He knows he could drive home, too, if he wanted. His house, his childhood bedroom, is ten minutes down China Road. His parents and two younger sisters would be happy to see him.

But he likes it there, in the gear room. He has always felt a little uncomfortable out in the regular world. In the back of his mind, he is always waiting for the time of day when he can be completely alone, reading or doing his homework or something. Every winter, his family pulls a small wooden ice-fishing hut onto Togus Pond; he’ll get up early just to be in

there. The one window is usually covered with a thick blanket to keep the heat in. He likes to sit in front of the stove, drinking coffee from a thermos and watching the algae-green glow come up from the holes in the ice. Knowing that for the next however many hours he'll be alone, setting the hooks and dropping the lines and generally doing everything exactly the way he wants to, exactly the way he was taught.

He turns off the lantern. In the pitch dark, he takes off his pants and crawls into the sleeping bag. Slowly, his eyes adjust, and he can see the dim green line under the door. Lying there, he wonders if he should have come up with his own New Year's resolution. But he doesn't know what it would be. Sure, he could try to change something about himself. But he's not sure that changing anything would change anything. He has never really understood how people become who they become. For the most part, it seems like there's not much you can do, and things just happen. He has a feeling that Heidi Lane would disagree with him.

•

The next night, she wears leggings and makes it to the top. She rings the little bell with a kind of rage. As soon as she touches down, she wants to go up again. Her face is red and her arms glisten. He offers her a pinch of chalk from his pouch.

“Looks like cocaine,” she says, peering in.

“It’s to keep your hands dry,” he says. He has never seen cocaine.

On Wednesday, she does three laps. On Thursday, she does the green route. He learns that she’s a senior, which surprises him, and that she’s an economics major, which, for some reason, doesn’t surprise him. He gets the sense that she lives a busy, high-stress life filled with exams and reports and interviews, and that she will live that way forever.

“I’d like to be classified as an intermediate,” she says on Friday, as she steps out of her harness.

“I’ll take it up with the committee,” he says.

“My forearms are killing me. Look. I swear I didn’t use to have these bulges.”

“I see them.”

She looks him right in the eyes. He has a hard time reading her expression, but he feels that there’s something he’s supposed to be reading. If only he could look at her for long enough, he might be able to figure it out. But it’s difficult to look at her because she’s looking at him.

“You’re pretty good at this,” she says, and by the time he thinks to ask her what she means she’s halfway across the gym, moving toward the double doors with the smooth speed of someone who knows exactly where she’s headed.

•

He goes home for the weekend. On Saturday night, his sisters have a basketball game. They’re both on varsity. A senior and a sophomore. It seems strange, almost wrong, that they are so old. He used to play two-on-one in the driveway with them. He never went easy on them. At first, that was because they would giggle louder if he was really trying. Then it was because they got too good. The backboard was made of old, waterlogged wood, so, no matter how hard you shot the ball, if you hit the right spot, it would bank softly into the hoop.

Now they’re both being recruited to play at Orono or maybe even somewhere out of state.

Before the game starts, a few of his old teachers and some parents of his friends come up to him and ask how college is going. Every year, one senior from China High receives the William C. Bergill Scholarship from Winslow College, and last year it was him. Nolan had his picture in the *Kennebec Current* and was given a round of applause during graduation.

“Going really well,” he says.

He sits with his parents near the top of the bleachers. Since China is playing Winslow Academy, some of his mother’s former students are there. She

teaches second grade to all the professors' kids at the elementary school near campus. When they see her, their eyes go wide, and then they blush and turn away, as if she were an ex-lover. She smiles and says their names, though it's too loud in the gym for anyone but Nolan to hear her. He has never understood how she can remember so many names.

His father is the chair of the social-studies department at a private high school outside Augusta. Here, though, he is just a dad. He even stands up and complains that the refs aren't calling fouls on the Winslow girls.

"They have enough going for them as it is," he says when he sits back down.

For some reason, Nolan has a hard time focussing on the game. He's watching, but he's not really taking anything in. Soon the halftime buzzer goes off and all the players sit on the white plastic folding chairs lined up alongside the court.

"Tell us something about school," his mother says.

"Yes, great idea," his father says, tapping him on the knee. "How are those neo-bohemian roommates?"

Nolan looks at the scoreboard. China is up four. Yet somehow he knows, he is certain, that they are going to lose.

"Honestly, I don't see them very much," he says. "I've been spending a lot of time at the wall."

•

On Monday, he gets there a little early and asks Trainer Joe to belay him while he tapes up a new route. Before he clips in, he tears a bunch of strips from the roll of yellow tape and sticks them to the belt of his harness.

"My daughter's got one of those," Trainer Joe says, pointing to Nolan's waist. "A tutu."

When Nolan gets down, he pastes one more yellow strip at eye level and writes "*HEIDI'S LANE*" across it with a black Sharpie.

While he waits for her, he sits on the blue mat and reads an article for his education class titled “Self-Fulfilling Prophecies in the American Classroom.” Apparently, studies show that teachers’ assumptions about students have a bigger effect on their outcomes than the students’ effort or intelligence does. So, if teachers have preconceptions or doubts or subconscious biases, it could be those very preconceptions or doubts or biases that end up proving them right.

“Solution = assume every single student has incredible potential,” Nolan writes in the margin. He knows it’s probably not that simple. But part of him believes that it wouldn’t be all that hard to look at a classroom full of kids and tell himself, over and over if he had to, that they were going to turn out great.

He watches the double doors for a while. A group of guys from the football team file in and head toward the locker rooms. They’re all wearing the same gray-green zip-ups, and most of them have mustaches. They look startlingly like sea lions. He has never actually seen a sea lion, but he has seen harbor seals.

He checks the time.

Last week, Heidi showed up every night exactly at seven.

At eight-fifteen, when she still hasn’t appeared, he puts her harness back on its hook, surprised, more than anything, at the sting of the disappointment coursing through him.

•

The next day, when he arrives for his shift at the wall, Heidi is already there, sitting cross-legged on the mat.

“I had presentation prep last night,” she says, standing.

He feels his heart beating in his chest. “How’d it go?”

“I’m a strong public speaker.”

“I believe you.”

“I saw the new route,” she says, looking at him. He sees a flash of acknowledgment in her eyes. As if she were now sure of something.

She has a little trouble with the sloper near the top, but eventually she clears it and rings the bell. As he lowers her down, she kicks and swings from the wall like a seasoned spelunker.

“It’s starting to snow,” she says, pointing her small, sharp chin toward the window.

“About time,” he says.

“How late do you usually stay here?”

“Late.”

“How late?” She unclips and faces him.

They stand like that for a while, looking at each other. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Trainer Joe leaving through the double doors in his big puffy coat.

“Some nights I sleep here,” he hears himself say.

She nods. “You know, I had a feeling.”

He opens the door to the gear room and clicks on the lantern. She slides past him. In the corner are the wrinkled sleeping bag and the green Winslow hoodie he’s been using as a pillow.

“Just on the ground like that?”



“I bring in the mat.”

“Show me.”

She stays with him that night. He doesn't admit that he's a virgin, but he has a feeling she can tell. From the beginning, she gives him clear instructions about where and how to touch her. At one point, she grabs his hand and says, “Try there,” and he remembers saying pretty much the same thing to her when she was up on the wall. With the lamp off, it's very dark, almost too dark. He has to turn it back on so she can fish a condom out of her wallet. When he turns it off again, he can't see a thing. He finds her shoulders, which are small and smooth and spherical, like baseballs, and moves on from there. The mat compresses under their weight, and he keeps having to shift around and change angles. “Yes, yes,” she says quietly into his ear, and this positive reinforcement is what brings him to the end.

“See?” she says afterward. “The horizontal life can be nice.”

“Thank you,” he says, because that is all he can think to say.

“Now where's the bathroom in this place?”

“Out by the treadmills,” he says.

•

Later that week, he shows her how to belay. He demonstrates feeding the slack through the device, always keeping at least one hand on the rope. She's skeptical at first and asks questions only in the hypothetical.

"Let's say you're up on the wall, and I'm down here belaying you like this."

"That's what's going to happen," he says. "Like, in two minutes."

"What if today was just a theory day?"

"Today is a do day."

"What if you fall? What if you land on your head? Or on a plexus?"

"I'm not going to fall. You'll be holding me."

"But you weigh more than me. So, if you go down, I'm going up. That's just physics."

He lifts the anchor line from the floor and clips it to her harness. "Now you weigh as much as a building."

"My dream come true," she says.

He clears Heidi's Lane without a hitch. Then, cheek on the ceiling, he asks if she's ready to lower him. She says she doesn't know. He leans back and lifts his hands.

"What's a plexus?" he asks when his toes touch the ground.

•

On Friday, she stays with him past closing again. This time, as they sink down into the darkness of the gear room, his excitement becomes almost too much to bear. It's a kind of pain. She laughs at his urgency.

"Slow down," she says.

Afterward, as they lie in the dark, he feels a different kind of affection wash over him, something deeper and quieter, almost ominous. He wants to tell her, to express, in some way, what he is feeling. But he can't find the words.

She sits up. "You have a car, right?"

"Yeah."

"I want to learn how to drive."

"You don't know how to drive?"

"I'm from Manhattan," she says, as if that's all he needs to know.

On Sunday, he drives them through China and heads south on Route 202. They pass all three of his old schools, one after the other, in opposite order: high, middle, elementary. For some reason, the buildings look unfamiliar to him. As if he were seeing them through her eyes.

"Now I can say I've driven across China," she says.

"There's also a Denmark," he tells her. "And a Norway. And a Poland. And an Egypt. My dad makes his students do this thing where they compare and contrast the real place with the one in Maine."

"So your dad's a teacher?"

"My mom is, too. There's also a Paris."

"The whole world is here," she says.

He pulls into the parking lot behind the town hall and they switch places. The lot is empty and bordered on three sides by mounds of blackened snow.

Soon, she is driving around in slow, oblong loops like a skater alone on the ice. The sun is low and almost bloody. She stares straight ahead, both hands on the wheel, humming to herself. He feels as if he were watching her from somewhere else, or from far in the future, living in a kind of memory.

When the sun goes down, they get out and meet each other in the back seat. This time, the same wild need comes back, but he does his best not to let it take over. At one point, he has to reach across the center console to turn down the heat. He understands that, from now on, every time he gets into his car, he will think of this night.

“So how did I do?” she asks later. “With the driving.”

“Really good.”

“That’s it?”

“You’re a fast learner,” he says. “But I knew that already.”

“I guess now I have to find another thing to teach you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I feel like that’s sort of what’s going on here,” she says.

•

In February, Heidi can climb only a couple of nights a week. She’s working on her honors thesis, something that’s optional at Winslow.

“In my mind, ‘optional’ usually means ‘mandatory,’ ” she says.

“I’ve noticed that,” he says.

One night, he meets her at the library after his shift. He finds her at a long wooden table on the second floor with a thermos of tea and a bag of popcorn. He sits across from her and takes out his folder and notebook and tries to get some work done, but it’s impossible to focus with her there. He’s supposed to be doing research for a paper about the effect of school start times on student outcomes. Everything, it seems, has an effect on student outcomes. Instead of reading through the materials, he keeps looking up to watch Heidi sip and chew and turn pages and write tiny, straight letters in her spiral notebook.

Eventually, she raises her eyebrows at him.

“What’s your thesis about?” he asks.

“I’m looking at the factors that keep people from investing their money. And what can be done to change their minds.”

“Why do we need to change their minds?”

“Because it’s mainly rich people who are taking advantage of the market. They know that if you do it the right way you make money. So they’re getting richer and everyone else is losing out.”

“And what’s the right way?”

“You put as much as you can in a moderately aggressive mutual fund and you let it sit for thirty years.”

“Get rich slow.”

“Exactly. It’s unsexy but it’s the truth.”

“And how much better is that than just having it in a regular bank account?”

She tilts her head at him. “A lot better.”

“Interesting,” he says.

•

That Saturday, Heidi drives them to the KeyBank in downtown Waterville. She goes about fifteen under the speed limit the whole way but otherwise does everything right.

“So, you have almost no expenses,” she says, pausing at a stop sign for the full three seconds. “And you’ll be working at the rec center around twenty hours a week for the next three and a half years.”

“I’ll probably keep doing the day camp over the summers, too,” he says. “What I have now is mainly from that. And from shovelling snow.”

“You have savings from shovelling snow?”

He looks out the window. “There was a lot of snow.”

He has never really spoken to anyone about money before. When he was growing up, his parents used to refer to money as “doll hairs.” Once, when he was little, he asked them why the big houses on Togus Pond were occupied only in the summer. “Because some people have a lot of doll hairs,” his mother said.

The meeting with the financial adviser takes twenty-five minutes. In addition to opening an investment account, Nolan signs up for a credit card.

“I’ve always wondered what those little glass rooms in the bank were for,” he says afterward.

As Heidi drives them back toward campus, he skims through the documents in his new KeyBank folder. What shocks him most are the ten-, twenty-, and thirty-year projections. It’s not just the estimated amounts but the dates themselves. The years. They seem fake. The idea that what he has done today will serve some other, older version of him, someone he doesn’t yet know, stirs up a kind of dread. It’s not so much the feeling that something bad is going to happen but that something very good is going to end.

“Use the credit card whenever you can,” Heidi says, leaning over the wheel to look left, then right, then left again. “But pay the balance in full every month. That’s how you build a good credit score.”

“Got it,” he says, trying his best to keep the pit in his stomach from changing the sound of his voice.

Soon they arrive at her off-campus house. He gets out and meets her by the hood of the car.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey.”

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” He lifts the folder. “Thanks for this.”

“Hey,” she says.

He looks up and realizes that she already understands. She has known, maybe for a while, that at some point this would come up—this question, and then, right behind it, the obvious answer. She’s a senior, graduating soon. He’s a freshman. There are other reasons, too, though they aren’t as clear to him, would be harder to name. Seeing in her eyes the same sorrow that she must see in his, he senses another kind of lesson being shared between them, a lesson that he knows will stay with him for the rest of his life. But, in the same moment, he decides not to learn it, because the future is not here yet, and they still have the time they have left.

•

Eighteen years later, Heidi opens an e-mail from Winslow College’s alumni office and learns that Nolan Everett was one of two teachers killed in a school shooting outside Portland, Maine. Three sixth graders were also killed.

She is home alone in Montclair, New Jersey.

She tries to read the e-mail again but keeps having to start over, the words no longer meaning anything, letters on a screen. *Dear alumni*, it starts, and then it’s as if she were falling: *heavy heart, Winslow community, thoughts and prayers, William C. Bergill Scholar, beloved teacher, memorial grant to pursue a master’s in education or a related degree, gifts can be made by mail or online, donor-advised fund, I.R.A. charitable rollover*.

There’s something unreal about it. Maybe she misread, or clicked on the wrong thing somehow; maybe she is dreaming. And yet already she can feel another part of herself begin to weave the information into her life, to slide the truth into sequence. To make it seem as if, somehow, this was always the way it was going to go.

Because she did, in fact, see the headline yesterday. A notification on her lock screen, recommended news. She even tilted her phone toward Brody and said, “Another one. In Maine.” Her husband is a doctor, did time in an E.R. in Newark. He understands what these things are like. The carnage, the bodies, the parting automatic doors, the wild-eyed parents stumbling toward the reception desk.

“Fuck this,” he said. Referring in general, she guessed, to the way the world had turned out.

But she didn’t read past the headline. She didn’t click the links. She had stopped clicking the links a long time ago. She didn’t think she knew anyone near Portland.

And this morning she let her son and her daughter go to school. Thinking herself rational, instead of insane.

She is in her home office. Beyond the desk is a window, latched shut, no curtains yet. Across the driveway, a line of thin but sprawling trees, their leafless branches like the veins in lungs. Aside from the desk and the small bookshelf behind her, the room is bare. “The no-go room,” her kids have started calling it. “Mommy’s on a meeting.” Clients tell her she has good lighting. Maybe that’s why they moved out here, to a suburb where they know almost no one. For good lighting. And, of course, for the schools.

She makes a noise, low and wheezing. Just to hear something, just to have something else in the room.

The computer screen, left idle, has darkened. She twitches the mouse and it bursts with light again, the message unchanged, his name still there.

She dumped him. Did it right before she went home for spring break. There was still snow on the ground. Dumped is the wrong word, of course, because they were never really a couple, not in any articulable way. It had lasted only a few months. She was graduating. It had to be her who cut it off. Why? And what if she never had? But she had. To save them both from the inevitable pain—that was what she told herself.

She was so sure of everything back then. She thought she knew exactly how her life would turn out. And, for the most part, she was right. She has become the person she thought she would become. A financial adviser, married mother of two. The things she was wrong about are minor. She thought she'd never leave the city. She thought she'd have her own practice, help everyday people set themselves up, rates on a sliding scale. Nurses, servers, delivery bikers, construction workers, teachers. Instead, she works for the biggest wealth-management firm in the country.

But Nolan was something she never expected. She remembers, all at once, her first time on the wall, the moment she thought she was falling to her death. She feels it now again—her blood hot, her heart lurching in her throat. Flush with the present, alive and nothing else. Later, in that dark supply closet that smelled like sweat, it was the same thing—she lost all sense of herself, said outlandish things, ordered him around like some kind of lazy dominatrix. When she came, he didn't know, or couldn't tell, and in the pitch black she felt a great weight lifted, as if everything beyond their bodies, even the future, had vanished.

She has kept these memories close. There's something different about them, the way they don't fit neatly into her history, the way they still make her heart race. As if they were unfinished. As if someday she might return to him.

Her final months at Winslow were a blur. She did a lot of schoolwork. She went to parties, had unmeaningful sex. She hated feeling guilty, so she didn't. She avoided the rec center, stared straight ahead when she walked across the quad. Magna cum laude. Phi Beta Kappa. At her five-year reunion, maybe she cupped the glare from the window, scanned around the empty climbing wall. As if he would still be in there, where she had left him.

She opens a new tab. The keys type themselves. Two teachers. His name again: a sixth-grade English teacher. The other teacher a young woman, barely out of college—an instructional-support specialist. And three children. She does not want to know their names. She reads their names. She does not want to know who did it, what happened, how it happened. She scrolls down, learns.

What she cannot accept, cannot believe, is that there might come a day when even this news slips from her mind.

She returns to the e-mail. There's a link to the donation page at the bottom. Money—is that really how this is going to end? With money? He had some funny name for money, something his parents made up. She can't remember. She clicks.

The slow drip of getting to know him. He didn't know his own secrets. One day, after she had been walking past the kind-eyed, hefty rec-center manager for weeks, Nolan mentioned, offhand, that they had known each other for years and spent their summers working together. "Him?" she said. "The guy at the front desk?" He had been there from the beginning, in his green golf shirt, lanyard dripping from the pocket of his slacks. There was some funny name for him, too.

And then there was that morning on the pond. She'd had no idea what was happening, where they were going. It was a Sunday. Sunny and freezing cold. He picked her up and drove them away from campus—south, or maybe east. It was the first time in a while that he hadn't let her drive. In five minutes, they were somewhere else entirely. Hills, farms. She could barely look out the window—it was too bright-white. Then he parked, and she followed him down a ramp to the edge of a long, frozen clearing.

"This is Togus Pond," he said.

The hut, she remembers, was on big, rounded skates, like a catamaran. The chimney was made of metal. Inside—it's as if she were there now—was dark, pulsing, cavelike. The front half had plank floors. In the back, down a little ledge, was a row of small, circular holes in the glassy ice. What she couldn't believe was the way the water glowed. Moss-green, almost neon. She has told Brody about this before: how she went ice fishing with an old college fling. How, in the dark hut, the water beneath them gave off light. There was something eternal about it. Like the northern lights. She has never seen the northern lights.

Nolan made a fire in the iron stove. Soon it was so warm they had to take off their coats. She could tell he was happy. He wasn't smiling—nothing so

obvious as that. Just something in his posture, the pride in his eyes. There were a few short, skinny fishing poles in the corner. A baggie of rubber minnows swimming in what looked like olive oil. He showed her how to bait the hook, drop the line, jig it around, jerk the rod when she felt a bite, reel in. And eventually, not by magic but by the opposite of magic, it all happened exactly as he'd said it would.

The fish came thrashing up through the hole—as if it had been drowning and had finally found air. He grabbed it with a bare hand and held it in front of her face. It was long and thin, speckled like a leopard, toothed like a terrier.

“This is a pike,” he said. “Good first fish.”

That was his way. He didn’t overexplain, didn’t push. He just named things, waited, watched, trusted.

“You’re a good teacher,” she told him.

She had thought, in her ignorance, that he was going to put the fish in a cooler or something. Instead, before she even knew what was happening, he crouched and lowered it back into the watery circle in the ice. It looked as if he were reaching through a kind of portal, into another realm. The fish had stopped its thrashing, and for a few seconds, even after he’d let it go and lifted his wet-haired wrists from the water, it remained completely still, not yet knowing that it was free. ♦

# The Critics

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A Critic at Large

# How Monsters Went from Menacing to Misunderstood

For most of human history, monsters were repugnant aberrations, breaches of the natural and moral order. What's behind our relentless urge to humanize them?

By Manvir Singh

October 27, 2025



Something's going on with our monsters. They used to feast on humans with abandon, burn our villages, prowl the margins of the map; now they're seeking therapy. The fangs are still there, but they're clenched in pain. Killing sprees have become cries for help; horns and scales are mere markers of identity. These creatures aren't out to destroy the world; they're just trying to find their place in it.

Consider sea monsters, perhaps the oldest terrors in world literature. Tiamat, the Babylonian chaos goddess, embodied the primordial ocean. She spawned a brood of abominations—snakes, beasts, scorpion-men—before the divine

champion Marduk smashed her skull and made the world from her dismembered body. Leviathan, of the Hebrew Bible, spat fire and churned the sea like boiling soup in a cauldron. Even into the twentieth century, the ocean coughed up colossi, none more famous than the king of monsters himself, Godzilla. Yet in the past decade sea demons have gone from menaces to misfits. In Pixar’s “Luca,” they’re cute kids yearning for sunlight. DreamWorks’ Ruby Gillman is a teen-age kraken who just wants to survive high school. The amphibian man of [Guillermo del Toro](#)’s “The Shape of Water” is a gentle romantic.

The same domestication has crept ashore. The misunderstood monster, once an occasional changeup, is now the default. Werewolves are heartthrobs (“Teen Wolf,” “Twilight”). Evil witches have tragic backstories (“Wicked,” “Maleficent”). Alien parasites (“Venom,” “Alien: Earth”) and notorious villains (“Cruella,” “Joker”) have their redeeming qualities. Ayana Gray’s new novel, “[I, Medusa](#),” reimagines one of Greek mythology’s most hideous fiends as a victim of bigotry and sexual trauma. Even Frankenstein’s creature—most recently reanimated in del Toro’s “Frankenstein”—has never been so soulful, so desperate to be understood.

Our appetite for relatable monsters—call it the sympathetic turn—is a profound reorientation, if you take the long view. For most of human history, monsters have been embodiments of aberration, breaches in the boundary between the human and everything else. The historian Surekha Davies, in “[Humans: A Monstrous History](#)” (California), sees them as falling “across or outside the categories of ‘normal’ people or beings in the world.” The Biblical scholar Esther J. Hamori, in “[God’s Monsters](#)” (Broadleaf), locates monstrosity in “juicy category violations”: ooze, grotesquerie, shape-shifting, supernatural strength, reanimation.

Humans tend to see something potently unsettling in such boundary-crossing. The word “monster” comes from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning “omen.” To the ancients, these beings could be warnings: disruptions of the natural order that foretold disaster or divine wrath. With the rise of monotheism, their existence had to be brought under the power and perfection of a single god. Leviathan, in the [Book of Job](#), is presented as evidence of God’s might: “No one is fierce enough to rouse it. Who then is

able to stand against me?" Elsewhere in the Bible, as in Daniel and Revelation, beasts appear as apocalyptic terrors poised to ravage the earth.

In medieval and early modern Europe, demons, werewolves, and more prowled the margins of Christendom, often embodying sin and rebellion. Between 1400 and 1775, an estimated fifty thousand people—four-fifths of them women—were executed for witchcraft in Europe. The charges weren't limited to spell-casting: they included flying, conspiring with the Devil, even cannibalism. To be monstrous was to offend against both God and nature.

With the Enlightenment, monsters were brought under the lamp of reason. The Hydra, the unicorn, mermaids—careful observers exposed them as hoaxes or misidentified species. The French anatomist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire analyzed certain apparent monstrosities, such as cyclopic and acephalic fetuses, not as moral warnings but as developmental mishaps.

Yet, as Goya warned in 1799, "the sleep of reason produces monsters," and Enlightenment vigilance regularly lapsed. In the stories we told then, the beasts still attacked, infected, and rampaged until they were vanquished by heroes. The current sympathetic turn unsettles that archetypal pattern. The talons and fangs have been filed down, the hunger for flesh recast as a troublesome compulsion to be managed through self-control. Audiences love these rehabilitations. But can we really do without the monstrous—or are we merely relocating it to places, and people, closer to home?

Even in an age of microscopes and anatomical theatres, horrors seeped in from the edges of empire, where the dead were said to rise and feed. Around 1726, in the Serbian village of Medveda, a man named Arnaut Pavle fell from a hay wagon and broke his neck. Soon after his burial, the village was gripped by fear. Four people died; others swore that Pavle harassed them in the night. Forty days later, the villagers exhumed his body. Their observations, recorded by the Austrian surgeon Johann Flückinger, helped give rise to one of modern culture's most enduring monsters.

"They found that he was quite complete and undecayed, and that fresh blood had flowed from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears," Flückinger wrote. Blood covered Pavle's shirt; his nails had peeled off, and new ones had grown in their place. Everything suggested that he was a *vampir*—the local word for

such demons. People recalled that Pavle had once complained of being tormented by a *vampir*, and, to protect himself, had smeared his body with its blood and eaten earth from its grave—foolproof ways to become bloodthirsty himself.

The villagers drove a stake through Pavle's heart. The corpse groaned and bled. They burned his body and threw the ashes back into the grave, then disinterred his supposed victims, who, by lore, must have become *vampiri* themselves. Flückinger, a regimental surgeon in the Habsburg army, led the inquiry. His report, dated January 7, 1732, marked the vampire's first major appearance in Enlightenment Europe. Soon after, a letter from another physician, Johann Friedrich Glaser, appeared in a Nuremberg journal, recounting the outbreak in greater detail. Translations and commentaries spread across northern and western Europe, provoking both panic and debate. In March, the London *Journal* published an account of “*dead Bodies* sucking, as it were, the Blood of the *Living*; for the *latter* visibly dry up, while the *former* are fill'd with Blood.” By the end of 1733, at least a dozen books and several dissertations had been published on vampires.

The vampire evolved quickly once it entered the bloodstream of European culture. Voltaire made it a metaphor for greed and parasitism, the perfect emblem of hypocritical excess. John Polidori's “[The Vampyre](#)” (1819) gave the creature aristocratic poise and predatory charm. Bram Stoker's “[Dracula](#)” (1897) completed the metamorphosis, fusing the Serbian corpse-demon with gothic eroticism (fangs, neck-biting), Romanian superstition (garlic), and late-Victorian dread—of contagion, of female sexuality, of imperial contamination.

[Stoker's count](#) was as courtly as he was corrupt. He fed on the living, defiled women, spread disease, and inverted sacred symbols. He offered no tragic backstory, no flicker of remorse, nothing to complicate his evil. He was, in Professor Van Helsing's words, “devil in callous, and the heart of him is not.”

For decades, his screen descendants stayed true to type. The title characters of F. W. Murnau's “*Nosferatu*” (1922) and Tod Browning's “*Dracula*” (1931), the villains of “*The Return of the Vampire*” (1943) and “*Horror of Dracula*” (1958): all were creatures of pure appetite, pure evil. But by the

nineteen-seventies the infection had mutated. A more introspective breed of bloodsucker appeared: the world-weary sensualist of Anne Rice's novel "[Interview with the Vampire](#)" (1976), the mournful aristocrat of Werner Herzog's film "Nosferatu the Vampyre" (1979). Today, the rehabilitation is complete. The undead are brooding and sensual, the perfect boyfriend material of "Twilight," "True Blood," and new-wave romantasy—creatures that would be unrecognizable to the Balkan villagers who first staked Arnaut Pavle in terror.

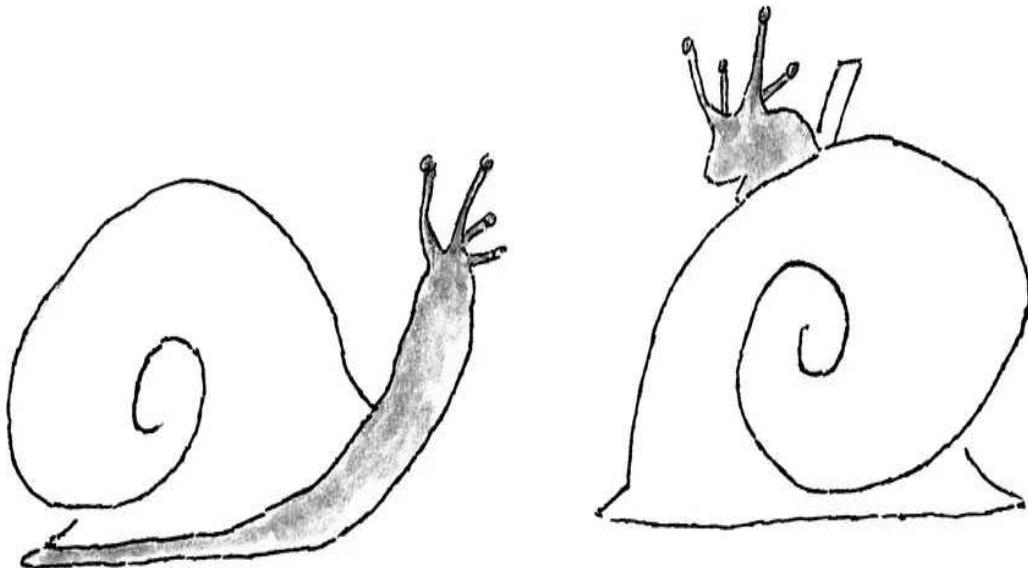
In a 2013 essay in *Gothic Studies*, the scholars Angela Tenga and Elizabeth Zimmerman observed that the "reformed vampire needs a counterpart who will look and feed like a monster," a figure that can "bear the burden of true monstrosity." They concluded that "the zombie meets this need, voicing anxieties that many contemporary vampire narratives silence."

It was a plausible diagnosis for its moment. In the late two-thousands and early twenty-tens, the culture was overrun by the undead: "World War Z," "The Last of Us," "The Walking Dead," "Left 4 Dead." Survivalism was the reigning mood, and the zombie—blank, voracious, beyond reason—seemed to be the last monster standing. But the sympathetic turn has claimed it, too. When "Warm Bodies," a human-zombie romance, reached theatres, in 2013, the critic Richard Roeper praised it for giving the undead heart and interiority. Since then, the infection has spread. Films like "The Girl with All the Gifts" and series such as "iZombie," "My Dead Ex," and "Santa Clarita Diet" have rendered the lurching corpse soulful, even adorable. The zombie-with-feelings trope is already starting to rot.

What of Frankenstein's monster? When [Mary Shelley](#) introduced him, in 1818, she was reimagining monstrosity. The creature was no longer a visitation from the gods or a sport of nature but a human artifact—stitched together from our own parts, endowed with our reason, and condemned to bear the moral weight of our actions. In making the monster a creation rather than an accident, Shelley turned him into a mirror. He learned language, read "[Paradise Lost](#)," and pleaded for compassion. "Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded," he tells his maker. "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend."

The version most of us picture, though—the one sold as latex masks every October—owes little to Shelley. It descends from James Whale’s 1931 film, itself adapted from Peggy Webling’s stage play. Whale gave the creature the neck bolts, the square head, the dragging gait. He also gave him his creator’s name, sealing the confusion. Mute and lumbering, stripped of intelligence and anguish, he became an icon of horror, cut off from his human source.

As with vampires and zombies, the trajectory of Frankenstein’s monster over the past century runs from terror to pathos. Whale’s sequel, “Bride of Frankenstein” (1935), began the softening: the monster acquired halting speech, longed for a mate, and wept when she recoiled. [Robert De Niro](#)’s turn in “Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein” (1994) restored much of the creature’s eloquence and pain, though he remained more brute than philosopher.



S. Gross

Del Toro’s “Frankenstein,” out soon on Netflix, carries the sympathetic turn to its logical conclusion. His monster (played by Jacob Elordi) enters with a guttural roar that rips across the Arctic, but in the course of the film a portrait emerges of a creature whose humanity matches, even exceeds, Shelley’s original. Like her creation, this one learns to speak and read, and secretly aids an impoverished family until they drive him away. Del Toro adds what Shelley omitted: the newborn stage, when the monster is gentle and bewildered, desperate for touch. His Dr. Frankenstein, by contrast, is a

tyrant—impatient, abusive, demanding more than his creation is ready to provide.

Although del Toro's monster has violent outbursts, they feel more justified, more defensive, than the unprovoked aggression that drove Shelley's creature to kill Dr. Frankenstein's brother, William. And then there's his appearance. "I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful!" says Dr. Frankenstein in the novel—yet it's the only time he is so described. Thereafter, the creature, with his yellow skin and black lips, is "filthy," "horrid," and, Shelley's favorite adjective, "wretched," terms that shaped later depictions. Del Toro's being—lithe, slate-colored, his scars tracing the lines of his musculature—recovers the grace Dr. Frankenstein originally intended.

Shelley's book presaged the modern humanization of monstrosity. By making the creature a human invention, she advanced a critique of scientific hubris and mechanistic thinking. But her sympathy is not ours. Shelley's monster is tragic: his eloquence condemns humanity rather than reassuring it. Today's sympathetic turn completes her project only by altering its meaning. Del Toro's creature no longer accuses; he invites understanding. He has ascended from Shelley's indictment of Enlightenment reason to become a fully dignified being, barely distinguishable from those who fear him.

While I was working on this essay, my wife and I spent an evening out with some family friends. As the adults talked, our friends' ten-year-old daughter, Zara, sat reading a fantasy novel. She's well-versed in the genre—I rarely see her without a book on dragons or imaginary quests—so I asked what she thought about monsters. What makes a bad one?

She rejected the premise. "I don't think anyone does bad things and is a bad person for no reason at all. They have to have a reason."

I asked her to elaborate. Sure, humans have reasons. But monsters—deformed, hideous, wretched?

"If you look up 'monster' in a dictionary, it'll say, like, a creature that is bad," she said. "But that's just how we use the word." Then she asked me to

imagine that she “turned into a huge, drooling, purple, polka-dotted tiger. . . . It looks dangerous. It might look at you and be, like, snarling. Our instincts tell us, Be scared of this. This might hurt us. But that doesn’t mean it actually will.”

Zara’s answer is revealing. It captures the intuition that the sympathetic turn has now made second nature: appearance isn’t character. You can limp and groan, or be huge and drooling, and still mean no harm. In her world, there are no monsters, only creatures we haven’t taken the time to understand.

Historically and cross-culturally, this is an astonishing idea. A 2001 comparative study of semi-human monsters from twenty traditions—from the Apache to the ancient Greeks—found remarkable consistency among them. The creatures were always outsiders, and many were cannibals. All bore some visible deviation: one from northwestern South America had eyes on his knees; the Apache ogre was encumbered by testicles so massive he could hardly walk. In every culture, the monsters were defeated, usually slain, by heroes whose courage reaffirmed the moral order. The creatures’ wickedness didn’t arise from trauma or poor life choices. Otherness alone was enough.

For millennia, that reflex—equating difference with danger—defined the moral imagination. The sympathy that Zara takes for granted would once have been unthinkable. It took a slow revolution in how we conceive of the monstrous to make it possible. Romanticism planted the seed, turning wickedness from an external contagion into an inward condition. Freud’s account of the *Unheimlich* made monstrosity inward in another sense: what terrifies us is not radical otherness but the sudden recognition of what is most our own—the return of the repressed. In his hands, the monster ceased to be a visitation from outside and became the uncanny face of the self.

But empathy hardened into a creed only after the twentieth century’s convulsions. Fascism and racial mythologies of a master race had shown what followed from deciding who was fully human and who was not. In the moral aftershocks of genocide, the very idea of monstrosity started to grow suspect. To demonize, stigmatize, dehumanize—words that once had a theological valence—became secular sins. As nations recoiled from Nazi dogma and colonial hierarchies, ideologies of universal dignity took hold.

Civil rights, second-wave feminism, and gay liberation were followed by disability activism and multiculturalism. In the Pixar era, empathy became the hegemonic moral sentiment of liberal modernity—and monstrosity the ultimate test case for inclusion.

Consider two movies from the past year: Isaiah Saxon’s “The Legend of Ochi” and Dean DeBlois’s live-action “How to Train Your Dragon.” Both follow the same moral geometry: villagers hate monsters; a father, who has lost his wife to the creatures, leads a hunt; his child sees the creatures’ humanity; the father resists until the child reveals their goodness. In each case, the villain is not the beast but the bigot—the man who insists on annihilating monsters when he could have chosen understanding instead.

The moral imagination has moved from essence to choice—from evil as something one *is* to evil as something one *does*. That reorientation has powered the sympathetic turn. But it has also brought a darker consequence: as monsters grow more human, humans look more monstrous.

There’s good data on this from Lillian Mason, a political psychologist at Johns Hopkins, and Nathan Kalmoe, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Beginning in 2017, they administered surveys to measure how people perceived members of the opposing political party. The surveys probed whether respondents viewed their political opponents as “a serious threat to the United States and its people,” considered them “downright evil,” or believed they “lack the traits to be considered fully human—they behave like animals.”

I asked Mason what she had expected to find with that last question—how many Americans did she think would literally dehumanize the other side? “Maybe five to ten per cent,” she said. “Because you can get five to ten per cent of people willing to say virtually anything in online surveys.” It turned out to be roughly twenty per cent. “I was surprised by that number,” she said. “I was worried by that number. But that was the lowest it ever was.” By November, 2022, more than thirty per cent of American respondents said that their political opponents were not fully human. In a survey conducted just after the 2024 Presidential election, the figure had climbed to nearly fifty per cent—with almost no difference between the parties.

These findings echo a broader pattern political scientists call affective polarization: the replacement of disagreement with abhorrence. In a 2024 study, when asked what proportion of partisans on the opposing side would condone political violence, both Democrats and Republicans guessed nearly half. (The real numbers, on both sides, were closer to four per cent.) Each camp, in other words, sees the other as monstrously bloodthirsty.

What begins as vigilance curdles into caricature. Another study published last year found that each side wildly overestimates its opponents' approval of all sorts of moral wrongs. Democrats imagine that nearly thirty per cent of Republicans consider wrongful imprisonment to be acceptable; Republicans believe that fifteen per cent of Democrats approve of child pornography. In both cases, the actual percentage is close to zero. Political opponents become monsterized—transmuted into villains beyond redemption. In teaching us to empathize with the feared and the misunderstood, liberal modernity, in particular, may have merely shifted the coördinates of monstrosity. It teaches us to see the humanity in the monstrous—and to see as monstrous those we think fail to do the same.

Del Toro's creature may be the gentlest of any "Frankenstein," gentler even than Mary Shelley's, but his maker is also the cruellest of Frankensteins, the most recognizably monstrous. Perhaps the next evolution isn't toward still cuddlier monsters but—as hard as it is to imagine just now—toward a moral universe less eager to see monsters in our opponents. As the creature in del Toro's film says to his creator, "We can both be human now." ♦

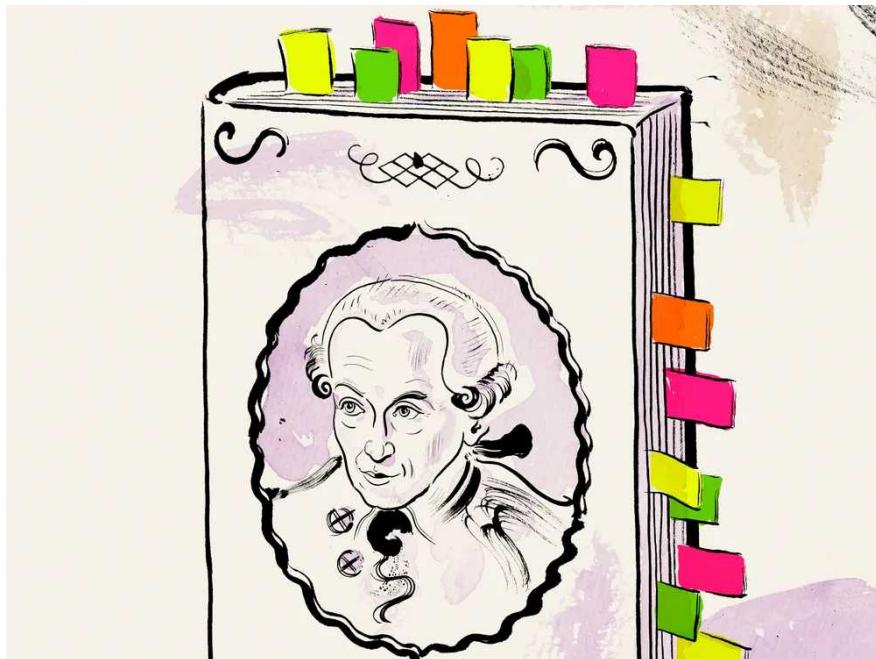
Books

# Why Immanuel Kant Still Has More to Teach Us

A new introduction to the great philosopher's work foregrounds its revolutionary nature and far-reaching impact.

By Adam Kirsch

October 27, 2025



In April, 1745, God appeared to a Swedish civil servant named Emanuel Swedenborg in a London tavern. Swedenborg was no wild-eyed prophet but, rather, a fifty-seven-year-old scientist and engineer who had worked for years for the Swedish crown as an administrator of mines. However, travelling around Europe while on leave, he had begun to have intense dreams about Jesus Christ, in which everyday details were shot through with mystical bliss. In one, Jesus borrowed a five-pound note from someone, and, Swedenborg recalled, “I was sorry he had not borrowed it from me.” Finally, God showed himself while Swedenborg was at dinner, taking the form of a man who told him not to eat too much.

From that night until his death, twenty-seven years later, Swedenborg devoted himself to conversing with “spirits and angels” and writing down the mystical truths that they told him. As Swedenborg’s fame spread across Europe, in the seventeen-sixties, he came to the attention of a junior professor of philosophy at the University of Königsberg, in eastern Prussia, named Immanuel Kant. Then in his late thirties, Kant considered himself, as he wrote to a friend, free of “any trace of a way of thinking inclined to the miraculous.” Yet he admitted to being interested in Swedenborg, especially because the man’s powers of clairvoyance seemed to have been vouched for by credible witnesses.

Kant had a lot in common with the Swedish mystic. He, too, was a northern European, a Protestant, and a man of science. At a time when philosophy and “natural philosophy”—the scholarly pursuits that developed into today’s natural sciences—were not yet entirely separate, Kant published work not only about metaphysics and ethics but also about physics, cosmology, and earthquakes. In his first book, “Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces,” published in 1749, Kant wondered how the human body, which is entirely material and physical, is related to the human mind, which doesn’t seem to be. “How is it possible for a force that produces only motions to generate representations and ideas?” he asked.

But, if what Swedenborg wrote was true, spirit and matter might not be so divided, after all. Kant ordered Swedenborg’s books from London and told a friend that he was waiting for them with longing. Yet when he eventually wrote about Swedenborg, in the short book “Dreams of a Spirit-Seer” (1766), it was with sarcasm. The Swedish mystic, Kant now believed, was “the worst of all dreamers,” his books “utterly empty of the last drop of reason.” The real source of Swedenborg’s visions, Kant joked, was bad digestion: “If a wind should rage in the guts, what matters is the direction it takes. If downwards, then the result is a fart; if upwards, an apparition or a heavenly inspiration.”

Still, reading Swedenborg hadn’t been a complete waste of time, because it led Kant to an important truth. Swedenborg had convinced himself that the spirit could, like matter, be perceived with the senses, but Kant concluded that the task of philosophy was to distinguish those two realms—to show what kinds of truths we can hope to know from experience, and what kinds

we can only ever imagine or make up stories about. “Metaphysics,” he wrote, “is the science of the boundaries of human reason.”

That may not exactly sound like a call to arms, but the title of an expert and engaging new introduction to the philosopher encourages us to think otherwise. “Kant: A Revolution in Thinking” (Harvard), by Marcus Willaschek, translated by Peter Lewis, argues that what made Kant revolutionary was his contention that to understand anything—science, justice, freedom, God—we first have to understand ourselves. Willaschek, one of the world’s leading authorities on Kant and the editor of the standard German edition of Kant’s works, writes, “Kant placed the human at the center of his thought like no other philosopher before him.” As Willaschek demonstrates, Kant believed that his ideas would change humanity’s understanding of its place in the world as profoundly as the Copernican revolution had changed our sense of Earth’s place in the cosmos.

And they did, for philosophy at least, igniting the most fertile period in Western thought since Plato and Aristotle. Willaschek offers a gauge of Kant’s influence by looking at the term “critique,” which Kant used in the titles of his three major books: the “Critique of Pure Reason” (1781), the “Critique of Practical Reason” (1788), and the “Critique of Judgment” (1790). At the time, the word *Kritik* was a relatively new addition to the German language, and Kant was the first to use it in a title. Today, Willaschek writes, “the catalog of the German National Library contains no fewer than twenty-four thousand works with the word ‘Kritik’ in their titles.”

More broadly, he observes, Kant’s ideas about the mind shaped the development of “psychology, anthropology, and the more recent social sciences.” In the twentieth century, philosophers of science grappled with Kant as they tried to make sense of the baffling discoveries of relativity and quantum physics. The American transcendentalists took their name from one of Kant’s key technical terms: “I apply the term transcendental,” he wrote, “to all knowledge which is not so much occupied with objects as with the mode of our cognition of these objects.” Ralph Waldo Emerson was thus waxing Kantian when he declared, “I become a transparent Eyeball; I am nothing; I see all.”

The central insight that these disparate thinkers took from Kant is that the world isn't simply a thing, or a collection of things, given to us to perceive. Rather, our minds help create the reality we experience. In particular, Kant argued that time, space, and causality, which we ordinarily take for granted as the most basic aspects of the world, are better understood as forms *imposed* on the world by the human mind.

The parallel with Copernicus turns out to be apt. Before Copernicus and Kepler and Galileo, people assumed that the sun and the planets revolved around the Earth, and justifiably so—that's how it appears to us when we look up at the sky. It took a lot of close observation and ingenious reasoning for astronomers to understand that this was a trick of perspective, and that in fact it is the Earth that revolves around the sun. Similarly, it is natural for human beings to assume that the way the world appears to us—extended in three dimensions, constantly moving from the past into the future, changing as its different elements interact—is the way it really is. But, Kant maintained, this is also a trick of perspective. Space and time do not exist objectively, only subjectively, as forms of our experience. He wrote that it is “from the human point of view only that we can speak of space, extended objects, etc.”

This thinking led Kant to a more pessimistic conclusion than Copernicus’s. Whereas humanity did eventually arrive at a correct understanding of the solar system, it is impossible for us to ever know “things in themselves”—what Kant called “noumena.” We have access only to “phenomena”—the way things look to us, given the kind of mind we have. “What things may be in themselves, I know not and need not know, because a thing is never presented to me otherwise than as a phenomenon,” Kant insisted.

This is an “unsettling” message, Willaschek writes: “It seems to rob all the things around us of their solidity, so to speak, and to transform them into mere figments of our imagination.” In fact, Kant didn’t intend to make us doubt the evidence of our senses. Instead, he reasoned, it is because all human beings experience the world through the same categories of time and space that scientific knowledge is possible. Science claims to deal with the world only as we perceive it, not as it is “in itself,” and to that extent it is completely reliable. Anyone who measures an object in free fall in a vacuum

will find that it accelerates at thirty-two feet per second squared; we don't have to worry that this is a "figment of our imagination."

But Kant's theory of knowledge poses a serious problem for any kind of religion or philosophy that claims to tell us about ultimate truths and eternal essences, such as God. If our minds are unable to reach beyond the limits of time and space, then metaphysical knowledge is a contradiction in terms. "The notion of a Supreme Being is in many respects a highly useful idea," Kant granted, but it is only an idea. "It is incapable of enlarging our cognition with regard to the existence of things."

Is it possible to live a meaningful existence in the absence of God and other absolute truths? This would become the central question for modern Western thought, and it was Kant who first posed it in all its complexity. The answer he offered was actually more hopeful than those of many writers who came after him. He believed that it was possible to live a good and moral life while accepting the boundaries of our understanding. But he was certain that, in philosophy as in astronomy, the "discovery of our deficiencies must produce a great change in the determination of the aims of human reason."

Such a revolutionary ambition was fitting for a philosopher who did his most important work in the age of the American and French Revolutions. Yet in his personal life Kant was the opposite of rebellious. Willaschek organizes his book around themes—with chapters devoted to Kant's ideas on education, revolution, wit, science, and even extraterrestrials (he believed that they *must* exist)—rather than chronologically, mainly because Kant's biography is terrifically dull.

He was born in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad), a bustling but remote port town, in 1724, and died there in 1804. Apart from a couple of teaching stints in nearby towns, he never lived anywhere else or even visited another city. He never married, saying that by the time he earned enough money to support a wife he no longer wanted one. There is no evidence that he ever had a love affair or a sexual encounter.

The central relationship of Kant's life was with the University of Königsberg, where he enrolled as a student at the age of sixteen and taught for forty-one years, with a few years' break when he worked as a private

tutor. This was an era when most professors weren't paid salaries, living instead on lecture fees from students. Unlike some of his colleagues, Kant had no family money to fall back on—his father was a poor saddle-maker—so, as Willaschek writes, he lectured on “logic, metaphysics, mathematics, and physics, and later supplemented these subjects with several others: physical geography, mineralogy, mechanics, general philosophy, practical philosophy, ethics, anthropology, natural law, natural theology, and pedagogy.” He was far from expert on all of these subjects, but what mattered was quantity. Kant taught for eighty-two consecutive semesters without a pause, initially for up to twenty-four hours a week, though later in his career he cut back to sixteen.

All this does not mean that he was a hermit or a bore. Kant had an active social life and was known for being well dressed. He emphasized this sociability to a younger philosopher when admonishing him for spending too much time with books; only by being in the world was it possible to educate oneself, Kant insisted. Later in life, though, he became more withdrawn as he focussed on writing: all his most important books were published after he turned fifty-five.

Perhaps the best-known thing about Kant as a person is that he was so regular in his habits that the people of Königsberg set their watches by his evening walk. Like many emblematic stories about famous people, this turns out to be not quite true. It was actually Kant's good friend Joseph Green, an English merchant, who was fanatically punctual; a Königsberg wit wrote a satirical play, “The Man of the Clock,” that is thought to be based on him. Kant's biographer Manfred Kuehn writes that “the neighbors could set their clocks in accordance with the time at which Kant left Green's house in the evening” because Green had an ironclad rule: “at seven o'clock the visit was over.”



By 1792, when France deposed King Louis XVI and proclaimed a republic, Kant was nearly seventy and had spent decades living sedately among Königsberg’s “‘better,’ often aristocratic, social circles.” It would have made perfect sense if he had joined them in deplored “the dispossession, expulsion, and murder of the French nobility,” Willaschek writes. Yet he made no secret of sympathizing with the Revolution, quoting what the aged Simeon said about the birth of Jesus in the Gospels: “Lord, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.” For Kant, the Revolution seemed to put into practice the ideal that he placed at the center of his own thought: emancipation—setting human beings free so that they could be in charge of their own lives.

In 1784, after a German magazine cheekily asked if anyone could define the fashionable term “enlightenment,” Kant rose to the challenge with an essay that is now possibly his most widely read work. Called “Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” it begins with a simple but thrilling definition: “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage.”

Tutelage is the condition of being a minor in need of a guardian. Throughout history, Kant says, that is how most human beings have thought of themselves. Afraid to trust their own judgment, they have looked to authorities to tell them what to do. “If I have a book which understands for

me, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a physician who decides my diet, and so forth, I need not trouble myself,” Kant writes. But, at last, ordinary people were starting to realize that they have the right and the ability to think for themselves. “Have courage to use your own reason!—that is the motto of enlightenment,” he proclaims.

The goal of the French revolutionaries was liberty, but Kant’s ideal was significantly different. He called it “autonomy,” from the Greek words for “self” and “law.” Liberty implies a lack of constraint; we are free when no one can stop us from doing what we want. Autonomy means living by rules that we choose to accept because we decide that they are reasonable. As Kant puts it, a free will is “subject to the law, of which it can regard itself as the author.”

“For Kant,” Willaschek writes, “it is this autonomy of humans, the capacity to impose moral laws upon ourselves, that forms the basis of our special dignity.” Accordingly, he formulated an entirely new definition of morality, one that has been enormously influential in the modern world, even though in some ways it is deeply counterintuitive.

If you asked an ordinary European in Kant’s lifetime what makes an action wrong, the answer would probably have involved God. Things like murder, theft, and adultery are wrong because they are sins, prohibited by God in the Bible, and sinners are punished in this world or the next. Many people today would say the same thing. Another kind of answer focusses on consequences: an action is wrong if it causes people to suffer. This idea is rooted in basic human sympathy, but in the nineteenth century it would be systematized as utilitarianism—the idea that the standard of morality is what brings the greatest benefit to the greatest number of people.

Kant’s understanding of right and wrong is far more abstract, having nothing to do with piety or pain. In “Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals”—one of his more accessible books, though he acknowledged that it had a “horrifying title”—he argues that actions themselves can’t be described as good or evil. Those terms can be applied only to the human will, which is free to decide how to act in any situation. “It is impossible to conceive anything at all in the world, or even out of it, which can be taken as good without qualification, except a good will,” Kant writes.

Ordinarily, we think of good will as a kind of emotion: a person of good will is happy when other people are happy. But, for Kant, emotion is irrelevant to morality. In fact, he believes that if you do the right thing because it makes you happy you don't have a truly good will, because you are acting out of a kind of self-interest. The only thing that should determine how we act is a pure sense of duty. When a man "does [an] action without any inclination for the sake of duty alone, then for the first time his action has its genuine moral worth," Kant writes.

We owe this duty not to God or to other people but to our own reason. Every time we face a moral choice, Kant argues, we should think as if we were lawmakers, drawing up a rule, or "maxim," for all of humanity to follow. If our reason approves of this maxim, then we are obligated to follow it, whether it benefits us personally or not. This is Kant's famous "categorical imperative," which he considers the essence of morality: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law."

Kant offers a few examples of how this works in practice. "May I not, when I am hard pressed, make a promise with the intention of not keeping it?" he asks. For instance, can I borrow money knowing that I will not be able to pay it back? One way of answering that question is to look at what would be good for me in the long term. If I default on a debt, no one will lend me money in the future, so my own self-interest tells me not to borrow on false pretenses.

But to refrain from making a false promise for this reason would not be moral, Kant argues, because I would be acting "solely on fear of consequences," not out of reason and duty. To act morally, I need to ask what would happen if everyone acted the way I do. And in a world where everyone makes promises that they do not intend to keep, Kant argues, "there could properly be no promises at all," since no one would ever trust anyone else's word.

This logical contradiction shows that when I break a promise I am not acting like a legislator, making rules for everyone to follow. What I really want is for everyone to follow the rule except for me, so that I can benefit by exploiting others' trust. Kant insists that we have a duty to follow the

categorical imperative even if it results in physical harm. In an essay from 1797, he considered a scenario in which a man allows a friend who is being pursued by a murderer to hide in his house. If the murderer comes to the door and asks where the intended victim is, does the man have a moral obligation to reveal the truth?

Surprisingly, Kant says yes—not because the murderer has a right to know the truth but because no human being ever has the right to lie. “To be truthful in all declarations is . . . a sacred unconditional command of reason, and not to be limited by any expediency,” he writes.

Although Kant’s definition of morality isn’t derived from religion, it makes the same kind of demand as many faiths: it urges us to forget our selves. Indeed, he compares this idea to “the passages from Scripture in which we are commanded to love our neighbor and even our enemy.”

It’s no coincidence that Kant ended up reformulating a religious ethic in rational terms. His work had two complementary goals: one destructive, the other constructive. In the “Critique of Pure Reason,” he shows that humanity cannot ever know the things we want to know most—about God, free will, and the true nature of reality. This was the achievement that earned him the sobriquet the All-Crushing Kant, leaving no traditional dogma standing.

But then, in the “Critique of Practical Reason” and the “Groundwork,” Kant turned to rebuilding. Reason and freedom, he argued, offer a better foundation for human life than authority and tradition. They can supply us with a sterner morality, a more just politics, and even a more peaceful international order. For Kant, putting “the human at the center of his thought” was, as Willaschek writes, an act of faith in our ability to live according to reason.

This faith is all the more moving at a time like our own, when the ideal of human reason is under attack both politically and technologically. Willaschek is concerned mainly with the first challenge; his primary motive in writing about Kant for a general readership is to ask how he can help us defend “our whole conception of liberal, rules-based democracies in the West.” In Europe, and especially in Germany, Kant has long served as a symbol and patron saint of the postwar liberal order. In the seventeen-

nineties, he argued for democracy, cosmopolitanism, and the settlement of international disputes through “a permanent congress of nations” instead of war. Two centuries later, the West, after destroying itself with irrational hatreds, finally seemed ready to put those ideals into practice, in the form of the United Nations and the European Union.

But now the Kantian consensus seems to be crumbling. Democratic countries are embracing authoritarian leaders; anti-immigration movements are insisting on exclusive national identities; and the Russian invasion of Ukraine brought war back to a continent that had grown used to what Kant called “perpetual peace.” In April, 2024, Olaf Scholz, then the Chancellor of Germany, marked the philosopher’s three-hundredth birthday with a speech attacking Vladimir Putin as the archenemy, not just of Ukraine and the West but of Kant personally—“diametrically opposed to all of his notions of human rights, freedom, autonomy and the dignity of each and every human being.”

At the same time, the rise of artificial intelligence is posing a quieter but even more profound challenge to Kantian humanism. Willaschek has less to say about Kant’s scientific legacy than he does about his political legacy, but both depend on Kant’s belief in the uniqueness of the human mind. “Man,” he wrote in the “Critique of Pure Reason,” is “the only animal that seems to be excepted” from the natural laws that govern plants and animals, because only we are capable of free thought and free will.

But the advance of A.I. technology may soon put an end to our species’ monopoly on mind. If computers can think, does that mean that they are also free moral agents, worthy of dignity and rights? Or does it mean, on the contrary, that human minds were never as free as Kant believed—that we are just biological machines that flatter ourselves by thinking we are something more? And if fundamental features of the world like time and space are creations of the human mind, as Kant argued, could artificial minds inhabit entirely different realities, built on different principles, that we will never fully understand? These kinds of questions are discussed in the 2022 anthology “Kant and Artificial Intelligence,” in which one contributor observes, “You can easily get the impression that much of contemporary cognitive science is heavily influenced by Kant’s philosophy.”

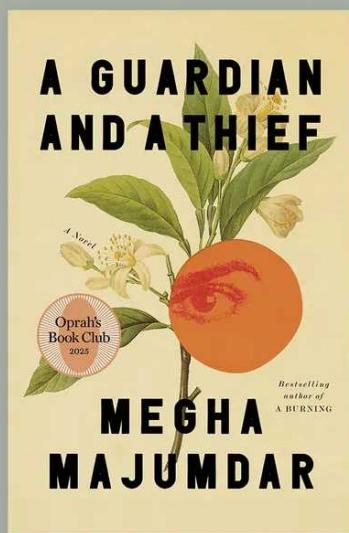
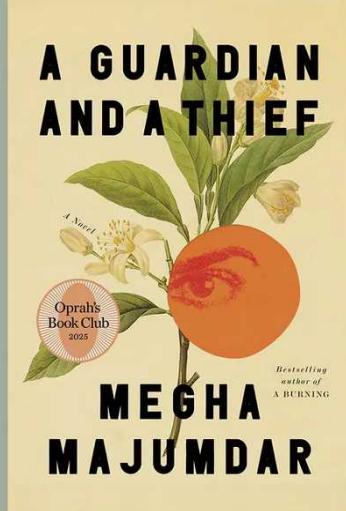
Of course, it is impossible to draw a straight line from the eighteenth century to the twenty-first, or to say with certainty what Kant would have thought about Ukraine or ChatGPT. As Willaschek writes, “Kant does not offer any ready-made solutions to the questions of our age.” But what makes a philosopher great isn’t that they have all the answers; it is that they help us formulate our most important questions, even ones that they could never have anticipated. Kant, Willaschek says, “challenges us to critically examine them for ourselves and form our own judgment.” Perhaps the Kantian idea hardest to accept today is his confidence that humanity is able to do such difficult things, and wants to. ♦

Books

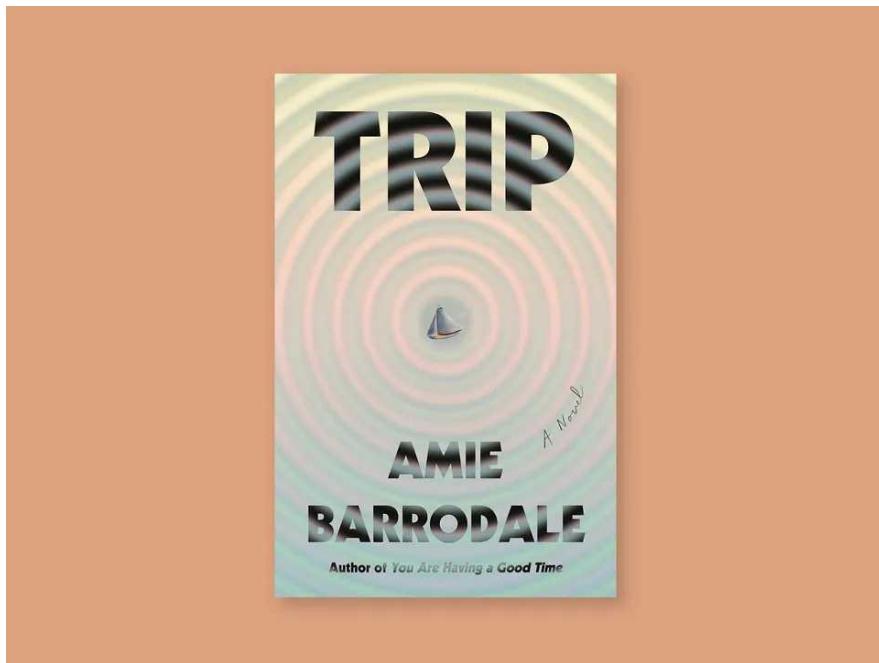
## Briefly Noted

“A Guardian and a Thief,” “Trip,” “Ready for My Close-Up,” and “The Eternal Forest.”

October 27, 2025



**A Guardian and a Thief**, by *Megha Majumdar* (*Knopf*). Set in the near future, in a version of Kolkata afflicted by food scarcity and dramatic global warming, this adroitly plotted novel centers on the manager of a homeless shelter who isn't above dipping into its donations to feed her young daughter and widower father. The three are days away from flying to the United States to join the woman's husband, when a shelter resident sneaks into their home and absconds with their food and, inadvertently, their passports. A finalist for the National Book Award, Majumdar's unstintingly graceful political novel has the grip of a nail-biter as the woman, the thief she must track down, and their fellow city dwellers take advantage of morality's elastic borders in times of existential threat.

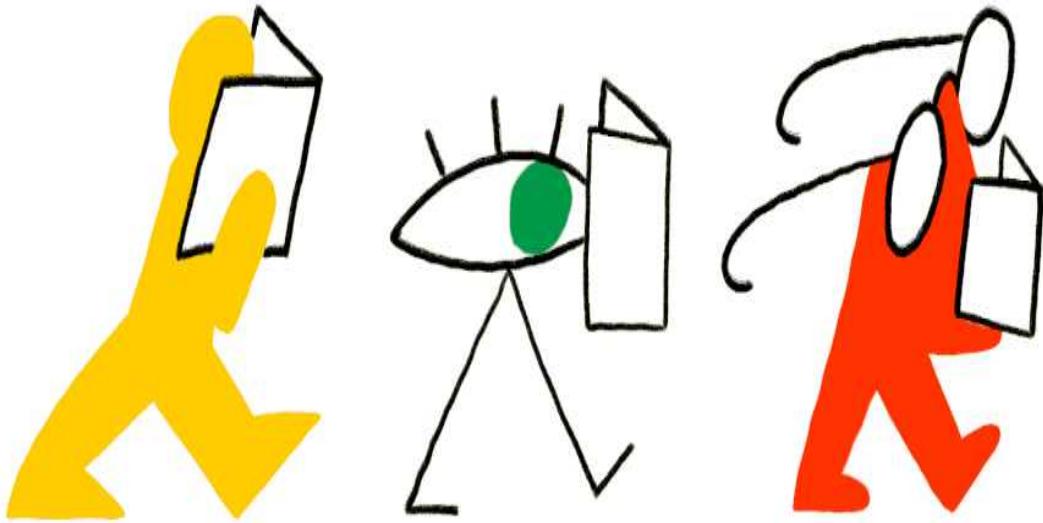


**Trip**, by *Amie Barrodale* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). The title of this brilliantly strange, funny, and moving novel refers to many things, among them a journey across the Atlantic, the quasi-psychedelic quality of dying, and a boy by that name. At the novel's outset, Trip's mother travels to Nepal to attend a conference "for people who study death." While there, she dies in a freak accident; at the same time, Trip, who has autism, runs away, ending up on a road trip with a recovering addict. As the mother lingers in spirit form, trying to communicate with the living in order to save Trip from calamity—by possessing the body of another conference-goer, for instance—she faces the prospect of losing the attachments that defined her. "You'll

forget everything," she's told, after lovingly relating a list of details about her son.

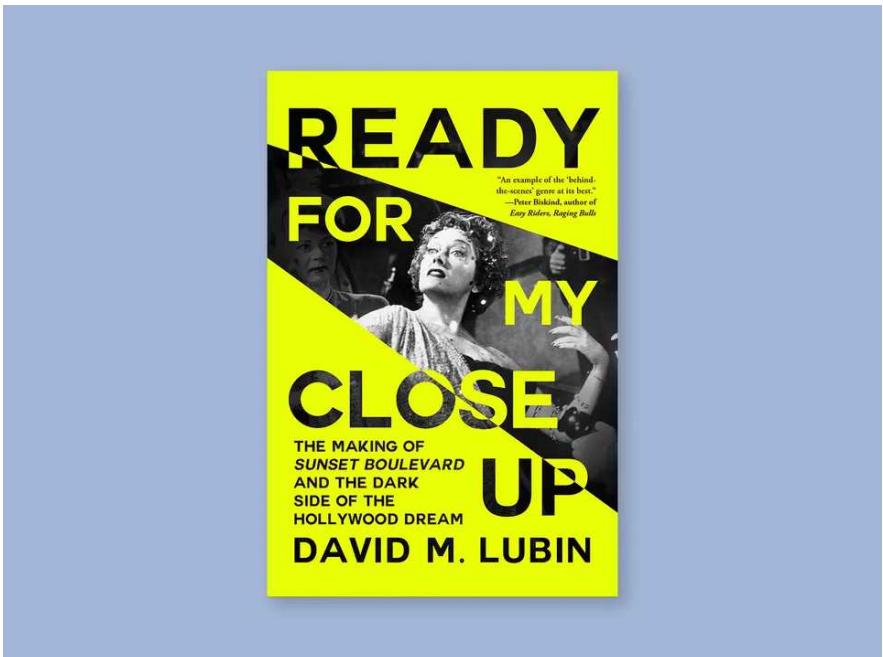
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## **What We're Reading**

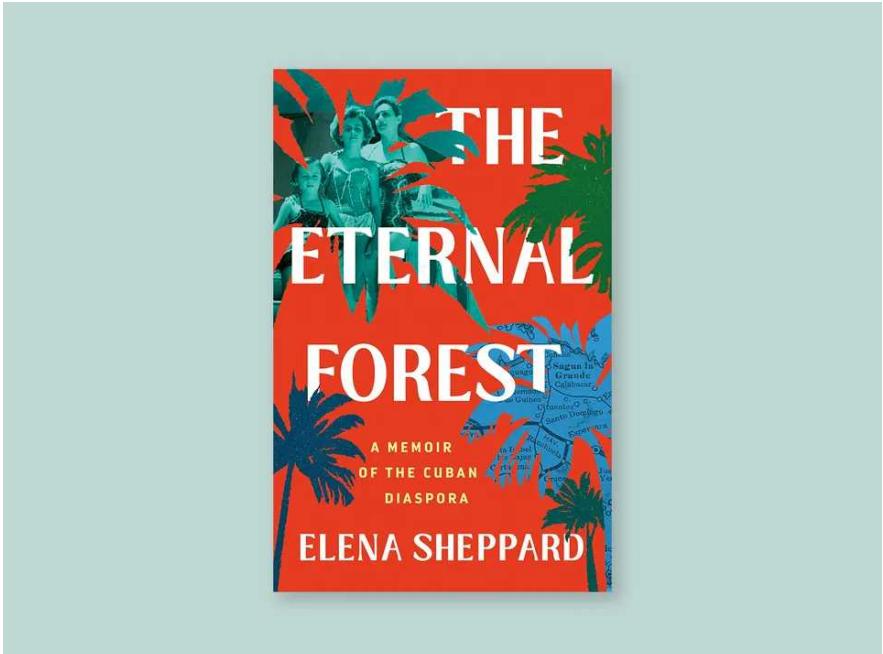


*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*

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**Ready for My Close-Up**, by David M. Lubin (*Grand Central*). In the late nineteen-forties, Hollywood was in transition: the blacklist was demolishing careers, the studio system was imploding, and television was emptying movie theatres. The noir film “Sunset Boulevard,” which came out in 1950, reflected this destabilization. The film focusses on two Hollywood castoffs: an aging former star and a floundering screenwriter who becomes her kept man. This scrupulous account of the making of the film—initially conceived as a comedy starring Mae West—traces how it became “a history of Hollywood” that mocked “an entire industry on the edge of collapse or reinvention, depending on whom you asked.”



**The Eternal Forest**, by *Elena Sheppard* (St. Martin's). On Christmas Eve in 1960, a woman named Rosita fled Castro's revolution in Cuba, boarding a flight with her two daughters to what she assumed would be temporary exile in Miami. She lived for another sixty years, but never returned to the island. In this artfully rendered memoir, Sheppard, Rosita's U.S.-born granddaughter, flits back and forth between the centuries, weaving Cuban history together with familial lore. She seeks to articulate her inherited sense of dislocation while grappling openly with the challenges of narrating a loss that was never entirely hers. "I have tried and failed at feeling what it was like to leave," she writes.

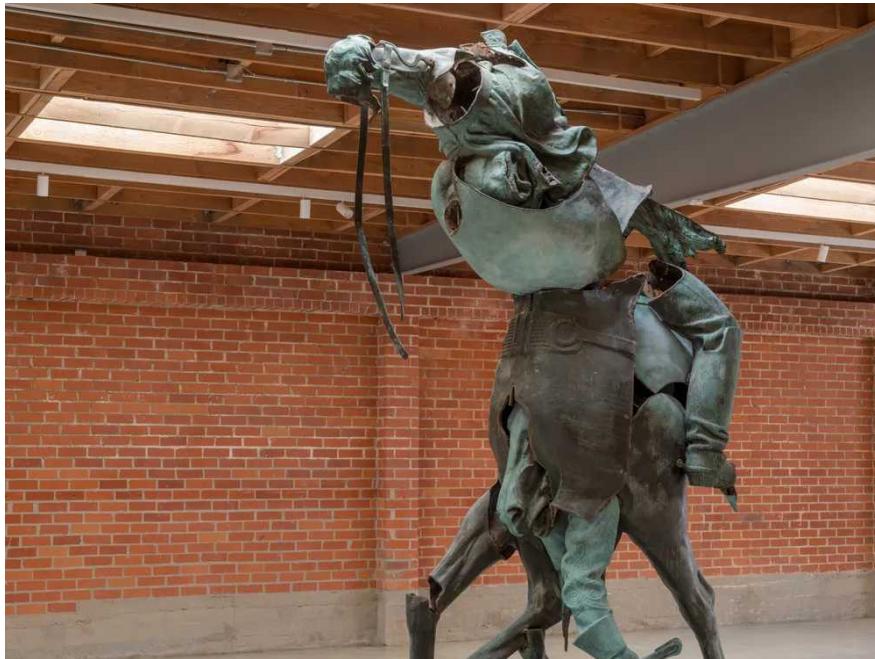
The Art World

# A Daring Show Remixes the Monuments of the Confederacy

As the Trump Administration tries to rescue symbols of the Lost Cause, an exhibition in Los Angeles, led by Kara Walker, finds meaning in their desecration.

By Julian Lucas

October 24, 2015



The first thing you see is a horse's ass, protruding, upside down, from the thorax of a monster. A man's arm descends from the beast's stomach, his gloved hand clutching the blade of a fallen sabre. There's no sign of a rider's face, but a head of well-coiffed hair dangles from the creature's eyeless muzzle. Every part of the work comes from a statue of the Confederate general Stonewall Jackson that was removed from Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2021. It was subsequently given to the artist Kara Walker, who carved it up in accordance with a butcher's diagram. The finished sculpture, "Unmanned Drone"—on view at the Brick, in Los Angeles, as part of a joint exhibition with MOCA called "Monuments"—is at once an act of

carnivalesque retribution and a recognition of the Confederacy's zombie-like persistence. A rebellion defeated more than a hundred and sixty years ago refuses to stay dead; between the creature's legs, a horse head emerges from a gape in the bronze, like a new Jackson already foaling.

In March, Donald Trump issued an executive order calling for the reinstatement of monuments "removed or changed to perpetuate a false reconstruction of American history." Chief among them were nearly two hundred Confederate memorials forced from their pedestals over the past decade, when they became lightning rods in a mass movement for racial justice. In 2017, the imminent removal of Charlottesville's Robert E. Lee statue provoked Unite the Right, the largest white-supremacist rally in a half century, and the start of a backlash that has only intensified. Last November, a private park in North Carolina celebrated its "rescue" of three previously toppled statues—not from destruction but from preservation in the county museum, where they might have fallen prey to "a narrative that didn't honor Our Confederate Dead."

Alas, then, that the nine statues in "Monuments" have been abandoned, like Scarlett O'Hara's Tara, to mortifying occupation. At MOCA, where all the works but Walker's are exhibited, you'll find Jefferson Davis lying on his back, still streaked with pink paint from protests, raising an arm—*Will anyone help me?*—toward a group of Klansmen photographed by Andres Serrano. In another room, an enormous statue of Lee and Jackson, with "*BEWARE TRAITORS*" scrawled in huge letters across its base, is paired with a replica of the car from "The Dukes of Hazzard," by Hank Willis Thomas—a Dodge Charger, emblazoned with a Confederate battle flag, which here stands totalled on its head. Charlottesville's Robert E. Lee has undergone the most viscerally satisfying transformation, into neatly stacked piles of bronze ingots. (They will be recycled for a future work.)

Iconoclasm is a time-honored means of exorcising history's ghosts. After the fall of Hungary's Communist dictatorship, dozens of decommissioned monuments were sent to Budapest's Memento Park, including the boots from an enormous statue of Stalin, which had been torn down by irate crowds. Artists can go further still, turning public works against themselves. In 2022, after a monument honoring J. Marion Sims, the father of modern gynecology, was removed from Central Park, Doreen Lynette Garner

conducted surgery on a silicone replica of the statue, reënacting a procedure that Sims had performed on enslaved women without their consent.



“Monuments” powerfully unites the two approaches, displaying its vandalized statuary alongside nineteen artists’ responses in a searching exploration of how the nation’s memory has been shaped. Curated by Hamza Walker, Bennett Simpson, and Kara Walker, the show was conceived eight years ago, as statues were beginning to come down. But it feels even timelier today, amid a moment of “anti-woke” resentment that echoes the Lost Cause; in Cauleen Smith’s installation “The Warden,” a CCTV camera watches a statue called the Vindicatrix, an allegorical embodiment of the Confederacy, in case she begins to stir.

American history certainly hasn’t sat still recently. In the past few years, the nation’s collective memory—never the strongest—has been relentlessly deformed by right-wing propaganda. The White House is attacking the Smithsonian and using A.I. to ventriloquize the Founding Fathers. Whitewashed cults of martyrdom have sprung up around the January 6th rioters and Charlie Kirk. (Oklahoma Republicans have proposed that statues of Kirk be erected at every public college in the state.) The playbook comes straight from the Confederacy, whose supporters, like *MAGA*’s, parlayed

defeat into an expanded universe of victimhood contrived to secure their domination.

At *MOCA*, a video installation by the Monument Lab, which conducted an audit of the nation's public memorials in 2021, quantifies this effort. Confederate leaders like Lee, Jackson, and Davis have more than a hundred statues between them, outnumbering those dedicated to Black Americans and to all but two American Presidents. Most of them were constructed decades after the Civil War, as part of an effort to demonize Reconstruction and its goal of multiracial democracy, and to justify the emerging Jim Crow regime. Sometimes, as the catalogue notes, segregation and monument-building went hand in hand: Charlottesville's Stonewall Jackson was erected, in 1921, on the former site of a largely Black working-class neighborhood called McKee Row.

The zenith of this counter-revolution was D. W. Griffith's film "The Birth of a Nation" (1915), arguably the biggest Confederate monument of all. Its heroes are the masked terrorists of the Ku Klux Klan, who overthrow a corrupt Reconstruction government of carpetbaggers and freedmen; the movie was so popular that it actually revived the organization. In a five-channel video installation, the Canadian artist Stan Douglas restages the film's climax, in which a Black Union soldier proposes marriage to a young white woman, then, when she refuses, chases her off a cliff. In Douglas's version, the original plays alongside a pair of alternative perspectives, which suggest that the young woman has mistaken one Black soldier for another and that neither intends harm. Douglas hews close enough to the original to throw its racist premises into relief, fabricating a more plausible "reality" that makes Griffith's film seem like a deepfake.



It's one of several reflections on the toll of living with a history honored under false premises. Another is Kevin Jerome Everson's video portrait of the activist Richard Bradley, who donned a Union Army uniform to strike the Confederate banner from a San Francisco flagpole in 1984. (He was arrested.) At the center of the exhibition is a sculpture of Matthew Fontaine Maury, a Confederate naval officer and pioneering oceanographer, who stands in front of an enormous bronze globe. Surrounding the globe are six paintings by Walter Price—layered bands of color that, on closer inspection, appear to consist of shoe prints. Price, a former Navy man, is conveying the exhaustion of Black sailors and soldiers in a military that continues to enshrine—most recently, in the names of Army bases—its Confederate enemies.

“Monuments” also raises the question of what *isn't* memorialized. Before encountering any recognizable Confederate statues, visitors at MOCA walk past granite fragments from the base of a Robert E. Lee monument, spray-painted with slogans from the Black Lives Matter protests of the early twenty-twenties. The debris somehow seems more remote from our moment than the nineteenth-century statuary, a feeling that speaks both to the whiplash of our era and to the ways that discrimination in remembrance shapes which histories are available to the public imagination. Several of the show's cleverest inclusions draw power from the contrast between

Confederate propaganda's relentless visibility and the cultivated amnesia that surrounds so much even very recent Black history.

There's the late Nona Faustine's series of self-portraits throughout New York City, in which she posed, naked, at locations linked to the slave trade. Close by is Torkwase Dyson's "Rate of Transformation, Distance" (2018-2025), a trio of trapezoidal black prisms whose unearthly smoothness gives the oblivion of the Middle Passage tangible form. An homage to millions of anonymous victims, the work implicitly rebukes the nearby figurative sculptures of slaveholders. Similarly abstract is Martin Puryear's "Tabernacle," a mixed-media sculpture shaped like the forage caps worn by soldiers on both sides of the Civil War. Through a cutaway, one can see an upholstered interior containing a siege mortar—a holy of holies, as the title suggests, for a people liberated on the battlefield.

Perhaps the most arresting alt-monument is Kahlil Robert Irving's "New Nation (States) Battle of Manassas—2014," a cast-bronze miniature model of Ferguson, Missouri. Humvees, torched cars, and police barricades litter a deserted avenue, capturing the unrest, and the subsequent law-enforcement crackdown, that followed the police killing of Michael Brown. Quasi-forensic in its precision, the work is based on thousands of satellite images—an expression of anxiety about Black history's precarity. But it also pointedly borrows the material of most Civil War memorials, as if to dramatize how the long shadow of one rebellion has deprived so many worthier ones of sunlight.

Although the bulk of Charlottesville's Stonewall Jackson was recycled for "Unmanned Drone," part of its pink-granite pediment was given to the artist Bethany Collins, who repurposed it in a sculpture called "Love is dangerous." It commemorates the very first Memorial Day, in 1865, when the Black freedmen of Charleston visited a mass grave of Union soldiers at a former Confederate prison camp. Nearly ten thousand people attended, consecrating the site with bouquets as children sang "John Brown's Body"—and yet the event was largely forgotten until an archival discovery in 1996. In remembrance, Collins carved a sliver of the Jackson pediment into tiny rose petals and scattered them around the remnant. I could almost picture the crowds walking over them, trampling out the vintage as they sang their way home. ♦

Dancing

# Jamar Roberts's Second Act

As a dancer-choreographer, Roberts has made astonishing work, but, since his retirement from the stage, his inspiration seems less sure-footed.

By Jennifer Homans

October 27, 2025



Jamar Roberts is the choreographer of the moment. His dances are in demand, with commissions from ballet and modern-dance companies across the country, including two world premières this season in New York. His work is often highly political: he has taken on gun violence, *COVID* isolation, and protest; now, with “Foreseeable Future,” for New York City Ballet, he addresses climate change. In a recent interview, he explained that he had read a newspaper report about climate protesters disrupting an N.Y.C.B. performance, and, although he found this “rude” to the dancers, he also felt that the protesters “were kinda right.” He wanted to “disrupt” what he sees as the escapist and perfectionist aspect of ballet with a dance about the threat of human extinction. A ballet, but also a provocation, one that raises a long-standing question: In a time of political crisis, what can art and artists do?

Roberts, who is forty-two and grew up in Miami, joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre at nineteen and danced there for nearly two decades, until 2021. He began to make dances in 2016, and his early choreography—astonishingly original and powerful—was inextricably tied to his own dancing and the ways he could morph his majestic six-foot-four body as if it were molten. I have rarely seen a dancer who projects such humility and calm while sustaining an intense physicality and focus on movement itself. And, although his choreography frequently treats political themes, he is a pure dance formalist. This creates a tension in his work: he doesn't make statements; he makes dances, and his best political work is expressed through the abstract movement that characterizes his dancing. A choreographer in a dancer's skin.



In 2019, for example, he made “Ode,” to Don Pullen’s jazz recording “Suite (Sweet) Malcolm (Part 1: Memories and Gunshots).” The dance opens against a colorful backdrop of flowers; a Black man lies on the ground—bare chest, loose pants, basic. He rises and dances, as though in a memory or resurrection, and five others join him. As the music moves into dissonant free-jazz exploration, the dancers ride over it, as if nothing could touch them; Roberts has said that the dance was a response to gun violence, but there are no shots or stricken bodies, until the fallen one gently falls again, the other dancers fusing, body to body, in what Roberts calls “this one long

arm,” to lower the man back into a lifeless heap. They have helped him die, and, as they fade offstage, he is just there, beneath the flowers. It is not a lament or a wail but a gentler act, like a wreath laid on a grave. Similarly, during the pandemic lockdown Roberts made “Cooped,” a profoundly disorienting, rigorously crafted five-minute filmed dance solo that he shot alone on his iPad in a small basement—his exposed body in an abstract, racially tinged study of confinement and anguish.

Roberts retired as a dancer in 2021, when he left Ailey, and since then I have often found his work wandering and diffuse, as if he’d lost some vital connection to his creative being. His first piece for the N.Y.C.B. stage, “Emanon—In Two Movements” (2022), was a pure dance tribute to Balanchine, but Roberts’s own voice seemed missing. Two years later, at Ailey, he took a more narrative approach, with “Al-Andalus Blues,” set to Miles Davis’s “Sketches of Spain” and pieces by Roberta Flack. The dance, about Moorish Spain, was stagey, heavy on pomp and gesture but slight on dancing. But another piece that year—“We the People,” for the Martha Graham Dance Company—hinted at a more promising path. It was billed as being about protest, but the topic was handled obliquely, with the protest lying in the juxtaposition of public and private states. Roberts intercut light dances, to music by Rhiannon Giddens performed by a live bluegrass band, with suspended moments of silence and darkness, as when the dancer Lloyd Knight slowly wound himself in torquing pain into a knot, as if handcuffed, or hung backward from a wide stance, hinged at the knees and dangling upside down from the hips, jugular exposed. The dance suggested a return to the inner worlds, more feeling than fact, that had made Roberts such a fine dancer.

Earlier this year, at City Center, Roberts came back to the stage as a dancer in “Dance Is a Mother,” a work that he made for the N.Y.C.B. star Sara Mearns and three other dancers, to music by Caroline Shaw. Roberts led the dancing with his arms, making shapes that broke and swooped back on themselves, pulling the rest of his body with them. In his presence, Mearns seemed clarified. Her thick balletic technique fell away to reveal something more essential—not emotion (she always had that) but a distancing from it, as if she were watching herself go by. Roberts and Mearns told an interviewer that the ballet was a reflection on their love-hate relationship with dancing, but what I saw was choreographically scattered, like material

for a dance that many of us would have liked to see—but didn’t. It was only at the very end that the work momentarily revealed itself. Mearns is just three years younger than Roberts, and it was as if he had returned to dancing to accompany her at this precipitous time in a dancer’s life: she fell to the floor, and Roberts went to her, offered a hand, and they danced briefly. He left, and she stood uncertainly near the wings until a warm light flooded over her. She stepped into it—and off the stage.

“Foreseeable Future,” at N.Y.C.B., marks a break and, to my mind, a crisis for Roberts as an artist. The curtain rose on an empty stage with a jarring electronic blast by the Venezuelan-born musician Arca. As the lights went up, we saw four spectacular winged creatures: two in flesh-colored unitards and flowing beige wings (Taylor Stanley and Ryan Tomash), and two (Mearns and Isabella LaFreniere) wearing long, red, honeycomb-patterned dresses with huge fire-red wings spreading from their backs. These elaborate costumes, by the iconoclastic Dutch fashion designer Iris van Herpen, dominated what followed: a pretty choreography of wings and light, with only the most basic movements; the women in particular were little more than porters for the striking but constrictive wings. As the birds departed, the light turned cold, and a sickly blue-green sun illuminated the backdrop. Eight dancers appeared, four of them in short, metallic triangular dresses, their feet encased in steely gray (no pointe shoes), hair spooled tight into high buns, and faces grimly fixed. They moved through angular balletic poses and patterns with machinelike precision.



I tried to follow Roberts into these warring worlds but was soon disenchanted with his dystopian dance pitting the inhuman children of technology against the beautiful birds of nature. Predictably, the angel-like birds eventually entered the robotic force field and the silvery people surrounded and obliterated them. In a parting angel duet, Stanley and Mearns elaborated on their earlier wing-and-light show. As Mearns sank lifelessly to the ground, a bot-woman laid hands on Stanley from behind, who also crumpled. The curtain fell with nature extinguished as the metallic people struck a victorious pose.

The piece premiered at N.Y.C.B.'s Fall Fashion Gala and the lavishly dressed audience seemed to love it, but I was left cold and wondering what had happened to Roberts. As a great dancer choreographing for himself and others, he seemed to access emotional states and build political dances from them. But "Foreseeable Future," I fear, falls into an age-old trap: in the name of provocation at a time of existential crisis, he has mortgaged his imagination to politics and asked some of the best dancers in the world to enact simple binaries and didactic, wooden concepts in a superficial morality tale. In the process, he lost sight of both the dancer and the dance. Nothing about "Foreseeable Future" shocks or pulls us into an intimate or moving experience. There is no depth or sensuality, no ugliness or any hint of human cruelty or passion, and even the ballet's message is diminished by its

heartless forms. Dance is a poetic language of the human body, and, as Roberts's earlier work has shown, it doesn't need to be about politics to be political. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misidentified the dancers referenced in the photo caption.*

The Current Cinema

# Emma Stone's Apocalyptic Showdown Blooms in "Bugonia"

In Yorgos Lanthimos's film, ripe with eco-paranoia, the actress and Jesse Plemons come to physical and psychological blows.

By Justin Chang

October 24, 2025



The first picture Emma Stone made with the director Yorgos Lanthimos was “The Favourite” (2018), a splendidly wicked royal romp, with a curiously prophetic title. Stone and Lanthimos have since worked together several times, and their collaboration, a mutual-favoritism society, has been hailed and sometimes reviled for its darkly exuberant sense of risk. In “Bleat” (2022), a deviation from Lanthimos norms—it was short, black-and-white, and dialogue-free—Stone played a lusty widow who miraculously fucked her dead husband back to life. More transgressive acts of sex and resuscitation awaited in “Poor Things” (2023), in which Stone incarnated the brain of a child, the body of a woman, and the skills of a mad surgeon. The world was her playpen, her boudoir, and her operating theatre.

Even for those of us who cherish Stone's earlier films—say, the way she both embodied and skewered girl-next-door innocence in the campus comedy “Easy A” (2010)—it’s been thrilling to see her embrace darkness with such wild abandon, while also maintaining meticulous control. Following the romantic musical “La La Land” (2016), the apotheosis of her sunny phase, Stone’s evolution has been nothing if not purposeful; in addition to picking boundary-pushing roles, she has emerged as a significant industry player, celebrated for her work as a producer. (Projects she has backed include the films “A Real Pain” and “I Saw the TV Glow,” both from 2024, and the miniseries “The Curse,” from 2023, in which she co-starred.)

Stone is one of the producers on Lanthimos’s new film, “Bugonia,” and also its star, and there is an acid delight in seeing her cast as a figure of ruthless authority: Michelle Fuller, the C.E.O. of Auxolith, a company that manufactures drugs and pesticides. Michelle is high-powered enough to have appeared on the covers of *Time* and *Forbes*, and to have been photographed with another famous Michelle (Obama). She’s a barracuda in a dark suit, with a blood-chilling mastery of doublespeak. Even when she outwardly affirms humane, progressive values—an inclusive corporate culture, shorter employee hours—Michelle can’t help but undercut her own sham platitudes. Recording a speech that repeatedly uses the word “diverse,” she snaps, “Can we try to *diversify* the language a little bit?” Michelle exists on a level that is invulnerable to reproach, termination, or cancellation. The only way to take her down would be through extreme stealth and deadly force, and, even then, she’s enough of a fighter that success would hardly be guaranteed.

A pair of peculiar men—Teddy (Jesse Plemons) and Don (Aidan Delbis), who are cousins—learn this the hard way. After lying in wait outside the glassy modernist fortress that Michelle calls home, they ambush her; engage in some tense, amusing slapstick fisticuffs; then overpower and sedate her. When Michelle awakens, she is tied up in the basement of Teddy’s farmhouse, her face and body smeared with anti-itch cream and her hair fully shorn—necessary precautions against her escape, Teddy insists. Baldness becomes Stone, bringing out the serpentine menace in her glare: what diabolical ideas are being cooked up inside that exposed noggin? Teddy claims to know. Michelle, he says, is an alien from the Andromeda

galaxy, bent on conquering planet Earth. He has already drilled this idea into Don, who is neurodivergent, and who makes a largely obedient accomplice—but not, in Delbis’s sweetly haunting performance, an unquestioning one.

Teddy’s reasoning is a confusion of save-the-world alarmism, garden-variety derangement, unhealed trauma, and single-minded revenge. He’s a beekeeper, and he blames Auxolith’s pesticides for accelerating colony-collapse disorder; the precarious state of his beehives becomes the film’s governing metaphor for a world on the verge of destruction. Teddy demands that Michelle take him and Don to her Andromedan leader in the hope of forcing the invaders to retreat. Michelle, unsurprisingly, says that she is not an alien. What *is* surprising is the utter rationalism of her response. She doesn’t scream or shout or plead for her life; instead, she calmly lays out the unhappy probable outcomes of Teddy and Don’s actions, and advises them to free her while they still can. So poised is Stone’s delivery that you begin to wonder if Michelle really is from Andromeda.

Stranger still, the answer scarcely seems to matter. After all, the human and the alien in Lanthimos’s films have always been divided by the most porous of membranes. Think of the cool Buñuelian satire of “The Lobster” (2016), which seemed to look down on its hapless human characters from an extraterrestrial remove—a distance magnified, visually, in “The Favourite” and “Poor Things,” which peered at their specimens through distortive fish-eye lenses. (The cinematographer Robbie Ryan has wisely relaxed the technique here, possibly figuring that it would have been redundant.) Or think—if you must—of “Kinds of Kindness” (2024), a triptych of grim tales with Stone and Plemons in various roles and psychological configurations; the result could have been the work of a Martian experimenter, subjecting the same human vessels to fresh injections of misery. The movie was a wearying experience, but it epitomized the disquieting chill at the heart—or, rather, the core—of Lanthimos’s work. Everything human is alien to him.

In bringing Stone and Plemons together once more, “Bugonia” might seem like a continuation of “Kinds of Kindness,” a fourth story that was cut and then expanded. In fact, it has a different writer (Will Tracy, who co-wrote the haute-cuisine horror-satire “The Menu,” from 2022), and is a remake of the South Korean thriller “Save the Green Planet!” (2003), which was a box-office flop at home but found cultish new life and critical support at film

festivals. “Bugonia” preserves most of the narrative particulars, though with a few gender swaps; the most significant changes have to do with form. “Save the Green Planet!” was a low-budget first feature from the director Jang Joon-hwan, and it had a rough, grotty aesthetic. It might have been produced, and not merely set, in a torturer’s basement.

“Bugonia” is an altogether more intoxicating specimen. Lanthimos’s gaze, so exactingly attuned to human ugliness, has seldom given us lovelier things to look at. The colors are richly saturated, and when something catches Ryan’s eye—say, a bee alighting on a wildflower—the images shimmer with an almost radioactive intensity. One is reminded of the chemical smog that grants us such vibrant sunsets; who ever said the end of the world wouldn’t be beautiful? The production design is by James Price, and what he and Ryan do with interior space is remarkably subversive: Teddy’s farmhouse, though strewn with lovingly detailed clutter, becomes a zone of psychological warfare as vast and cavernous as Auxolith’s headquarters. For an abduction thriller, “Bugonia” displays little interest in generating claustrophobia, and Michelle is neither a victim nor an easy point of identification. Even when she’s in shackles, she and Teddy are on unnervingly equal footing.

So, too, are Stone and Plemons. The threat of conspiracy theories run amok carries a sharper, less funny sting now than it did twenty years ago, and Plemons delivers the venom in unusually concentrated form. Teddy, as ruddy and scruffy as Michelle is pale and bald, has a courtly manner that conceals an unpredictable propensity for violence, and it is hard to imagine an actor better equipped than Plemons to make sense of the contradiction. Teddy can be methodical in his brutality, as when he subjects Michelle to sustained electric shocks; he can also lose it completely, lurching across a dining-room table and assaulting her in a murderous rage. What unites Teddy and Michelle, ironically, and makes them formidable foes, is a matter-of-fact cynicism about politics. Teddy says that he’s cycled through every position under the sun—alt-right, alt-lite, leftist, Marxist—before deciding he was done with labels forever. “Ninety-nine point nine per cent of what’s called activism,” he tells Michelle, “is really personal exhibitionism and brand maintenance in disguise.”

“Bugonia” is its own skillful exercise in brand maintenance—more an expertly engineered Lanthimos product, perhaps, than a full-bore Lanthimos triumph. But that’s more than enough. Tracy’s dialogue, though absent the staccato non sequiturs of the director’s earlier work, has a bracing nastiness; every visual flourish and every menacing thrum of the score, by Jerskin Fendrix, escalates the intensity of Stone and Plemons’s bravura showdown. This movie offers an uncommonly pleasurable descent into hell, and for that reason, I suspect, it will elude the criticisms that have been flung at two other recent provocations, Luca Guadagnino’s “After the Hunt” and Ari Aster’s “Eddington,” both of which likewise sneered at performative politics and were attacked as noxiously reactionary. It’s worth noting that Aster is a producer on “Bugonia,” and he cast Stone in “Eddington,” as a trauma survivor in thrall to her own dark conspiracies. It was one of many poor choices in that film; I’ve seldom seen an actor of Stone’s calibre so egregiously squandered. Lanthimos, it’s safe to say, would never. ♦

# Poems

- [Sorry for Existing](#)
- [The Fifties](#)

Poems

# Sorry for Existing

By Patricia Lockwood

October 27, 2025



In Art Chat, Jamie was building a piece.  
I would offer her little scenes  
Of awkwardness or intimacy—  
At the closet-size barbershop where  
The bald man, nearly breathing on my cheek,  
Commented on the wave in my hair.  
Or at the mineral shop, where the air  
Was the air of eternity—redwoods  
Fallen to the rain-forest floor, eventually  
To become bookends. Those moments  
When you feel so freshly hatched  
You don't know where to put yourself—  
Sorry for existing. Or the time I struck  
A huge pose at the cocktail party  
And then realized I was next to the  
PowerPoint and had to be a statue

For the next thirty minutes. Jamie made  
A small motion at the level of her chest  
That was like removing every Kleenex  
From a box at once and it cured—  
Illness, sorrow, not-being! I could see  
The song, the dance. “Here is a big egg.”  
My brother-in-law sends a picture  
Of a sculpture from Seoul. “An egg  
Has a simple form but connotes limitless  
Possibility. Life begins and all things  
Are created by delicate oscillations  
Felt from oValness.” Spelled like that.  
An egg must crack, is the secret.  
Must be always in the process of cracking:  
Producing feathers, newness, wings.  
When the wind flipped through Noguchi’s  
Catalog in the garden, it paused on  
1000 Horsepower Heart. It flew  
Past Miss Expanding Universe  
And came to rest on a picture of him  
Assembling Figure in his workshop.  
Always and forever assembling  
Figure, in a pair of drawstring pants.  
Sorry for existing. Black flies landed  
On the backs of my ankles and bit.  
The egg was engraved with a human  
Fingerprint. Long world, and patterns  
Flung large and small. On the endless  
Lawn, a boy ran by with a badminton  
Racquet in one hand—to pose for a  
Foreshortened picture with the birdies—  
And a small mesh carrier in the other.  
1000 Horsepower Heart is lost.  
Figure will never be assembled again.  
Littlest moment, smallest scene:  
The look that passed between

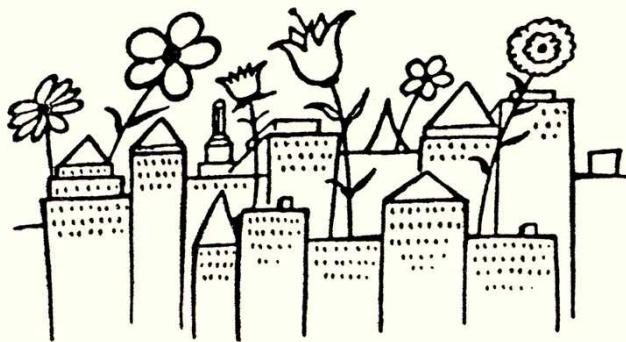
Me and his mother  
When I saw it was a living thing.

Poems

# The Fifties

By Monica Ferrell

October 27, 2025



They were such innocents  
They took straight razors to clean faces  
Smoked and drank milk at the same time  
Crammed whole junk yards with steel

Nearly never touched plastic  
Whatever they touched was real  
The TV was a box of shadows  
In the living room

And if you wanted really to go crazy  
There was always the bomb shelter  
They were babies, comparatively  
They woke each day completely new

They never had to worry about memories  
Swelling and following them like algal blooms  
Through the internet's tides of forever—  
I don't even know what starch is

And have never used Brylcreem  
Or testified, sweating liberally,  
Before the Un-American Committee  
I'll bet back then was crummy too

With the same fevers and pus  
Though they probably let you die of colon cancer  
Without making you defecate first  
Into a box lab techs will scan for polyps

And if you looked nothing at all like me  
They probably left you alone at the lunch counter  
With "Meditations in an Emergency" by O'Hara  
The cook in his white apron nods gravely  
Both of you know it's serious

*This is drawn from "The Future."*

# Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, October 27, 2025](#)

Crossword

# The Crossword: Monday, October 27, 2025

A challenging puzzle.

**By Natan Last**

October 27, 2025



# The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

## Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Dana Goodyear's piece about losing her home to the California wildfires.

October 27, 2025

### On Fire

Dana Goodyear's article about the loss of her home during the California wildfires earlier this year reminded me of when my family watched the 1991 Oakland Hills fire from our living room ("Fire Season," September 29th). I designed five new houses for families that lost their homes then, and now I'm working on one for a friend in Malibu. Thirty-four years ago, I was disappointed that the code for the replacement homes I planned required only a modest uptick in fire resistance. I find myself feeling the same way today.

Not long ago, I saw a new wood-frame house going up in the Palisades. When will we stop allowing the construction of combustible wooden boxes in combustible landscapes? Future-oriented public policies are in order: the preventable loss of thousands of structures threatens the stability of the insurance system, diverts public funding and attention from other important issues, and causes great suffering and even death. Fire-resistant materials like metal, concrete, masonry, and tile are common—let's encourage people to use them.

*Kirk E. Peterson  
Oakland, Calif.*

Goodyear's description of the despair over useless fire hydrants alludes to a fundamental issue when it comes to controlling urban conflagrations: water management. Building codes certainly need to be updated so that houses themselves are less flammable, but water should also be regulated in order to prevent rather than just fight fires. As much as eighty per cent of the water California manages, according to the state, is allocated to agriculture, which

makes up less than five per cent of the economy. A much larger fraction of this resource should be earmarked for municipalities to create hydrated green infrastructure. It is important to recognize the dry climate and to use drought-tolerant plants, but within urban environments let's not try to replicate the native wildlands that have evolved with fires. Cities are human ecologies, and people need spaces that are livable, green, and flame-resilient.

*Saxon Holt  
Novato, Calif.*

Margaret, the woman with elegant shoes but no house whom Goodyear mentions, is a friend of mine. I, too, live in the burn zone; after the evacuation, I was relieved to reach Margaret by phone. I listened to her harrowing account of escape, and I want to assure Goodyear and her readers that Margaret is now safe, and housed.

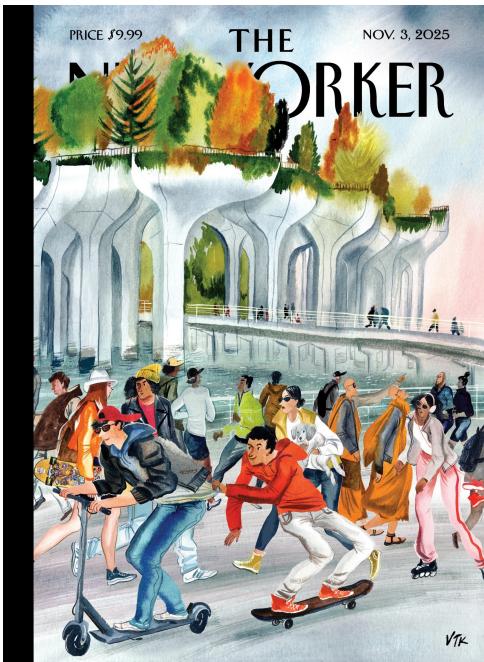
Margaret preceded me as the art director of our college's literary journal, which was modelled on this magazine, and went on to work at a prestigious publishing house in New York. As a student, Margaret would've been thrilled to be mentioned in *The New Yorker*, if not exactly in this way. (Recently, she and I had a long laugh about the irony of her fiery path to inclusion in its pages.) I hope that she can be fully acknowledged here, as the cultured and poetic human being she is.

Margaret said much the same as Goodyear about the wildfires, emphasizing that what was lost goes deeper than buildings and objects, and she wanted survivors to remember the importance of rebuilding not only structures but community. She told me that, in the days after the fires, she was embraced by people at the evacuation site who had lost everything. In that moment, her neighbors acknowledged that they all shared the predicament that Margaret had weathered for years. I also hope it's possible to re-create this type of community, one that so generously accepted an unusual woman with an uncertain address.

*Sarah Lejeune  
Topanga, Calif.*

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*Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to [themail@newyorker.com](mailto:themail@newyorker.com). Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.*



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