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# THE NEW YORKER



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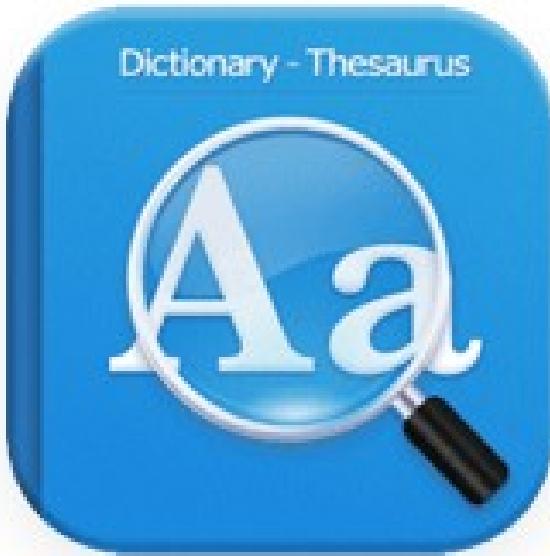
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# Goings On

- [Guanyu Xu's Powerful Photographs of Immigration Limbo](#)
- [A Chef's Guide to Sumptuous Writing](#)

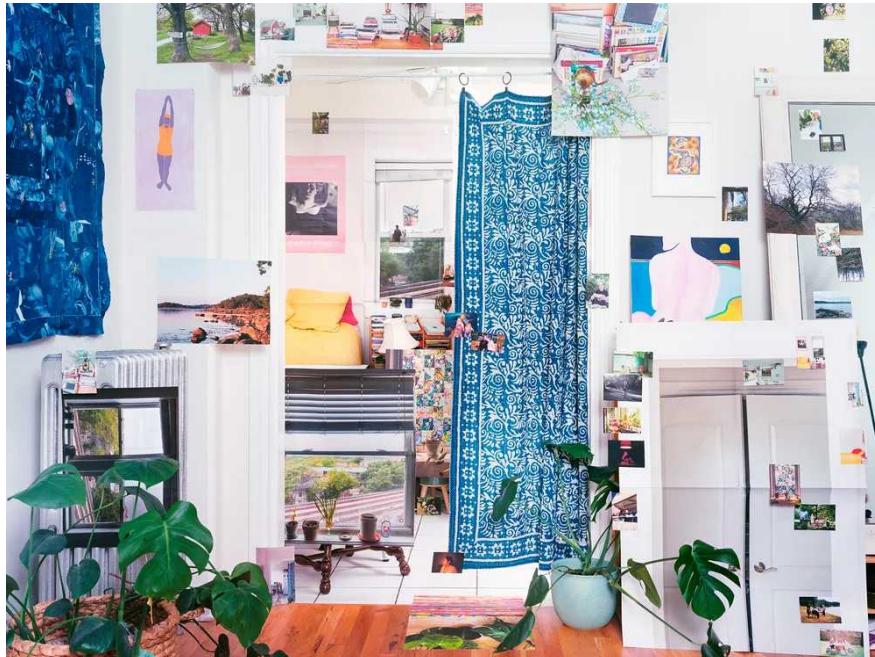
Going On

# Guanyu Xu's Powerful Photographs of Immigration Limbo

Also: Alvin Ailey's annual City Center residency, the D.I.Y. virtuoso Jay Som, Alexandra Schwartz's Shakespeare-movie picks, and more.

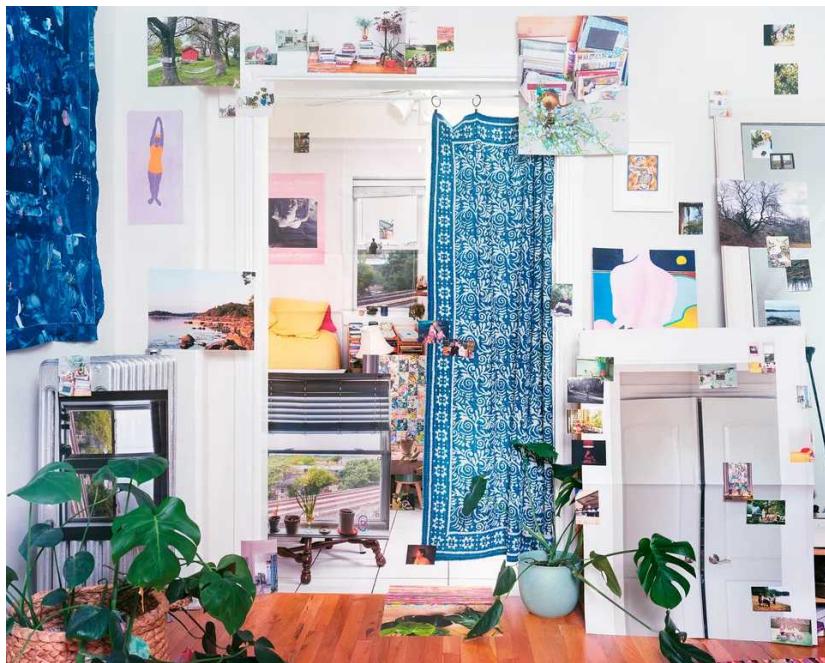
By **Vince Aletti, Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Brian Seibert, Leo Lasdun, Richard Brody, Alexandra Schwartz**

December 05, 2025



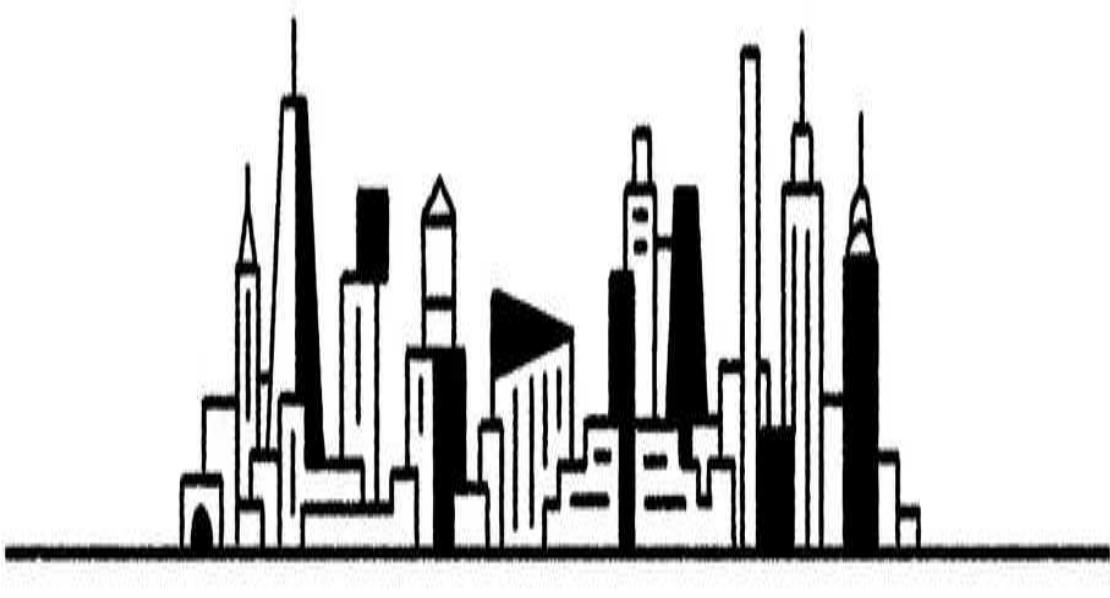
The photographer **Guanyu Xu**, born in China, based in Chicago, creates densely layered images of installations in domestic spaces that make them look like exploding scrapbooks. In 2018, he began the series “Temporarily Censored Home,” for which he queered large-scale color images of his parents’ house in Beijing with a dizzying array of snapshots and appropriated photos reflecting Xu’s otherwise unacknowledged life as a gay man. His claim to a vivid place in his family’s home, however fleeting, was both playful and powerful. Xu’s new series, “**Resident Aliens**,” was made in the apartments of immigrants who are hoping to become U.S. citizens but are still making their way through the legal process. By combining their

family photos with pictures he made in their homes, Xu helps them stake a claim on a space that looks as fragile as a house of cards.



Xu's resident aliens (he calls them his "collaborators") are from China, India, Croatia, Sweden, Canada, and elsewhere. The people in the show (at [Yancey Richardson](#), through Dec. 20) are living, for now, in many different cities in the U.S. The process of applying for legal status or citizenship involves regular recordkeeping and documentation—proof of an immigrant's day-to-day existence that Xu picks up on visually by borrowing and blowing up some of that proof, such as keepsakes and selfies. By shuffling these more personal images with his own photographs of their rooms—draperies, windows, unmade beds, a shower stall—Xu constructs a fascinating if confounding new reality, a stage set destined to be struck. Suspended between permanence and precarity, Xu's images mirror their occupants' status and state of mind.—*Vince Aletti*

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## About Town

Indie Rock

The singer-songwriter and producer Melina Duterte emerged as a lone D.I.Y. virtuoso in the mid-twenty-tens, performing as **Jay Som**. Duterte played all of the instruments on demos that she first released to Bandcamp, which then became her début, “Turn Into,” and which established her multifaceted dream-pop sound alongside her 2017 bedroom opus, “Everybody Works.” In 2019, she began focussing on her work as a producer and engineer, opening her up to more collaboration: she was in the indie-rock supergroup boygenius’s touring band, and “Belong,” her first album in six years, is her first to feature other writers and musicians. In its songs, a one-woman band finds her place: among the players.—*Sheldon Pearce ([Warsaw](#); Dec. 11.)*

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Off Broadway

The composer Philip Venables and the director Ted Huffman turn Larry Mitchell’s 1977 book “**The Faggots and Their Friends Between**

**Revolutions**” into a singspiel—revellers amble around a dim stage, accompanying themselves on harpsichord, viola da gamba, and, occasionally, plastic buckets that they beat in martial time. The first line (sung in haunting soprano by Mariamelle Lamagat) sets the key: “It’s been a long time, and we are still not free.” The show takes an oddly languorous approach to Mitchell’s unpretentious fable, a chronicle of “faggot” resistance (via nature, via the exchange of “the magical cock fluid”) against “the men.” It’s telling that the best moment comes when the deliciously mischievous Kit Green breaks the fourth wall—not to mention the ensemble’s air of reverential uplift.—Helen Shaw ([Park Avenue Armory](#); through Dec. 14.)

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Dance



Most performances by **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre** seem like dances of the gods. But in “Jazz Island,” a première by Maija García, some of the dancers do embody deities of Haitian vodou, called lwa. The work, which tells a folktale of gods interceding in the lives of men, is a return to a neglected mode of storytelling, and it rides on a rich and characterful Afro-Caribbean score by Etienne Charles. Other débuts during the company’s month at City Center—alongside repertory and plenty of “Revelations”—include a work by Matthew Neenan with a score by Heather Christian (a

MacArthur Fellow this year) and a brief reimagining, by Jamar Roberts, of Ailey's 1961 "Hermit Songs."—*Brian Seibert* ([New York City Center](#); through Jan. 4.)

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Art

"Beauty has no obvious use...yet civilization could not do without it," Sigmund Freud wrote in 1930. Today, at the "**Dress, Dreams, and Desire**" exhibition, at F.I.T., beauty abounds, as the show parses the historical dialogue between fashion and psychoanalysis. How do clothes reveal our secret fantasies? Why do we dream about being naked? If a man wears a particularly long necktie, is he compensating for something? Such questions are posed and addressed in the exhibit's sensually lit chambers, populated by waifish mannequins decked out in extravagant frocks. Gowns from Gaultier, McQueen, Versace, and others are put in conversation with the heavyweights of psychoanalytic thought—mainly Lacan and Freud—via informative commentary curated by Valerie Steele, the museum's director.—*Leo Lasdun* ([The Museum at FIT](#); through Jan. 4.)

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Broadway



Arriving in New York without a solid plan is both the topic and the plight of the musical **“Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York),”** by Jim Barne and Kit Buchan, directed by Tim Jackson, transferring from London’s West End. A naïve Brit, Dougal (Sam Tutty), and a world-weary New Yorker, Robin (Christiani Pitts), meet when Dougal comes to town to see his estranged father marry Robin’s sister; their titular errand leads to sweeter things. Buchan’s story wouldn’t fill a side plate; any of his many plot holes could swallow it. The extraordinary Tutty, however, is a whole dish: he manages to play both adorably inaccurate (“It’s the capital city of the U.S.A.!”) and secretly swaggy; Robin falls for him long after we do.—H.S. ([Longacre](#); open run.)

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Movies

Amalie R. Rothschild’s first film, **“Woo Who? May Wilson,”** from 1969—a thirty-four-minute short, now streaming—raises a portrait of an artist to a vision of the times. Wilson, who was sixty-three during the filming, was a homemaker in suburban Maryland whose artistic pursuits prompted her husband to end the marriage. In 1966, she moved to Manhattan, where Rothschild interviewed her and filmed her in daily life, whether at mundane tasks or in the creation of her distinctive work—especially collages featuring

her comedic photo-booth self-portraits and assemblages of domestic objects. The movie is also an inspired collage of Wilson's joyful but tenuous social life with younger artists, her contemplative solitude, her stringent artistic self-critique, and her indignant reflections on the domestic oppressions borne by women of her generation.—*Richard Brody (OVID.tv and [Kanopy](#).)*

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## What to Watch

*Alexandra Schwartz on her favorite Shakespeare movies.*



With the release of Chloé Zhao’s “Hamnet,” the Bard is back onscreen—not that he ever went away. Here is a highly subjective list of five of my favorite Shakespeare film adaptations.

**“[Much Ado About Nothing](#)” (1993).** I grew up in the nineteen-nineties, when the names Shakespeare and Kenneth Branagh seemed inextricably entwined. Branagh’s sumptuously sun-dappled Messina remains my picture of heaven. Michael Keaton as the pompous constable Dogberry is ridiculous in the best sense, and Emma Thompson’s barbed-tongued Beatrice is a paragon performance of wit, heartbreak, and joy.

**“A Midsummer Night’s Dream” (1935).** After the Nazis confiscated the celebrated Austrian stage director Max Reinhardt’s theatres in Germany, Reinhardt came to Hollywood and directed this masterpiece for Warner Brothers. (His fellow-emigré, William Dieterle, co-directed.) Shimmering with German Expressionist style—and reams of decorative cellophane—the film features Olivia de Havilland at the very start of her career, as Hermia, alongside James Cagney, as Bottom, and a fourteen-year-old Mickey Rooney, as Puck.

**“Throne of Blood” (1957).** The Scottish play finds gorgeous, terrifying expression in Akira Kurosawa’s war-soaked vision of feudal Japan. Kurosawa’s black-and-white images are indelible—instead of Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters, we get an eerie old man slowly spinning a wheel with a stick—as is the sublimely ominous atmosphere. The climactic scene, in which Washizu, the Macbeth figure, played by Toshiro Mifune, is assailed by his enemies’ arrows, remains one of my favorites in all of cinema.

**“Chimes at Midnight” (1966).** For decades, it was nearly impossible to watch Orson Welles’s tribute to Falstaff, which Welles pieced together from the “Henry” plays. That it can now be summoned up to stream in an instant is something of a miracle. Welles commits himself so deeply to Shakespeare’s most ingenious comic creation that the film has often been seen as a kind of self-portrait, filled in equal measure with delightful ribaldry and heartbreaking pathos.

**“10 Things I Hate About You” (1999).** Did I mention that I’m a child of the nineties? Gil Junger’s rom-com manages to be both one of the best high-school comedies of an era full of them and a stellar contemporary adaptation of the very unmodern “Taming of the Shrew.” Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles, as bad boy Patrick Verona and the rebellious Kat Stratford, both got their big breaks here, and watching Ledger croon Frankie Valli’s “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” still transmits an electric thrill.

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

- [Fighting phone noise](#)
- [All your “Heated Rivalry” questions answered](#)

- Claire Danes loves “Las Culturistas”

# A Chef's Guide to Sumptuous Writing

How the restaurateur Gabrielle Hamilton—of the beloved New York City establishment Prune—became a noted memoirist.

November 26, 2025

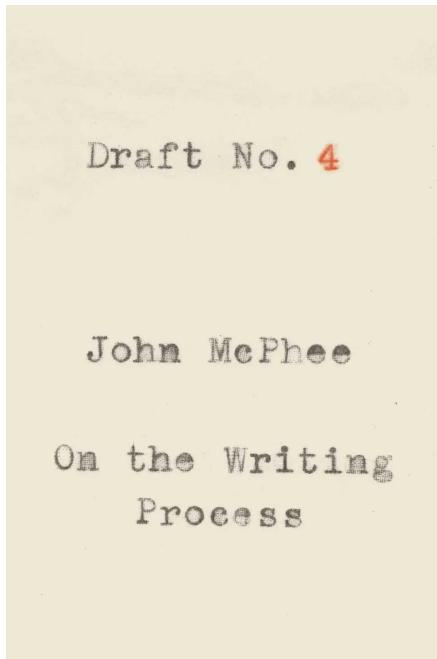


From 1999 to 2020, Prune, a thirty-seat restaurant in the East Village, was a New York City institution. Its creator was Gabrielle Hamilton, a woman who (as *The New Yorker* noted in [a review](#) shortly after the restaurant's opening) "hails from New Jersey but cooks more like a French countrywoman." That may be true—the restaurant was renowned for, among other things, radishes served with butter and salt. But Hamilton is also a celebrated author. In 2011, she published "[Blood, Bones & Butter](#)," a memoir that is about her chaotic upbringing in rural Pennsylvania as much as it is about her career. Hamilton returned to the subject of her family with "[Next of Kin](#)," which was released earlier this fall. Its characters include her overbearing yet emotionally detached father and her mother, a former ballerina who "taught her everything" she knows "about eating and cooking"—and from whom she was estranged for thirty years. Not long ago, Hamilton joined us to

discuss a few of the books that have guided her as a writer. Her remarks have been edited and condensed.

## Draft No. 4

by John McPhee



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

This is [McPhee](#)'s guide to writing nonfiction. I don't know. It might be out of fashion to admire such rigor, but I will still argue for it—I will still argue that you should have one hundred conversations with your editor about a word. Does that make me nostalgic? I feel like recently lots of people around me have been saying that we live in a “post-literate world.” I guess, if that's true, I'm going to stand on the deck of the Titanic. I just think that we should insist that words matter. It's important that your facts are checked, and sometimes it's important for a certain formality to be there on the page. And McPhee, here, really makes the argument for careful, correct craft beautifully. He articulates a truth that isn't faddish or trendy—a kind of truth that doesn't expire.

## The Writing Life

*by Annie Dillard*

# THE *Writing* LIFE

Winner  
of the  
Pulitzer  
Prize  
ANNIE  
DILLARD

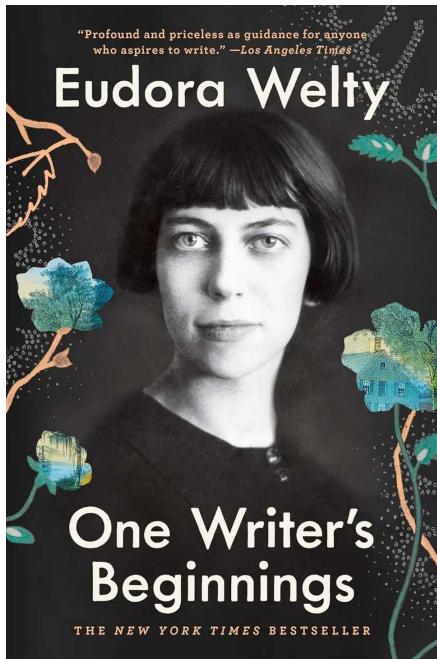
[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

It took me forever to read Dillard's breakout book, "[Pilgrim at Tinker Creek](#)," which came out in 1974. But once I got on to her, I couldn't get away from her. I just think that when you read her writing, you get to witness an astonishing mind at work.

"The Writing Life" is inspirational to me because, among other reasons, Dillard is so fucking funny. She has a profound and self-deprecating humor. Dillard has always felt like a person who can be playful and silly even while being incredibly smart. She reminds me of the people that I met in graduate school who picked up the very difficult language of theory but were so fluent that they could just riff and have fun and play. Meanwhile, back then, I felt like I was barely hanging on to the back of the bus by the fender while it was barreling ahead.

## One Writer's Beginnings

*by Eudora Welty*

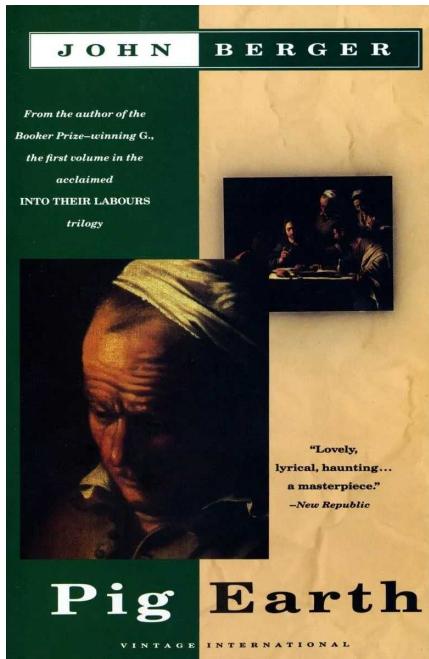


[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

I bought this book when I was seventeen, and I really admire it. It's all about how Welty became a writer—or, really, how she started to notice that maybe she had the quality of observation that makes someone a writer. There's a part where she's lying on the floor of the dining room of her house, reading. It so mirrored my own existence as a young person. I started to write young, and at the time I was such an observer—a person who noticed all the little sounds in the house, who liked to watch the particles of dust in the shafts of sunlight. It was just so exciting and so satisfying to read a description of a similar experience in Welty's book and to think, Oh, my god, I'm doing that, too. Maybe I'm a writer, too.

## Pig Earth

*by John Berger*



[Amazon](#)

I love [Berger's](#) “[Into Their Labours](#)” series, but I would say that “Pig Earth” is the freaking Bible for me. I always look to this book as a guide for food writing. The way he talks about food is interesting because it’s not really about the food—it’s a way of talking about peasantry, and agricultural labor, and class. For me, even when I’m writing about the tomato salad at such-and-such restaurant or about the cheese at such-and-such cheese store, as I did when I had [a column](#) at the *Times*, it’s important for me to have writing like Berger’s in the back of my mind.

There’s something about food writing—for me, at least—where you can feel like it’s cheap and disposable. It can disappear in two weeks. And to an extent it probably should. But there’s something about Berger’s approach—which is in all of his books—that feels evergreen. He’s always talking about the brandy or the soup or the wine. How a character is collecting walnuts or has a fistful of berries in her hand. Or how the leeks are under a bank of snow outside as someone is lying on their deathbed inside. He makes food a part of life.

# The Talk of the Town

- [The Trump Administration's Chaos in the Caribbean](#)
- [The Many Stages of Cynthia Nixon](#)
- [Baubles Melting on an Open Fire](#)
- [Marilyn Minter's Rapturous Visions](#)
- [What's the Fastest Subway Line? \(Yes, There Is One\)](#)

Comment

# The Trump Administration's Chaos in the Caribbean

Pete Hegseth's conduct is a case study in how the government's growing sense of heedlessness and unaccountability is shaping disastrous policy.

By Jonathan Blitzer

December 07, 2025



In a federal courtroom in New York City last year, a crime boss from the most notorious drug cartel in Honduras took the stand to testify against Juan Orlando Hernández, the country's former President. "They should have tried to catch us," he said, of the Honduran government, which Hernández led from 2014 to 2022. Instead, "they allied with us." The former President was found to be responsible for more than four hundred tons of cocaine reaching the United States. The Justice Department had been building the case against many of his family members and associates for years, most notably during Donald Trump's first term.

On November 28th, two days before national elections in Honduras, President Trump announced that he was pardoning Hernández, who was just a year into a forty-five-year sentence he was serving in a federal prison in West Virginia. “It was a Biden setup,” Trump said. “I looked at the facts.” Though the White House denied it, such facts had apparently come via the political operative Roger Stone, who’d handed the President a letter from Hernández in which the former President called Trump “Your Excellency” and compared his plight to Trump’s own “persecution.” The two men’s shared resentment of Joe Biden evidently proved more important than Hernández’s rap sheet. Trump didn’t seem troubled by the fact that combatting the flow of drugs into the U.S. is his Administration’s principal rationale for launching a string of boat attacks in the Caribbean. Those attacks, in which the U.S. military, without evidence, has targeted alleged drug traffickers and killed at least eighty-seven people to date, appear to violate national and international law.

The same day that Trump announced the pardon, the *Washington Post* published a story saying that the Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, had reportedly given a verbal order to kill two survivors of a September strike in the Caribbean. It is a war crime to kill anyone who has surrendered or is incapacitated. Hegseth, who had watched the operation from a remote location, immediately deflected responsibility to Admiral Frank M. Bradley, the commanding officer in charge of the operation. “I did not personally see survivors,” Hegseth said. “This is called the fog of war.”

On Thursday, Bradley briefed members of Congress in a closed-door session at the Capitol, where he denied that there had been an order to kill survivors and justified the second strike on the ground that undestroyed cocaine on the boat posed a “risk.” Predictably, the vast majority of Republicans were ready to move on, but lawmakers who saw the footage described the two survivors clinging to part of the boat. “How is that legitimate,” Senator Chris Coons, of Delaware, asked of the strikes, “if President Trump can pardon a convicted narcoterrorist trafficker?” By that evening, Hegseth was facing another scandal: the inspector general at the Department of Defense had just released to Congress its report that he had “created a risk to operational security” by sharing classified details of an attack in Yemen in a group chat on his phone. “Total exoneration,” Hegseth wrote on X.

Hegseth's conduct is a case study in how the Administration's growing sense of heedlessness and unaccountability is shaping disastrous policy. Because the President had labelled several drug cartels "terrorist organizations" in a series of executive orders, the government simply asserted that suspected traffickers were "unlawful combatants" who could be summarily killed. Trump, citing drug-overdose deaths in the U.S., claimed that the boat attacks were a form of national self-defense. But the drug overwhelmingly responsible for such deaths in the U.S. is fentanyl, which doesn't come from South America.

The idea that these attacks are about stopping drugs was never credible; they instead reflect the President's increasing fixation on Venezuela and the belief inside the Administration that its authoritarian leader, Nicolás Maduro, needs to be removed from office. Few outside Maduro's circle of loyalists and abettors deny that he is a repressive, corrupt leader who's collapsed the economy and brutally punished critics. Last summer, he declared victory in an election that he appears to have lost badly. How to deal with Maduro's regime is a legitimately pressing question. But wrapped up in the case for his ouster are all of Trump's most dangerous proclivities, including his anti-immigrant sentiments and his disregard for laws constraining his power.

At the start of his second term, Trump declared a Venezuelan prison gang called Tren de Aragua a foreign terrorist organization and falsely claimed that the Maduro government was directing it to use migrants to invade the U.S. This became the basis, in March, for invoking the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, a law previously used on just three occasions in American history, and only during times of war. According to a source with close ties to the Administration, Venezuela became a natural target: Maduro was an international pariah, and his ability to strike back seemed relatively limited.

Trump has now ordered the largest military buildup in the region since the Cuban missile crisis. Yet key questions remain flagrantly unaddressed: What will happen if Maduro refuses to leave office? In the event that he does leave, how will the U.S. prevent a power vacuum that would lead to further violence and instability? The Venezuelan regime could well survive Maduro's absence, with his second-in-command, Diosdado Cabello, or any number of other senior figures poised to succeed him. The Trump Administration's logic has seemed to depend on the notion that the

Venezuelan opposition, now led by this year's Nobel Peace Prize laureate, María Corina Machado, would take over the government in an interim capacity. Experts, however, caution that this would be exceedingly complicated. Machado is opposed by the military officers whose support she would need for her or a close ally to assume power. Machado has championed Trump, in anticipation of his help in dislodging Maduro, but if the regime can reëntrench itself this endorsement would damage her reputation and set back her cause.

Much, as usual, will hinge on the unpredictable impulses of the President. When Maduro's advisers offered to cut a deal with the U.S., in October, Trump called off diplomatic talks. Weeks later, after rumors of an assassination plot against Maduro, the two men spoke by phone. An invasion would be catastrophic, but the current course of brinkmanship isn't sustainable. Trump is in a bind but doesn't seem to know it, or care. Hours after Thursday's briefing about a potential war crime, the Pentagon announced that it had killed four more people in another strike, this time in the Pacific. ♦

The Boards

# The Many Stages of Cynthia Nixon

Now starring in her fourteenth Broadway production, the “Sex and the City” actress reflects on Mike Nichols, F. Murray Abraham, and Times Square sleaze.

By Sarah Larson

December 08, 2025



This week, Cynthia Nixon—star of “Sex and the City,” “The Gilded Age,” and, to many, the 2018 New York gubernatorial primary—makes her fourteenth Broadway début, in “*Marjorie Prime*,” at the Hayes. The play, by Jordan Harrison, centers on themes of family stories, aging, and memory (June Squibb, ninety-six, plays her mother), and, one recent morning, Nixon, a lifelong Manhattanite whose stage career began at fourteen, in 1980, went to the theatre district to reflect on some memories of her own. She headed from her home, in midtown, where she lives with her wife and two of their sons, to the subway, wearing a gray wool jacket, an autumnal plaid scarf, and a Wonder Woman backpack. Transferring to the 1 at Times Square, she admired a pair of subway-themed mosaics evoking Persephone (“Look, there’s a pomegranate!”) and interpreted them while descending the stairs.

“It’s like the subway is Hell,” she said, looking pleased. “And going into the subway is like Persephone descending to the underworld.” On the platform: a “Marjorie Prime” ad. Vulgar graffiti floated around her co-stars—Squibb, Danny Burstein, and Christopher Lowell (“‘Stop asking your grandma to give you head!’” Nixon read, laughing)—but the image of her, elegant in a pale-blue suit, remained unscrawled upon.

Outside, memories were everywhere. At Fiftieth and Broadway, she nodded toward the Gershwin, formerly the Uris. “Danny Burstein and I were just saying, ‘The King and I’ was playing there forever, and Yul Brynner’s face was just—” She made an expansive gesture. Walking briskly, she reminisced about the Circle in the Square and Mars 2112, the immersive space restaurant of yore. (“So fun—and they recognized me, so the aliens would linger by our table.”) Striding toward the Walter Kerr, she said, “I did ‘Angels’ there”—the original production of “Angels in America,” which she joined in 1994. “Marcia Gay Harden and Ron Leibman left, and Murray Abraham, my old friend, and I came in.” She’d met F. Murray Abraham at sixteen, in Prague, as a bonnet-wearing maid alongside his scheming Salieri in Miloš Forman’s “Amadeus.” (Nixon, then a junior at Hunter College High School, flew back and forth to shoot.) Of “Angels,” she said, “I remember doing it on Gay Pride weekend—it was like being in the U.S.O.” At a fire station, she said, “They have on their truck ‘Never Missed a Performance.’ When I was in the Drama Dept.”—a theatre company that she co-founded with Douglas Carter Beane, J. Smith-Cameron, and others—“we took some early publicity photos at the Biltmore, which was burned out at the time, and also the fire station.” She laughed at a vestige of old Times Square sleaze. (“Femme Fun,” she read. “‘Romantic lingerie’!”) Two tourists from Puerto Rico stopped her to rave about “Sex and the City,” “la nueva” (“And Just Like That . . .”), and “la de época” (“The Gilded Age”). Nixon beamed; they took a selfie.

Next: the Manhattan Theatre Club (“I did ‘Wit’ here, and ‘Rabbit Hole’”), the Glass House Tavern (“Still a good place to eat”), and the Barrymore. “I did ‘Hurlyburly’ here. I think I did ‘Indiscretions’ here,” she said. (She did.) “This is the *Ethel* Barrymore. Everybody just calls it the Barrymore, but it’s not John, it’s not Lionel—it’s *Ethel*.” In 1984, as a student at Barnard, Nixon performed in David Rabe’s “Hurlyburly” and Tom Stoppard’s “The Real Thing”—both directed by Mike Nichols—simultaneously, her entrances and

exits timed just right. “I would walk through the Edison hotel” as a shortcut between the theatres, she said. She did it again now—tourists, red velvet, Christmas jazz—and emerged by the Richard Rodgers (“Hamilton”). “Nichols directed by anecdote, and kind of by parable,” she said. “He would tell you all these things about his own life. It wasn’t name-dropping, because those were all his friends.” He was warm, too. Whoopi Goldberg was performing her groundbreaking self-titled show at the Lyceum, and “she was lonely because she was in a one-woman show,” Nixon said. “Mike said, ‘Oh, the “Hurlyburly” cast will be your cast.’ ” After work, they’d all hang out.

“I got to see Mike a couple of weeks before he died,” in 2014, she went on. “We”—Glenn Close, Whoopi Goldberg, Christine Baranski, Nixon—“went out with him for his birthday. What was great was, I remembered his old stories about his children, and I told those stories back to him. And he didn’t remember them. He couldn’t remember a lot at that point, but I think also they were just random stories. But, when he told you a story, you remembered it.” ♦

Deep Breath Dept.

# Baubles Melting on an Open Fire

A third-generation German glassblower and Santa look-alike struts his stuff at John Derian.

By Emilia Petrarca

December 08, 2025



Just before Thanksgiving, Steffen Flessa lit a blowtorch inside John Derian's Holiday Shop, on East Second Street. The last time he'd visited the store was in 2018, when Derian first invited him to New York after encountering his work at an ornament fair in Frankfurt, Germany, on a tip from a Martha Stewart staffer. "It was love at first sight," Derian recalled.

Originally from Lauscha, a small German town where the glass bauble is said to have been invented, in the nineteenth century, Flessa is a third-generation glassblower and the owner of Nostalgie-Christbaumschmuck, an ornament-making outfit founded by his grandfather. Large and jolly, wearing a red velvet vest, he looked the part. One customer pointed to a Santa ornament and told Flessa, "This could be you!"

“The vest is just for show,” Flessa said, in a deep baritone, after taking a cigarette break. “I like my sweatshirts.”

He’d arrived the day before with his partner, Olina Cmielova. Derian had asked him back this year to do an in-store demonstration because of increased demand for Nostalgie-Christbaumschmuck’s vintage-y ornaments. “A couple of years ago, our ‘classic tree’ was not popular,” Derian said, referring to a tree decorated with such stalwarts as snowmen and angels. “Last year, it was.”

Flessa is not fazed by trends. His grandfather started making ornaments a hundred years ago, but stopped at the beginning of the Second World War. As legend has it, a glassblower in Lauscha, nestled in a valley at the base of the Thuringian Forest, could not afford the fruit that affluent Germans hung in baskets on their Christmas trees, so they made their own. Then came the baubles. By the thirties, Lauscha produced ninety-five per cent of the Christmas ornaments sold in the United States.

“It’s always Christmas,” Cmielova said. She wore a Christmas sweater featuring a rocking horse. While Flessa blows, she paints.

It’s tedious work, baubling. The youngest blower at Nostalgie-Christbaumschmuck is fifty. “Young people don’t like to do it because sometimes you’re blowing three thousand a day,” Cmielova said. “It’s boring for them.”

“In the socialistic time, they had three to four hundred glassblowers in our area,” Flessa said. “Every second house was a glassblower.” Now there are fewer than forty.

But eager recruits of all ages showed up at John Derian for a chance to blow their own baubles. First, Flessa demonstrated. He picked up a glass pipette and spun it around in the blowtorch flame as if it were a marshmallow over a campfire. When it began to glow, “like honey,” as Cmielova said, he put the tube into his mouth and blew. His cheeks puffed and his eyes crossed. A small bubble began to form. After about a minute, he inserted the hot glass ball into a hundred-year-old mold, which resembled ancient wooden salad tongs, and out popped Santa.

“You try it,” Flessa told the crowd. Brave volunteers stepped up. Flessa held the tube to their lips and ordered them to blow. “Quickly!” he said. “More! More!”

Some were more successful than others. “That’s hard,” one woman said, after producing a ball that looked more like a peanut. “It’s not like blowing birthday candles.”

“Two bucks? Three?” Flessa joked, of her ornament’s potential price.

“If I weren’t a smoker, I could do it,” one man said. He took home a heart-shaped ornament on which Cmielova had painted the name of his dog, Bagel.

A shy participant ended up blowing the biggest bauble of the night. “Any bigger and it would explode,” Flessa said.

“That’s what she said,” one shopper muttered.

Nearby was a mushroom ornament the size of a human head which cost a hundred and eighty dollars. The most expensive ornament on the shelves was a three-hundred-and-fifty-two-dollar dragon from Poland.

“A dollar a day,” Derian deadpanned. “I’ve sold a bunch.”

Every year, his top-selling ornaments are ones resembling oysters, champagne bottles, and tins of caviar. The all-pickle tree is also a hit, and “somebody already came in asking for a pastrami sandwich,” he said. He mused that he can never seem to stock enough dog breeds. “There’s always someone who’s, like, ‘Oh, you don’t have a Snickerdoodle?’ ”His personal favorite is a handblown plastic water bottle—“the thing you don’t want in your life, ever”—which goes for forty dollars.

But, that night, it was the classic designs of Nostalgie-Christbaumschmuck that got the attention. “It’s still warm,” one customer whispered, holding her bauble in her hand.

“It reminds them of their childhood,” Flessa said. He makes fifteen hundred different ornament designs. “Every one has a story to tell,” he said, whether

about the birth of Jesus or birds in the forest. As for his own tree at home, he doesn't need to decorate; it's up all year. On Christmas, he eats carp for dinner and goes to church. In January, a month before the Frankfurt ornament fair, it will be Christmastime all over again. ♦

Middle Finger Dept.

# Marilyn Minter's Rapturous Visions

The artist was shunned by the art world for being too vulgar. Her new show embraces the female body, with muses like Lizzo, Padma Lakshmi, and Jane Fonda.

By Dana Goodyear

December 08, 2025



In the late nineties, the artist Marilyn Minter was in exile. After a sexually explicit show called “Porn Grid” upset critics, several galleries dropped her. She turned to painting images of things that she knew existed but had never seen represented in art: a glitter-encrusted glam-rock eye, girls’ mouths with lustrous red lips and food stuck in their teeth. While she painted, the Clinton-impeachment hearings played on the radio. “I listened to every minute of it,” she said the other day. “I was thinking to myself, If I was her, I would have fucked his brains out.”

Minter, who is seventy-seven, with reddish-purple hair and glinting blue eyes, was sitting on a folding chair in the middle of the art gallery Regen Projects, in Hollywood, surrounded by a newly installed group of her

realistic portraits. She begins each painting with a photo shoot, then uses Photoshop to create composites, searching for her subject's essential characteristics. Like a sketch, the resulting image becomes a study for the painting, which she renders in layers of enamel sign paint on sheet metal. Minter did one of Monica Lewinsky, in 2023. "I met her at one of Cindy Sherman's New Year's Eve parties," she said. "She was slut-shamed so bad. She's my hero because she lived."

The show featured other Minter heroes, including Jane Fonda giving the finger and two large-scale odalisques: Padma Lakshmi, in a bra and a boa, eating oranges, and Lizzo, in a corset, holding an iPhone. Historically, Minter said, such paintings were a sanctioned form of titillation. "They were tits and ass for the public," she said. "I decided I would make my odalisques women who are really proud of their bodies. They have agency. Lizzo's talking on the phone to her boyfriend, Myke. She's actually talking to him while I'm shooting her, and she's shooting me, too, sometimes."

Minter, who wore braces until high school, grew up in Florida, with a drug-addled single mother. Once a glamorous Southern belle, her mother routinely called her a whore, despairing that she wasn't invited to be a débutante. (There was no way: Minter had been jailed at sixteen for using her drawing skills to make fake I.D.s.) Minter, who herself struggled with drugs—she started freebasing as a kid—has been clean for forty years. She and her husband, a former portfolio manager at Morgan Stanley, have matching twenty- and thirty-five-year anniversary tattoos. If you're fit and healthy, she says, you can "have sex until you die." She's made art about that—a series, using models and about forty dildos, collected in a book called "Elder Sex."

"All my work has been about getting rid of shame," Minter said, specifically the shame that accrues to women in the public eye: Pamela Anderson, Miley Cyrus. She regrets not being able to schedule Virginia Giuffre, a survivor of Jeffrey Epstein and an advocate for sex-trafficking victims, whom she had planned to photograph. Giuffre died by suicide in April.

Also in the column of righting historical wrongs? Pubic hair. Why has art history pretended that it doesn't exist? "I could find maybe ten paintings where the artist paints it. Pubic hair was vulgar," Minter said. "So I decided

to make pubic-hair paintings that are gorgeous. They’re so beautiful you can put them over your living-room couch.”

The following night, Minter attended the West Coast première of “Pretty Dirty,” a documentary about her work, directed by Jennifer Ash Rudick and Amanda Benchley. Jane Fonda, whose photo shoot with Minter is featured in the film, arrived wearing a periwinkle pants suit. Minter told her that she’d made a rapturous portrait of her but that, judging it too proper, she’d had to start over. “You looked gorgeous, but I couldn’t make you a stately elder,” Minter said, apologetically.

“Instead, you got this,” Fonda said, extending a middle finger banded in a thick gold ring.

“You’re a troublemaker,” Minter said. “I had no choice. I got so mad at Trump.”

Talk turned to politics. Members of Minter’s studio had spent months knocking on doors for Zohran Mamdani, the thirty-four-year-old democratic socialist who was just elected mayor. Minter said that she got so caught up in scrolling election news—from Mamdani to California’s passage of a redistricting measure—that she lost her winning streak on Connections. “I want to paint Gavin Newsom,” she said. “He was one of the first to stand up to Trump.”

“What else do you want to do to him?” Kenny Scharf, an artist she has known for decades, asked.

It was almost time for the movie to begin. Minter settled into a big red theatre seat next to Fonda. “Would you like some popcorn?” Fonda asked her.

“I don’t think so,” Minter replied. “Because then it will be stuck in my teeth.” ♦

Here To There Dept.

# What's the Fastest Subway Line? (Yes, There Is One)

The M.T.A.'s new "Love Letter to the Subway" tells all about the underground system beloved—and hated—by New Yorkers.

By Ben McGrath

December 08, 2025



Ten trains converge at Fulton Center, in lower Manhattan, which makes it a fitting setting for the short video that's been playing at the top of every hour on screens throughout the station. Titled "A Data Love Letter to the Subway," the video, which will continue running through early January, uses snaking black lines to depict the city's trains as characters in a kind of infrastructural dance, like Yankee Stadium's "Great Subway Race" without the competition. "The A and C travel together for 18 miles," the video's printed narration begins. "However, for 14 miles the A and C go their own ways." This is only somewhat true, as a recent visit to the offices of Pentagram, the design firm that produced the video, revealed. The A indeed runs on for thirty-two-plus miles, the longest "single-seat ride" in the

system, according to M.T.A. parlance. The C doesn't so much diverge at a certain point as give up, in East New York, while the A seeks the ocean breeze of the Rockaways.

Giorgia Lupi, a Pentagram partner and the lead designer on the project, which is meant to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of M.T.A. Arts & Design, had projected a vast spreadsheet on a wall. The document contained the source material for her video and then some—perhaps one of the largest assemblages of subway-related miscellany. Nearly seven hundred miles of track: New York to South Bend, or to Charleston. Sixty-seven hundred and sixty-seven individual cars. (Don't tell a middle schooler.) More than a billion annual rides. "I love data," Lupi said. "What is the tallest station above ground?" (Smith and Ninth: eighty-seven and a half feet.) "What is the fastest train?" (Both the L and the M reach forty-five miles per hour.) "What is the deepest station, the longest line, the shortest line, and the longest distance between stations?" Answers: 191st Street, the A, the Forty-second Street Shuttle, and the three-and-a-half-mile stretch over Jamaica Bay between Broad Channel and Howard Beach/J.F.K. Airport. A couple of trains that never meet: the 2 and the G.

Lupi hopes eventually to turn the idea into a children's book. "I've always been fascinated by trying to unpack what I believe can be really a magical way to see what we usually complain about," she said. "Because as much as, sure, we want them to not have raised the prices, or to be more on time, or to be less crowded, I kind of see it as this magic underground landscape." Or aboveground, as it were: one of the nice things about the video is the way in which it sorts the various train lines by their relative exposure to sunlight. The N and the Z, for instance, cover more miles up top than below, while the R travels the farthest in darkness.

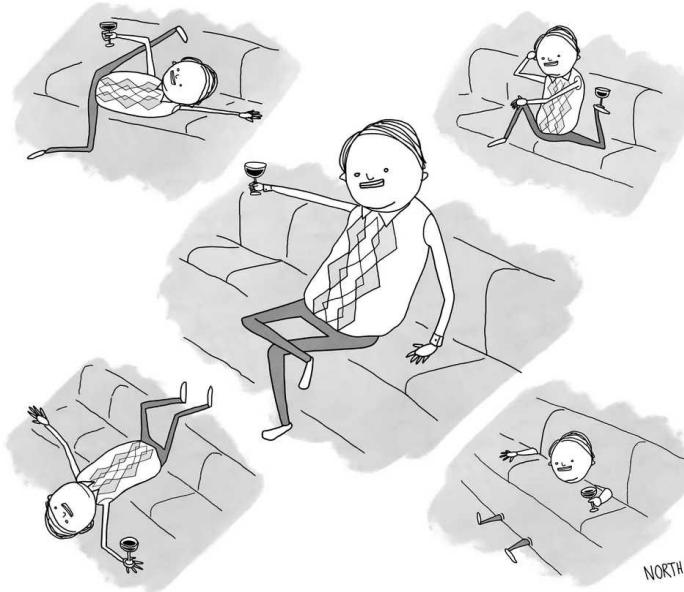
Lupi's interlocutor wasn't unfond of data himself but couldn't help casting his eyes toward the "Missed You" component of her spreadsheet, a compilation of "missed connections" like those found on Craigslist. The video includes two sample laments:

We locked eyes for an eternity as you got out at 42nd Street and descended deeper into the subway abyss. I was already late.

I got off at Astor Place. You stayed on. When I was leaving the train, you smiled at me, I smiled back.

They were slightly generic by design, Lupi explained, adding that anything too funny would distract from the closing message that “we’re all part of the same story.”

DAN ATTEMPTS TO SIT CASUALLY AT THE HOLIDAY PARTY



In terms of data, the candidates compiled in the spreadsheet skewed heavily in favor of the L and the G—no great surprise. (Lupi lived in Greenpoint when the project began and has since moved to Fort Greene. “I’m struggling a little bit with the Q,” she said.) A few of the unchosen entries stood out:

I’m the tatted curly haired goth bimbo that forgot to ask your name and how I know you.

We see each other almost every week day morning, but I didn’t realize how cute you were until I dropped my umbrella on your thigh.

We shot a few glances back and forth and then you whipped out The Empath’s Survival Guide.

The interlocutor was soon on an uncrowded uptown 2. Ads for a courtesy campaign filled the car. “Don’t be someone’s subway story,” they warned. ♦

# Reporting & Essays

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- [And Your Little Dog, Too](#)
- [Oliver Sacks Put Himself Into His Case Studies. What Was the Cost?](#)
- [The Mischievous Ex-Bankers Behind “Industry”](#)

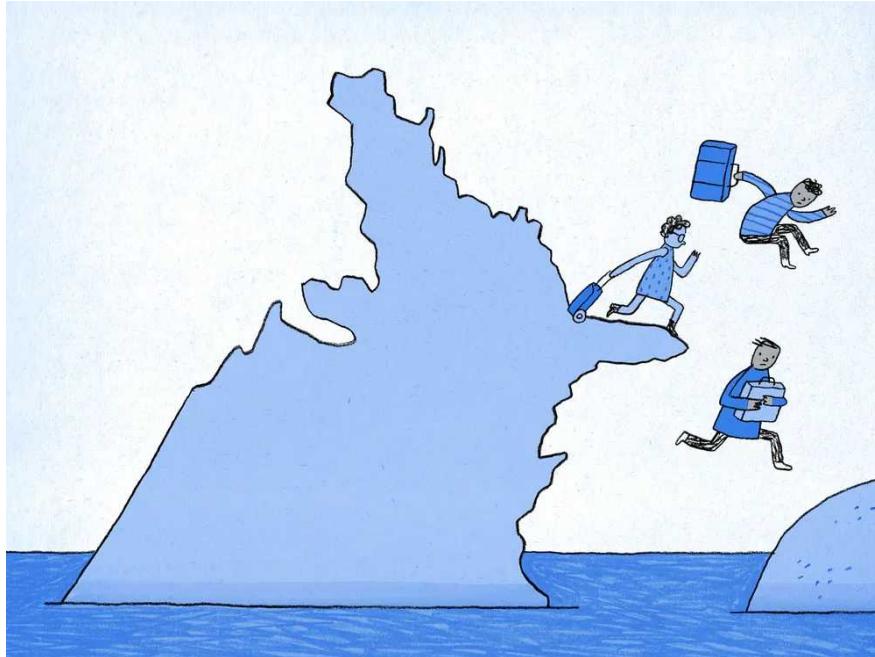
Letter from the Netherlands

# How to Leave the U.S.A.

In the wake of President Trump's reëlection, the number of aggrieved Americans seeking a new life abroad appears to be rising. The Netherlands offers one way out.

By Atossa Araxia Abrahamian

December 08, 2016



On an overcast Saturday in September, a group of travellers gathered for dinner at Jopenkerk, a brewery inside a converted church in the Dutch city of Haarlem. They'd come from Texas, Iowa, and Pennsylvania, and they planned to spend the next week visiting the Netherlands. The purpose of their trip was neither business nor pleasure. These Americans were there because they wanted out of the U.S.A.

Debi and Bane, a couple from Denton, Texas, sat at a long table on the mezzanine level, admiring the space's stained-glass windows. Debi is a forty-two-year-old project manager with an easy laugh and dark bangs that frame her heart-shaped face. "It hasn't hit me yet that we're here, to be honest," she said.

Bane, thirty-seven, works as a freelance photographer and manages social media for an orthopedic surgeon. He enjoys heavy metal and complex tabletop games like [Dungeons & Dragons](#) and lets his wife do most of the talking. Debi assured me that he'd been "just giddy" at their hotel. "This is a guy who barely shows emotion," she said.

I'd been in touch with Debi and Bane throughout the summer, as they planned their trip—and their eventual exit from the United States. They'd always thought about retiring overseas, Debi said, but they moved up their timeline last spring because of [Donald Trump's](#) flagrant disregard of court orders; precursors, Bane noted, of full-blown [authoritarianism](#). After he took office for the second time, "things got real," Debi said. "At first, we were hopeful things would get better, or not worse."

"But they didn't," Bane deadpanned.

The evening had been organized by G.T.F.O. Tours, a relocation service that helps aggrieved U.S. citizens start new lives abroad. The dinner was the first stop on a crash course in the Dutch way of life. The tour, Debi and Bane hoped, would help them plan a permanent move in January.

Over beers and *bitterballen*, breaded balls of beef stew, the conversation at the table quickly turned to politics. G.T.F.O.'s clients are liberal—they all want to escape Trump—but Bane is a democratic socialist, and Debi considers herself more of a centrist. Debi, who has two adult sons, grew up in a military family and enlisted when she was nineteen. She served as a communications specialist on bases in the U.S., Korea, Iraq, and Germany and worked as a civilian contractor in [Afghanistan](#). Although she now feels "duped" by the government's rationale for the [war on terror](#), the military allowed her to pay for school and provide for her family. She enjoyed the work. "Even in Iraq, I had a great time," she said, recalling the camaraderie.

Until Debi moved to Denton and met Bane, at a bar, in 2012, she'd voted Republican by default. "I remember being in Iraq when Obama got elected. I didn't even know who he was," she said. She gives Bane credit for her change of heart but also says that watching people in her community struggle made her appreciate the importance of the social safety net. "We were well taken care of in the military. You don't realize how socialistic that

is: we're given [free health care](#), free housing, free food," she said. Coming out of isolation after the [pandemic](#), Debi had a harder time countenancing the inequality around her. "I felt like it was for some reason on my shoulders to fix everything," she recalled.

She coped by volunteering in her community, but that did little to calm her fears. The more news stories she read about Trump's second term, the more she foresaw a time when ordinary Americans would be stripped of their civil rights and live under martial law. That didn't look like much of a future.

[Inflation](#) had also made it hard to save money, and the couple's economic prospects seemed uncertain. Even though she was making six figures working for a large bank, things felt tight. Debi and Bane worried about retirement. They sold blood plasma to pad their bank accounts.

"The American Dream is something you're told about to make you part of a system that clearly doesn't work anymore," Bane said during one of our conversations. "I want to be where the government cares about you and takes care of you and *is* you."

Every four years, a group of Americans threatens to leave the country. These proclamations tend to take place in early November and involve Canada. No mass exodus occurs. Moving is hard; moving countries is harder. There are families, jobs, pets in the mix. This time around, though, Americans seem to be acting on their desires. The State Department doesn't keep close track of how many Americans settle abroad, but immigration lawyers told me that the number of people approaching them about it has gone up since Trump was reelected. "Anecdotally, there's a noticeable increase," Sanjay Sethi, an American attorney who recently relocated to Geneva, told me. "What's been so surprising is how much I'm hearing in my personal life—the desire to leave or get another passport."

Migration is never simple, but money helps. At least half the world's nations offer visas or fast-track citizenship to foreigners in exchange for investments or cash. According to Eric Major, whose company, Latitude, helps people apply for such programs, citizenship-by-investment clients once primarily came from places with limited civil and economic freedoms—Russia, China, Iran. Now the majority of them come from the U.S. "We are seeing an

increase in Americans actioning a Plan A (full outright migration, with a view of leaving the US) as opposed to just securing a Plan B,” Major told me in an e-mail. “We just signed up a *NASA* lady (moving to Portugal), a SpaceX guy (moving to Malta), and a Cornell University professor (moving to London).”

For Americans without much money, grandparents can be a golden ticket. Tens of thousands of U.S. citizens have sought out second passports since last fall, hunting down birth registrations, marriage certificates, and records from synagogues and churches. By one estimate, forty per cent of Americans could be eligible for another citizenship. Failing that, online influencers advertise alternative paths to a beautiful, affordable, gun- and car-free life style: using Social Security payments to qualify for a Portuguese passive-income visa, skirting Thai laws with regular “visa runs” to Cambodia, or exploiting Albania’s generosity—twelve months visa-free!—to try out the Mediterranean.

This ever-proliferating content often glosses over bureaucracy, crime, and the fact that Westerners tend to sequester themselves in spaces that locals can’t afford. Anywhere must be cheaper—and less stressful—than America is today. A recent survey by the Harris Poll, a research firm, found that nearly half of its respondents had considered leaving the U.S., citing politics and the cost of living as their main factors. There’s a historical irony to these responses. Americans are looking to emigrate for the same reasons that immigrants once came to America—for safety, economic security, better opportunities, and an over-all sense that their families would have a better future.

Americans are also afraid. Between January and November, sixty-seven U.S. citizens (many of them transgender) have requested asylum in the Netherlands; last year, there were nine. No applications have been approved this year. In October, a Rutgers professor named Mark Bray moved to Spain after receiving death threats at his home prompted by a petition, from the school’s chapter of the conservative group [Turning Point USA](#), to have him fired. Bray is a scholar of antifascism, “so the dynamics of this aren’t alien to me *per se*,” he told me. “But you know the Nietzsche quote ‘If you stare long enough into the void, the void stares back?’ Everything I’d been writing about was suddenly looking at me through the void.”

Debi and Bane's contingency planning was frantic at first, spurred on by "extreme, zombie-apocalypse scenarios," as Debi remembered it. They envisioned having their passports revoked, or being detained for having said the wrong things. Debi was especially preoccupied with [Project 2025](#), a blueprint for the country conceived by the Heritage Foundation. Trump had distanced himself from the conservative think tank during his campaign, but once in office he openly pushed to sign its prescriptions into law.

When her life went on as usual, albeit against a backdrop of disturbing headlines, she said, "it evolved to 'Why do we have to wait for something extreme to happen?'"

She and Bane couldn't afford to drop hundreds of thousands of dollars on a Caribbean investor passport. They looked into Canada—Americans assume they're welcome there—but did not qualify for permits based on their work or education. They found no prospects in Spain, Portugal, or the U.K., either.

Then, while browsing Facebook in the spring, Debi discovered G.T.F.O. tours. The company's founders, Jana Sanchez and Bethany Quinn, posted links and comments that spoke to Debi's concerns about Trump's America, but they seemed also to have practical advice. In a Zoom call, Sanchez explained that, thanks to the Dutch-American Friendship Treaty (*DAFT*), an agreement signed in 1956 to promote bilateral investment, Bane could register his business in the Netherlands, capitalize it with forty-five hundred euros, and bring Debi along. They could be gone in a matter of months.

Debi had never given the Netherlands, a country of eighteen million people, all that much thought. She'd visited Amsterdam in her twenties, and she'd learned in school that the Pilgrims had lived there before setting off for the New World. Then she remembered that the art works in her home with Bane—a pair of paintings from his grandparents, a set of cookie molds hanging on a wall, and prints of paintings by [van Gogh](#) and [Vermeer](#)—were all Dutch. "I love antiquing, and I found this cute little lithograph that I thought was maybe a street in Paris," Debi told me. "A few weeks ago, I got a hunch and put it through Google Lens. And, sure enough, it's Amsterdam. Who has all this Dutch art work?" she marvelled. It seemed as sure a sign as any.

In Haarlem, on Sunday, the Americans convened in the lobby of their hotel to meet a real-estate agent, or *makelaar*, named Daniel Pilon, who had immigrated to the Netherlands from South Africa. The number of Americans approaching Pilon this year has increased tenfold—“It’s the political situation,” he told me—but many give up, he said, when they can’t find an apartment. “It’s difficult, because they are serious, but not serious enough,” he said.

The Netherlands’ cities have a persistent housing shortage. It’s not unusual for there to be forty people at an apartment viewing, Pilon explained, each with higher salaries and better references than the last. Someone asked him what a perfect candidate looked like. “The single person coming on a work contract for two years, working for a big company,” he replied without missing a beat.

Self-employed workers arriving on the *DAFT* visa are at a disadvantage: landlords prefer Dutch work contracts as proof of income, so Americans sometimes offer a year’s rent up front. Sanchez pressed Pilon for the monthly cost, in euros. “How much would you suggest for a budget?” she prompted.

“Two and a half thousand,” he said.

“Are you only competing with other expats?”



“Also Dutch people. Most Dutch people will not be paying over three thousand.”

“Dutch people buy,” Sanchez added. “The interest rates here are, like, three per cent. If you have a Dutch contract, you’re loving life.”

Sanchez lives on the bank of a Haarlem canal in a town house with her Dutch husband, Edwin; they bought the place in 2000. At sixty-one, Sanchez, who has hazel eyes, freckles, and leonine gray hair that she pulls back with a scrunchie, is intensely personable, if prone to hyperbole. She describes her role with G.T.F.O. as an “escaping-fascism doula” and seemed a little hurt when I said I wasn’t making plans to leave the States. “Nobody thinks their great-grandparents left Germany too early,” she and Quinn reminded me on several occasions.

On the desk of her home office are two canonical texts of the American resistance—“[How Fascism Works](#),” by Jason Stanley, and “[On Tyranny](#),” by [Timothy Snyder](#). Both authors recently left Yale to work at the University of Toronto.

Sanchez was born in California and raised in Texas. Her grandfather was a migrant farmworker from Mexico; she was the first in her immediate family to attend college, graduating from Rice University and going on to work in

political fund-raising in California. After a stint as a news reporter in the Netherlands and London, she switched to communications—coaching executives has been the source of most of her income—and, along the way, she met Edwin online. They married in 2001, and Sanchez became a Dutch citizen three years later.

In 2014, the couple divorced. Sanchez returned to the U.S., where she planned to settle down with her dog, focus on her business, and bask in the election of America’s first woman President. She was in Texas, practicing with her country-music band (“They’re all *MAGA* now,” she says), when the 2016 election results started coming in. Her friends back in Europe texted, pushing Sanchez to return. “I was, like, Shit, how would I do that?” she recalled. “I had my dog, my car.”

The next morning, a friend urged her to run for office. They were both in a state of shock from the night before. “But, at the time, it seemed reasonable,” Sanchez said.

She threw herself into a campaign for a House seat in Texas’s Sixth Congressional District. “It was exhausting, and I was broke,” she told me. She lost the election to a local conservative politician, Ronald Wright. When Wright died after contracting *COVID*, three years later, she ran for his seat again—and lost again.

That year, Sanchez had got back together with Edwin, and they’d talked about making a go of it in the States. But, when Trump was reëlected, “I was just done,” she said. “I’d fought the fight.” In January, she returned to Haarlem.

Sanchez had survivor’s guilt about having left, so she started organizing weekly Zoom sessions to educate Americans about their options abroad. The most promising was the *DAFT* visa. It is affordable and quick, and it offers a path to citizenship after five years. Crucially, spouses of applicants receive work permits, and children can enroll in language schools to learn Dutch.

On the “*DAFThub*,” a Facebook page, Sanchez met Bethany Quinn, a former corporate recruiter who had moved to the Netherlands in 2022. Over drinks and tapas in Amsterdam, they devised a plan to offer relocation tours

and coaching. Quinn came up with the name: Get the Fuck Out. It captured the mood.

One of G.T.F.O.'s selling points is, perhaps paradoxically, how very American its approach is. Sanchez has a warm Southern confidence, addressing clients, waitstaff, even strangers on the commuter rail, like old pals. She also has a habit of reading alarming news headlines off her phone out loud. That, I suppose, is part of her pitch. Her own Facebook page is full of memes of a distinctly #resistance flavor. "I shitpost a lot," she once told me, cackling.

Sanchez's Americanness is rivalled only by Quinn's. A forty-year-old from the Washington, D.C., area with theatre-kid energy, Quinn worked in policy for the Service Employees International Union and has an M.B.A. from Johns Hopkins. She believes that Americans are traumatized by Trump's assaults on both the Constitution and their constitutions. "When I come to the Netherlands, I feel my blood pressure drop," she remarked in Haarlem. "And then I go to the U.S. and it's back up again."

In addition to Debi and Bane, the G.T.F.O. group had three participants—a Pennsylvania resident who didn't want to be identified, and a couple in their early forties named Rita and Chris. They, like Debi, were military veterans. After our session with the real-estate agent in Haarlem, we took the train to Utrecht, a university town about thirty miles away.

An American musician in his fifties named Jeffrey Scott Pearson served as our guide. He'd left the U.S. back in 2017; not long after his move, he had a heart attack. "I was in the hospital for two, three weeks, and as an American I wondered what that would cost me," he said, rolling up his left sleeve to reveal a long, skinny scar from where his surgeon had taken a blood vessel to graft. "But, when the bill came back, it was three hundred and twelve euros—and all of it was for parking and the pizza I ordered from the commissary."

He added, "Even with health insurance, in the U.S., it would have cost me thirty-five thousand dollars."

The Americans nodded in sober recognition. They all had conditions to manage—asthma, A.D.H.D., rheumatoid arthritis, various injuries—and had found medical care expensive and hard to navigate. According to a Harris poll, thirty-eight per cent of those surveyed cited health care as a reason for considering a move abroad.

Rita and Chris have spent their lives chasing stability. They grew up in Colorado, in chaotic families, and met in a high-school Spanish class when Rita was a freshman and Chris a senior. They married four years later. Their wedding reception was at Denny’s—“They had a military discount,” Rita recalls—and, the next day, Chris left for field training, in preparation for going to Iraq.

Chris, who has short blond hair and an athletic build, had been offered a scholarship to run track at Michigan State but couldn’t afford to go, because his family could not complete his financial-aid paperwork. He says he joined the military “to break the cycle of poverty”; he served two tours before he was caught in an explosion and a serious spinal-cord injury put him in retirement. Chris’s body is still peppered with shrapnel, and, even after surgery, the right side of his face is a little dented.

Rita couldn’t afford college initially, either, so she did odd jobs and entered beauty pageants for extra cash. It’s hard today to picture Rita in a pageant uttering sentences such as “My journey is all about the red-white-and-blue.” With a long brown braid and an austere personal style, Rita reminded me of a Dorothea Lange portrait mixed with a bit of “American Gothic.” She served in the Navy as a logistics specialist and enrolled in college as a reservist while Chris convalesced, waiting for his disability payments. She went on to get a master’s degree in organizational leadership.

In 2021, the pair moved to Iowa, where Rita ran a student-veteran center at a local college. She had a bad feeling when the state’s Board of Regents began scrapping diversity-equity-and-inclusion programs in 2023. But when Trump was elected again her instincts told her to run. “We’d watch the news, Chris and I, and we’d see something really bad and say, ‘We gotta get out,’ ” Rita recalled.

The President reminded them of all the things that had been wrong with the United States for as long as they could remember. They were “bamboozled,” in Rita’s words, about the [Iraq War](#). “And now they’re using the military against their own people,” Chris lamented.

Rita channelled her anxiety into cleaning, in preparation for leaving the country. “You could tell it was a bad news day because you could look at the bedroom and see every piece of clothing had been gone through,” she said. “Our house got empty pretty quick at the start of the new Administration.”

Rita and Chris aren’t ideological. They like [Bernie Sanders](#) and [Elizabeth Warren’s](#) economic positions but would have been O.K. with a Republican such as [Mitt Romney](#) or the late [John McCain](#) in office. They weren’t planning to leave during Trump’s first term, either. “Trump Derangement Syndrome” this is not. Rather, Rita and Chris have come to understand their experience as U.S. citizens as a form of moral injury, or the distress a person feels after witnessing an event that transgresses one’s deeply held values. Chris already struggled to square his own sense of what was right with the orders he received in Iraq, where the war is estimated to have killed more than two hundred thousand civilians.

As with Debi and Bane, the couple’s unease had to do with everyday ethical concerns. “If you have any kind of empathy, it’s hard to live in the U.S. and watch what’s happening,” Chris said.

“I feel like I’m screaming at the top of my lungs, saying, ‘The house is on fire!’ while there are people actively telling me the house isn’t on fire, and they’re actively being burned,” Rita said.

Their exit was financially possible thanks to Rita’s foresight. A long time ago, she had put them on an intense saving plan, following the tenets of the Financial Independence, Retire Early, or *FIRE*, movement, and for years they lived in austerity. First, she got them out of credit-card debt, then they built a nest egg. “My goal was to be un-fuck-with-able,” Rita told me.

Over lunch in Utrecht, Rita and Chris surprised the group with an announcement. They were buying an apartment in the city of Delft. It seemed a bit rash—they’d been in the Netherlands for only a few weeks—

but the couple knew that they would not be returning home. Earlier that summer, they'd sold their split-level house in Iowa and most of their belongings. Then they drove around the U.S. saying goodbye to friends and family. Many of Rita's friends were sympathetic, even envious, but conversations with her family were trickier (angry relatives are a recurring theme in online expatriation forums). With them, she explained, "I've focussed more on the 'I've always wanted to travel' angle."

After their goodbye tour, Rita and Chris flew to St. Kitts and Nevis, a Caribbean nation that bundles citizenship with a housing purchase beginning at three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. But, exploring St. Kitts's lush greenery, sandy beaches, and garish condos, they couldn't see themselves there long term. So they flew to Spain, hiked the Camino de Santiago trail, and discussed where else they might go.

Rita, the methodical half of the couple, led the search. She learned about the *DAFT* on social media and rushed to make a move. Given Trump's posturing, a friendship treaty with a foreign government seemed like a fragile thing, and their European visas would be valid only into October. They talked to a lawyer and, on August 26th, landed at Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. Their Dutch life was about to begin.

Still, the past is never too far away. On the afternoon of our tour of Utrecht, the group attended an English-language comedy show, and an Iraqi-born comedian named Maryam Ameer told stories about her life in her native country. Ameer recalled a moment during wartime when her father was trying to corral his family into a shelter. Her sister, she said, refused to go; she wanted to sleep. Her brothers were at the final level of a game on their PlayStation. "You're gonna die," their father said, to which they responded, "At least we'll die with an achievement!" Ameer was in the kitchen, eating. Her dad likewise implored her to leave. "But I said, 'I don't want to die on an empty stomach.' "

Chris, Rita, and Debi laughed politely, but I could tell they were uncomfortable. Later, they shared their own war stories: the time Chris ignored evacuation orders so that he could grab a lemon-meringue pie at the chow hall; Debi's pact with a roommate to stay in their room at night so that

they could at least die well rested. I told them that their stories sounded remarkably like Ameer's.

"It was really awkward," Debi said.

"I wanted so badly to apologize to her after the show, but I didn't have the balls," Chris said.

They took comfort in the fact that they were all there—in the same city, in the same bar, drinking beer and laughing at the same jokes.

The Netherlands is a natural place for an American to seek refuge. The Dutch influence is everywhere in America: in architecture (barns, stoops, gabled roofs); food (waffles, doughnuts, tiny pancakes); and oligarchs, from the Vanderbilt dynasty to the Koch brothers. The language sounds like American English until you realize you don't understand a word. Reading Dutch is quite the opposite experience, however. Stare hard enough at its abundance of strange vowels, and you'll uncover meaning. *Nieuw. Brouwerij. Koekje.*

Not that it matters. English is spoken widely and well by citizens of all ages, which makes Dutch hard to practice. "They respond in English because it's more efficient," Sanchez said.

Culturally, the Dutch are sometimes known on the Continent as the Americans of Europe, owing to their large stature, loud voices, and blunt manners. This stops being true the moment actual Americans come to town and proceed to outweigh, outtalk, and generally out-everything the locals. Out-apologize, too: for blocking the bike path, mispronouncing a word, ordering the wrong condiment. "My husband gets so embarrassed when I ask for ketchup. Horribly embarrassed," Sanchez said over fries at lunch one day.

Sanchez is quick to say she's sorry, because she knows what the Dutch are thinking. There is a perception that Americans bring with them American problems, like higher costs, fake news, and bad food. (Come on, though—*bitterballen*?) As a class, expats are seen as transient, insular, and rich—some can even benefit from a thirty-per-cent tax break originating from a

1964 ruling designed to attract skilled foreign workers. Sanchez encourages tour participants to be humble and not make trouble. “We’re immigrants, not expats,” she says. “You have to think like an immigrant.”

*DAFT*ers, as they call themselves, have, in fact, taken on the characteristics of other immigrant communities defined not by their privilege but by necessity—giving one another work, for instance. On the tour, I met Chris O’Connell, a genial forty-eight-year-old with dark hair pulled back in a bun. O’Connell’s ancestors fled Ireland for California during the potato famine; O’Connell left his home in Salem, Oregon, in May, 2024, because he felt physically unsafe around his neighbors, who shot guns all night and jeered at his rainbow bumper stickers. When he recalls his final years in the U.S., he sounds like a man under siege. “Hate in my face is the way I came to look at it,” he said. “It really wore on me.”

O’Connell and his wife arrived in Amsterdam six weeks after speaking to a lawyer about *DAFT*, in the hope that his eldest child, who was about to turn eighteen, would qualify for a visa. Also travelling were two dogs, four cats, a bearded dragon, and a crested gecko: Noah’s ark. It was O’Connell’s first time in the Netherlands.

O’Connell used to work in the wine industry. He now does brisk business shuttling new arrivals (and their animals) home from airports around Europe in a big blue van. “I think I helped seventeen groups in July and another thirteen or fifteen in August,” he said. “All Americans.” He also assists with errands, like [IKEA](#) runs, “because no one here has a car.”



This mode of transacting—scrappy, insular, focussed on survival—is typical of lower-class immigrant communities, as opposed to professionals arriving on expat packages. Anthropologists might call this a migrant network. But to describe a group of white middle-class Americans in such a way feels dissonant.

James Rosow, a former New Yorker who moved to Madrid twelve years ago, is the clinical director for the Truman Group, a psychology practice that specializes in treating expats. Rosow understands why his compatriots want to leave, but he worries that social media is misleading them. Videos about farmer’s markets and bike commutes are more appealing than posts outlining the drudgery of applying for a state I.D. “The biggest misconception is that it’ll be really easy once you get yourself here,” he said.

At the same time, he’s noticed that, on Facebook forums for Americans in Spain, requests for advice by those looking to move get mocked by Americans already in the country. He doesn’t partake, but he understands. “I left America to be outside America. And now it feels like they’re coming,” he told me.

About a quarter of the Truman Group’s patients are current or former U.S. government employees. After the Administration made deep cuts to

U.S.A.I.D. and other programs, not all of those laid off overseas were eager to return. “I know a family in an African country, and they decided, ‘We’re not going home,’ ” Rosow said. “So they worked out a digital-nomad visa.”

Rosow and his wife had assumed they’d move back when their adult daughters, who arrived in Spain as small children, started college in the U.S. —or at least when they started families of their own. Now, he said, “I’m hoping they move here.”

When migration scholars describe why people move, they generalize motivations into “pull” factors, or reasons to come, and “push” factors, or reasons to go. For G.T.F.O.’s clientele, the push is self-evident, but the pull is somewhat less defined. The Netherlands has many good qualities, such as excellent social services, great infrastructure, proximity to European capitals. For this group, though, its primary appeal is the country it is not.

It’s also hard to overstate the influence of social media on Americans’ escape fantasies. One morning, as Sanchez showed us around Haarlem, Debi waved down a man in a beanie who was filming a video on the street. “Are you Sky?” she called out. She turned back to the group. “He’s a very popular YouTuber!”

The man was, in fact, Sky, or, as he’s known online, Itz SKY. “You’ve been a huge inspiration for us!” Debi said.

Sky, who’s Black, grew up on Chicago’s South Side and had been living in Los Angeles before he left the country, five years ago. His wife has an Irish passport, which gave them their pick of E.U. countries. They now live in Haarlem with their two young children. Sky works for an American TV network, and on the side he makes videos about being an American in the Netherlands. He doesn’t glamorize life abroad as much as some other influencers, but you can tell he’s happy with his decision. In one clip, Sky lists the ways his life has changed. He doesn’t worry about his children’s safety, there are no mass shootings, his health insurance is affordable. He doesn’t get harassed by the police, either. “Cops don’t make me feel safe until I moved here,” he says.

Sanchez invited Sky to walk with us, and on our way to a park he asked where the group was from.

“We’re from Texas,” Debi said.

“How’s Texas?” Sky asked.

“Well, we’re here,” she noted.

“We’re moving on January 20th,” Bane said, newly decisive.

“I get it,” Sky replied. “I remember one time I was home with my son, and my wife went to a mall where there was a shooting,” he went on. “Glendale Galleria.”

“It happens so frequently we don’t even know about the Glendale shooting,” Debi said.

We arrived at the park, and Sky left for work. It was damp and chilly, and we stood before a statue commemorating Hannie Schaft, a young Dutch resistance fighter known as “the girl with the red hair.” “There were women who weren’t afraid to pick up a gun and kill a Nazi,” Sanchez said.

There was much talk of antifascism (and anti-antifascism) during our tour. Back home, Americans were reeling from the assassination of [Charlie Kirk](#), the founder of Turning Point USA. But lurking in the background on our Dutch tour was the question of whether European nations were themselves delaying an inevitable descent into Trump-style demagoguery. In October, a few weeks after our visit, the Netherlands elected a center-left party, D66, to lead the next government, but the country has also produced Geert Wilders, a proto-Trump figure whose Party for Freedom came in a close second. Over the past decade, countries around the world have either elected right-wing leaders or come awfully close. If these politics are what Americans are fleeing, is anywhere truly safe?

One day, on the train, as Sanchez worried aloud about Trump’s plans to persecute his ideological foes, a passenger chimed in, speaking in accentless English, to point out that it was happening in the Netherlands as well. The week before, Wilders had called on parliament to designate Antifa a terrorist

organization. He won a majority. (In the Dutch parliamentary process, these motions function as recommendations for government ministers.)

“But you don’t have crazy far-right religious fanatics,” Sanchez replied.

“That’s true,” the passenger conceded.

The next day, on a trip to The Hague, we encountered a bedraggled-looking group of anti-abortion protesters outside the train station. They were waving signs about Christianity and fetal personhood. It all felt very familiar.

Sanchez, irate, scared off an elderly man who tried to hand her a flyer. “No! Absolutely not!” she snapped.

We were walking with our guide, a young architectural-history student named Oskar Oonk. He ushered us through a field where, three nights before, fifteen hundred anti-immigration protesters had set fire to a police car and smashed the windows of D66’s offices. As we watched workers clean up the debris, Sanchez asked Oonk, for the benefit of the group, whether the anti-migrant protests were also about Americans, or just asylum seekers.

“You’re privileged—you’d be exposed to people who keep their opinions to themselves,” Oonk demurred. The truth is that white-collar (and just white) foreigners are very much a part of the country’s immigration culture wars. Rob Jetten, the leader of D66, defended them, telling a Dutch news site, “The idea that expats come in here like some kind of predators and then leave is simply untrue.”

Ambivalent as some Dutch citizens might be about immigration, the country has a robust infrastructure for welcoming outsiders. The municipality of The Hague, where about half the residents are first- or second-generation immigrants, operates a gleaming International Center, and on Wednesday a young woman named Sarah Feid hosted our group there for a seminar on relocation logistics and integration.

Feid explained some local customs: manners (the Dutch are very direct); how to find a good bike; and the *polder* model, the Dutch approach to

making decisions in a spirit of collaboration, consensus, and compromise. “We are a very equal, nonhierarchical society,” Feid said. “The cleaning lady, the C.E.O., the intern, the junior, the senior—everybody’s input is valued.” The Americans (myself included) seemed a little disbelieving, until Feid’s intern vigorously agreed.

Feid also told us about Tikkie, a popular mobile app that splits checks down to the cent. Going Dutch is, it turns out, Dutch.

On the last full day of the tour, G.T.F.O. travelled to Rotterdam. A taller, starker, and more contemporary Dutch city than the ones we had seen, it lacks its neighbors’ lopsided appeal, having been almost entirely rebuilt after the [Second World War](#). It was cold and gusty, and none of the participants seemed that charmed.

While the group went on a three-hour walk (more than twenty-two thousand steps, they informed me), I fought a cold brought on by the Netherlands’ terrible weather and sought refuge in Fenix, a museum built inside a converted warehouse, dedicated to migration. There, I visited a two-hundred-photo exhibit titled “The Family of Migrants.”

The collection was a tribute to “The Family of Man,” a 1955 *MOMA* show, curated by [Edward Steichen](#), which captured people in every stage of life, from birth to the grave. The show was intended as a postwar “declaration of global solidarity,” but critics panned Steichen for eliding “the determining weight of history—of genuine and historically embedded differences, injustices, and conflicts,” as Susan Sontag put it. Perhaps because of such schmaltzy sentimentality, the show was a hit, and ten million people saw it on its world tour.

“The Family of Migrants” goes further, and in doing so it addresses Sontag’s gripes: by leaving home (or, in some cases, by returning), the subjects of these photographs are exercising what little agency they have within their unique historical contexts.

Some of the images were familiar—Dorothea Lange’s portrait “Migrant Mother,” Steve McCurry’s “Afghan Girl,” [Albert Einstein](#) at his U.S. naturalization ceremony. The photos were taken at ports and customs

checkpoints, behind fences and walls, on boats and trains, in airports. They depicted migration's push and pull factors while capturing something that's overlooked in a lot of literature about the topic—the simple desire for a different life.

Many of the Americans I'd met in the Netherlands had a lot in common with the subjects of the exhibit. They, too, would leave their loved ones behind. They, too, would haul around their belongings, fill out paperwork, and arrive at their destinations a little dazed. They would leave because they felt they had to, and because they wanted to. They would leave because they could.

G.T.F.O.'s participants are not refugees in the traditional sense—at least, not yet. None were in immediate danger. They could move to Vermont, Massachusetts, or California. They'd all thought about changing states, of course, but had concluded it wasn't enough. These decisions, I think, say more about the U.S. than they do about the people making them.

Nevertheless, "The Family of Migrants" was a reminder that Americans' growing appetite for expatriation is a historical anomaly. For centuries, tens of millions of impoverished immigrants have settled in the U.S. seeking safety, prosperity, and happiness, transforming the country in indelible, wonderful ways. I came to the U.S. from Switzerland as a student in 2004, and ran the gauntlet of visa and green-card applications before naturalizing, in 2022, but I'm not so sure I'd be welcome now. I'm not even sure I'd move here at all.

Is there anything worth staying for? I asked myself this question a lot during my week immersed in the Dutch way of life. I came back to the same old reasons—family, community, work.

Then, for a moment at the museum, a portrait by Chien-Chi Chang made me remember what I love about New York City—and, I suppose, an idea about America that's still hard to shake. In the photo, a recent Chinese immigrant is in his underwear, eating a bowl of noodles on a fire escape. He has chopsticks in one hand and holds a bowl up to his mouth with the other. The man's perch overlooks the Bowery, and the cars pass beneath him, oblivious of his presence. He has the best seat in the house. He looks free.

Walking around Haarlem at dusk, I'd noticed that the occupants of the loveliest town houses along the canals made a point of leaving their blinds open—perhaps to show, in the old Calvinist tradition, that they have nothing to hide. I admired the tidy interiors, the high, beamed ceilings, the moldings that reminded me of Brooklyn brownstones. I wandered for hours through winding alleys and waterfront streets, peering into windows. I saw no one eating noodles in his underwear. ♦

Personal History

# And Your Little Dog, Too

Two small dogs, both unleashed, rushed toward me, snarling, and one of them bit me on my left leg, just below the knee. It all happened within a second.

By David Sedaris

December 08, 2025



There's a place in Portland, Oregon, that sells these doughnuts I like, and I was walking to it early one afternoon when a dark-haired man twenty or so feet ahead of me turned to shout, "Why are you following me?"

"I'm not," I said, and I pointed past him, farther down the block. "I'm following that guy in the blue sweatshirt."

I've been coming to Portland since the late seventies, and there are days when everyone I encounter on the street there seems either drug-dependent or mentally ill. Since the mid-nineties, all my visits have been work-related. I go at least once a year and stay downtown, within walking distance of the theatre I perform in. The city always had more than its share of panhandlers,

strident ones who'd yell, "You could at least say hello, asshole!" as you passed them by, but the place took a definite turn for the worse in 2020, when voters approved a measure to [decriminalize](#) the possession of illicit drugs, at least in small amounts. After that, you saw people dealing openly on the street. You saw addicts shooting up outside restaurants and grocery stores and came upon them bent over in what's commonly called "[the fentanyl fold](#)," seemingly unconscious yet somehow still on their feet. *How is it that they don't topple over?* I've always wondered.

I have done a mountain of drugs in my lifetime, and not just recreational ones. At twenty-one, I was seriously addicted to [meth](#). Yet I managed to quit—not through the strength of my character but because my dealer moved to Florida and there was no one in Raleigh, North Carolina, to take her place. After withdrawing, I prudently stuck to [pot](#), [acid](#), mushrooms, Quaaludes, and [Ecstasy](#). I tried [heroin](#) only once, and, to no real effect, would snort cocaine, though not often because it was too expensive. And I drank and was an alcoholic. In 1999, I quit everything—woke up one day and realized that, in the jargon of A.A., I was sick and tired of being sick and tired.

I'm not obnoxiously sober—at least, I don't think I am. I don't scold people or preach at them, but if their habit impinges upon my freedom or comfort I can be less than generous with my sympathy. It's not that I *say* anything; rather, I *think* it, and in a way that no doubt shows on my face. "Good God, man," my expression likely reads. "Pull yourself together."

Portland recriminalized hard drugs in 2024, but it's tough to put that fucked-up genie back in its bottle. I lost count of the strung-out addicts I passed on my way to the doughnut shop and back, and I had just headed out from my hotel again when I came upon three men and a woman, all in their late thirties. The four were gathered around a baby carriage, and as I neared the woman lowered her head into it and took a powerful hit off a pipe. Just as I registered that the carriage was empty, two small dogs, both unleashed, rushed toward me, snarling, and one of them bit me on my left leg, just below the knee. It all happened within a second.

"He just bit me!" I said.

The woman stood upright and pushed her hair away from her face. She was pretty except for her mouth, which was thin-lipped and hard-looking.  
“Huh?”

“Your dog just bit me!” I repeated.

“No, it didn’t,” one of the men said.

I raised my pant leg and pointed to the broken skin. “Yes, it did,” I told him.  
“Look!”

The group collectively shrugged and turned back to the business of smoking fentanyl.

“How is this O.K.?” I asked.

Blank expressions.

“You should wash it,” the woman said, leaning again into the baby carriage with a lighter in her hand.

“I should call the police is what I should do,” I told her.

“Whatever,” one of the men said.

If I had a dog and it bit a man who was just passing by, I’d freak out, and hard. After apologizing until he begged me to stop, I’d give the guy my phone number and e-mail address. I’d offer to take him to the hospital. I would execute the animal in front of his eyes—whatever he wanted. Here, though, the only one who cared was me.

“The baby carriages are fairly new,” a pharmacist at the drugstore I went to afterward said. “People use them to get sympathy and to hide their drugs in.”

She asked when I’d last had a tetanus shot, and suggested that I go to the emergency room. And I meant to, really. Then I recalled the people whose dog bit me. The thought that their day would proceed uninterrupted while mine would be spent in what I imagined would be a very sad and busy

hospital was more than I could bear. And so I returned to my hotel room deciding I would rather die.

That night, I had a show in the town of Salem, and, boy, did I talk about my afternoon, at least while I signed books beforehand.

“You have to understand that these addicts, especially those with an opioid-use disorder, lead incredibly difficult lives,” the first person I spoke to, a woman with long, straight hair the color of spaghetti, said.

“How is that an excuse?” I asked. “Her dog *bit* me.”

“Well, you’re still better off than she and her friends are,” the woman continued.

Unfortunately, I had already finished signing her book.

“I was bitten by a dog today,” I said to another woman sometime later. “It was with these people who were smoking fentanyl and pushing a baby carriage.”

“What kind of dog was it?” she asked.

“Whatever Toto was in ‘The Wizard of Oz,’ ” I told her.

“Oh,” she moaned. “A cairn terrier. That poor thing.”

“Did I leave out the part where it bit me?” I asked.



"People like that aren't in any condition to take care of their animals," the woman said. "That's the really sad part."

"Is it?" I asked, pointing to the bandage on my leg. "Is that the really sad part?"

The next person in line asked, "Did you get their names?"

"I really don't think they'd have given them to me," I told him.

"No," he said. "The names of the dogs. It might have helped the authorities rescue them."

That was when I quit talking about it. I mean, how hard should it be to get a little sympathy when an unleashed dog bites you? *What if I were a baby?* I wondered. *Would people side with me then?* *What if I were ninety or blind or Nelson Mandela?* *Why is everyone so afraid of saying that drug addicts shouldn't let their dogs bite people?* Actually, I know why. We're afraid we'll be mistaken for Republicans, when, really, isn't this something we should all be able to agree on? How did allowing dogs to bite people become a Democratic point of principle? Or is it just certain people's dogs? If a German shepherd jumped, growling, out of one of those Tesla trucks that

look like an origami project and its owner, wearing a *MAGA* hat, yelled, “Trumper, no!!!,” *then* would the people in my audience be aghast?

A few months before the incident in Portland, news broke of a Canadian tourist who was wading in the Atlantic when a shark she was trying to photograph bit off both her hands. I read about it on half a dozen websites, and on each of them the comments were brutal. How awful, I thought, to lose your hands and get no sympathy whatsoever, not even “I’m sorry you’re so stupid.” That’s what keeps me from feeding bears in national parks, or attempting to hug a baby hippo with its mother watching. In my case, though, all I did was walk down a street two blocks from an art museum.

“Well, that’s what you get for walking,” the world seemed to say.

I said to a neighbor when I got back to New York, “I was bitten by a dog last week!”

And he asked in a scolding tone, “What did you do?” As if it was most certainly my fault.

“Nothing,” I told him. “I was walking down the street and passed four people smoking fentanyl.”

“I didn’t know you could smoke it,” he said.

This was like me telling someone I got hit by a car and him responding, “What kind of mileage did it get?”

“Did you go to a doctor?” my neighbor asked.

I said I’d spoken to a pharmacist, and my neighbor said that wasn’t good enough: “You need to see your physician *now*.”

Again, I resented the onus being placed on me, and not on the dog or its masters.

*Was it always this way?* I wondered.

When I was ten or so, one of the three television networks we had in the mid-sixties started broadcasting "[The Wizard of Oz](#)." It came on once a year and was a real event in our household. I would make tickets and my sisters and I would turn our basement into a theatre, with popcorn and everything. At the start of the movie, the wealthy landowner Almira Gulch cycles across the plain to Aunt Em and Uncle Henry's rural Kansas farm. She's come because Toto bit her on the leg. "That dog's a menace to the community," she says, eventually producing a folded legal document from her dress pocket. "I'm taking him to the sheriff and will make sure he's destroyed."

Even as a child, I'd watch Uncle Henry force Toto into the basket, with Dorothy sobbing in the background, and think, *It's only fair. I mean, he did bite the woman.*

Interesting, to me, was the word "destroyed." That was what you did to a dog that hurt people. Regular dogs were simply "put to sleep." The result was the same but one was harsh-sounding and the other seemed almost like a kindness. *One little shot and it would all be over*, I'd think, looking sideways at our live-in grandmother, who hadn't purchased one of my ten-cent "Wizard of Oz" tickets but was occupying a front-row seat, even though she didn't speak English and would certainly fall asleep before the movie turned from black-and-white to (purported) color.

A few days after I was bitten in Portland, I wrote a short essay about the experience, which I read at a show in Anchorage, Alaska. The audience reacted much the way people had at the Salem book signing. "Really?" I said. "I get *nothing* here?"

"Dogs are really good judges of character!" someone called out from the darkness.

I had other essays to get through that night, and, though I read them with what I hoped seemed like precision, I was a thousand miles away, wondering, *Is it true that I deserved to get bitten? Am I a worse person than a drug addict who allows their dog to attack people, and who's likely stealing to support their habit? Is it because I'm not sympathetic enough, or because earlier in the day I'd considered buying a sports coat that cost five*

*thousand dollars and didn't even fit me, thinking it would look good tossed over a chair?*

Why am I always so willing to accept the worst idea of myself, even when it's put forth by strangers?

Then I remembered that my sister Gretchen was bitten in the face as a toddler, and still bears the scar on her cheek. Who's evil at that age? And why wouldn't the dog have gone for my father, who was standing two feet away, and was a massive dick? Hugh was bitten by a stray dog in Ethiopia and had to get fourteen rabies shots in his back—Hugh, who has never told a lie in his entire life and has always gone out of his way for the elderly. My friend Dawn was bitten as well. It happened about sixty years ago, and, though she'd done nothing to provoke the attack, she got blamed for it.

“By whom?” I asked.

“My grandmother,” she told me. “That’s who Becky belonged to.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said, my incredulity directed not at her being held responsible but at the animal’s name—Becky! That’s as good as a donkey my friend Kimberly has named Cameron.

To this day, when Dawn sees a dog approaching, even on a leash, she steps into the street.

I do the same thing now. Me, a former drunk and meth addict who could very well have rabies. The only symptom I’ve noticed so far is an almost blinding rage, but give it time. ♦

Life and Letters

# Oliver Sacks Put Himself Into His Case Studies. What Was the Cost?

The scientist was famous for linking healing with storytelling. Sometimes that meant reshaping patients' reality.

By Rachel Aviv

December 08, 2025



When Oliver Sacks arrived in New York City, in September, 1965, he wore a butter-colored suit that reminded him of the sun. He had just spent a romantic week in Europe travelling with a man named Jenö Vincze, and he found himself walking too fast, fizzing with happiness. “My blood is champagne,” he wrote. He kept a letter Vincze had written him in his pocket all day, feeling as if its pages were glowing. Sacks had moved to New York to work as a fellow in neuropathology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in the Bronx, and a colleague observed that he was “walking on air.” Every morning, he carefully polished his shoes and shaved. He adored his bosses. “I smile like a lighthouse in all directions,” he wrote Vincze.

Sacks was thirty-two, and he told Vincze that this was his first romantic relationship that was both physical and reciprocal. He felt he was part of a “two man universe,” seeing the world for the first time—“seeing it clear, and seeing it whole.” He wandered along the shipping piers on the Hudson River, where gay men cruised, with a notebook that he treated as a diary and as an endless letter to Vincze. “To watch life with the eyes of a homosexual is the greatest thing in the world,” Vincze had once told Sacks.

Sacks’s mother, a surgeon in London, had suspected that her son was gay when he was a teen-ager. She declared that homosexuality was an “abomination,” using the phrase “filth of the bowel” and telling him that she wished he’d never been born. They didn’t speak of the subject again. Sacks had moved to America—first to California and then, after five years, to New York—because, he wrote in his journal, “I wanted a *sexual and moral freedom* I felt I could never have in England.” That fall, during Yom Kippur, he decided that, rather than going to synagogue to confess “to the total range of human sin,” a ritual he’d grown up with, he’d spend the night at a bar, enjoying a couple of beers. “What I suppose I am saying, Jenö, is that I now feel differently about myself, and therefore about homosexuality as a whole,” he wrote. “I am through with cringing, and apologies, and pious wishes that I might have been ‘normal.’ ” (The Oliver Sacks Foundation shared with me his correspondence and other records, as well as four decades’ worth of journals—many of which had not been read since he wrote them.)

In early October, Sacks sent two letters to Vincze, but a week passed without a reply. Sacks asked his colleagues to search their mailboxes, in case the letter had been put in the wrong slot. Within a few days, however, he had given up on innocent explanations. He began dressing sloppily. He stopped coming to work on time. He had sex with a series of men who disgusted him.

After two weeks, Vincze, who was living in Berlin, sent a letter apologizing for his delayed reply and reiterating his love. He explained that he was so preoccupied by thoughts of Sacks that he felt as if he were living in a “Klaudur,” a German word that Vincze defined as a “spiritual cell.” He seems to have misspelled *Klausur*, which refers to an enclosed area in a monastery, but Sacks kept using the misspelled word, becoming obsessed

with it. “It ramifies in horrible associations,” he wrote Vincze. “The closing of a door. Klaudur, claustrophobia, the sense of being shut in.” Sacks had long felt as if he were living in a cell, incapable of human contact, and this word appeared to be all he needed to confirm that the condition was terminal. The meaning of the word began morphing from “spiritual cell” to “psychotic cage.”



The intimacy Sacks had rejoiced in now seemed phony, a “folie à deux”—a two-person delusion. His doubts intensified for a month, then he cut off the relationship. “I must tear you out of my system, *because I dare not be involved*,” he told Vincze, explaining that he barely remembered how he looked, or the sound of his voice. “I hope I will not be taken in like this again, and that—conversely—I will have the strength and clarity of mind to perceive any future such relationships as morbid at their inception, and to abort the folly of their further growth.”

Two months later, Sacks felt himself “slipping down the greased path of withdrawal, discontent, inability to make friends, inability to have sex, etc. etc. towards suicide in a New York apartment at the age of 32.” He took enormous amounts of amphetamines, to the point of hallucinating. A family friend, a psychiatrist who worked with Anna Freud, urged him to find a psychoanalyst. She wrote him that his homosexuality was “a very

‘secondary phenomenon’ ”: he was attracted to men as “a substitute for veering uncertainties of what/whom you could love other than as ‘idealizations’ of yourself.” A few weeks later, he started therapy with Leonard Shengold, a young psychiatrist who was deeply immersed in Manhattan’s psychoanalytic culture. “I think he is very good, and he has at least a very considerable local reputation,” Sacks wrote his parents, who helped to pay for the sessions, three times a week.

Sacks had elevated yet hazy ambitions at the time: he wanted to be a novelist, but he also wanted to become the “Galileo of the inward,” he told a mentor, and to write the neurological equivalent of Sigmund Freud’s [“Interpretation of Dreams.”](#) He worked in wards with chronically ill and elderly patients who had been warehoused and neglected, and his prospects within academic medicine looked dim. “Have you published anything lately?” his father wrote him, in 1968. “Or have you found yourself temperamentally incapacitated from doing so?”

When Sacks began therapy, “my initial and ultimate complaint was of *fixity* —a feeling of *not-going*,” he wrote in his journal. He regarded Shengold as “a sort of analytic machine.” But gradually Sacks came to feel that “I love him, and need him; that I need him—and *love* him.” He had planned to stay in New York City only for a few years, but he kept delaying his return to England so that he could reach “a terminable point in my analysis.” Shengold, who would eventually publish ten books about psychoanalysis, wrote that therapy requires a “long period of working through”—a term he defined as the “need to repeat emotional conflicts over and over in life” until the patient has the “freedom to own what is there to be felt.”

Sacks saw Shengold for half a century. In that time, Sacks became one of the world’s most prominent neurologists and a kind of founding father of medical humanities—a discipline that coalesced in the seventies, linking healing with storytelling. But the freedom that Shengold’s analysis promised was elusive. After Vincze, Sacks did not have another relationship for forty-four years. He seemed to be doing the “working through” at a remove—again and again, his psychic conflicts were displaced onto the lives of his patients. He gave them “some of *my own powers*, and some of *my phantasies* too,” he wrote in his journal. “I write out symbolic versions of myself.”

During Sacks's neurology internship, in San Francisco, his childhood friend Eric Korn warned him that the residents at his hospital could sense he was gay. "For God's sake, exercise what seems to you immoderate caution," Korn wrote, in 1961. "Compartmentalize your life. Cover your tracks. Don't bring in the wrong sort of guests to the hospital, or sign your name and address to the wrong sort of register." He encouraged Sacks to read "Homosexuality: Disease or Way of Life?," a best-selling book by Edmund Bergler, who argued that homosexuality was an "illness as painful, as unpleasant and as disabling as any other serious affliction," but one that psychoanalysis could cure. "The book is full of interest," Korn wrote. "He claims a potential 100% 'cures' (a term he chooses to employ because he knows it teases) which is worth investigating perhaps."

Freud characterized homosexuality as a relatively normal variant of human behavior, but when psychoanalysis came to the United States, in the postwar years, homophobia took on new life. The historian Dagmar Herzog has described how, in the U.S., "reinventing psychoanalysis and reinventing homophobia went hand in hand." Faced with men who persisted in their love for other men, American analysts commonly proposed celibacy as a stopgap solution. In the historian Martin Duberman's memoir "[Cures](#)," he writes that his psychoanalyst instructed him to "take the veil"—live celibately—so that he could be cured of his desire for men. Duberman agreed to these terms. The best he could get, he thought, was sublimation: instead of enjoying an "affective life," he would make "some contribution to the general culture from which I was effectively barred." Sacks, who was closeted until he was eighty, also followed this course.

Shengold had portraits of Charles Dickens, William Shakespeare, and Sigmund Freud in his office, on the Upper East Side. Like Sacks, he came from a literary Jewish family. He seemed deeply attuned to Sacks's creative life, which took the form of ecstatic surges of literary inspiration followed by months of sterility and depression. "Do your best to enjoy and to work—it is the power of your mind that is *crucial*," Shengold wrote when Sacks was on a visit with his family in England. Sacks wrote in his journal that he'd dreamed he overheard Shengold telling someone, "Oliver is lacking in proper self-respect; he has never really appreciated himself, or appreciated others' appreciation of him. And yet, in his way, he is not less gifted than Auden was." Sacks woke up flushed with embarrassment and pleasure.



Unlike many of his contemporaries, Shengold was not a doctrinaire thinker, but he was still susceptible to psychoanalytic fashions. Reflecting on how he might have viewed living openly as a gay man at that time, Shengold's daughter, Nina, told me, "I don't know that was a door that Dad necessarily had wide open." In several books and papers, Shengold, a prolific reader of Western literature, tried to understand the process by which troubled people sublimate their conflicts into art. In his 1988 book, "[Halo in the Sky: Observations on Anality and Defense](#)," Shengold wrote about the importance of transforming "anal-sadistic drives"—he used the anus as a metaphor for primitive, dangerous impulses—into "adaptive and creative 'making.'" When Sacks read the book, he wrote in his journal that it "made me feel I was 'lost in anality' (whatever this means)."

Before Vincze, Sacks had been in love with a man named Mel Erpelding, who once told him, Sacks wrote, that he "oozed sexuality, that it poured out through every pore, that I was alive and vibrant with sexuality (a positive-admiring way of putting things), but also that I was reeking and toxic with it." (Erpelding, who ended up marrying a woman, never allowed his relationship with Sacks to become sexual.) In his early years of therapy, in the late sixties, Sacks resolved that he would give up both drugs and sex. It's doubtful that Shengold encouraged his celibacy, but he may have accepted that sexual abstinence could be productive, at least for a time. Richard Isay,

the first openly gay member of the American Psychoanalytic Association, said that, in the seventies, he'd "rationalized that maturity and mental health demanded the sublimation of sexual excitement in work." Sacks told a friend, "Shengold is fond of quoting Flaubert's words 'the mind has its erections too.' "

For Sacks, writing seemed almost physiological, like sweating—an involuntary response to stimuli. He routinely filled a whole journal in two days. "Should I then *put down my pen*, my interminable Journal (for this is but a fragment of the journal I have kept all my life)," he asked, "and 'start living' instead?" The answer was almost always no. Sometimes Sacks, who would eventually publish sixteen books, wrote continuously in his journal for six hours. Even when he was driving his car, he was still writing—he set up a tape recorder so that he could keep developing his thoughts, which were regularly interrupted by traffic or a wrong turn. Driving through Manhattan one day in 1975, he reflected on the fact that his closets, stuffed with pages of writing, resembled a "grave bursting open."

By the late sixties, Sacks had become, he wrote, "almost a monk in my asceticism and devotion to work." He estimated that he produced a million and a half words a year. When he woke up in the middle of the night with an erection, he would cool his penis by putting it in orange jello. He told Erpelding, "I partly accept myself as a celibate and a cripple, but partly—and this is . . . the wonder of sublimation—am able to *transform* my erotic feelings into other sorts of love—love for my patients, my work, art, thought." He explained, "I keep my distance from people, am always courteous, never close. For me (as perhaps for you) there is almost no room, no moral room."

"I have some hard 'confessing' to do—if not in public, at least to Shengold—and myself," Sacks wrote in his journal, in 1985. By then, he had published four books—"Migraine," "Awakenings," "A Leg to Stand On," and "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat"—establishing his reputation as "our modern master of the case study," as the *Times* put it. He rejected what he called "pallid, abstract knowing," and pushed medicine to engage more deeply with patients' interiority and how it interacted with their diseases. Medical schools began creating programs in medical humanities and "narrative medicine," and a new belief took hold: that an ill person has

lost narrative coherence, and that doctors, if they attend to their patients' private struggles, could help them reconstruct a new story of their lives. At Harvard Medical School, for a time, students were assigned to write a "book" about a patient. Stories of illness written by physicians (and by patients) began proliferating, to the point that the medical sociologist Arthur Frank noted, "'Oliver Sacks' now designates not only a specific physician author but also a . . . genre—a distinctively recognizable form of storytelling."

But, in his journal, Sacks wrote that "a sense of hideous criminality remains (psychologically) attached" to his work: he had given his patients "powers (starting with powers of speech) which they do not have." Some details, he recognized, were "pure fabrications." He tried to reassure himself that the exaggerations did not come from a shallow place, such as a desire for fame or attention. "The impulse is both 'purer'—and deeper," he wrote. "It is not merely or wholly a *projection*—nor (as I have sometimes, ingeniously-disingenuously, maintained) a mere 'sensitization' of what I know so well in myself. But (if you will) a *sort of autobiography*." He called it "symbolic 'exo-graphy.' "

Sacks had "misstepped in this regard, many many times, in 'Awakenings,'" he wrote in another journal entry, describing it as a "source of severe, long-lasting, self-recrimination." In the [book](#), published in 1973, he startled readers with the depth of his compassion for some eighty patients at Beth Abraham Hospital, in the Bronx, who had survived an epidemic of encephalitis lethargica, a mysterious, often fatal virus that appeared around the time of the First World War. The patients had been institutionalized for decades, in nearly catatonic states. At the time, the book was met with silence or skepticism by other neurologists—Sacks had presented his findings in a form that could not be readily replicated, or extrapolated from—but, to nonspecialists, it was a masterpiece of medical witnessing. The *Guardian* would [name](#) it the twelfth-best nonfiction book of all time.



Sacks spent up to fifteen hours a day with his patients, one of the largest groups of post-encephalitic survivors in the world. They were “mummified,” like “living statues,” he observed. A medicine called L-dopa, which elevates the brain’s dopamine levels, was just starting to be used for Parkinson’s disease, on an experimental basis, and Sacks reasoned that his patients, whose symptoms resembled those of Parkinson’s, could benefit from the drug. In 1969, within days of giving his patients the medication, they suddenly “woke up,” their old personalities intact. Other doctors had dismissed these patients as hopeless, but Sacks had sensed that they still had life in them—a recognition that he understood was possible because he, too, felt as if he were “buried alive.”

In “[Awakenings](#),” Sacks writes about his encounters with a man he calls Leonard L. “What’s it like being the way you are?” Sacks asks him the first time they meet. “Caged,” Leonard replies, by pointing to letters of the alphabet on a board. “Deprived. Like Rilke’s ‘Panther’”—a reference to a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke about a panther pacing repetitively in cramped circles “around a center / in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.”

When Sacks was struggling to write his first book, “[Migraine](#),” he told a friend that he felt like “Rilke’s image of the caged panther, stupefied, dying, behind bars.” In a letter to Shengold, he repeated this image. When Sacks

met Leonard, he jotted down elegant observations in his chart (“Quick and darting eye movements are at odds with his general petrified immobility”), but there is no mention of Leonard invoking the Rilke poem.

In the preface to “[Awakenings](#),” Sacks acknowledges that he changed circumstantial details to protect his patients’ privacy but preserved “what is important and essential—the real and full presence of the patients themselves.” Sacks characterizes Leonard as a solitary figure even before his illness: he was “continually buried in books, and had few or no friends, and indulged in none of the sexual, social, or other activities common to boys of his age.” But, in an autobiography that Leonard wrote after taking L-dopa, he never mentions reading or writing or being alone in those years. In fact, he notes that he spent all his time with his two best friends—“We were inseparable,” he writes. He also recalls raping several people. “We placed our cousin over a chair, pulled down her pants and inserted our penises into the crack,” he writes on the third page, in the tone of an aging man reminiscing on better days. By page 10, he is describing how, when he babysat two girls, he made one of them strip and then “leaped on her. I tossed her on her belly and pulled out my penis and placed it between her buttocks and started to screw her.”



In “[Awakenings](#),” Sacks has cleansed his patient’s history of sexuality. He depicts him as a man of “most unusual intelligence, cultivation, and sophistication”—the “‘ideal’ patient.” L-dopa may have made Leonard remember his childhood in a heightened sexual register—his niece and nephew, who visited him at the hospital until his death, in 1981, told me that the drug had made him very sexual. But they said that he had been a normal child and adolescent, not a recluse who renounced human entanglement for a life of the mind.

Sacks finished writing “Awakenings” rapidly in the weeks after burying his mother, who’d died suddenly, at the age of seventy-seven. He felt “a great open torrent—and *release*,” he wrote in his journal. “It seems to be surely significant that ‘Awakenings’ finally came forth from me like a cry after the death of my own mother.” He referred to the writing of the book as his “Great Awakening,” the moment he “came out.” He doesn’t mention another event of significance: his patients had awakened during the summer of the Stonewall riots, the beginning of the gay-rights movement.

Shengold once told Sacks that he had “never met anyone less affected by gay liberation.” (Shengold supported his own son when he came out as gay, in the eighties.) Sacks agreed with the characterization. “I remain resolutely locked in my cell despite the dancing at the prison gates,” he said, in 1984.

In “Awakenings,” his patients are at first overjoyed by their freedom; then their new vitality becomes unbearable. As they continue taking L-dopa, many of them are consumed by insatiable desires. “L-DOPA is wanton, egotistical power,” Leonard says in the book. He injures his penis twice and tries to suffocate himself with a pillow. Another patient is so aroused and euphoric that she tells Sacks, “My blood is champagne”—the phrase Sacks used to describe himself when he was in love with Vincze. Sacks begins tapering his patients’ L-dopa, and taking some of them off of it completely. The book becomes a kind of drama about dosage: an examination of how much aliveness is tolerable, and at what cost. Some side effects of L-dopa, like involuntary movements and overactivity, have been well documented, but it’s hard not to wonder if “Awakenings” exaggerates the psychological fallout—Leonard becomes so unmanageable that the hospital moves him into a “punishment cell”—as if Sacks is reassuring himself that free rein of the libido cannot be sustained without grim consequence.

After “Awakenings,” Sacks intended his next book to be about his work with young people in a psychiatric ward at Bronx State Hospital who had been institutionalized since they were children. The environment reminded Sacks of a boarding school where he had been sent, between the ages of six and nine, during the Second World War. He was one of four hundred thousand children evacuated from London without their parents, and he felt abandoned. He was beaten by the headmaster and bullied by the other boys. The ward at Bronx State “exerted a sort of spell on me,” Sacks wrote in his journal, in 1974. “I lost my footing of proper sympathy and got sucked, so to speak, into an improper ‘perilous condition’ of identification to the patients.”

Shengold wrote several papers and books about a concept he called “soul murder”—a category of childhood trauma that induces “a hypnotic living-deadness, a state of existing ‘as if’ one were there.” Sacks planned to turn his work at Bronx State into a book about “‘SOUL MURDER’ and ‘SOUL SURVIVAL,’ ” he wrote. He was especially invested in two young men on the ward whom he thought he was curing. “The miracle-of-recovery started to occur in and through their relation to me (our relation and feelings *to each other*, of course),” he wrote in his journal. “We had to meet in a passionate subjectivity, a sort of collaboration or communication which transcended the Socratic relation of teacher-and-pupil.”

In a spontaneous creative burst lasting three weeks, Sacks wrote twenty-four essays about his work at Bronx State which he believed had the “beauty, the intensity, of Revelation . . . as if I was coming to know, once again, what I knew as a child, that sense of Dearness and Trust I had lost for so long.” But in the ward he sensed a “dreadful silent tension.” His colleagues didn’t understand the attention he was lavishing on his patients—he got a piano and a Ping-Pong table for them and took one patient to the botanical garden. Their suspicion, he wrote in his journal, “centred on the unbearable of my uncategorizability.” As a middle-aged man living alone—he had a huge beard and dressed eccentrically, sometimes wearing a black leather shirt—Sacks was particularly vulnerable to baseless innuendo. In April, 1974, he was fired. There had been rumors that he was molesting some of the boys.

That night, Sacks tore up his essays and then burned them. “Spite! Hate! Hateful spite!” he wrote in his journal shortly after. “And now I am empty—empty handed, empty hearted, desolate.”

The series of events was so distressing that even writing about it in his journal made Sacks feel that he was about to die. He knew that he should shrug off the false accusations as “vile idle gossip thrown by tiddlers and piddlers,” he wrote. But he couldn’t, because of “the *parental* accusation which I have borne—a Kafka-esque cross, guilt without crime, since my earliest days.”

The historian of medicine Henri Ellenberger observed that psychiatry owes its development to two intertwined dynamics: the neuroses of its founders—in trying to master their own conflicts, they came to new insights and forms of therapy—and the prolonged, ambiguous relationships they had with their patients. The case studies of these relationships, Ellenberger wrote, tended to have a distinct arc: psychiatrists had to unravel their patients’ “pathogenic secret,” a hidden source of hopelessness, in order to heal them.

Sacks’s early case studies also tended to revolve around secrets, but wonderful ones. Through his care, his patients realized that they had hidden gifts—for music, painting, writing—that could restore to them a sense of wholeness. The critic Anatole Broyard, [recounting](#) his cancer treatment in the *Times Magazine* in 1990, wrote that he longed for a charismatic, passionate physician, skilled in “empathetic witnessing.” In short, he wrote, a doctor who “would resemble Oliver Sacks.” He added, “He would see the genius of my illness.”

It speaks to the power of the fantasy of the magical healer that readers and publishers accepted Sacks’s stories as literal truth. In a letter to one of his three brothers, Marcus, Sacks enclosed a copy of “[The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat](#),” which was published in 1985, calling it a book of “fairy tales.” He explained that “these odd Narratives—half-report, half-imagined, half-science, half-fable, but with a fidelity of their own—are what *I* do, basically, to keep MY demons of boredom and loneliness and despair away.” He added that Marcus would likely call them “confabulations”—a phenomenon Sacks explores in a chapter about a patient who could retain memories for only a few seconds and must “make meaning, in a desperate way, continually inventing, throwing bridges of meaning over abysses,” but the “bridges, the patches, for all their brilliance . . . cannot do service for reality.”

Sacks was startled by the success of the book, which he had dedicated to Shengold, “my own mentor and physician.” It became an international best-seller, routinely assigned in medical schools. Sacks wrote in his journal,

Guilt has been *much* greater since ‘Hat’ because of (among other things)

My lies,

falsification

He pondered the phrase “art is the lie that tells the truth,” often attributed to Picasso, but he seemed unconvinced. “I think I have to thrash this out with Shengold—it is killing me, soul-killing me,” he wrote. “My ‘cast of characters’ (for this is what they become) take on an almost *Dickensian* quality.”

Sacks once told a reporter that he hoped to be remembered as someone who “bore witness”—a term often used within medicine to describe the act of accompanying patients in their most vulnerable moments, rather than turning away. To bear witness is to recognize and respond to suffering that would otherwise go unseen. But perhaps bearing witness is incompatible with writing a story about it. In his journal, after a session with a patient with Tourette’s syndrome, Sacks describes the miracle of being “enabled to ‘feel’—that is, to imagine, with all the powers of my head and heart—how it felt to be another human being.” Empathy tends to be held up as a moral end point, as if it exists as its own little island of good work. And yet it is part of a longer transaction, and it is, fundamentally, a projection. A writer who imagines what it’s like to exist as another person must then translate that into his own idiom—a process that Sacks makes particularly literal.

“I’ll tell you what you are saying,” Sacks told a woman with an I.Q. of around 60 whose grandmother had just died. “You want to go down below and join your dead grandparents down in the Kingdom of Death.” In the conversation, which Sacks recorded, the patient becomes more expressive under the rare glow of her doctor’s sustained attention, and it’s clear that she is fond of him. But he is so excited about her words (“One feels that she is

voicing universal symbols,” he says in a recording, “symbols which are infinite in meaning”) that he usurps her experience.

“I know, in a way, you don’t feel like living,” Sacks tells her, in another recorded session. “Part of one feels dead inside, I know, I know that. . . . One feels that one wants to die, one wants to end it, and what’s the use of going on?”

“I don’t mean it in that way,” she responds.

“I know, but you do, partly,” Sacks tells her. “I know you have been lonely all your life.”



The woman’s story is told, with details altered, in a chapter in “Hat” titled “Rebecca.” In the essay, Rebecca is transformed by grief for her grandmother. She reminds Sacks of Chekhov’s Nina, in “The Seagull,” who longs to be an actress. Though Nina’s life is painful and disappointing, at the end of the play her suffering gives her depth and strength. Rebecca, too, ends the story in full flower. “Rather suddenly, after her grandmother’s death,” Sacks writes, she becomes decisive, joining a theatre group and appearing to him as “a complete person, poised, fluent,” a “natural poet.” The case study is presented as an ode to the power of understanding a patient’s life as a narrative, not as a collection of symptoms. But in the

transcripts of their conversations—at least the ones saved from the year that followed, as well as Sacks’s journals from that period—Rebecca never joins a theatre group or emerges from her despair. She complains that it’s “better that I shouldn’t have been born,” that she is “useless,” “good for nothing,” and Sacks vehemently tries to convince her that she’s not. Instead of bearing witness to her reality, he reshapes it so that she, too, awakens.

Some of the most prominent nonfiction writers of Sacks’s era ([Joseph Mitchell](#), [A. J. Liebling](#), [Ryszard Kapuściński](#)) also took liberties with the truth, believing that they had a higher purpose: to illuminate the human condition. Sacks was writing in that spirit, too, but in a discipline that depends on reproducible findings. The “most flagrant example” of his distortions, Sacks wrote in his journal, was in one of the last chapters of “Hat,” titled “The Twins,” about twenty-six-year-old twins with autism who had been institutionalized since they were seven. They spend their days reciting numbers, which they “savored, shared” while “closeted in their numerical communion.” Sacks lingers near them, jotting down the numbers, and eventually realizes that they are all prime. As a child, Sacks used to spend hours alone, trying to come up with a formula for prime numbers, but, he wrote, “I never found any Law or Pattern for them—and this gave me an intense feeling of Terror, Pleasure, and—Mystery.” Delighted by the twins’ pastime, Sacks comes to the ward with a book of prime numbers which he’d loved as a child. After offering his own prime number, “they drew apart slightly, making room for me, a new number playmate, a third in their world.” Having apparently uncovered the impossible algorithm that Sacks had once wished for, the twins continue sharing primes until they’re exchanging ones with twenty digits. The scene reads like a kind of dream: he has discovered that human intimacy has a decipherable structure, and identified a hidden pattern that will allow him to finally join in.

Before Sacks met them, the twins had been extensively studied because of their capacity to determine the day of the week on which any date in the calendar fell. In the sixties, two papers in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* provided detailed accounts of the extent of their abilities. Neither paper mentioned a gift for prime numbers or math. When Sacks wrote Alexander Luria, a Russian neuropsychologist, about his work with the twins, in 1973, he also did not mention any special mathematical skills. In 2007, a psychologist with a background in learning theory published a short

article in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, challenging Sacks's assertion that these twins could spontaneously generate large prime numbers. Because this is not something that humans can reliably do, Sacks's finding had been widely cited, and was theoretically "important for not only psychologists but also for all scientists and mathematicians," the psychologist wrote. (The psychologist had contacted Sacks to ask for the title of his childhood book of prime numbers, because he couldn't find a book of that description, but Sacks said that it had been lost.) Without pointing to new evidence, another scientist wrote in Sacks's defense, describing his case study as "the most compelling account of savant numerosity skills" and arguing, "This is an example of science at the frontier, requiring daring to advance new interpretations of partial data."

After the publication of "Hat," when Sacks was fifty-two years old, he wrote his friend Robert Rodman, a psychoanalyst, that "Shengold suggested, with some hesitancy, some months ago, that I should consider going *deeper* with him." He added, "He also observes that I don't complain, say, of sexual deprivation—though this is absolute." At first, Sacks was worried that Shengold was preparing to dismiss him from treatment: "I've done all I can for you—now manage on your own!" Then he felt hopeful that he didn't need to assume that "boredom-depression-loneliness-cutoffness" would define the rest of his life. He was also moved that, after twenty years, Shengold still considered him "worth extra work."

But Sacks was shaken by the idea that they'd only been skimming the surface. He looked back through his notebooks and noticed "a perceptible decline in concern and passion," which he felt had also dulled the quality of his thought. "Is the superficiality of my work, then, due to superficiality of relationships—to running away from whatever has deeper feeling and meaning?" he asked Rodman. "Is this perhaps spoken of, in a camouflaged way, when I describe the 'superficialization' of various patients?" As an example, he referenced an essay in "Hat" about a woman with a cerebral tumor. She was intelligent and amusing but seemed not to care about anyone. "Was this the 'cover' of some unbearable emotion?" he writes in the essay.

Sacks felt that Shengold was the reason he was still alive, and that he should go further with him. "What have I to lose?" he asked Rodman. But, he

wrote, “what one has to lose, of course, may be just that quasi-stable if fragile ‘functioning’ . . . so there is reason to hesitate.” Going deeper would also mean more fully submitting to someone else’s interpretation, experiencing what he asked of his own patients; Rodman proposed that Sacks was “afraid of the enclosure of analysis, of being reduced and fixed with a formulated phrase.”



In the early eighties, Lawrence Weschler, then a writer for *The New Yorker*, began working on a biography of Sacks. Weschler came to feel that Sacks’s homosexuality was integral to his work, but Sacks didn’t want his sexuality mentioned at all, and eventually asked him to stop the project. “I have lived a life wrapped in concealment and wracked by inhibition, and I can’t see that changing now,” he told Weschler. In his journal, Sacks jotted down thoughts to share with Weschler on the subject: “My ‘sex life’ (or lack of it) is, in a sense *irrelevant* to the . . . sweep of my *mind*.” In another entry, he wrote that the Freudian term “sublimation” diminished the process he’d undergone. When he was still having sex, as a young man in California, he used to sheath his body in leather gear, so he was “totally encased, enclosed,” his real self sealed in a kind of “black box.” He wrote, “I have, *in a sense*, ‘outgrown’ these extraordinary, almost *convulsive* compulsions—but this detachment has been made possible by *incorporating* them into a vast and comprehending view of the world.” (Weschler became close friends

with Sacks, and, after Sacks died, published a “biographical memoir” titled “And How Are You, Dr. Sacks?”)

It’s unclear whether Sacks did “go deeper” with Shengold. In the late eighties, Sacks wrote in his journal that he was “scared, horrified (but, in an awful way, accepting or complaisant) about my non-life.” He likened himself to a “pithed and gutted creature.” Rather than living, he was managing a kind of “homeostasis.”

In 1987, Sacks had an intense friendship with a psychiatrist named Jonathan Mueller, with whom he briefly fell in love. Mueller, who was married to a woman, told me that he did not realize Sacks had romantic feelings for him. Sacks eventually moved on. But he felt that the experience had altered him. “I can read ‘love stories’ with empathy and understanding—I can *‘enter into them’* in a way which was impossible before,” he wrote in his journal. He perceived, in a new light, what it meant for his patients in “Awakenings” to glimpse the possibility of “liberation”: like him, he wrote, they were seeking “not merely a cure but an indemnification for the loss of their lives.”

By the nineties, Sacks seemed to ask less of himself, emotionally, in relation to his patients. He had started working with Kate Edgar, who’d begun as his assistant but eventually edited his writing, organized his daily life, and became a close friend. (Shengold had encouraged Sacks to find someone to assist with his work. “The secretary is certainly an important ‘ego-auxiliary,’ ” he wrote him in a letter.) Edgar was wary about the way Sacks quoted his patients—they were suspiciously literary, she thought—and she checked to make sure he wasn’t getting carried away. She spent hours with some of his patients, and, she told me, “I never caught him in anything like that, which actually surprises me.”

Weschler told me that Sacks used to express anxiety about whether he’d distorted the truth. Weschler would assure him that good writing is not a strict account of reality; there has to be space for the writer’s imagination. He said he told Sacks, “Come on, you’re extravagantly romanticizing how bad you are—just as much as you were extravagantly romanticizing what the patient said. Your mother’s accusing voice has taken over.” Weschler had gone to Beth Abraham Hospital to meet some of the patients from “Awakenings” and had been shaken by their condition. “There’s a lot of

people shitting in their pants, drooling—the sedimentation of thirty years living in a warehouse,” he said. “His genius was to see past that, to the dignity of the person. He would talk to them for an hour, and maybe their eyes would brighten only once—the rest of the time their eyes were cloudy—but he would glom onto that and keep talking.”

After “Hat,” Sacks’s relationship with his subjects became more mediated. Most of them were not his patients; many wrote to him after reading his work, recognizing themselves in his books. There was a different power dynamic, because these people already believed that they had stories to tell. Perhaps the guilt over liberties he had taken in “Hat” caused him to curb the impulse to exaggerate. His expressions of remorse over “making up, ‘enhancing,’ etc,” which had appeared in his journals throughout the seventies and eighties, stopped. In his case studies, he used fewer and shorter quotes. His patients were far more likely to say ordinary, banal things, and they rarely quoted literature. They still had secret gifts, but they weren’t redeemed by them; they were just trying to cope.

In “[An Anthropologist on Mars](#),” from 1992, a book of [case studies](#) about people compensating for, and adapting to, neurological conditions, some of the richest passages are the ones in which Sacks allows his incomprehension to become part of the portrait. In a chapter called “Prodigies,” he wants badly to connect with a thirteen-year-old boy named Stephen, who is autistic and has an extraordinary ability to draw, but Stephen resists Sacks’s attempts at intimacy. He will not allow himself to be romanticized, a refusal that Sacks ultimately accepts: “Is Stephen, or his autism, changed by his art? Here, I think, the answer is no.” In this new mode, Sacks is less inclined to replace Stephen’s unknowable experience with his own fantasy of it. He is open about the discomfort, and even embarrassment, of his multiple failures to reach him: “I had hoped, perhaps sentimentally, for some depth of feeling from him; my heart had leapt at the first ‘Hullo, Oliver!’ but there had been no follow-up.”

Mort Doran, a surgeon with [Tourette’s](#) syndrome whom Sacks profiled in “Anthropologist,” told me that he was happy with the way Sacks had rendered his life. He said that only one detail was inaccurate—Sacks had written that the brick wall of Doran’s kitchen was marked from Doran hitting it during Tourette’s episodes. “I thought, Why would he embellish

that? And then I thought, Maybe that's just what writers do." Doran never mentioned the error to Sacks. He was grateful that Sacks "had the gravitas to put it out there to the rest of the world and say, 'These people aren't all nuts or deluded. They're real people.' "

The wife in the title story of "Hat" had privately disagreed with Sacks about the portrayal of her husband, but for the most part Sacks appeared to have had remarkable relationships with his patients, corresponding with them for years. A patient called Ray, the subject of a 1981 piece about Tourette's syndrome, told me that Sacks came to his son's wedding years after his formal treatment had ended. Recalling Sacks's death, he found himself suddenly crying. "Part of me left," he said. "Part of my self was gone."

A year after "Awakenings" was published, Sacks broke his leg in Norway, and Leonard L. and his mother wrote him a get-well letter. Thirty-two patients added their names, their signatures wavering. "Everybody had been counting the days for your return, so you can imagine the turmoil when they heard the news," Leonard's mother wrote. She explained that "most of the patients are not doing so well without your help and interest." She added that Leonard "isn't doing too well either." When Leonard learned that Sacks wouldn't be back, she said, "he shed enough tears to fill a bucket."

Sacks spoke of "animating" his patients, as if lending them some of his narrative energy. After living in the forgotten wards of hospitals, in a kind of narrative void, perhaps his patients felt that some inaccuracies were part of the exchange. Or maybe they thought, That's just what writers do. Sacks established empathy as a quality every good doctor should possess, enshrining the ideal through his stories. But his case studies, and the genre they helped inspire, were never clear about what they exposed: the ease with which empathy can slide into something too creative, or invasive, or possessive. Therapists—and writers—inevitably see their subjects through the lens of their own lives, in ways that can be both generative and misleading.

In his journal, reflecting on his work with Tourette's patients, Sacks described his desire to help their illness "reach fruition," so that they would become floridly symptomatic. "With my help and almost my collusion, they can extract the maximum possible from their sickness—maximum of

knowledge, insight, courage,” he wrote. “Thus I will FIRST help them to get ill, to *experience* their illness with maximum intensity; and then, *only then*, will I help them get well!” On the next line, he wrote, “IS THIS MONSTROUS?” The practice came from a sense of awe, not opportunism, but he recognized that it made him complicit, as if their illness had become a collaboration. “An impulse both neurotic and intellectual (artistic) makes me *get the most out of suffering*,” he wrote. His approach set the template for a branch of writing and thinking that made it seem as if the natural arc of illness involved insight and revelation, and even some poetry, too.

In his journals, Sacks repeatedly complained that his life story was over. He had the “feeling that I have stopped doing, that doing has stopped, that life itself has stopped, that it is petering out in a sort of twilight of half-being,” he wrote, in 1987. His journals convey a sense of tangible boredom. He transcribed long passages from philosophers and theologists (Simone Weil, Søren Kierkegaard, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Dietrich Bonhoeffer) and embarked on disquisitions on the best definition of reality, the “metabolism of grace,” the “deep mystery of incubation.” His thoughts cast outward in many directions—notes for a thousand lectures—then tunneled inward to the point of non-meaning. “Where Life is Free, Immaterial, full of Art,” he wrote, “the laws of life, of Grace, are those of *Fitness*.<sup>1</sup>”

Sacks proposed various theories for why he had undergone what he called “psychic death.” He wondered if he had become too popular, merely a fuzzy symbol of compassionate care. “Good old Sacks—the House Humanist,” he wrote, mocking himself. He also considered the idea that his four decades of analysis were to blame. Was it possible, he wrote, that a “vivisection of inner life, however conceived, however subtle and delicate, may in fact destroy the very thing it examines?” His treatment with Shengold seemed to align with a life of “homeostasis”—intimacy managed through more and more language, in a contained, sterile setting, on Monday and Wednesday mornings, from 6:00 to 6:45 A.M. They still referred to each other as “Dr. Sacks” and “Dr. Shengold.” Once, they ran into each other at a chamber concert. They were a few rows apart, but they didn’t interact. Occasionally, Shengold told his children that he “heard from the couch” about a good movie or play, but he never shared what happened in his sessions. They inferred that Sacks was their father’s patient after reading the dedication to him in “Hat.”

As Sacks aged, he felt as if he were gazing at people from the outside. But he also noticed a new kind of affection for humans—“homo sap.” “They’re quite complex (little) creatures (I say to myself),” he wrote in his journal. “They suffer, authentically, a good deal. Gifted, too. Brave, resourceful, challenging.”

Perhaps because love no longer appeared to be a realistic risk—he had now entered a “geriatric situation”—Sacks could finally confess that he craved it. “I keep being *stabbed* by love,” he wrote in his journal. “A look. A glance. An expression. A posture.” He guessed that he had at least five, possibly ten, more years to live. “I want to, I want to ••• I dare not say. At least not in writing.”

In 2008, Sacks had lunch with Bill Hayes, a forty-seven-year-old writer from San Francisco who was visiting New York. Hayes had never considered Sacks’s sexuality, but, as soon as they began talking, he thought, “Oh, my God, he’s gay,” he told me. They lingered at the table for much of the afternoon, connecting over their insomnia, among other subjects. After the meal, Sacks wrote Hayes a letter (which he never sent) explaining that relationships had been “a ‘forbidden’ area for me—although I am entirely sympathetic to ~~indeed wistful and perhaps envious about~~ other people’s relationships.”

A year later, Hayes, whose partner of seventeen years had died of a heart attack, moved to New York. He and Sacks began spending time together. At Sacks’s recommendation, Hayes started keeping a journal, too. He often wrote down his exchanges with Sacks, some of which he later published in a memoir, “Insomniac City.”

“It’s really a question of mutuality, isn’t it?” Sacks asked him, two weeks after they had declared their feelings for each other.

“Love?” Hayes responded. “Are you talking about love?”

“Yes,” Sacks replied.

Sacks began taking Hayes to dinner parties, although he introduced him as “my friend Billy.” He did not allow physical affection in public. “Sometimes

this issue of not being out became very difficult,” Hayes told me. “We’d have arguments, and I’d say things like ‘Do you and Shengold ever talk about why you can’t come out? Or is all you ever talk about your dreams?’ ” Sacks wrote down stray phrases from his dreams on a whiteboard in his kitchen so that he could report on them at his sessions, but he didn’t share what happened in therapy.

Kate Edgar, who worked for Sacks for three decades, had two brothers who were gay, and for years she had advocated for gay civil rights, organizing Pride marches for her son’s school. She intentionally found an office for Sacks in the West Village so that he would be surrounded by gay men living openly and could see how normal it had become. She tended to hire gay assistants for him, for the same reason. “So I was sort of plotting on that level for some years,” she told me.

In 2013, after being in a relationship with Hayes for four years—they lived in separate apartments in the same building—Sacks began writing a memoir, “On the Move,” in which he divulged his sexuality for the first time. He recounts his mother’s curses upon learning that he was gay, and his decades of celibacy—a fact he mentions casually, without explanation. Edgar wondered why, after so many years of analysis, coming out took him so long, but, she said, “Oliver did not regard his relationship with Shengold as a failure of therapy.” She said that she’d guessed Shengold had thought, “This is something Oliver has to do in his own way, on his own time.” Shengold’s daughter, Nina, said that, “for my dad to have a patient he loved and respected finally find comfort in identifying who he’d been all his life—that’s growth for both of them.”

A few weeks after finishing the manuscript, Sacks, who’d had melanoma of the eye in 2005, learned that the cancer had come back, spreading to his liver, and that he had only months to live. He had tended toward hypochondria all his life, and Edgar thought that the diagnosis might induce a state of chronic panic. Since he was a child, Sacks had had a horror of losing things, even irrelevant objects. He would be overcome by the “feeling that *there was a hole in the world*,” he wrote in his journal, and the fear that “I might somehow fall through that hole-in-the-world, and be absolutely, inconceivably lost.” Edgar had dealt for decades with his distress over lost

objects, but she noticed that now, when he misplaced things, he didn't get upset. He had an uncharacteristic ease of being.

In the summer of 2015, before Shengold went on his annual summer break, Sacks said to Edgar, "If I'm alive in September when Shengold returns, I'm not sure I need to go back to my sessions." They had been seeing each other for forty-nine years. Sacks was eighty-two; Shengold was eighty-nine.

When Sacks was struggling with his third book, "[A Leg to Stand On](#)," which was about breaking his leg and his frustration that his doctors wouldn't listen to him, he wrote in his journal that Shengold had suggested (while apologizing for the corniness of the phrase) that the book should be "a message of love"—a form of protest against the indifference that so many patients find in their doctors. Shengold may have been giving Sacks permission to see their own relationship—the one place in which Sacks felt an enduring sense of recognition and care—as a hidden subject of the book. Extending Shengold's idea, Sacks wrote, of his book, "The 'moral' center has to do with . . . the irreducible ultimate in doctor-patient relations."

In August, two weeks before Sacks died, he and Shengold spoke on the phone. Shengold was with his family at a cottage in the Finger Lakes region of central New York, where he spent every summer. Nina told me, "We all gathered in the living room of that little cottage and put my father on speakerphone. Oliver Sacks was clearly on his deathbed—he was not able to articulate very well. Sometimes his diction was just gone. Dad kept shaking his head. He said, 'I can't understand you. I'm so sorry, I can't understand you.' " At the end of the call, Shengold told Sacks, "It's been the honor of my life to work with you," and said, "Goodbye, Oliver." Sacks responded, "Goodbye, Leonard." It was the first time they had ever used each other's first names. When they hung up, Shengold was crying.

After Sacks died, Shengold started closing down his practice. "It was the beginning of the end for him," his son David told me. "He had lost most of his colleagues. He was really the last of his generation." Nina said, "I do think part of why my father lived so long and was able to work so long was because of that relationship. That feeling of affection and kindred spirit was lifesaving."

In “Awakenings,” when describing how Leonard L.—his “ ‘ideal’ patient”—initially responded to L-dopa, Sacks characterizes him as “a man released from entombment” whose “predominant feelings at this time were feelings of freedom, openness, and exchange with the world.” He quotes Leonard saying, “I have been hungry and yearning all my life . . . and now I am full.” He also says, “I feel saved. . . . I feel like a man in love. I have broken through the barriers which cut me off from love.’ ”

For years, Sacks had tested the possibility of awakenings in others, as if rehearsing, or outsourcing, the cure he had longed to achieve with Shengold. But at the end of his life, like an inside-out case study, he inhabited the story he’d imagined for his patients. “All of us entertain the idea of *another* sort of medicine . . . which will restore us to our lost health and wholeness,” he wrote, in “Awakenings.” “We spend our lives searching for what we have lost; and one day, perhaps, we will suddenly find it.” ♦

Annals of Television

# The Mischievous Ex-Bankers Behind “Industry”

Konrad Kay and Mickey Down failed as financiers—but they’re making a killing by depicting the profession on HBO.

By **Rebecca Mead**

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Clwb Ifor Bach, a night club in Cardiff, the capital of Wales, is the kind of venue whose sticky floors hold generational memories of first intoxications. One evening in July, about a hundred young people lined up outside—girls in crop tops and short skirts, boys in baggy pants and tees. Once admitted, they gathered in knots on the dance floor, holding drinks in plastic cups. This was not a typical night out, though: the assembled had responded to a casting call and were about to be extras in a charged scene for Season 4 of “Industry,” the HBO drama about the world of finance and associated realms of power.

A stage beside the dance floor had been curtained off. There, Mickey Down and Konrad Kay, the two Brits who created the show, huddled with a small team around several monitors, assessing the scene as it would appear onscreen. Down, thirty-six, and Kay, thirty-seven, had written the episode and were also directing it. They have been close friends since meeting as undergraduates at Oxford University, and they conceived of “Industry” a decade ago, not long after spending a short time working at different banks in the City of London. The début episode, which aired in 2020, deftly established the show’s premise: a feral group of young people, granted more money than they have ever known and a modicum of adult power, are let loose in an environment in which amorality is not just excused but rewarded. The setting is Pierpoint & Co., a fictional bank that has a training program for recent college graduates. As at actual élite institutions, Pierpoint’s program is fiercely competitive, with only some of the annual intake advancing to permanent positions. The initial protagonists of “Industry”—Yasmin Kara-Hanani, an Anglo-Lebanese publishing heiress; Robert Spearing, a white working-class publican’s son; Gus Sackey, the Eton- and Oxford-educated offspring of a Ghanaian Ambassador; and Harper Stern, a Black American striver with a pierced nose and a dodgy college transcript—enter the competition with chilly gusto, sniffing one another out for drugs or transactional sex, and sometimes cutting one another off at the knees professionally.

At the club, Tiësto’s remix of Delerium’s trance anthem “Silence” played on the sound system while the extras danced under swirling spotlights. In the center of the crowd were Marisa Abela, who plays Yasmin, and Myha’la, the mononymous actor who plays Harper. In the show’s first three seasons, the relationship between the two characters is by turns rivalrous, affectionate, hostile, conspiratorial, and codependent. Earlier that day, Down had described this dyad as “the beating heart of the show.” Kay had chimed in, “It’s the true romantic arc of the four seasons.” Over throbbing synths, the actors shouted declarations into each other’s ears—and additionally communicated with eyes and hands—while a cameraman circled them with a Steadicam. Kay squatted by a monitor, bobbing his head to the beat.

For the next take, the cameraman got very close to the two principals, who seized the opportunity to switch from high heels to Uggs. After several takes, the actors joined Down and Kay at the monitor, to see what had been

captured. Both women are nearly thirty, and clearly belonged to a different generation than that of the college-aged kids who had been swaying around them. Abela smiled with satisfaction at the scene, which conjured the characters' youthful openness to experience at the beginning of the series. "It's so Season 1, isn't it?" she said. At one point, Kay turned to me, looking elated and emotional. He said, "I just realized this is an elegy for mine and Mickey's youth. It just dawned on me—we don't do this kind of thing anymore."



This reminder of where Yasmin and Harper started underlines the extraordinary distances they've travelled in four seasons. Yasmin has chosen the questionable protection offered by marriage to Sir Henry Muck (Kit Harington), the heir to an ancient estate. Harper, with a ruthlessness that has verged on the sociopathic, has maneuvered herself from outsider status to a position of wealth and power. The show, which originally confined itself to the claustrophobic ecosystem of the trading floor, has expanded to include the grubby workings of British media and politics, and to show the intersection of the country's landed aristocracy with other, newer forms of class aggrandizement. "Yasmin and Harper are at the center of geopolitical intrigue this season in a way that would seem crazy if you had only watched Season 1," Down told me.

The same might be said of the characters' creators, who'd never made a show before, and who were barely mentioned in reviews when Season 1 aired. Most assessments focussed on the fact that Lena Dunham had directed the pilot, in her first such outing since "Girls." Even with that pedigree, initial ratings were dismal. "It was the second-least-watched show on HBO of all time," Kay told me, adding that just seventy thousand households viewed the program live when it first aired. "That's fewer than go to watch Barcelona in the stadium," he noted, with the pride of the underestimated. "Industry" is a co-production with the BBC in the U.K., where I was among the early adopters, having discovered it during a grim period of pandemic lockdown. The show offered a curdled stand-in for socializing. I watched it on dark, boring afternoons while pedalling furiously on my hateful exercise bike, weirdly energized by the show's dense flurry of financial jargon and magnetically appalled by its commitment to joyless sex scenes. Season 1 arguably reached its stylistic apogee in the sixth episode, when, during Pierpoint's in-office holiday party, Yasmin led Robert into a bathroom and put her hand down his pants, then commanded him to masturbate in front of the mirror and lick his semen from his fingers.

Despite its low viewership, the show was renewed, in part because it had been cheap to produce compared with such HBO shows as "Succession" and "White Lotus." The network could afford to let this little experiment run. The young actors of "Industry" were gifted unknowns, and production costs in Wales, where the show is shot, are considerably lower than in London or New York, let alone Koh Samui. Season 2, which aired in 2022, enlarged the show's world while also rooting it in a pointedly contemporary moment: Harper became professionally embroiled with Jesse Bloom, an American hedge funder (played by a beguiling Jay Duplass) who, much like the real-life financier Bill Ackman, made billions of dollars by speculating on the pandemic. By the time Season 3 aired, buzz had grown, and the show was moved to the prestigious Sunday-night slot formerly occupied by "Succession." Viewership averaged 1.6 million per episode—not a "Game of Thrones"-level hit, though unquestionably a niche success. By that point, Down and Kay had asserted decisive ownership over their project. Last year, they signed a three-year exclusive deal, worth many millions of dollars, with HBO, in which they agreed to work on "Industry" until 2027. In addition to writing and producing the show, they have co-directed half of the eight episodes in the forthcoming season, which begins airing in January.



Down and Kay have enjoyed their hard-won prosperity as much as their characters have. They've been photographed on red carpets at premières and openings, and they have appeared on the "Throwing Fits" fashion podcast to talk about their favorite designers. (Down dilated on his partiality for pleated pants by Issey Miyake.) Both are handsome and stylish and could withstand the filter of a dating app that eliminates profiles of men under six feet tall. Down, in particular, is given to posting on Instagram aspects of the high life—Ibiza, Gstaad, yachts—that aren't traditionally enjoyed by many television writers. To fellow-Brits, Down and Kay's unabashed appetite for success can look like an American-style trait, simultaneously attractive and suspect. Russell T. Davies, the Welsh writer and producer who has been the showrunner for "Doctor Who" and the creator of other popular programs, including "It's a Sin," told me that he was charmed by Down and Kay's revelry in their triumph, despite being more of a rumpled-sweater guy himself. "I love the fact that Mickey and Konrad are so glamorous," he said. "I don't approve of a world in which actors and directors become superstars but writers never do."

More than one friend or acquaintance of the pair told me it was important to understand that "Industry" is not a satire, and that the characters' ambition—and their pleasure in material wealth—is shared by the show's creators, even if Down and Kay no longer have the resilience for the hard-driving social

life depicted on the show. Both have settled into relationships: Down is married to Daisy Mostyn Down, a producer of television commercials; they have two small children and are expecting a third. Kay lives with his girlfriend, Elle Delmonte, a booker for a child-modelling agency. The duo's renunciation has its limits, though. After our first meeting, Kay texted me his hangover regimen, which consists of capsules of N-acetyl cysteine, alpha-lipoic acid, and a supplement called Hangheal Liver Detox. "They are always up for a party," Ollie White, the music supervisor for "Industry," told me. He added that the three of them had imminent plans for a visit to Berlin, to see the composer Nathan Micay—who is responsible for the show's jittery soundtrack—perform at Berghain, the notoriously sybaritic club. The trip sounded very Season 2: in one episode, Harper and Yasmin went on a psychedelics-fuelled bender in the German city.

Down and Kay's recreational activities have evolved in ways that mirror the show's expanded social compass. Earlier this fall, they told me that they were heading for a guys' weekend at Gleneagles, the famous resort hotel in Scotland. When I asked if they'd be playing golf—the property has three courses—they demurred. "We're just going to have a slap-up weekend," Down said. "Some good dinners," Kay added. A few weeks later, Down's Instagram filled in some details. He posted images of Kay and him dressed in plaid plus-fours, Barbour jackets, and flat tweed caps, each posing with a smile on his face and a shotgun under an arm.

There is a rich history of movies set in the world of finance, from "Wall Street" to "The Big Short." On TV, "Billions" chronicled the depredations of hedge funders for seven lurid seasons. In those depictions, however, the vantage point was from the top down; their central characters were those with the most money. The originality of "Industry" lay in the inversion of this perspective: its protagonists were the junior employees, even if they were nonetheless in a position to lose hundreds of thousands of pounds in a millisecond, either by mistake or misjudgment. At the outset, Down and Kay were committed to a *vérité* version of the trading floor, including what to many viewers was an utterly opaque argot. But the show unambiguously captures the hierarchies and the brutalities that exist in many demanding work environments. You don't need to have a job in finance to feel the humiliation of being made to do a coffee run, or to bristle at gibes about a trainee's off-the-rack suit.

Viewers of “Industry” hoping for a fresh crop of callow, horny grads this season will be confronted, instead, with a story that is tonally darker and structurally denser than anything that came before. “With Season 3, we realized that the most narratively interesting and exciting thing would be to kill the precinct of the show,” Kay told me. Pierpoint, the fictional bank, was sold off and its trading floor shut down—forcing its denizens into new storytelling realms. An important inspiration for Season 4 was the 2007 movie “Michael Clayton,” in which George Clooney plays a lawyer who discovers corporate wrongdoing at his firm. The challenge, Kay said, was “Can we effectively tell a story over eight hours that has the narrative propulsion of a great conspiracy thriller?”

The godmother of “Industry” is Jane Tranter, a powerful executive producer who has worked in both the U.K. and Hollywood. In the early twenty-tens, Tranter had the idea of making a show about newcomers to the City of London. “I could not work out why young people, after the whole credit crunch and everything that had happened with the banks, were still flocking in their hordes to go and work in the City,” she told me. “Wasn’t this the generation that was meant to be saving the world from the atrocious mistakes of *my* generation?” (One bleak data point in Tranter’s research file was the death of a young intern, in 2013, who worked at a bank in London; he suffered a seizure after working three nights in a row without sleep. In the pilot of “Industry,” a trainee expires under similar circumstances.) Tranter secured a modest budget from HBO to explore the idea, with the directive, she told me, to “just make it young and sexy somehow.” By chance, a colleague had met Down and Kay while discussing a different project, a psychological thriller, and steered them to Tranter. “They were so bright and so personable, and they had exactly what you want when you are tackling something like this,” Tranter told me. “They both had authenticity, and they had objectivity and clarity. But they also had scores to settle.”



On set, the pair work together seamlessly—so much so that the cast and crew refer to them by the moniker M.K. The actor Ken Leung, who plays Eric Tao, a veteran trader, told me, “I almost never think of one without the other. You wouldn’t want to talk to one about something without the other knowing. It would feel wrong.” (One instance of score-settling: a scene in which Eric undresses in front of underlings is based on the behavior of a former senior colleague of Kay’s, who would summon him to his office on a Friday afternoon to talk about the week’s business, all the while stripping down to his underwear before putting on his weekend clothes.) When Down and Kay do interviews together, they regularly finish each other’s sentences. Tranter told me, “I often think, if they both get on their phones during a meeting, or on set, that they are texting each other.”

The two men’s temperaments are very different. Down overflows with ebullient confidence, whereas Kay is more anxious and cerebral. Myha’la told me, “Mickey feels very like a superstar—kind of flashy, like an old-school director. I know for a fact that he really badly wants to be on the Director Fits Instagram account, where they say, ‘Look at this great director, and look at his awesome outfit.’ And then, with Konrad, I feel like I have seen his heart blossom in real time this season. He gets such a twinkle in his eye, and a chaotic excitement, when he is, like, ‘Let’s try this.’” She went on, “They’re no longer holding on to anything so tightly, and they are really

eager to let us play with them, because of the trust that's been built." Their own ambitions are unabashedly large. "I like reading biographies of John Boorman and David Lean and all these great directors," Kay told me. "Sometimes I think I won't be satisfied until I can see Mickey on a hilltop overseeing, like, fifteen hundred extras, through a megaphone, directing a big, two-and-a-half-hour-long period epic." He continued, "It's, like, someone is detonating something, and Mickey is saying, 'We missed that by thirty seconds,' and the whole shot costs another hundred and twenty grand. *That* excites me."

Down and Kay met in 2007. Down had just arrived at Oxford for his first year, and Kay was a second-year student. Down recalled that Kay was playing foosball: "I sidled up to him, and he said, 'Oh, you're new—you're going to fucking hate it here.'" They were both members of Regent's Park College, which enrolls a high proportion of divinity students. Both had been bounced there after being rejected by older and more prestigious Oxford colleges. Kay blew his interview at his first choice by holding forth about Homeric allusions in "Ulysses," despite never having read the book. "I fucked up so badly I cried afterward," he told me. Both arrived at Oxford with the insouciance of privilege, having been privately educated at exclusive institutions, Down at Charterhouse School (Thackeray, Vaughan Williams) and Kay at King's College School, Wimbledon (Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Walter Sickert). Down studied theology; he had applied for the subject because he knew it was statistically much easier to get into Oxford as a theologian than as a historian, his true interest. (Robert Spearing has leveraged a similar application tactic in "Industry.") Kay studied English literature, favoring modules on sparse modernist poetry to ones on lengthy Victorian novels. Both did the minimum of academic work. Down tried his hand at acting, without great success. "One play was just a disaster—it was Luigi Pirandello's 'Six Characters in Search of an Author,' and on the first night I got the cue wrong, and we skipped about forty minutes of the play," he told me. Mostly, the two went out.

Entering the television or film industry at the bottom rung, or trying to launch a career as a writer, wasn't a realistic proposition for either man upon graduation. Down's parents, who are partners in their own architectural practice, in North London, urged him to enter a steady profession such as the law. He had done a summer internship at the Home Office, and he was

invited to apply for the intelligence services. Down, whose mother is Ghanaian and whose father is white British, said, “There was a diversity ‘fast stream.’ I got to the meeting and we were all Black or brown people. I thought, *That’s interesting.*” But he didn’t get the job. Not knowing what else to do, he successfully applied for a summer internship at Morgan Stanley, and after it ended he went to Rothschild. Élite financial institutions in the U.K. recruit from half a dozen similarly élite universities and, traditionally, have accepted a significant number of humanities grads, many of whom have never taken an economics class. Of course, not all jobs in finance require math skills: Anraj Rayat, a close friend of Kay’s, who works as a sales trader at Barclays and was an inspiration for the confrontational, scabrous character of Rishi Ramdani in “Industry,” told me, “There’s a job called prime brokerage, and I always say that their biggest skill set is asking clients ‘Red or white?’ and ‘Still or sparkling?,’ because that’s basically all you need to do.” Nevertheless, it was clear that there were other qualifications under consideration. Down said, “I didn’t get a single technical question at my interview—it was all questions about university, and literally talking about people that we both knew.”



At Rothschild, Down was assigned to mergers and acquisitions. “The way the office was set up was that the analysts and interns were at one end of the office, and the managing directors were at the other,” he told me. Like the

characters in Season 1 of the show, he worked long hours, getting home at 2 A.M. and then stressing over a mistake in a PowerPoint deck that had to be sent to a client in the morning. “I kind of saw the door as soon as I started,” he said. “I thought, I am not good at this, and it’s been really hard to be average at this, and I have to start thinking about other things I’d like to do.” He started writing scripts—like one of Pierpoint’s slightly older traders, who is roundly scorned when one is discovered on his desk—and within a year *Down* was out.

For Kay, the expectation had always been that he would join the banking industry; his mother, who emigrated from Poland during the country’s years of martial law, and his father, who had grown up in a working-class household in the North of England, had both worked in London at Merrill Lynch. (Kay’s father, Roger, acted as an informal consultant on the show’s early scripts.) “They told me, ‘You can do your writing on the side, but you have to go and get a practical job,’ ” Kay recalled. He didn’t resist the idea of becoming a financier. “In your early twenties, you don’t know who you are—you have no idea,” he said. “The idea that you could go into an institution and have a gym bag that sort of speaks for you, and you can put a tie on, and you can cosplay maturity, is super seductive.” Kay entered a trainee program at Morgan Stanley—he’d chatted to his interviewer about Oxford and about soccer—and enjoyed the social life that meeting with clients offered. (“When I was twenty-three, my body could take anything.”) But he quickly realized that he was not cut out for the job. “With numbers, I’m dyslexic,” he told me. “I can’t do basic arithmetic. I would be in these meetings where people would be talking about the P/E”—the price-to-earnings—“value of a stock. This is the most basic metric on which a stock is valued, and I could never get my head around it. I’d call a leading pension-fund manager, who had billions of dollars invested in Apple, and try to talk to him about something he’d known about for years. I was a sales guy who was supposed to make forty calls a day, and I was making four calls a month.” In Season 2 of “Industry,” this paralysis is assigned to Robert Spearing, who escapes from his rut via a toxic affair with a much older, and predatory, female client.

Kay’s view of banking quickly dimmed: “You could literally see your career progression—you could see the paunches get bigger and the hair recede in real time.” He found a niche writing a daily e-mail report in which he

analyzed the performance of various companies. “I’d write about politics or film but, tangentially, about BMW stock,” he said. “I’d spend two hours a day doing that, and then my boss would see me hit Send, and then for eight hours I would do nothing.” He and Down traded e-mails about their respective workplaces, parodying the style of Bret Easton Ellis. (Sadly, these remain trapped on proprietary servers.) Kay moved back home, to South London, increasingly depressed about his situation. On Friday evenings, he met up with Rayat at a pub to drown his sorrows. “We used to drink these blood-orange cocktails—we called them ‘blood-orange snarlers,’ ” Rayat recalled. “We used to say, at 6 a.m. on Friday morning, ‘What time’s your first blood-orange snarler?’ It was a race to see who could get to the pub first, and whoever was last would buy the drinks.” They would talk about their respective weeks at work, Rayat said, “and he would tell me how much he hated it.” Kay was grateful when he was fired, after two and a half years on the job: “My boss said, ‘You’re a great guy, I really like you, but you are the worst salesman I have ever met in my life.’ ”

Meanwhile, Down, who had also moved back in with his parents, had taken entry-level jobs in the entertainment industry, working for a talent agency and as an assistant to Sacha Baron Cohen. He’d also started making his own projects, including “Alexander the Great,” a series of mockumentary shorts indebted to the British version of “The Office.” Down starred as Michael Alexander, a clueless, Hermès-tie-flipping banker with a side gig making execrable hip-hop music. Michael says things like “Banking comes with a lot of trappings. It pays a lot of money, but the stress, the pressure, the constant stigma from every single person around you—is there even enough time to spend it? And to that I just say . . . ‘Yes, there is.’ ”



Together, Down and Kay wrote a screenplay about the finance industry. Its title, “Not an Exit,” borrows the final words of Ellis’s “American Psycho,” which Down ironically calls “a guidebook for finance bros.” They couldn’t sell the movie, but after raising funds on Kickstarter they wrote and produced another feature, “Gregor,” about a young man adrift in London, which was also produced by Daisy Mostyn, then Down’s girlfriend. The film, in which Down acted, is mysteriously unavailable, though an online clip shows Down’s character wearing nothing but a loincloth, Burberry briefs, and manacles around his wrists, having been drafted into a perverse role-play scenario by a racist American woman who is masquerading as a champion of racial justice. “Today, she was in the bath, and I just read Malcolm X to her,” Down’s character says, adding with a sigh, “I’m actually half white as well.”

With “Gregor” as their calling card, Down and Kay sold about a dozen ideas for TV shows. “But selling a TV show in the U.K. is very different from in the U.S.,” Down explained. “When you go to the U.S. and say, ‘I sold a TV show,’ it sounds like you made hundreds of thousands of pounds. We sold our best idea for about five hundred pounds each. It seemed like a lot. It was December, and I remember thinking, I need money to buy Christmas presents.” (The idea, about a Black highwaywoman in eighteenth-century Britain—Down describes it as a mashup between Quentin Tarantino and

“Barry Lyndon”—is still owned by Cinemax.) Not long thereafter, however, they began writing “Industry.”

When Down and Kay talk about their early efforts, they regularly reach for the cliché about building the plane while flying it: as they see it, Season 1 was under-plotted, offering a vibe rather than a narrative, while Season 2 overcompensated with an embarrassment of subplots—Harper’s attempts to track down her estranged brother, Yasmin’s psychosexual intrigue with her new boss in private wealth management, Celeste Paquet, and Robert’s teetering sobriety. In Season 3, the creators and the critics agreed, the show hit its stride, with a panorama that included a drowning off the coast of Majorca and a punchy climate conference in Switzerland. For Season 4, the Pierpoint trading-floor set has been replaced by one depicting the headquarters of Tender, a fintech startup led by Whitney Halberstram, an American played by Max Minghella.

The first time I visited Down and Kay in Cardiff, I was shown around the new set; it had walls lined with metal mesh, and at its center was a gladiatorial, glassed-in conference room that looked like the perfect environment for a C-suite cage fight. Another enormous studio was occupied by half a plane, at that moment neither being built nor flown. One afternoon, while I was on set, Down and Kay were directing an airborne showdown between Halberstram and Kit Harington’s Henry. Before the cameras rolled, Harington popped his head out of the back of the plane with a question about protocols around the use of iPhones by characters on the show. “How are Apple with the word ‘c-u-n-t’?” he asked. “Am I allowed to say that?” He and Minghella traded good-natured tales of their weekend activities. But once filming began they became spiky and competitive.

“In truth, we just add layers of complexity to everything until it becomes illegible,” Harington’s Henry said, with dawning insight.

“Welcome to finance, bro,” Minghella’s Halberstram shot back.

In September, I joined Down and Kay as they gave notes on the sound editing for the second episode of Season 4. This stand-alone episode focusses on the unravelling of Henry, who—reflecting Down and Kay’s commitment to hew closely to real-world events—wins a parliamentary seat

in a by-election, only to lose it during the Labour Party’s landslide victory in the general election of July, 2024. The opening credits appear over closeups of Harington during the vote count, as he alternately grins and fights back tears. The episode assumes a familiarity with the technicalities of the British electoral system. (What, exactly, *is* a by-election?) It’s a far cry from HBO’s early mandate to make “Industry” young and sexy.

“We Trojan-horse whatever we want into the show,” Down said later, as the three of us sat down for lunch at a Cardiff steak house. Not that the episode had been sexless: Down had given a wry note to Neil Collymore, the series’ rerecording mixer, about the audio accompanying a grimly dispatched bathtub hand job. “I am very disappointed in you, Neil—there are no wanking noises,” Down had said. “I thought we’d at least hear the chopping under the water.” As we scanned the menu, he explained, “Usually, Neil adds in these pretty aggressive sex noises. In the last episode, there was a sex scene, and it sounded like someone doing that”—Down mimed a vigorous plunging action—“with mac and cheese.” He ordered beef tartare and a green salad.

Whereas the early seasons of “Industry” challenged the audience’s knowledge of financial arcana, the show has become increasingly specialized about the intricacies and contradictions of the British class system. In the first episode of Season 3, Yasmin is summoned by a shirtless, sweaty Henry to a handball court designed for the playing of Eton fives, a game so exclusive that its courts can be found almost nowhere but in a smattering of Britain’s private clubs and schools (including Down’s alma mater). There are personal in-jokes, too: Otto Mostyn, a cold-blooded financier, shares a surname with Down’s in-laws. Down’s father-in-law, Sir Nicholas Mostyn, had a high-profile legal career, and his last name became a byword for a favorable settlement in a divorce case. (Former clients include Diana, Princess of Wales, and Paul McCartney.) “Industry” exposes the ways that generational wealth and inherited cultural capital shape the workings of power in Britain, revealing how an individual such as Henry can go from heading a catastrophically failing green-tech startup in Season 3 to, at the outset of Season 4, becoming a junior minister in government.



Kay said, of the character, “He’s been polished up to be a leader of men when he’s actually not got the intellectual capacity—which is the trick of private schooling in this country.” He went on, “It polishes up intellectual duds and tells them they deserve to inherit the world, and obviously some of them don’t.” Among the inspirations for Henry’s empty bluster was Boris Johnson, the former British Prime Minister, whose manifold flaws—Johnson was sacked from *his* graduate-trainee job, at the *Times* of London, for inventing a quote—would have quickly derailed anyone less advantaged. This kind of privilege, Kay went on, also bestows lessons in the tactical value of bullshittery: “That dissembling bluster that Johnson does is a brilliant rhetorical technique, because people think you’re charming, and you can change the subject. It’s a function of, like—and I’ve done this, and Mickey has, too—years of going to a tutorial at Oxford, and not doing any work, and just being able to extemporize. I think it teaches you that really, really well. And Henry’s brilliant at that—using the right hundred-dollar word there, and being slightly charming here, and a slight elision there. People go, ‘Oh, you must be smart, because I don’t understand what you said.’”

A cultural fascination with the upper classes cycles in and out of fashion in Britain, Down observed. “In the nineties, when I was at school, everyone was sort of shaving their accents down, and listening to rap, and pretending

to be rude boys,” he said. “And then everyone got to university, and I honestly think it was part and parcel with the nascent Tory government, but suddenly at Oxford people were, like, ‘Oh, it’s O.K. to be posh again.’ ” Down, whose own accent is far more Brideshead than Brixton, said that, at least among the self-assured graduates from the world’s best schools who enter the world’s most remunerative professions, there exists an inherent sense of competition for its own sake, and a frustration when the path of ascent isn’t as clear as promised. “You hit a wall in your trajectory that your peers haven’t hit—it’s, like, you’ve gone to Oxford, and you’ve gone to McKinsey, and you’ve done a startup, and your peer is doing a startup that gets twenty million in seed funding, and you get fifteen. And you’re, like, ‘Actually, I don’t want to do a startup anymore. Maybe I’ll go into politics.’ And then, to be truly successful, you have to be Prime Minister.”

Showing how the dynamics of power and privilege intersect with race in Britain is also part of what makes “Industry” novel. Myha’la—who, like her character, had never visited the U.K. before arriving for work, to film Season 1—told me that she’d had to quiz Down and Kay about why Harper does not immediately bond with Gus Sackey, the Pierpoint colleague whose father is a Ghanaian diplomat. “In my world, if I see another person of color in the room, I’m, like, ‘O.K., clocked, we got each other,’ ” she told me. “It was not that way with his character at all—he had some kind of weird disdain for Harper.” Down remarked of Gus, “Because of where he has come from, he doesn’t see himself as a ‘Black man at Pierpoint.’ He’s coming to a place where he’s surrounded by people he already knows. He has the entitlement of education. He’s, like, ‘Don’t collectivize me. Don’t make me the same as you. We’re not the same just because we have the same skin color.’ ” Though Down does not share Gus’s right-wing politics, the character’s experience in some respects mirrors his own. “I don’t like to be collectivized, and I do think of myself as an individual,” he told me. “I haven’t had to think about race in the same way. It’s a function of my upbringing. I’ve been insulated by privilege my entire life.”



Portraits of the British aristocracy have often been produced by its own members or by those socially adjacent to them. “Downton Abbey,” which precisely anatomized the landed élite at a moment of social transition, was created by Julian Fellowes, who was himself born into the British gentry. Authors from Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford to Edward St. Aubyn have portrayed the ruling classes with the jaundiced eye of a skeptical insider. Joseph Charlton, a playwright and a longtime friend of Down and Kay’s who also works on scripts for “Industry,” told me that the program’s perspective on class mirrors that of its creators. He said, “The show is about characters that are fascinated by the class system and climbing up it, and then feel kind of revulsed by where they find themselves.” That revulsion, though, is usually expressed tonally rather than verbally—in the loveless couplings, or in the cold white privacy of yet another bathroom stall. “Industry” celebrates the accomplishment of capitalist dominance while also provoking disgust at the emptiness of capitalism’s excesses. Being on the yacht feels like Heaven; being on the yacht feels like Hell.

One evening, I met Down and Kay for a drink at a London pub around the corner from Down’s house. They were both adrenalized: they’d been reviewing the final cut of the season finale before sending it to HBO. The first three seasons of the show formed a kind of trilogy; they see the fourth season as a reset. Having thrown themselves, post-banking, into the world of

television, they said, they had not necessarily expected success on the level at which they have found it. At the same time, Kay said, “I knew that we had it in us, together, to make something good.”

“I never, ever had impostor syndrome in *this* industry,” Down added. Kay remarked that their creative partnership, as well as their nearly twenty-year friendship, has been strengthened by their willingness to be vulnerable with each other. “We’re super ambitious, and we drive each other’s ambition,” he said. “But what’s really nice is now, I think, in my mid-thirties, I can step back from whatever we do, and I can just feel a genuine sense of love for him, which is sort of totally divorced from our career relationship.” Down agreed, though with his characteristic restraint. “My softness is a bit more inside,” he admitted.

After an hour, Down had to return home to his family, but Kay was awaiting a friend, and we kept talking. He said that he has been influenced by the writings of the late cultural theorist Mark Fisher, whose book “Capitalist Realism,” from 2009, posited that the hegemony of capitalism has made it impossible to imagine a political or economic system outside of it. The observation that it is “easier to imagine an end to the world than it is to imagine an end to capitalism” did not originate with Fisher, but he did much to disseminate the idea. From Fisher, Kay said, he had learned that “any product of capitalism has to be, on some level, a celebration of it.” That was certainly true of “Industry.”

The show appears in one sense to be aspirational, Kay explained: “These people have money, there’s the sex and the drugs. But, if you get underneath that stuff, they are hyper-alienated—they are hyper-individualistic, they are all miserable, they are all contending with these huge traumas in their past. And the temporary salve of sex and drugs and money masks all those things. All the characters are, on some level, automatons.” He added, “For me, the power of the show is that everyone thinks they are soulless and dead-eyed, and they *are*, and they have chosen a business that is going to exacerbate that problem within themselves. And romance is at the edges of the show, and sometimes they can let it in and it can be transformative for them.” In Season 4, Kay went on, one of the main characters comes face to face with the reality that his miserable situation is the inevitable end point of a transactional approach to life. “For financial markets, that’s phenomenal—

for a society, that is a *disaster*,” Kay said. “We have constructed a society where we have made financial markets and society into an analogous thing. And then people take the world of the trading floor out into their relationships, and I don’t know where that leaves them.”

Kay, who by then was finishing his second Guinness, gestured at my phone. “My screen time is eight hours a day, and anytime I feel *anything*—anxiety, feelings of self-worthlessness, does my girlfriend love me, why am I not a dad, I’m going to die, all the things I think when I have five minutes on my own—*this* thing denies you all that, in a way that is so pleasurable,” he said. “I’m, like, ‘Wow, this fucking jacket! It’s going to make me feel fucking amazing.’ The jacket comes, and I look good for a day, and then I start to feel that feeling again. The danger of this thing is it flattens the experience of the world. So I can go on Instagram and see some woman I’m not dating, and then I can go on Twitter and see some kid being beheaded in Gaza, and then I can look at the jacket—spending the *exact* same amount of time on each of them.” Kay had become impassioned in a way that his and Down’s characters only rarely allow themselves to be.

“And you wonder why people are fucking miserable!” he said. “You know, recently, I would prefer to be alone in my thoughts, thinking, I’m going to die. *That* is the better choice.” He rose from the table and, while I gathered my belongings to leave, greeted a young man who had just entered the pub. Kay wasn’t going to be alone with his thoughts just yet. “This is my friend Dan,” he told me. “He works at Goldman.” ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the playwright Joseph Charlton.*

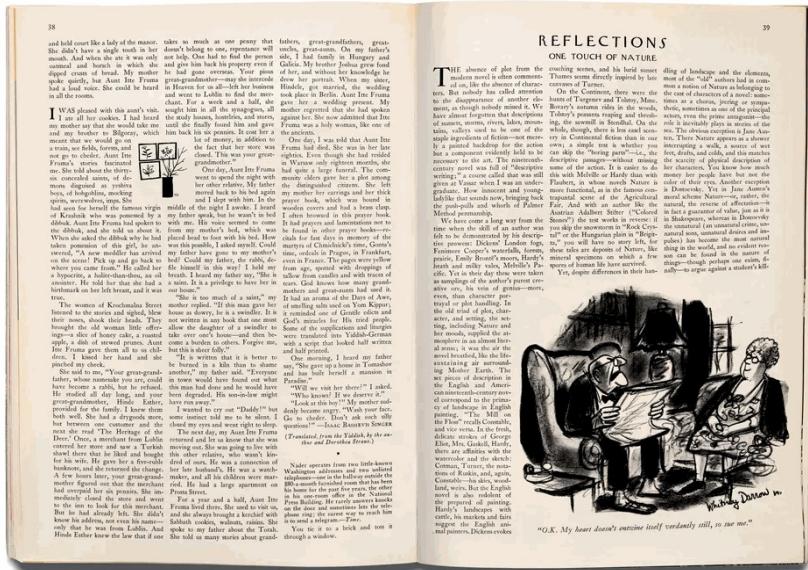
# Takes

- [Katy Waldman on Mary McCarthy's "One Touch of Nature"](#)

# Katy Waldman on Mary McCarthy's “One Touch of Nature”

By Katy Waldman

December 07, 2025



I first encountered Mary McCarthy not through her novels or criticism but through her political reporting. A former editor recommended that I read “The Mask of State: Watergate Portraits” before covering Paul Manafort’s arraignment in 2017. (Were we ever so young?) I loved McCarthy’s witty cameos of malefactors—behold Maurice Stans, Nixon’s erstwhile Secretary of Commerce, “a silver-haired, sideburned super-accountant and magic fund-raiser, who gave a day-and-a-half-long demonstration of the athletics of evasion, showing himself very fit for a man of his age.” McCarthy’s sentences were like mousetraps, snapping shut on both visual information and something deeper, the kind of quintessence that fictional characters possess and that we often long for real people to have, too.

In January, 1970, *The New Yorker* published McCarthy's "One Touch of Nature," a tour-de-force essay that stretched across nineteen pages and was

animated by a simple question: What happened to nature imagery in fiction? McCarthy contends that novels have drifted far from “when the skill of an author was felt to be demonstrated by his descriptive prowess”—Dickens’s London fogs, Melville’s Pacific. Now, she observes, “rivers, lakes, mountains, valleys” are thin on the literary ground.

The technical term for the piece—a loose, sprawling, associative freestyle, in which McCarthy seemingly wheels through as many proper nouns and pithy summaries as she can—is a “riff.” It spans movements (classicism, Romanticism, modernism), regions (Continental Europe, England, the U.S.), and art forms (painting, poetry, fiction). McCarthy aims to account for nature’s mutable presence across three centuries of Western cultural production. As she proceeds, grudges are revived: “What betrays the bad faith of Hemingway is the invariable intrusion of the social into a natural context.” Politicians are etherized: Joseph McCarthy’s vision of the outdoors is “doubtless based on a frozen-food locker.” Opinions are tossed in the manner of house keys. Zola is “the only Naturalist to have a real conception of Nature.”

A reader trusts this voice instinctively, charmed by its opaline assessments and zinging aperçus, forgiving a shortage of textual evidence because each claim feels spot-on. “The characteristic of truth for Tolstoy was its recognizability,” McCarthy submits. “The truth (compare Socrates) is what we have ‘always’ known.” Still, one can quibble. “The novel (unlike the tale) is a social medium,” she declares with perfect confidence. Twelve pages in, we’re told that, “at this point, a definition”—of nature—“is called for.” At *this* point?

Like novelistic interludes concerning pine forests, McCarthy’s breed of criticism feels endangered. The breezy authority, the absurd plenitude: these qualities suggest a more hospitable era for the printed word, even if you prefer today’s careful efficiency. That McCarthy rarely bothers to explain her voluminous references evokes a time when the writer’s job was less to make thinking easy than to make it rewarding. “One Touch of Nature” supplies the loveliness it praises, pausing to describe “the still, ribbony roads leading nowhere” in paintings by the Dutch artist Jacob van Ruisdael (whereas the essay itself is a snarl of colored lines on an M.T.A. map, leading everywhere at once) and “the snow in ‘The Dead’ falling softly over

Ireland, a universal blanket or shroud.” As McCarthy surveys her subject, she conjures a living artistic ecosystem that is constantly evolving, including in its relationship to the natural world. The subtext is that this system, like the carbon-based one, is beautiful and worth attending to; McCarthy, novelist that she is, encrypts her themes on the way to elucidating them.

“One Touch of Nature” bursts with so much virtuosity and élan that you might forget it’s a whodunnit, out to solve the mystery of why organic scenery has gone missing from fiction. But, in the final paragraphs, McCarthy provides an answer. “Nature,” she writes, “is no longer the human home”—thanks to technology, which has become “the No. 1 opponent of human society.” This turn feels especially haunting in 2025, when much of contemporary life has migrated online and A.I.’s devastating environmental impact is only beginning. One wonders what McCarthy would make of our moment, in which runaway machines seem poised to further degrade both nature and art, alongside her own profession of literary criticism. Surely she’d have some choice words. ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)

# Fiction

- [The Show Must Go On](#)
- [Understanding the Science](#)

Comic Strip

# The Show Must Go On

A location shoot's hierarchy of needs.

By Adrian Tomine

December 08, 2025



EXT. NYC STREETS - NIGHT









2009

SORRY, SIR, BUT  
THIS BLOCK IS CLOSED  
OFF FOR FILMING.



BUT-- I'VE GOT A NEW-  
BORN BABY WHO WON'T  
STOP PUKING, AND WE  
DON'T HAVE LAUNDRY  
IN OUR BUILDING!





WELL, THE  
LAUNDROMAT WILL  
BE ACCESSIBLE  
AGAIN BRIGHT AND  
EARLY TOMORROW  
MORNING.

YOU'RE WELCOME TO  
HANG OUT AND WATCH.  
LOOK--THERE'S TED  
DANSON AND JASON  
SCHWARTZMAN!



I DON'T GIVE  
A SHIT ABOUT TED  
DANSON AND JASON  
SCHWARTZMAN!



I'VE GOT A BAG FULL OF  
PUKE-COVERED ONESIES  
AND I NEED TO GET TO  
THE LAUNDROMAT!

SECURITY!



2022

UNBELIEVABLE!  
I WROTE A MOVIE, AND  
NOW IT'S BEING FILMED  
RIGHT HERE IN  
MANHATTAN!



THERE'S A BUNCH OF  
LIGHTS AND A GIANT  
CRANE IN THE MIDDLE  
OF THE STREET, ALL  
BECAUSE OF SOMETHING  
I DREAMED UP!



WE'VE ALREADY KICKED  
OUT TWO VERY IMPATIENT  
PEOPLE WHO TRIED TO  
GET THROUGH THE  
BARRICADES!

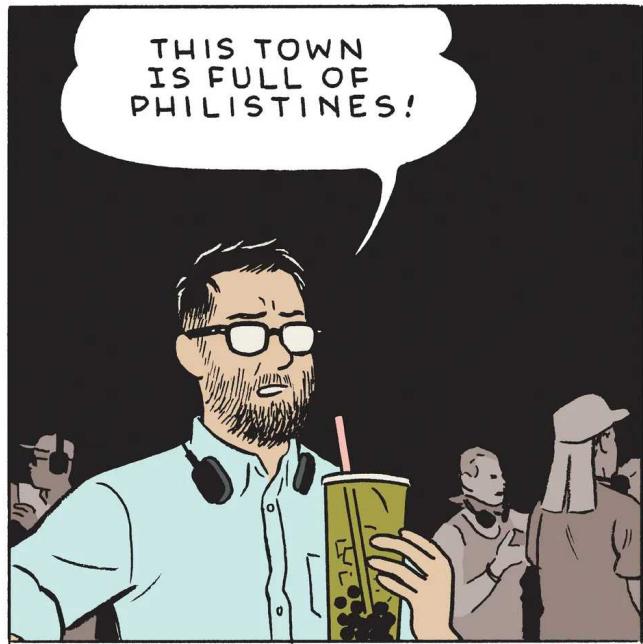


AND WE JUST TALKED  
AN EMERGENCY CON ED  
CREW INTO PAUSING  
THEIR WORK WHILE  
WE SHOOT!



HOLLYWOOD  
ASSHOLES!





2023

THAT CRANE SHOT  
WAS ONSCREEN  
FOR LESS THAN  
TWO SECONDS.

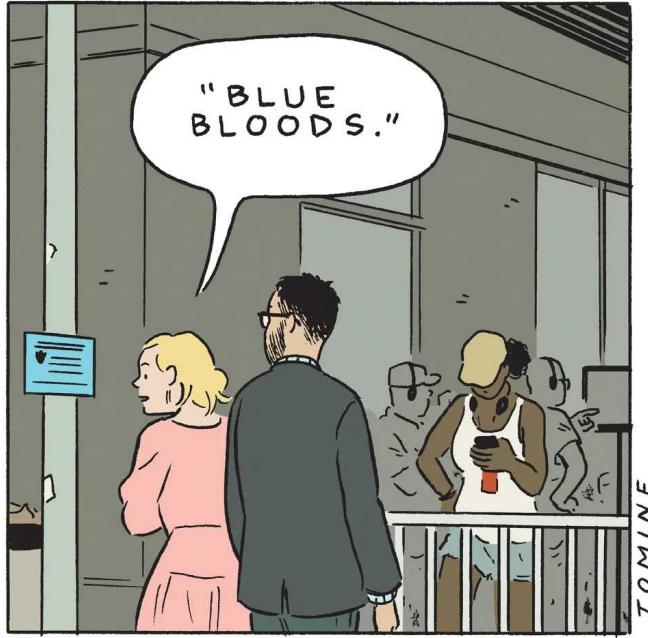


AND IT DIDN'T EVEN  
REALLY LOOK LIKE A  
CRANE SHOT. AND IT  
WAS KIND OF POINT-  
LESS, ANYWAY.









TOMINE

Fiction

# Understanding the Science

Katherine's phone rang, and, because it was Adrian calling, everyone went quiet, trying to hear the famous actor's voice.

By Camille Bordas

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"Everyone thinks they're on this big *journey* now," Debbie said, refilling her glass. "I've had it with the journey. I've had it with you people."

"I don't think I'm on a journey," Burt said.

"Self-discovery," Debbie added. "What a joke. Life's too short to find out who we really are."

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

It was the first time the six of them had got together for dinner in more than a year (since Maria's diagnosis), and after such a long time (and in celebration of Maria's remission) they'd expected to have more interesting

things to tell one another, deeper things, but they were entering dessert territory now, a cake was on the table, and only superficial topics had been broached: Ervin's promotion, Jane and Burt's move to the suburbs, Katherine's recent purchase of a metabolism-tracking device—a pen-shaped item and the cause of Debbie's rant.

"How much can you know about yourself, exactly?" she said. "The therapy, the vision quests, the birth charts—do we really need the data on metabolic flexibility, too?"

Jane, in Katherine's defense, said that, the more you knew about yourself, the more useful you could be to society.

"Bullshit," Debbie said. "I call bullshit. Knowing whether Kat is in fat- or carb-burning mode doesn't help anyone."

As a result of Katherine declining cake five minutes earlier, no one had touched it. No one, Debbie included, really wanted to. They'd all overeaten already, drunk too much, made private plans to atone for it the next day. The cake presented a challenge, it sat there taunting them, and Debbie knew this, that you couldn't serve cake to a group of fortysomethings without causing ripples, but what else could she have done? *Not* offered dessert? She got it, no one wanted to put on weight, but this was a gorgeous princess cake, just gorgeous, she'd had to drive all the way to Andersonville to get it from that Swedish bakery everyone talked about. Staring at it now, though, she wondered if the cake didn't look a little bit like a tit, the smooth half sphere, the small pink marzipan flower nippling the top of it—and, oh, God, did *Maria* think it looked like a tit? Did Maria still have nipples? Debbie had been meaning to look it up, what exactly it was they took in a mastectomy, but she hadn't had the nerve.

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"I'm not on a journey," Katherine said. "I just want to lose a few pounds."

Back in the summer, she'd met a pretty famous actor at a friend's gallery in L.A., and they'd been dating long-distance ever since. The actor was a little

younger than her. She didn't want people to think they looked wrong together. He was about to come to Chicago for a six-week shoot. It would be the first time they were in the same city for more than a few days.

Katherine changed the subject to the documentary she'd just seen, about flat-earthers, but this topic, too, made Debbie angry. Debbie's anger at flat-earthers turned out to run deeper, in fact, than her anger at metabolism-tracking devices. It was one thing to *feel* the earth was flat, she said, but that anyone could believe that a secret of this magnitude could've been kept from the public by scientists and governments for centuries, for *millennia*, even—no one could keep a secret for that long. Didn't people understand this?

"Why would Pythagoras have lied about the earth being round?" she said. "And Aristotle? And Eratosthenes? Why go to the trouble of pretending to measure the planet's diameter, going out, planting sticks, tracking shadows?"

"Maybe they just wanted to impress their wives," Burt said.

"Were those guys even married?" Katherine said. "Weren't they all gay?"

Debbie rolled her eyes. She happened to know a lot about the Greek wives: Pythias had been a scientist (on her honeymoon with Aristotle, she gathered materials for an encyclopedia they were working on together); Theano (Pythagoras' wife) had been a mathematician in her own right.

Maria hadn't said anything in a while. It hadn't occurred to her that the cake looked like a tit. She didn't care how accomplished certain wives had been thirty centuries ago, and she hadn't seen the flat-earth documentary. She couldn't understand why such a documentary existed in the first place, why someone would bother filming idiots displaying their idiocy. There was something repulsive about it, wasn't there? About ridiculing people, amplifying their dumb beliefs, so that upper-middle-class Chicagoans like her and her friends could feel alarmed and superior. Most things were aesthetically repulsive to her, if Maria was honest. Her aging friends certainly were. Not so much their appearance (they used the retinol creams and popped the antioxidants, they dyed their hair, they exercised) but their thoughts—had they always been so small? Maria was getting bored of them.

She was getting bored of herself, too, but what could you do. You could do one thing, Maria knew, but she didn't have the guts. And, for all that she'd thought of suicide as a teen, it had surprised her how determined she'd been to survive cancer, to *see the world through*. (Those were the words that had appeared in her head when she'd been diagnosed.)

"And Eratosthenes was killed by the man whose wife he was sleeping with," Debbie said. "So maybe bisexual, all those guys, but definitely not straight-up gay."

Who cared who'd been what and slept with whom? Maria wondered, but she knew that everyone did—everyone but her cared about those two things. She was the outlier. She was so bored that she started wondering what she would take in a fire. She knew what she would take in a fire at *Katherine's* place, but what would she save from Deb and Ervin's apartment if it went up in flames right at this moment? There wasn't much to get excited about. Everything matched, nothing begged to be noticed. Kat's apartment was much nicer, Maria thought. She wished they were having dinner at Kat's. There was art on the walls there, real art, by real painters. Not painters whose names anyone recognized yet, but soon.

Kat was the best of the lot, really. After Maria's diagnosis, Kat had offered everything she could—a shoulder to cry on, chemo drives, pharmacy runs, ice-cream deliveries. Maria said no to all, but still. She appreciated the effort. She appreciated that Kat had kept trying, too, offering stranger and stranger services as the weeks went on—she could do Maria's nails, if she wanted, she could read to her, she could teach her piano. The idea of piano lessons offended Maria at first—that she could be expected to learn a new skill while dealing with cancer. Wasn't cancer itself enough to learn from? she thought. What else would be asked of her? Was she supposed to master Mandarin as well? Meet new people? Yet, mere hours after the piano suggestion, Maria was in the shower, once again fighting the urge to feel the lump (Had it grown? Was it shrinking?), and when she extended her arms as far away from her body as possible, pleading with the fingers at the end of them to stay still and not touch, to refrain from palpating, from inquiring, she realized 1) how thin her fingers had become and 2) that giving them something to do might not be such a bad idea. She started going to Kat's on Mondays and Thursdays for piano lessons, skipping only one week, when

she went in for her mastectomy. Now that she was in remission, she wondered if Kat would want to keep teaching her. Already Kat was less available, but that had to do with the new boyfriend, Maria wanted to believe, not with her newly recovered health. Kat was spending more and more time with Adrian, in L.A. or on set, but she told Maria that she was free to come practice at her apartment when she was out of town—she'd given her a set of keys. Maria took advantage of Kat's empty apartment every chance she got. Sometimes she even spent the night there, though she never told Kat when she did. She didn't necessarily practice much piano; mostly she lay on Kat's tufted daybed, read from Kat's library, made tea in Kat's enamelled-steel kettle. Every little thing Kat owned was beautiful. In a fire, Maria would've taken the small painting of a woman in a bathtub, which hung in the guest room.

Debbie choked on a sip of wine, and, in the few seconds it took her to catch her breath, Ervin saw an opportunity to open up the conversation. His wife could be hard to stop when she'd had a few, and she always started early when they hosted. (A first glass of wine while she gathered ingredients on the counter, a second while dinner simmered—by the time the guests arrived, she was usually four drinks ahead.) Ervin asked everyone what their favorite conspiracy theory was.

Jane said global warming. Oceans rising.

“You don’t believe in global warming?”

“I thought we were naming things *other* people don’t believe in,” Jane said.

“Every time I hear about oceans rising, I think about the Steven Wright joke,” Burt said. “ ‘Sponges live in the ocean. I wonder how much deeper it would be if that weren’t the case.’ ”

“Maybe the world would be saved if we grew more sponges,” Jane said.

“Or just one very big sponge,” Katherine said.

She said her favorite conspiracy theory was that Elvis was alive. Ervin said Roswell, and Burt said God, which made Maria uneasy. Not that she

believed in God, but her parents had, and she'd tried it herself, a handful of times.

It was going to be her turn to share. She didn't have a favorite conspiracy theory. What did that even mean? She thought her friends might not insist that she come up with an answer, though. One good thing about her illness was that people had mostly stopped trying to change her mind once she'd said no. Whenever she said no now, everyone assumed the no came from a place of knowledge they couldn't access, that it was the no of someone who'd seen not exactly the future but something akin to the future, a shortcut to the end, and who knew what was worth her time and what wasn't.

"What about you, Maria?" Ervin asked. "What's your favorite conspiracy theory?"

She thought of her parents, who hadn't believed in evolution, who'd tried to tell her, when she'd expressed a desire to become a paleontologist after seeing "Jurassic Park," that fossils had been placed on earth by God in order to test people's faith. Would her parents have called the existence of dinosaurs a conspiracy theory? Would saying "dinosaurs" be an insult to her parents' memory?

The cake was still untouched at the center of the table.

"Why is it called a princess cake?" Maria asked, but Katherine's phone rang before Debbie could look for an answer on the internet, and, because it was Adrian calling, everyone went quiet, trying to hear the famous actor's voice.

"Adrian's in town!" Katherine said.

"I thought he wasn't coming till Sunday!" Burt said.

Adrian had taken an earlier flight to surprise Katherine, but had found no one at her place.

"Can he come over?" she asked Debbie. "Maybe he'll eat the whole cake. Adrian can eat anything."

The mood shifted in an instant. They were going to meet a movie star! Jane and Debbie both pretended they had to pee, and took turns in the bathroom to reapply their makeup.

When Adrian arrived, Debbie brought him a small plate and a spoon from the kitchen, even though he could've used any clean plate or spoon already on the table.

“This looks amazing,” Adrian said. “Did you make it yourself?”

Debbie blushed and said, “Don’t be silly.” She cut him too big a slice, and, as she did that, she thought the cake now looked worse than a tit, looked like a mangled tit. Adrian made appreciative sounds the moment the cake entered his mouth, and Maria assumed that he was acting. Not enough time had passed for flavor to register in his brain.

Jane brought him into the fold by asking what his favorite conspiracy theory was, and Adrian didn’t take a beat to think about it or pretend that the question surprised him: his favorite conspiracy theory was that he had a secret twin. With every new film he made, he explained, speculation erupted online as to which twin had done the work.

“That’s creepy,” Burt said. “I don’t think I’ve heard that theory.”

“The worst part is, I think my therapist believes it,” Adrian said. “I feel like she’s always trying to trick me, always quizzing me to see if I remember this or that from a previous session.”

“Why don’t you fire her?”

“Because she’s really good. She helps me keep the right boundaries between my characters and my true self.”

Maria and Debbie met eyes over the cake. Neither of them found the concept of therapy interesting—they knew this about each other. Debbie, besides despising the idea of self-knowledge, believed that she was too complicated for therapy; Maria felt the opposite, that one needed an interesting personality to take to a shrink and that she didn’t have one. Her dreams didn’t contain sophisticated layers of meaning, for example. Before a trip,

she dreamed that she was packing a suitcase. Every time she quit smoking, she had pleasant dreams in which she smoked.

“I think that’s more of a rumor than a conspiracy theory,” Katherine said, about Adrian’s secret twin.

“What’s the difference?”

“I’ve always wondered how rumors start,” Jane said.

They thought about it as a group. Did a rumor start the moment someone came up with a story? The powerful men in an office, the bored children behind a tree? Or did it start only once a certain number of strangers had heard it? What was that number? It had to be tricky, launching a rumor into the world which you knew would get warped and amended, something whose nature it was to be distorted. The main beats of the story had to be foolproof. The first people you told it to had to be picked with utmost care. Burt wondered how many rumors got nipped in the bud—for every successful one, how many failed to take off?

“And why did the rumor that I have a twin make it?” Adrian asked. “What’s so fascinating about that?”

Maria figured that he wasn’t comfortable when a conversation strayed from him for too long.

“Are you kidding?” Ervin said. “Two Adrian Kerrys! That’s the definition of hope for the ladies.”

“And the gentlemen,” Katherine added. “Adrian is quite popular among the L.G.B.T.Q. community.”

They agreed that rumors, like conspiracy theories, played on hope. Hope that there was always more to uncover, more to life than they’d been told, more meaning. More life. Everything had to be more than it was, to have a secret layer that only truly enlightened people could see. Even the darkest of conspiracy theories held a promise.

“I guess I can see the hope in the twin theory,” Debbie admitted. “Or even in Roswell. But where’s the promise in flat earth?”

“Oh, Lord. Not this again.”

“I’m serious! Who would feel better if we suddenly were to find out that the earth is, indeed, flat?”

“The hope is to discover that everyone has been lying to you,” Katherine said. “Which then gives you an explanation as to why your life sucks. The hope is to put the blame on someone else.”

“It gives you a chance to give up, too,” Jane added. “If everything you were told is a lie, then you’re free to give up on the sheep life you’ve been living and start anew. It’s the ultimate fantasy.”

“I don’t have that fantasy,” Burt said. “Why does everyone always want to quit what they’re doing?”

“I don’t know, Einstein, why did you quit med school? Because it’s hard!”

“That’s not why I quit,” Burt said.

“Everything’s fun for a minute, then it gets hard,” Jane insisted.

Maria wanted to ask why Burt had quit med school, but Adrian jumped in before she could.



"I just played a heart surgeon in an indie film," he said. "I observed a couple surgeries back in May, to prepare for the role. That stuff is *wild*."

Maria's mastectomy had been in May, and though she knew it wasn't her surgery that Adrian had attended, she became uncomfortable at the thought that it could have been.

"What type of surgery did you observe?" she asked.

Adrian was going for another slice of cake.

"Just a couple valve replacements," he said.

"Did you have to ask for the patients' consent?"

"They were *so* psyched to let me watch."

Maria struggled to find a response to this. She glanced in Katherine's direction for help (Was her boyfriend serious? Did he really think that his presence had made open-heart surgery better for the patients?), but Katherine was focussed on the new slice of cake on Adrian's plate.

“I’m going out for a cigarette,” Maria ended up saying, and her friends looked at one another. Were they supposed to stop her? She’d never been a heavy smoker, but after her diagnosis they’d all been relieved to hear that she’d quit.

“You sure you want to do that?” Jane asked. “I didn’t know you’d taken it up again.”

“I’ll come out with you for one,” Adrian said.

From the balcony, which was right off the dining room, they could’ve kept participating in the conversation, but Maria slid the glass door shut behind them, which muted her friends. She needed to be away from everyone for a minute. That was, in fact, the main reason she’d started smoking again—a cigarette was an excuse to get out. People, even nonsmokers, understood that a smoker needed to take a cigarette break once in a while. What they seldom knew was that the break was also one that the smoker was taking from them. She resented Adrian for following her out.

“Can I ask you something?” he said, lighting Maria’s cigarette before his. She didn’t like it when people lit her cigarettes for her—lighting your own cigarette was half the fun.

“Ask away,” she said, then looked down at the street, three floors below.

“What do you think Kat sees in me?”

Maria wondered what it might feel like to be so self-involved. She doubted it could be all that pleasant.

“Katherine is pretty private,” she said, unsure why it felt important to use Kat’s whole name. “We don’t really talk about these things.”

“What do you talk about?”

Maria thought about it for a moment. The past few weeks, they’d mostly talked about Maria’s apartment. She wanted Kat to help her redesign it—she couldn’t stand the way it looked anymore, the sad eggshell-colored walls, the smooth kitchen cabinets.

“Neither of us talks very much,” she said.

The wind in the trees made a sound that reminded her of the hospital, the pillow they’d given her there. Whenever she’d turned her head, the pillow had made this unnerving sound, something between a ruffle and a squeak, like it was filled with Styrofoam bits.

“We did talk about you once,” she remembered. “I asked her about actors, if she thought it was easier for actors to accept the idea of death, because their youth had been recorded on film, their energy preserved forever.”

“*Forever?*” Adrian said. “Who believes in *that*? ”

He said he didn’t think humans were going to last very much longer. His *youth*, as Maria had put it, would exist on film for a while, but soon no one would be left to watch it.

“All humans fantasize that their generation will be the last,” Maria said.

“Believe me, I’m aware. I work in Hollywood. Every other script I get is an end-of-the-world story. The movie I’m shooting right now is an end-of-the-world story.” Maria showed no curiosity about the plot, so Adrian went on: “I didn’t say we were going to be the last. Maybe humans will stick around for thousands and thousands of years, but it’s a known fact that we’ll disappear at some point. We don’t know how yet, that’s the whole thrill, but we know that we will. And then what difference will it make that I was once young and did my own stunts in ‘Last Pursuit’? Or that I was in the film adaptation of ‘Cat’s Cradle’? ”

Maria had never seen any of Adrian’s movies. She didn’t suspect they were very good.

“I think, after someone dies, there’s solace to be found in moving images,” she said. “For the family, at least.”

Adrian said that she might be right. His mother had died when he was young, and he found it sad sometimes that there was no footage of her, only a few photos, and photos didn’t help you remember someone as well as home videos did.

“What did your mother die of?” Maria asked.

“Cancer.”

“What kind?”

He hesitated to say it.

“The kind you had.”

So, Kat had told him a bit about her. Maria looked away from the street and at Adrian, but she couldn’t make out his expression. There were no lights on the balcony, and his face was turned toward the moon and a flock of birds heading for a warmer climate.

“I wonder if birds also have conspiracy theories,” Adrian said. He’d read somewhere that people who studied birdsong had noticed slight changes in a flock’s repertoire after certain migrations, as if bird stories and vocabulary were amended according to what they’d learned from a trip. “I wonder if they have gossip.”

“Do you like birds?”

“Not really,” he said. “They creep me out a bit.”

“Me, too,” Maria said.

Especially since dead birds had started showing up on the sidewalks again, she added, as they did at this time of year. She’d seen her first dead warbler of the season just the day before, and that always felt like a bad omen. She couldn’t understand why migratory birds insisted on flying through Chicago on their way south. Studies had shown that Chicago was the most dangerous place for them. Every fall, they got confused by the lights and reflections. Every fall, thousands of them hit windows and died. It seemed as if their birdsong should’ve included “Avoid Chicago” by now, she told Adrian. “Avoid Chicago at all cost.”

“But maybe Chicago is part of their mythology,” he objected. “Maybe their vocabulary does include something about the dangers of Chicago, and they

know something bad might happen there, but it has to be part of the journey. Like, they know that it's dangerous the way we know that smoking and drinking are dangerous. We still do it."

The wind in the leaves made that Styrofoam sound again. Maria shivered. When she came home from the hospital, she threw away all her pillows; she'd ended up not using the noisy hospital one, and so she realized that pillows weren't necessary for sleep, as she'd been led to believe they were since childhood. That the human need for pillows was just another lie.

"The real question, though," Adrian said, "is, do *birds* know that they're dinosaurs? That they've been around so much longer than us? Do they have any clue?"

Maria found it odd, this shift to dinosaurs. Adrian's commitment, since he'd stepped out on the balcony, to talk about the nothingness of humanity, the specks of dust they all were, made her question if he treated every change of locale as a new scene. He'd seemed so interested in himself back at the table.

"I used to wonder about that, too," she admitted. "I used to wonder if birds carried some kind of collective memory of the asteroid."

"Right? We always talk about the species that were wiped out, we mourn the T. rexes and the brontosaurus, but when I was a kid I was obsessed with the ones that remained, the birds and the turtles. The fungi. I always wondered what it must've been like for them, to survive all those years alone in the dark. If they carried any sense of responsibility, or guilt. I think they did. I think they still might. Maybe that's why I find it hard to look at them for too long. They embody a form of regret—what the world could've been."

Maria thought his last line cheesy, and stilted—something he might have read in a bad script. But then maybe it was hard not to be cheesy when you talked about birds.

"My parents believed that the world was six thousand years old," she said.

They might have also believed that birds merely sang, she realized now, were constantly cutely singing—not alerting one another to potential dangers, not retelling old stories and cautionary tales.

“Six thousand years is still a good chunk of time,” Adrian said. “It’s still a frightening amount to consider.”

Maria thought that was a nice thing to say. Or maybe it was condescending to her parents. She couldn’t tell. Her cigarette was almost finished, and she didn’t want to go back inside thinking about her parents, or about time, how much there had been and how much was left. She asked Adrian what it was that he saw in Katherine.

Adrian turned toward the window, as if he needed to look at his girlfriend to remember what he liked about her. She and Debbie were animated in conversation, Debbie making hand gestures like *Let me stop you right there*, Katherine leaning forward to say what she was going to say.

“Kat . . . she doesn’t think about this stuff,” Adrian said. “She doesn’t think about geological eras, what she’s bigger or smaller than. She’s content. It’s an amazing thing to see.”

Maria wondered if he knew about the metabolism-tracking device. It didn’t seem to be on the table anymore. Perhaps Kat had hidden it before he arrived.

Katherine broke up with Adrian before the end of his first week in Chicago. Back at her place after filming a stunt in which his character was thrown through a bay window, he’d talked for too long about his nostalgia for sugar glass, a type of prop that had been replaced by something called breakaway glass. He just didn’t like the resin in the breakaway glass as much. The stunts weren’t as fun. Katherine couldn’t find it in her to pretend to care. The split was amicable. Adrian moved into Soho House that very night.

He was supposed to spend the next few days filming action scenes on Lower Wacker Drive, but heavy rain flooded it, and production adjusted the schedule: a monologue that Adrian had been dreading was moved up by three weeks. He was now expected to give it to the camera in about an hour.

“You’re right,” he said to the mirror in his dressing room. “I *am* a physicist.”

Would the audience believe this? Well, Adrian reasoned, they would already have been asked to buy the idea that, after Russia tested secret new weapons in Siberia, the earth had started spinning faster on its axis.

“I understand the science,” he went on. “I know what is happening. What I *don’t* know is how to explain it to my kid. I don’t know how to tell my kid that if the earth keeps spinning faster and faster, that if the numbers keep rising at the pace we’ve been seeing, it won’t just be satellites going off track, it won’t just be shorter days and constant jet lag, tsunamis and plants dying and horses going mad. If my projections are correct, we’ll reach terminal acceleration in a week. We’ll become weightless, which will be fun, sure, but only for a split second, before we start flying around like bloody—literally bloody—confetti. We’ll hit the walls in our houses and die, we’ll collide with buildings if we’re outside, or trees, or other bodies, already dead bodies, just floating in the air. Is that what I should tell my kid? How do I get him ready for this? I’m a physicist, yes, but I’m a father first. Now, tell me, what equations can I solve to prepare my boy for this kind of death?”

Later in the script, Adrian’s character did have a talk with his son, another twenty lines he wasn’t looking forward to learning, especially given how much he disliked the child actor they’d cast to play the son. The kid had been chosen for his resemblance to Adrian, supposedly, but Adrian couldn’t see it, was insulted that production hadn’t found a better match.

His assistant knocked on the door. They were waiting for him on set.

Walking to the soundstage, Adrian heard a flapping noise and looked up at the thirty-five-foot ceilings. He spotted two pigeons amid the rigging, looking down at the set. Their puffy chests brought to mind plump ladies at the opera, passing judgment from the comfort of a private box. He wasn’t fond of pigeons, but seeing birds where they shouldn’t be always cheered him for a moment. There was security to go through to get into Cinespace, but the pigeons hadn’t bothered with it. Maybe they’d take the El and go to an indoor mall later, or to the airport, or to the movies. He’d never seen a bird in a movie theatre, but it had to have happened.

The makeup artist did some touch-ups to his forehead, and Adrian tried to focus on his lines, to get in the zone. The only thing he liked about the script was a scene, much later on, in which his character prepares for the erosion of gravitational power by strapping pillows against his and his kid's chests, arms, and legs. He looked forward to shooting that scene, and the ones that would follow, in which he'd hang from cables in front of a green screen, padded in pillows. He hadn't known Maria when he first read the script (he hadn't even known Katherine), and he would only ever think of her once more: when the time came to shoot that pillow scene. When they'd gone back inside after their cigarette, Maria had told the table about her newfound discovery that people didn't need pillows to sleep. She presented her act of throwing away all her pillows as a grand cathartic gesture, a step toward freedom, but her friends looked troubled by it. She couldn't go to bed without pillows, they said. They all seemed to believe it was unthinkable.

Adrian stood on his mark and waited for the director's go. The pigeons were still up there, but they were restless now, they seemed to have sensed that something was about to happen. Perhaps they were debating flying down toward the set for front-row seats.

The set today was a physics lab. There were many fine details, but there was also a gigantic periodic table of the elements hanging on the wall. Adrian didn't think that a real physicist would have a poster of the periodic table in his lab, but his doubts had been brushed away. "It communicates," the director said. ♦

*This is drawn from "[One Sun Only: Stories](#)."*

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The Art World

# The New Studio Museum in Harlem Is a Landmark in the History of Black Art

Reopening with work by Tom Lloyd and others, the museum is a manifestation of possibility, specifically in Black lives.

By Hilton Als

December 08, 2025

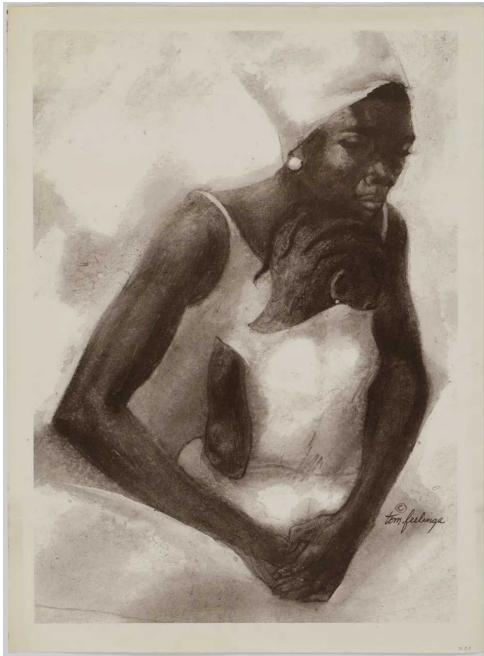


On weekends we'd take the bus into the city—my father, my younger brother, and I. We lived in Brooklyn then, in Flatbush; this was in the late sixties, when I was nine or ten. My father didn't live with us. He'd pick us up late morning on a Saturday, and off we'd head to Manhattan—three explorers in pursuit of discovery.

We had to change buses in Williamsburg. Handing our transfers to the driver of the second bus was like making it through passport control: nothing could stop us now.

And there was no stopping Manhattan once we got there. The speed of it! So many people, so many cars, and so much energy on those wide and sometimes narrow streets. In my memory of those trips, it's always fall, and everyone is wearing a trenchcoat, just like Suzy Parker on Madison Avenue in "The Best of Everything." My father, gone now for many years, was, in some ways, fearful of the world and bewildered by his boy children, but he was fearless when it came to showing us Manhattan. Yorkville, the Upper West Side, the Guggenheim, the New York Public Library—these were places we could and did visit, and they stayed with us forever. The only obstacle, at times, was the prejudice of others, which we didn't allow to limit us or our dreams. Our father fed us the richness of culture by making it part of our everyday lives. Even now, I get rigid with anger and boredom when any voice of "authority" refers to art as one of life's exceptions, not one of its rules.

The three of us didn't spend much time in Harlem on those afternoons, and it's not hard to deduce why: my father had an aversion to live entertainment—to "show biz"—and, for many people who didn't live there, Harlem *was* the Apollo Theatre. Also, I think that my father, whose family was from Barbados, felt destabilized and unsettled in Harlem: he didn't recognize himself in the Black American men in beautifully tailored suits, selling bean pies or books by Black authors or standing on street corners in a cloud of incense, or in the street preachers and Back-to-Africanists who contributed to the cacophony that greeted us the few times that we did get off the train at 125th Street. Were they like the Black Americans in Crown Heights, Bed-Stuy, or Flatbush who made fun of him and his family's Bajan ways? Where were his people, and where did he belong? Everywhere and nowhere.



I had to wait for the next generation—my older sister—to break through that uncertainty and introduce me to the political, social, and aesthetic significance of Harlem. In my sister’s company, I protested the construction of the State Office Building, at 125th and Seventh Avenue, in 1969, and I went to the Studio Museum in Harlem, which opened, on Fifth Avenue, in 1968, where I found ways of understanding what my father probably never understood, although he embodied it: the complications of being a wandering, dreaming, diasporic self.

Last summer, I was fortunate enough to be given a tour of the Studio Museum in Harlem’s new home by its director and chief curator, [Thelma Golden](#), who, with the architecture firm [Adjaye](#) Associates, had been working to re-create and expand the museum for a long time. (The museum had been given a building, on West 125th Street, in 1979; that incarnation closed in 2018 and was demolished to make way for the current structure.) My impression of the new building was more spiritual than architectural: I was struck by how its design allows a perfect synthesis between the material and the immaterial—an unusual quality for a museum, given that part of its purpose is to acquire material, to build a unique collection that says as much about the institution’s interests as its exhibitions do. Then again, the Studio Museum in Harlem did not establish an official collecting policy until 1977, under the leadership of its fourth director, the scholar Mary Schmidt

Campbell. (The museum has had seven directors since it was founded, with Golden serving the longest in the post; this year is her twentieth at the helm.)

When I was a kid, the sister who took me to the museum also took me to see Black-nationalist-inspired plays at places like the East, in Brooklyn, but I don't remember coming across any forced ideological work at the Studio Museum in Harlem. (Don't confuse ideology with politics—the Studio Museum has a history of political engagement that is integral to its DNA.) The museum's primary mission then was to show living Black artists and connect them to the community, while also providing a space where they could work—hence the “studio” in the name. That ethos hasn't changed, but the scale of the museum—from the extraordinary lobby, with its wide, welcoming entranceway and an adjacent seating area inspired by Harlem's stoops, where so much life happens, to the verticality of the space as it goes up, up, up, taking your spirits with it—says something different now, not so much about ambition as about the realization of dreams. The museum is a manifestation of possibility, specifically possibility in Black lives that are not on a first-name basis with hope.

In recent decades, Harlem, through no fault of its own, has come to symbolize political and economic defeat—how Black lives *don't* matter. Sometimes I feel that the general perception of the place is frozen in 1964, when Harlemites rioted for six days after a fifteen-year-old kid was shot by an off-duty police officer. The Harlem I knew when I was growing up evoked violence and nostalgia—the Cotton Club, [Langston](#) and [Zora](#) and [Billie](#), “Get whitey” and all that—but was never realistically itself in the present time, an evolving community. The new Studio Museum roots Harlem in the present, without insisting on it, and in that way it tells a different tale: Harlem has a future, and the future is now.

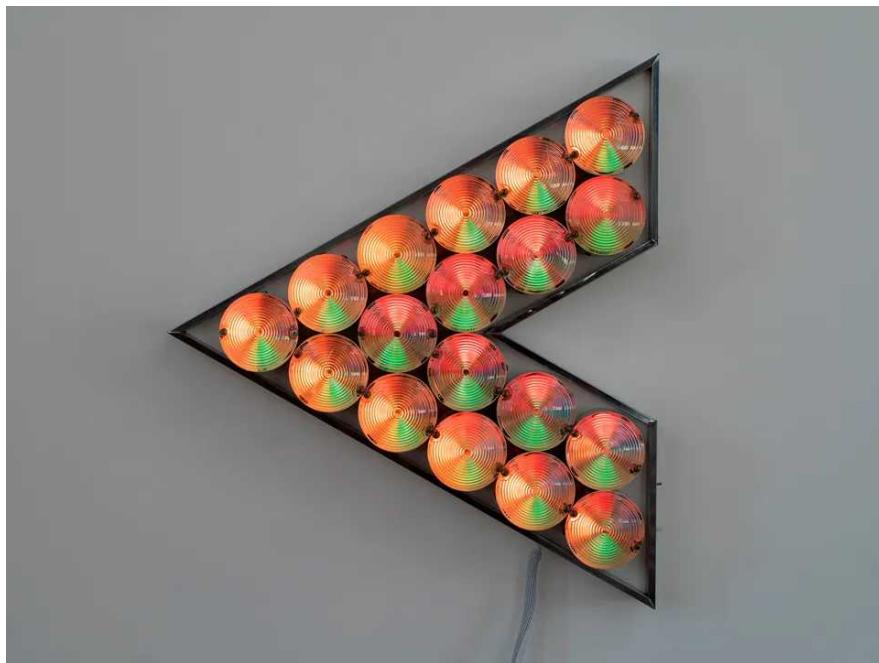
During the tour, Golden showed me where the makers who had won a spot in the museum's Artist-in-Residence program would have studio space. (Past recipients range from [Kerry James Marshall](#) and Leonardo Drew to Leslie Hewitt and [Julie Mehretu](#). Malcolm Peacock, Zoë Pulley, and sonia louise davis make up the most recent class.) As Golden described some of the programs that were planned for the museum's Education Workshop, which is dedicated to art-making activities for all ages, I was taken by her ability—and her willingness—to imagine the art and ideas that could be fostered here

in her historic community. That's an important part of the Studio Museum's legacy, and Golden's, too. At the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), before coming to the Studio Museum, she curated, among other shows, the first retrospective of the Black artist Bob Thompson, a brilliant painter who died of a heroin overdose in 1966, at the age of twenty-eight, and the landmark exhibition "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," which put the Black man, his body and his mind—as seen, heard, or experienced by artists ranging from [David Hammons](#) and [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#) to Leon Golub and Adrian Piper—front and center at a powerful New York institution where they rarely appeared at all. She brought that degree of assertiveness—and her desire to tie exhibitions to what she observes in the world—to the Studio Museum as well.

For the opening of the new building, Golden put together a sort of introductory wall of images, just off the lobby. The section is titled "From Now: A Collection in Context" and includes works I knew as a child, such as Tom Feelings's wonderful black-and-white print "Untitled (Mother and Child)," from 1967. In the mosaic of figures and narratives which Golden assembled with a loving eye, I was jolted by the presence of several depictions of defiant queerness: Max Petrus's 1976 color photograph of [James Baldwin](#) holding the hand of his mentor the artist [Beauford Delaney](#), for one, and Texas Isaiah's 2021 image "Ceremonies (Lullaby for My Insomniac)," which shows a beautiful brown trans person with pierced ears, sporting a string of pearls. It's no secret—nor should it be—that Black nationalism, which has also been part of the fabric of Harlem, has rarely been, or made, a home for queerness. But here it was: Golden was saying, in an artful way, free of bombast, Queerness is part of who we are, our current revolution of being, so let's look at it—together.

In 2017, Golden hired Connie H. Choi to be the Studio Museum's associate curator. At Columbia University, where Choi earned her Ph.D., she studied with the art historian Kellie Jones, who has done an enormous amount to bring Black American art and aesthetics to the often segregated art world. For the museum's reopening, Choi curated an exhibition of works by Tom Lloyd, who died in 1996; in a way, you could see the show (on view until March 22nd)—which includes ten of the artist's lyrical and tender light-based abstract sculptures, as well as wall-mounted assemblages, works on paper, and assorted ephemera from the nineteen-sixties—as an act of

excavation, but it is more of an act of illumination, both literally and figuratively. Choi has placed Lloyd's work in a gallery that evokes a chapel, especially when filled with his celestial lights and geometric shapes. Lloyd, who collaborated with an engineer at the Radio Corporation of America, worked with what was then cutting-edge technology to program the lights in his pieces to create changing patterns.



Lloyd's work was new to me, but it turns out that the artist, teacher, and activist, who was born in Detroit in 1929—his family moved to Brooklyn in the nineteen-thirties, and eventually to Queens, during the Great Migration—was the first person to show at the museum, in 1968. As I learned from Choi's text in the catalogue, his abstract sculptures were criticized at the time for not being "Black" enough, which is to say not representational. This went straight to my heart, because to say that something is not Black enough is to silence all critical inquiry; ideological fury eliminates the possibility of thought. To insist on being represented in the work of others implies that you feel you haven't been seen. But seen as what? And by whom? On those long walks through Manhattan with my father, I learned—or intuited—that you can exist as an image in the staring eyes of others, but that image may not match who you really are. Making art—even abstract art, which lacks the built-in sentiment of figurative imagery—is one way of expressing your individuality, and what parts of yourself you put into it is ultimately

nobody's business but your own. Lloyd's pieces, which address light and form and the interplay between them, reveal far more about who he was than the conventional modes of "Black art" at the time would have.

Still, attacks on your "authenticity" are hard to take, especially if you're an artist—what else do you have?—and I felt a kind of protective anger for Lloyd as I looked at such strong and beautiful pieces as "Moussakoo" (1968), a work in which four hexagonal shapes, each thirty-five by thirty-three by fifteen inches and filled with rows of bulbs, are placed together to make one transfixing polyhedron. The bulbs, which light up in various color patterns—red, orange, green, blue—show the artist's interest in conveying the warmth and luminosity of the world. Standing in front of "Moussakoo," I was reminded of the bright, happy feeling you get as Dorothy and her cohort run through a poppy field in "[The Wizard of Oz](#)." That feeling changes when they fall asleep, and something like fear takes over. "Moussakoo" changes, too—darker, more mysterious color combinations flash—and your thoughts go somewhere else with it.

A smaller, no less elegant work, "Telaunt" (1965), is a double row of lights in a V shape that is turned on its side, like a less-than sign. Its sharp angles remind you that, when Lloyd was making these works, supergraphics were becoming common decorating tools in dorm rooms and banks across the country, and Lite-Brite—the toy, released in 1967, that allowed you to make your own marquee by punching translucent pegs into black paper with a light bulb beneath it—was enormously popular. In Lloyd's pieces, I could sense again the wonderful playfulness of neon, the glamorous flashing colors of Times Square that I saw on those walks with my father, and the lights of the city's great noisemakers, telegraphing danger or, for people of color, possible disaster: fire trucks, police cars, ambulances. Lloyd let New York into his work just as the Studio Museum lets Harlem in, and his pieces are lit as much by memory as by the light he created.

It's clear that [Frank Stella](#), too, was a major influence on Lloyd. In 1964, Stella began his "Notched-V" series—geometric works, made up of stripes painted on V-shaped canvases, that challenged the conventional view of how a painting could or should look. Away with those rectangles and squares (not to mention the squares who thought that painting had to be one thing and not another)! Let's put some shape and color on those antiseptic gallery and

museum walls! Lloyd's lights are Stella's stripes brought to life, moving beyond the canvas entirely. They push abstraction further, but they also serve to remind the viewer that you need light in order to see art in the first place.

By the early seventies, Lloyd had more or less stopped producing art, though his commitment to it remained ever present. In 1971, he opened the Store Front Museum, the first art museum in Queens, where he showed and supported Black artists. (The Store Front closed, in 1988, after relocating two years earlier.) But why did Lloyd stop making work? The question underlines the poignancy of the current show. Why artists stop creating is always a mystery. Why did Rimbaud stop writing poetry? Why did Nella Larsen stop writing stories? We puzzle over these self-imposed exiles, wondering if we are somehow to blame. Did we not love them enough? Praise them enough? I wonder how many of the makers Lloyd nurtured in those years in Queens knew of his younger self, the artist who created light, and who now, with Choi's help, lives on in a Harlem version of Houston's Rothko Chapel: meditative but alive, pulsing to the rhythm of modern times and the flashes and lulls of life on the avenue, uptown and down. ♦

Books

# The Ancient Roots of Doing Time

The historical and archeological record upends the widespread belief that long-term incarceration belongs to the modern state.

By Adam Gopnik

December 08, 2025



In Ryan George’s wonderful “Pitch Meeting” series, on YouTube, the excitable producer character, relishing the eager screenwriter character’s ability to load a conflict with life-or-death consequences, always enunciates “stakes!” with shivering excitement. Similarly, when we read non-narrative scholarly books, what we want in exchange for all the minutiae is a sense that something significant, something we might call stakesy, is on the line. When scholars debate the dating of the Gospels, the time difference may seem small, but the stakes are obvious: Were these texts written by contemporaries of Jesus or not? Another book, say, on eighteenth-century musket design, may take many pages before it reveals that nothing less than the proper interpretation of the Second Amendment is in play.

Matthew D. C. Larsen and Mark Letteney's "[Ancient Mediterranean Incarceration](#)" (California) is a dense, sometimes exhaustingly detailed work, but its stakes turn out to be as high as can be: the origins and meaning of incarceration itself. The central question is whether incarceration is a special affliction of the post-Enlightenment world, as Michel Foucault argued in his epoch-marking 1977 book, "[Discipline and Punish](#)"—a position that by the late twentieth century had become, well, almost gospel. What if the history of incarceration is, in fact, remarkably continuous across time, place, and circumstance? Foucault's enveloping project was to recast Western history as a series of closed "epistemes," or governing structures of thought, each redefining conventional terms like "reason" and "humanity" according to the brute dictates of power. If the central plank of this hugely influential model is rotten, then the whole might be shakier than it looks.

Much of today's prison-reform and abolitionist literature rests on the Foucauldian view of incarceration as a distinctly modern cruelty. Foucault's thesis, advanced as much by oracular assertion as by sustained scholarly argument, was that, before modernity, punishment was almost always physical and absolute. Those designated as criminals, he contended, were torn apart, hanged, or thrown to wild beasts, but rarely locked away alone for decades in institutions designed for the purpose. Temporary confinement in a dungeon might precede crucifixion or a trip to the lions, but the notion of serving a fixed sentence in a cell was, to Foucault, a historically recent development. Instead, punishment was more likely to take the form of fines or of exile—the fate that befell [the poet Ovid](#).

For Foucault, the defining image of pre-modern punishment was the almost unimaginably brutal execution of the would-be royal assassin Robert-François Damiens, in the Paris of Fontenelle and Voltaire. Despite having done little actual harm to Louis XV, Damiens was tortured to death before a crowd—his hands and feet burned, his flesh torn apart by horses. Such punishments, Foucault argued, were aimed at the body: to banish it or to destroy it. The Enlightenment, by contrast, privileged the mind, so the point of punishment shifted to "reform"—to the improvement of a mis-set mind by locking its owner away for years, presumably to give him time to educate it.

Foucault, for his part, did not necessarily see the shift from spectacular violence to confinement as an advance in decency or compassion. To be locked away for decades was not, in his eyes, more humane than being torn apart in a public square—though Damiens himself might have had a different opinion. Only when the mind, rather than the body or the soul, was seen as the true locus of danger did confinement become the preferred solution. In Foucault’s account, the prison cell is not a monument to humanity but a cage for errant consciousness.

Against the idea that modern incarceration is a wholly novel phenomenon, the evidence from antiquity proves to be both abundant and conclusive. Throughout the Mediterranean world—during the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine eras—there were prisons, not just temporary holding cells for the condemned en route to execution but purpose-built structures designed to house people for extended periods. As Larsen and Letteney note, it is curious that anyone ever doubted this, given that Vitruvius, the great Roman architectural theorist, explicitly listed a prison alongside a treasury and a meeting house as standard features of a proper city center, or forum. An ancient prison, the Tullian, still sits in the heart of Rome, preserved in part because a Christian church was built atop it to honor the tradition that Peter and Paul were held there before their executions. The Tullian, a dark, wet, cold underground chamber, was used for so many centuries that it was twice renovated and became a model for other prisons throughout the Empire. At least four “civic prisons”—distinct from those attached to military camps or slave-labor mines—have been identified, all following a similar architectural plan.

Hard labor and prison farms were as much a feature of the ancient world as they are of our own. In recent decades, archeologists have uncovered a major Roman prison complex at Simitthus, in present-day Tunisia—a facility capable of holding more than a thousand prisoners in conditions that were, for the time, reasonably sanitary. Built beside a marble mine, it housed slaves and prisoners sentenced to short and long terms as laborers. Larsen and Letteney draw a direct comparison between Simitthus and the notorious Eastern State Penitentiary, built in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, one of Foucault’s emblematic Enlightenment prisons. Simitthus, too, was designed for surveillance, discipline, and punishment—a place where the metaphysical machinery of incarceration was already in operation.

Tales of ancient incarceration, which might once have seemed the stuff of legend, turn out, again and again, to have an archeological foundation. Plutarch, the first-century Greek historian, described the misery of a prisoner in the Greek town of Messene; modern excavations have confirmed his account down to the details. A story by the Greco-Roman satirist Lucian, meanwhile, assumes the existence of established protocols for seeing prisoners, including fixed visiting hours—assumptions that make sense only if such routines were part of civic life. The rules of Roman sentencing may have been imprecise, but life sentences certainly existed, and the prisons were genuinely residential, not merely meant for holding people before execution.

People knew about incarceration. Seneca, the Roman philosopher and dramatist (and court counsellor), argued that punishment should be proportionate to the crime, and resisted the notion that every offense required execution. Some crimes, he claimed, called for little more than “a private rebuke followed by public disgrace”; others warranted exile, chains, and imprisonment. In an inscription from the third century C.E., a prisoner named Theodorus thanks the gods after having served a term of twenty-two months in a civic prison—proof that “doing time” was not an invention of the modern era. Graduated, reform-minded incarceration, Larsen and Letteney insist, was present more than a millennium before the Foucauldian model says it was born.

Indeed, some of the most enduring myths of antiquity—often retold, even more often depicted—make sense only against the backdrop of long-term imprisonment. The tale of Pero and Cimon, for instance, is as potent as it is oddly Freudian: Pero, a young woman, visits her starving father, Cimon, in a prison and sustains him with her own breast milk. The scene appears in Roman frescoes, including a surviving example in Pompeii, and after the Renaissance it became a staple of Western art—Rubens, naturally, offered his own disturbingly fleshy version. The story continued to be cited and pictured as an exemplar of Roman charity, but the fable couldn’t have taken root if the idea of Cimon’s long sentence hadn’t resonated with an ancient audience. (The famous Gospel episode featuring Barabbas—the prisoner whom Pilate offers to exchange for Jesus—depends on the plausibility, for a second-century audience, of prolonged imprisonment with the possibility of parole.)

Ancient prisons, of course, had their own distinctive character. Most were underground, like the Tullian in Rome—buried chambers with little light or air, and only the most rudimentary latrines. (One imagines a Foucauldian history of sewage and sanitation, which might prove more pivotal in the shaping of civilization than law or punishment.) Certainly, the stench of antique prisons is the dominant note in the ancient reporting. And, although the microbial mechanisms of disease were unknown, it was obvious that these circumstances were insalubrious in the extreme; a set sentence could easily become a death sentence.



Even that condition, though, is familiar from the debtors' prisons in Dickens, depicted in the midst of Victorian prosperity. The atmosphere of ancient prisons recalls the ones in "[Little Dorrit](#)" and "[The Pickwick Papers](#)": situated in the middle of the city, with a relatively transparent membrane between the streets and the cells, allowing affluent letter writers and provisioners easy access to those inside. There was a kind of constant civic bargaining between guards and prisoners, depending on social status or, more to the point, the money that one had for bribes and favors.

In the end, Larsen and Letteney make their polemical point unambiguously plain. "The modern prison," they write, "is not a new construction but an old and haunted house." For all the differences between ancient and modern

practice, they conclude, “some aspects of incarceration have appeared in every Mediterranean society for which we have historical data.” Turning decisively against Foucault, they write that incarceration may be “a facet of every hierarchical, complex society.” In other words, it’s always been with us.

What’s at stake in this study is more than the truth or falsity of Foucault’s account of modern incarceration. It is our picture of history itself, and of how incommensurable one period truly is with another. Under the influence of Foucault and his contemporaries, many scholars treat the so-called dialogue of the dead—the imagined passage back and forth between eras—as a kind of pious fiction. Where the third Annales school spoke of mentalités, a shared cast of mind or sensibility, Foucault proposed a more radical concept: the episteme, a matter not of shared psychology but of the governing rules and structures that determine what can be thought or said at any given moment. We are as closed off from the ancients’ mind-set as firmly as they are from ours; their assumptions and tacit expectations about the order of things are lost to us.

It seems possible that prisons existed almost as an afterthought to Roman theories of law. In Andrew M. Riggsby’s “[Crime and Community in Ciceronian Rome](#),” for instance, we are given detailed studies of some of Cicero’s surviving legal arguments in defense of Romans accused usually of high crimes, like extortion and conspiracy. There seems enormous and striking contemporaneity in the kind of reasoning Cicero uses—sometimes appealing to the letter of the law, sometimes to a larger framework of social good, so that an accused who can be shown to have done much good in the past ought to be acquitted of a presented misdeed. But there are few references to what will happen to the accused after they are convicted or acquitted. The supple flexibility of Cicero’s arguments is immensely impressive, and so is the sense that the jury—albeit a selective one, of high-ranking Romans—will really listen to the arguments as arguments, and that the still animating republican idea of the rule of law, rather than the diktat of the emperor, genuinely matters to the outcome. But the aftermath is blurred. Capital crimes entail execution or exile, presumably, but the notion of state retribution seems absent from the discourse of individual defense. (Cicero himself, of course, eventually ended up executed, headless and handless, a victim of the new imperial ideal of justice.)

For all the resemblances between the ancient incarceration system and our own, the differences are real. Though we still see the same disparity between the noble public architecture of courts and the degraded architecture of prisons, there was nothing in antiquity close to our bureaucratic machinery for portioning out time behind bars, with its elaborate accessories—parole boards, probation hearings, sentencing guidelines. Foucault's point was, in retrospect, more illustrative than strictly argumentative: the modern prison was a Black Mass parody of other institutions of modernity—the factory, the office, the psychiatric hospital—where people are processed and sent on their way, reduced to abstract entries in a ledger. That some partial precedent for this practice might be found, if one looks hard enough, doesn't invalidate the general truth of the view—any more than the existence of medieval European inns offering food for money disproves the fact that the modern restaurant is specifically an invention of post-revolutionary France. Nothing under the sun is ever wholly new—but not everything is as old as time, either.

And yet the odd effect of Larsen and Letteney's study is to make the continuities more vivid to us than the breaks. The empathetic likeness is greater than the epistemic difference. The sum effect of their book is not so much argumentative as it is *piteous*. We are left with an image of countless forgotten souls, locked away in dark, underground chambers: some condemned to wait for years without hope of release, others all too aware that they might one day be thrown to the lions or leopards. (Roman mosaics still survive that show leopards leaping at prisoners' faces—scenes at once horrifying and, by the strange logic of history, the remote source of a contemporary political meme.) Some prisoners were doubtless guilty of some offense; others were simply unlucky in birth or circumstance. What persists is a quiet, bitter awareness of lives long ago consigned to suffering and despair. The feeling, inescapably, is not so different from what we experience today, seeing the images from El Salvador's *CECOT* mega-prison: rows of men, heads shaved, stripped of identity, packed into cells in a choreography of human pain which has scarcely changed across the millennia.

Suffering and cruelty, after all, are constants—remarkably consistent in their distribution throughout time. It is a familiar mistake to read Foucault through a Marxist lens, as if mass incarceration could be explained by

capitalism. Doing so misses his deeper, Nietzschean point: if it isn't capitalism, it will be something else. For Foucault, cruelty is the substrate of reality, the sediment that lies beneath every system we devise.

Even against that darker kind of universalism, however, some light manages to break through. What lingers with us after reading this book is not so much the sense of an abstract argument won or lost as a helpless awareness of the endless, needless suffering of humanity. Although the ancient world had little resembling a modern prison-reform movement, it was not without moments of indignation which still have the power to move us. Christians, perhaps because they often came from the lower strata most at risk, formed support societies for the imprisoned. Among educated pagans, there were regular, if often ineffectual, appeals to *humanitas* in the treatment of the oppressed.

*Humanitas*, as Latinists remind us, is a complex and now contested word: it refers both to a chosen curriculum and to an imperative toward compassion—to artistic cultivation as well as to altruism. Seneca's and Cicero's invocations of *humanitas* were as double-edged as our own talk of the humanities, pointing at once to a body of knowledge and to a moral choice that learning might inspire. The practice of cruelty was all too real, yet so was the idea that humanity entailed a genuine feeling for the helpless. It's what Seneca meant when he wrote that we give not to man but to humanity. Not just for the people we know but out of a shared feeling for humanity itself.

If we accept a vision of history as a sequence of sealed epistemes—each age defined by its own system of cruelties, each as senseless as the last, with “humanism” reduced to a polite fiction—then the past loses its moral urgency. The history of imprisonment becomes a catalogue of absurdities, to be met with dulled resignation. Even our efforts at reform begin to feel like the latest round in an unwinnable, ageless struggle with power.

It need not be so. The dialogues of the dead are not dialogues of the deaf. The conversation between antiquity and modernity, this new study implicitly argues, is real and constructive. We feel for the victims of both times. For that matter, it's why poor, exiled Ovid and cautious, persecuted Shakespeare speak so happily across more than a thousand years, why Shakespeare's

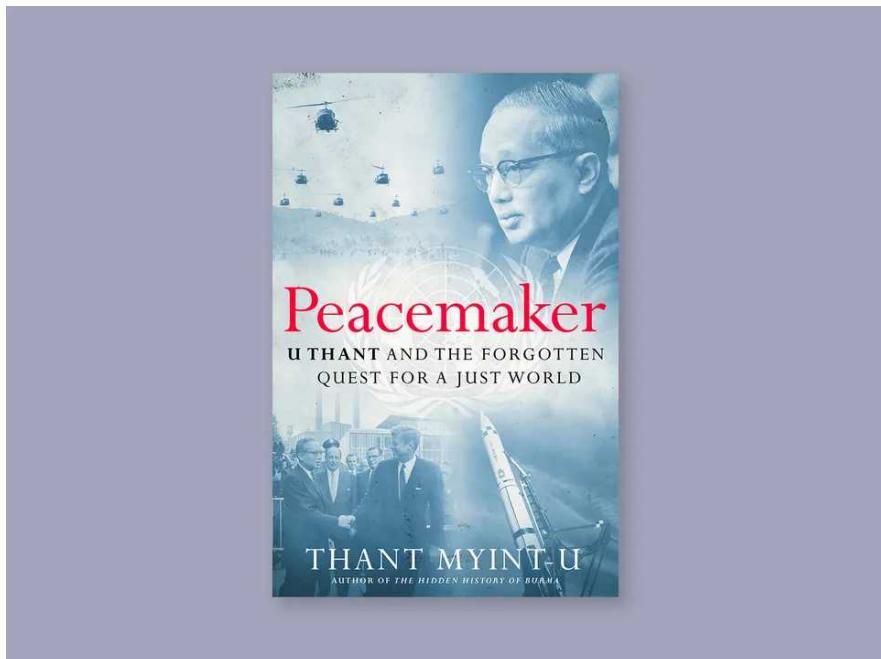
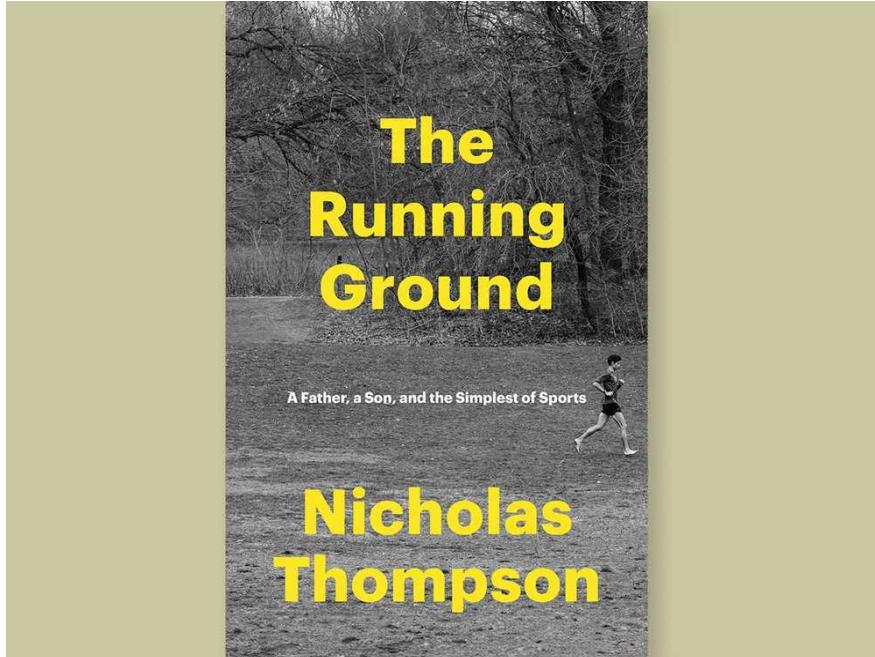
poems so closely mirror the Roman poet's: they are speaking the same language, about the same desires and the same sufferings of the body and the heart. The idea of a common humanity, in this very stakesy view, is not an invention that separates us from the ancients but an inheritance that connects us to them. It's what makes the dialogue of the dead a conversation among the living. ♦

Books

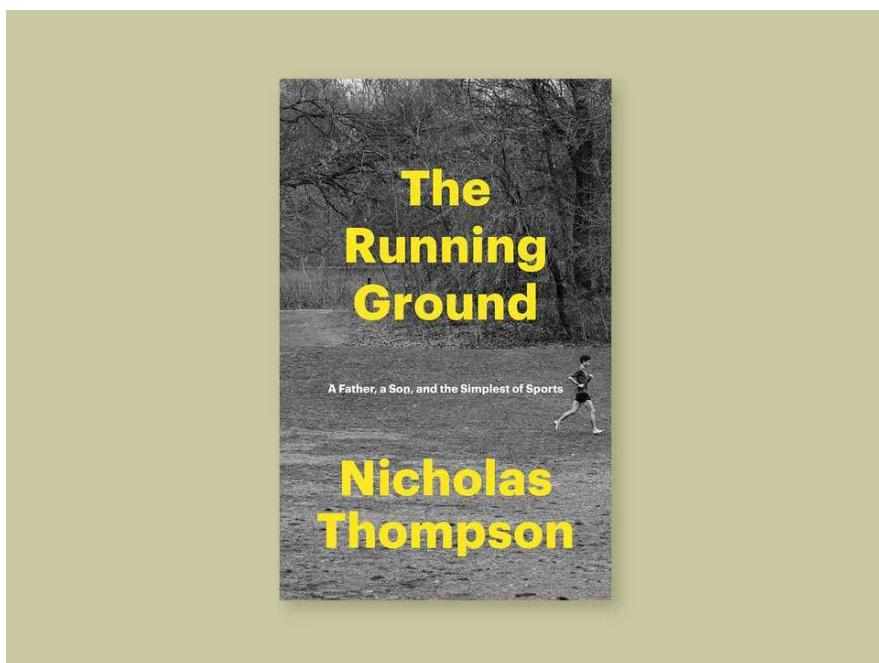
## Briefly Noted

“Peacemaker,” “The Running Ground,” “Cursed Daughters,” and “Bog Queen.”

December 08, 2025



**Peacemaker**, by *Thant Myint-U* (Norton). In 1961, U Thant, a soft-spoken Burmese diplomat, became the first non-European to head the United Nations. His decade as Secretary-General would be a time of emergencies. During the Cuban missile crisis, the United States and the Soviet Union came dangerously close to nuclear catastrophe; across Africa and Asia, post-colonial states plunged into bloodshed. This biography, written by Thant's grandson, focusses on his tireless efforts to defuse the conflicts of his era—above all, America's disastrous adventure in Vietnam. Thant's frustrated attempts to end that war tarnished his reputation in Washington and, this book suggests, may have helped deprive him of his rightful place in history. Leading the U.N., Thant once remarked, was “the loneliest job in the world.”

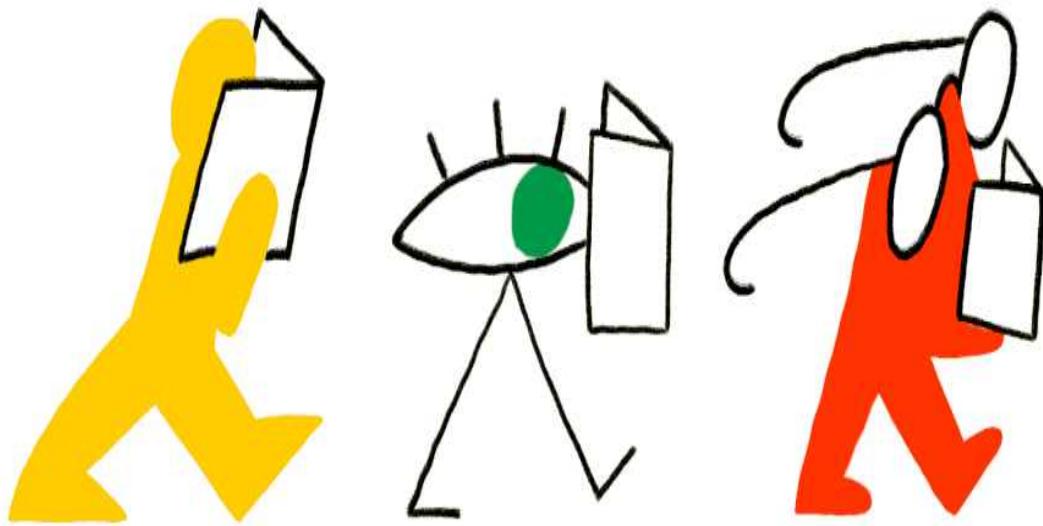


**The Running Ground**, by *Nicholas Thompson* (Random House). This affecting memoir is part ode to the pleasures of long-distance running, part study of a son’s relationship with his complicated father. For Thompson, a career editor who is now the C.E.O. of *The Atlantic*, running has provided many things—a sense of identity during an awkward adolescence, a reminder of his resilience following a cancer diagnosis, and a stage on which to prove himself, in middle age, as an élite athlete. It has also served as a way, he writes, to explore his origins: “Running connects me to my father; it

reminds me of my father; and it gives me a way to avoid becoming my father.”

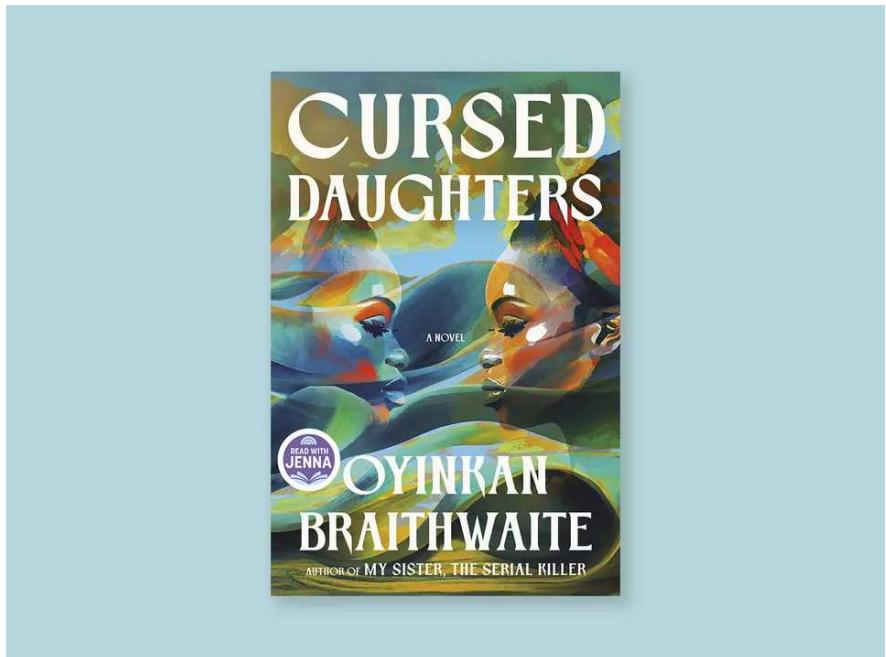
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## **What We’re Reading**

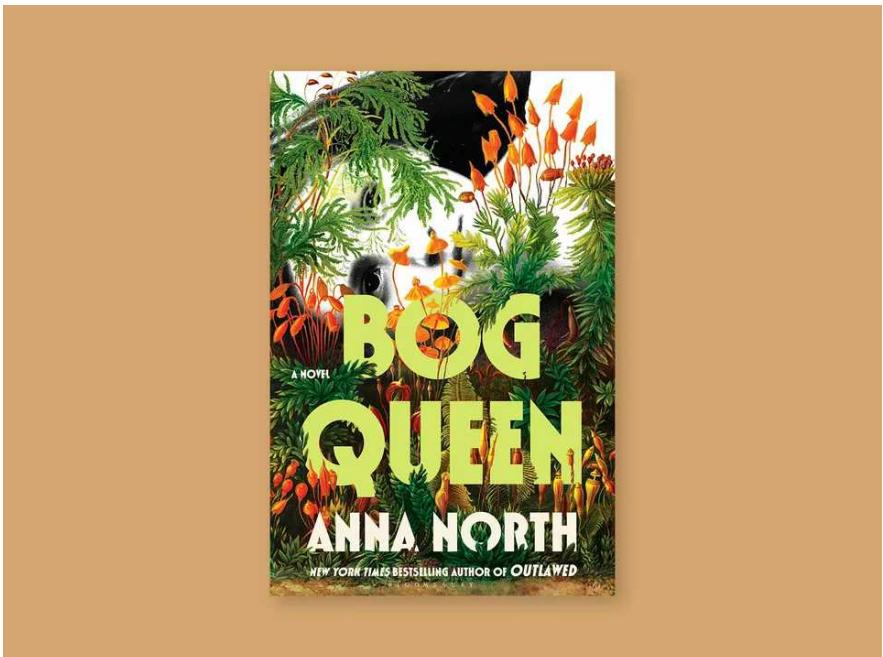


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**Cursed Daughters**, by *Oyinkan Braithwaite* (*Doubleday*). Set in Lagos, this moody, engrossing novel braids together the stories of three women reared to believe that they are cursed because of a shared ancestor's adultery. The novel opens with the suicide, by drowning, of one of the women, whose death is cast as the “inevitable consequence” of her forebear’s actions. Shortly after that woman’s funeral, her cousin gives birth to a daughter, who bears such a striking resemblance to the deceased that some in the family take her to be a reincarnation. As Braithwaite follows the protagonists’ attempts to avoid the fate of the generations of women who preceded them, she explores the possibility of personal freedom in a society that is still bound by tradition, prejudice, and superstition.



**Bog Queen**, by Anna North (*Bloomsbury*). In this ecologically inflected novel, Agnes, a forensic anthropologist, is asked to identify the body of a woman found in an English peat bog. Remarkably preserved, the body turns out to be more than two thousand years old. As Agnes tries to learn more about the woman's death, she encounters obstacles from a company intent on peat extraction and a group of environmentalists occupying the site in protest. The novel alternates between Agnes's life and that of the woman, a Celtic druid weighing an alliance with a Roman settlement; additional interludes are voiced by the moss that connects them. Agnes's investigation sparks a new attention to the world around her, and the novel's sensibility mirrors the peat organisms themselves, which, a character explains, are “interconnected not just across space, but across time.”

On and Off the Menu

# A New Afghan Bakery, in New York's Golden Age of Bread

The city has vaunted sourdough loaves and endlessly hyped croissants. Diljān, in Brooklyn Heights, brings a classic Afghan flatbread into the mix.

By Hannah Goldfield

December 08, 2025



The other day, while shopping for dried figs and pink, plum-soaked sesame seeds at the East Village spice store SOS Chefs, I asked the baker and cookbook author Bryan Ford where in the city he'd go for a baguette or a croissant. "I wouldn't!" Ford, who is thirty-six, barrel-chested, and bearded, with a propensity for four-letter words, said, laughing. "That's just not what I crave." Born in the Bronx and raised in New Orleans, Ford specializes in breads that can be harder to find in New York: sourdough pan de coco (soft, sweet dinner rolls made with coconut milk, a staple in his parents' native Honduras); conchas and other Mexican pan dulce; pan chapla, an anise-scented Peruvian loaf that is leavened with chicha de jora, a fermented corn beverage. I first met him in 2023, when he served me a phenomenal alfajor

—a sandwich cookie made with shortbread and dulce de leche—at the Family Reunion, the chef Kwame Onwuachi’s annual food festival; for a while, he baked bread for Tatiana, Onwuachi’s acclaimed restaurant at Lincoln Center. Last year, Ford published “Pan y Dulce,” a follow-up to his first cookbook, “New World Sourdough” (2020). Both books are part of his mission to “decolonize the baking world,” as he sometimes puts it, by showcasing the breadth and complexity of Latin American and Caribbean baking.

Also last year, Ford and his wife, Bridget Kenna—whom he met when she produced his first TV show, “The Artisan’s Kitchen”—left New York for Florida. They were preparing for the arrival of their first child, and Ford had previously lived in Miami, where he baked at a beloved local shop called El Bagel and sold jalá (also known as challah) on the side. So I was surprised when Ford called, over the summer, to tell me that he and Kenna were returning to the city, and that he’d be opening a bakery in Brooklyn Heights. I was even more surprised when he told me that it would be an Afghan bakery, called Diljān.

New York is in a golden age of baked goods. A decade ago, it was a cliché for New Yorkers to visit Paris and come back yearning for that city’s corner boulangeries, which casually sold baguettes that were leagues beyond anything you’d find in the boroughs. Today, even if New York hasn’t matched Paris’s density of excellent options, it has seen a flourishing of superlative baking. In the early twenty-tens, Brooklyn bakeries such as She Wolf and Bien Cuit inaugurated a wave of prestige bread, proffering expertly crafted sourdough loaves. During the pandemic, a number of out-of-work professional bakers started selling bread and pastries out of their home kitchens; more than one eventually turned their quarantine hustle into a brick-and-mortar business. Now a town that used to apologize for its croissants boasts hours-long lines for them: both the West Village and Brooklyn Heights locations of L’Appartement 4F, a game-changing French bakery, are consistently mobbed with people seeking pâtisserie, baguettes, and fifty-dollar boxes of breakfast cereal made of tiny, hand-rolled croissants.

As the city’s bakeries have grown increasingly culturally specific, representing far-flung cuisines and styles—see Librae, in the East Village,

which deploys Danish techniques and Middle Eastern ingredients like za’atar and black lime—they have also leaned into the culinary identity of New York. Radio Bakery, a spinoff of a Ridgewood restaurant called Rolo’s, sells bacon-egg-and-cheese focaccia by the slice; Elbow Bread, inspired by the Jewish history of the Lower East Side, offers a challah croissant and a buckwheat latte.

Perhaps none is as specific as Diljān. Ford’s partners in the business are Ali Zaman and Mohamed Ghiasi, a pair of Afghan American restaurateurs. Zaman, who is thirty, and Ghiasi, who is twenty-eight, went to the same high school in Queens, as did their fathers, who are veterans of the local restaurant industry. In 2021, the younger Zaman and Ghiasi opened Little Flower, a halal coffee shop in Astoria, which became a beloved haunt of Mayor-elect Zohran Mamdani, who also frequents Zaman’s father’s restaurant, Sami’s Kabab House. Ford, who lived in Astoria, was a regular at Little Flower, too, and Zaman and Ghiasi enlisted him to revamp the café’s pastry menu, devising items such as a jalapeño-cheddar tart with halal beef bacon. When the pair decided to open Diljān, where they planned to focus on naan-e panjayi—the chewy, yeasty Afghan flatbread that they’d grown up eating—Ford was their first call.

Diljān, on Hicks Street, is not far from the formidable queues of L’Appartement 4F, but it’s even closer to a stretch of Atlantic Avenue where Lebanese and Syrian immigrants flocked in the middle of the twentieth century, after the decline of Manhattan’s Little Syria. The street is dotted with time-tested Middle Eastern businesses, including the spare but inviting Yemen Café, with its steaming platters of slow-roasted lamb and self-serve dispenser of sweet milky tea, and the grocery store Sahadi’s, which still uses take-a-number deli tickets to fill orders for dried fruit and nuts by the pound.

Zaman and Ghiasi—a former theatre actor and a real-estate developer, respectively—have a talent for riffing on classic New York tropes. After Little Flower, they opened a halal fast-food counter called Blue Hour inside a gas station in Bushwick; the interior of Diljān, with its crimson tiles and stainless-steel counter, is meant to evoke both the Afghan flag and the sidewalk coffee carts that their fathers used to operate. “I think people just think Afghan food is, like, kabab, and it’s way more than that,” Zaman told me. Standing behind the counter, Ford handed me a slab of puffy, finger-

pocked golden bread, its shiny surface flecked with sesame and nigella seeds, to be eaten with a pair of cream-cheese dips. One was speckled with chopped beef bacon and scallion. The other was blended with sour-cherry jam, inspired by a simple breakfast of Zaman and Ghiasi's childhoods. (Their parents would substitute Philadelphia for the clotted cream they might have had in Afghanistan.)

In Afghan cuisine, naan-e panjayi is ubiquitous, as likely to appear in a breakfast spread as it is to be served with stews and roasts at dinner. Before signing on to Diljān, Ford had never made it. He started by researching what kind of wheat grows in Afghanistan. From American mills, Ford sourced flours stone-ground from varietals similar to those most commonly found in Afghanistan and began experimenting, vetting each iteration of the bread with Zaman, Ghiasi, and their families. Zaman and Ghiasi gave notes on how wheaty they wanted it to taste (very); Sami, Zaman's father, would tell Ford if it was too thick or too salty. The rows of dimples, Ford told me, are supposed to be as straight as arrows. "I'm still working on that," he added.

The dimples, and the bread's oblong shape, give it a passing resemblance to focaccia, though Ford seemed to find the comparison reductive. "It might remind me of a focaccia because I learned how to make focaccia first, but that's just part of the system we're trying to break, right?" he said. "There are so many Italian and French bakeries because that's the standard, but I think there should be more people being immersed in this kind of baking." Ford hopes to distinguish Diljān by prioritizing tradition over hype. "We won't be selling anything that we call a croissant," he said, though he acknowledged that "any bakery that's doing well" is selling pâtisserie. "People just love that shit," he continued. "So what do we do? We use Afghan flavors. We didn't want to do a pistachio-rose"—a Middle Eastern combination that has already become a cliché of trendy pastry. "It has to be deeper," he said, assessing a tray of laminated confections. One, shaped in a more defined crescent than that of a typical croissant, curved like the emblem of the Ottoman Empire; Ford piped it full of the pale-yellow pastry cream that gave it its name, the Saffron Shah. From a small tray of sheer pira—Afghan milk fudge, made with cardamom and orange-blossom water—he used a cookie cutter to extract glossy circles to fit into a Danish-like pastry, between layers of a vanilla pastry cream and diplomat cream. The texture of

the finished product was delightfully riotous, shards of crisp golden crumb collapsing into the pleasingly claggy fudge and luscious custard.

Using a smaller, circular version of the naan-e panjayi, Ford began to assemble a matryoshka doll of carbs, stuffing the bread with a Jamaican-style patty that was in turn stuffed with a spiced potato mixture typically found inside bolani (a deep-fried Afghan flatbread), plus spoonfuls of green chutney and white sauce. It was a clever homage to the iconic beef-patty-on-coco-bread sandwich, popular in the Caribbean neighborhoods of the North Bronx, and beloved by all three Diljān co-founders. “It’s a New York staple!” Ghiasi said proudly. Zaman observed that their partnership felt natural in part because Afghan cuisine is itself a fusion. “It’s the melting pot of Asia, Central Asia,” Zaman said. “We have all these different influences: India, China, the Soviet Union, Iran.” New York was an obvious counterpart. “My dad loves conchas. My dad fucking loves bagels,” Zaman said, recalling his father’s coffee-cart days. “He was selling bagels and cream cheese. Cinnamon-raisin was his shit.”

Zaman and Ghiasi have hopes of greatly expanding their business; talking to them reminded me of the short-lived HBO comedy “How to Make It in America,” about a pair of ballsy young guys hustling to break into the fashion industry. But their ambition is imbued with an endearing vulnerability. “A big thing that I always talk about, just in my own life, is being an Afghan New Yorker,” Zaman told me. “You’re a kid, 9/11 happens, and you’re both sides of your identity. I’m Afghan and now there’s war with Afghanistan, but I’m also a New Yorker, and this tragedy happened. Growing up, you feel a little embarrassed that you’re Muslim. And now, I keep joking, it’s Zohran’s New York, it’s cool to be Muslim again. It’s, like, the coolest thing.” ♦

Pop Music

# Will Geese Redeem Noisy, Lawless Rock and Roll?

Critics love to make these kinds of breathless pronouncements. But with this band, currently on tour to promote its album “Getting Killed,” controlled hysteria is sort of the point.

By Amanda Petrusich

December 08, 2025



On a recent Friday night, the indie-rock band Geese—which formed in New York City in 2016, when its members were still a couple of years short of the legal driving age—played the final date of its North American tour. The show, at the Brooklyn Paramount, a baroque nineteen-twenties movie house turned concert hall, was a jubilant homecoming. (Even Mr. Met was in attendance, paying respects, perhaps, after the band’s bassist, Dominic DiGesu, told a reporter, “If there are going to be billionaires in the world, the Mets are the only thing worth funding, in my opinion.”) In the months since Geese released its third studio album, “Getting Killed,” the band has been rhapsodically heralded as the redeemer of a certain kind of noisy, lawless

rock and roll. Critics love making such breathless declarations, and fans love to scoff at them. But isn't controlled hysteria sort of the point? Geese itself is a dramatic outfit, prone to bursts of noise, meandering digressions, and feral bleating. Responding to this music with reason and reserve feels at odds, in some fundamental way, with its spirit.

At the Paramount—Friday was the second of two sold-out shows there—Geese's front man, Cameron Winter, invited members of one of the opening bands onstage for an abbreviated cover of the Stooges' "Fun House," an almost eight-minute song, from 1970, about who knows what. ("Yeah, I came to play and I mean to play around / Yeah, I came to play and I mean to play real good.") "Please welcome horns and shit like that," Winter said, as the musicians ambled onstage. Geese is often compared to ambitious turn-of-the-millennium bands like Radiohead and the Strokes, but the Stooges might, in fact, be the most accurate analogue—attitudinally, if not quite musically. There's a petulance to Geese, and especially to Winter, who has been known to mess around with journalists, fibbing, dodging questions, or giving deranged answers. (The band's apparent lack of interest in projecting sincerity, or in earnestly engaging with the press, also feels very millennium-coded to me: ironic detachment, writ large.) I have come to enjoy this about Geese. I do not necessarily need my hand held after an album's release, and Winter's indifference when it comes to annotating his songwriting creates a kind of pleasant friction with the emotional intensity of the music itself. When the band appeared on "The Zane Lowe Show" recently, Winter responded to a question about the writing of "Husbands," one of the album's best and most fraught songs, by saying, "I don't remember," venturing only that it might have occurred near the Gowanus Canal, a famously putrid waterway in Brooklyn. "You know, a dolphin died in there last week . . . or something," Winter offered. He was wearing sunglasses inside.

This approach works in part because "Getting Killed" is such a raw and unprotected art work. Winter is obviously someone who feels unusually deeply, even if he's not very interested in performing cathexis outside the studio. At the show, I caught myself involuntarily tearing up during "Au Pays du Cocaine," a loose, heart-wrenching song that builds to a kind of transcendent climax. It's possible that the title is a warped allusion to Bruegel's "Het Luilekkerland," an oil painting, from 1567, that depicts the psychic aftermath of sloth and hedonism; "Het Luilekkerland" loosely

translates to “The Land of Cockaigne,” a mythical medieval wonderland in which all appetites, however deviant, are satiated. (In proper French, the phrase would be “Le Pays de Cocagne.”) The connection might feel like a stretch, if only the limits (and perils) of contentment weren’t such a central theme in Winter’s lyrics. As he sings on the album’s title track, “I’m getting killed by a pretty good life.”

Of course, it’s hard to say precisely what “Au Pays du Cocaine” is about. Winter’s vocals are pleading, as though he is begging someone not to leave: “You can stay with me and just pretend I’m not there”; “You can be free and still come home”; “Baby, you can change and still choose me.” He sounds, to me, like a person in a faltering relationship trying to make whatever concessions are necessary to not get left. (Something about the song reminds me of an especially heartbreakingly scene in the penultimate episode of “Mad Men,” in which Betty Draper, after being given a diagnosis of terminal lung cancer, tells her teen-age daughter, “I’ve learned to believe people when they tell you it’s over. They don’t want to say it, so it’s usually the truth.”) In the music video, Winter is seated at a dining table, singing to a baby. At the end, he walks upstairs, hoists himself into a crib, and assumes the fetal position. (When Winter was growing up, his parents had an open marriage, which his mother, Molly Roden Winter, described in somewhat exacting detail in a 2024 memoir, “More.”) At the Paramount, for whatever reason, the line that really got me is also one of the song’s most inscrutable: “Like a sailor in a big green boat.” It’s a meaningless image, which I suppose is central to its beauty—the potential for projection. It inevitably makes me think of people I have lost, now adrift in some unknowable sea. Winter’s voice, froggy and sad, filled the theatre. He played a leggy little guitar solo before the second verse. The tempo decelerated. I felt, briefly, as though something inside me was dissolving.

Even “Taxes,” possibly the most euphoric song on “Getting Killed,” is both darkly funny (“If you want me to pay my taxes / You better come over with a crucifix / You’re gonna have to nail me down”) and just dark (“Doctor, doctor, heal yourself / And I will break my own heart / I will break my own heart from now on”). These songs lean heavily on the marvel of Winter’s voice, wobbly and slurred, and on the drummer, Max Bassin, who plays with enormous restraint but a great deal of emotion. (The percussion on

“Husbands,” one of my favorite tracks of the year, is slinky, nervous, weird, perfect.)

There’s a base level of melancholy and loneliness to everything Winter writes, which might have to do with the state of the modern world, or perhaps with the time during which he came of age. Winter, who is twenty-three, had recently turned eighteen when the *COVID* pandemic hit New York. In an appearance on the video series “A View from a Bridge,” in which guests stand outside and tell a story into a red telephone, Winter spoke about buying a virtual-reality headset during that tenuous, gruesome spring. He started messing around on a V.R. chat, and one day found himself on a Russian server set at a gas station in Siberia. He came upon two lovers in the snow. “Something about that was very tragic,” he said. “It was a very human moment and I think about it all the time.” It is possible that “Getting Killed” and its predecessor, “3D Country,” from 2023, are the first two great works of *COVID*-era music—not so much in their evocation of the events themselves but in the way the pandemic’s contours of isolation and fear seem to have shaped Winter’s consciousness at such a crucial moment in his life.

In Brooklyn, Geese came back onstage for an encore. “This is the last show of the U.S. tour, which would make this the last song,” Winter said. “We only thought it right to end this tour with a cover of Waylon Jennings, the legend who lives on in our hearts.” The band began playing “Trinidad,” the track that opens “Getting Killed.” It is decidedly not a Waylon Jennings song, although I suppose it shares a kind of coarse outlaw ethos. “I try,” Winter moaned. The guitarist, Emily Green, played an antsy little riff. “I try / I try so hard.” Winter took a sharp breath. “I try,” he sang again, before leaning into the song’s frantic, screamed refrain: “There’s a bomb in my car!” The crowd went nuts—crowd-surfing, moshing, collapsing on itself. Lights flashed. There was a feeling of giddy, collective release. Green, still fiddling with a guitar pedal, was the last to leave the stage. The crowd filed from the theatre, dazed, satiated, the good kind of emptied out. ♦

# Poems

- [Of the People for the People but by Me](#)
- [Almost Home](#)

Poems

# Of the People for the People but by Me

By Lucie Brock-Broido

December 08, 2025



What is it I will have left when I leave, little but the milkweed silk,  
My inky fetishes, my spirit-papers and my urns, like the simpler

Despot in Afghanistan—whose only leavings were a small herd  
Of mostly still unrusted Land Rovers with linen songbooks holding

All Islamic hymns and some antique Americana  
(Judy Garland, Andy Williams, Bing),

And just a few blond-gold effigies of self, in the gnarled garden  
Where he had spent endless hours petting his favorite cow.

The half-life of neptunium is 2.1 million years. My moment  
Is over—the most velvet of the annuals live far less than a year.

Regarding loss: I had been its isotope  
From the youngest age. Not momentous,

Just the small bunkers of a child's lack of long-term memory  
And its greenest lengths of moss. A pet green turtle expired after

The long hot summer of my own short-term amnesia, the drought  
Of my forgetting to water him while I was away riding spotted ponies

In the South. Every memory is a death, even the sweet ones:  
Whatever rabbit eating parsley in the photograph

(I was a-beam with joy) in our unkempt yard—where mint grew  
Tall and accidentally—is gone.

But at a certain moment in the middle of the summer dark  
Standing on the porch in the dotted Swiss of night, if you watch

Almost microscopically, you can perceive the orange daylilies then  
Begin to grow back after death before your eyes.

In my opinion, I am not scheduled yet to go,  
Not anywhere, just now.

—*Lucie Brock-Broido (1956-2018)*

# Almost Home

By Adrian Matejka

December 08, 2025



*We know some things, man, about some things,* Bob Kaufman said, strutting down another San Francisco street on his way from there to whatever's here. His pockets were turned out to their linty parts like a magician's mid-trick. He had a dull pencil tucked between his ear & his preternatural Afro. I followed, up roller-coaster hills, past misbegotten alley kisses, hummingbirds everywhere hitchhike-thumbing California's daylight. Bob Kaufman loved San Francisco's gentle malaise, long views of bay & insistent bridge, the ocean right after. I'm from Indiana, where dirt roads lead to other dirt roads that always

lead to fields of blondly tasselled stalks  
wafted by local infidelities. When  
the wind kicks up, crops stammer secrets  
recklessly as the gnats cloud in buggy  
doubts above those lazy farmers in repose.  
Just like the poets in San Francisco—  
chez lounging-it in silk kimonos  
for their gorgeous, sun-slicked photos.  
Everyone stays skyward out here.  
Just then, Bob Kaufman turned  
a corner in his own quick reverie  
& started up & down the coronary hills  
of a city everyone talks about but nobody  
can afford to love. Not like my home town  
of Indianapolis, where four skyscrapers  
stand affordably in the center of your wallet's  
imagination. They subsidize everybody's  
big ideas while the penthouse couple  
fishes for a third for their kinky party.  
There's even a cuck chair in their bedroom  
where the husband watches his wife  
being ravished. Indy can be just as fantastic  
& horny as San Francisco or Paris at times.  
For a time, Bob Kaufman was the most  
famous poet in France—bigger than Verlaine  
or the pirate Rimbaud. But in San Francisco,  
during his ten years of silence,  
he was wrong-eyed & woebegone.  
He stayed silent & alone as if not naming  
the words ricocheting in his ears could  
sustain him while passersby side-eyed  
him up & down—his hobo couture, street  
sleeping, all those paper-bag manifestos.

*This is drawn from “[Be Easy: New and Selected Poems](#).”*

# Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, December 3, 2025](#)

Crossword

# The Crossword: Wednesday, December 3, 2025

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Caitlin Reid

December 03, 2025



# The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

## Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Adam Gopnik's piece about the demolition of the East Wing, Jessica Winter's essay about the so-called crisis of men, and Jill Lepore's essay about historical precedents for the Trump era.

December 08, 2025

### Foundations

Adam Gopnik is right that Trump's demolition of Roosevelt's East Wing violates the democratic process (Comment, November 3rd). But the White House building itself is not exactly a paragon of democracy. Gopnik's piece sent me back to John Ruskin, whom he cites as "the greatest of architectural critics." In "The Stones of Venice," Ruskin insists that buildings record not just the ideals of those who commissioned them but also the conditions of those who built them. The East Wing was grafted onto an original structure that was built in part by enslaved people. Its neoclassical form proclaimed republican ideals; its production betrayed them. Trump's wrecking ball is crude, but the gap between democratic symbolism and democratic practice is not new.

*Dylan Mulvaney  
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

### Better Men

As a feminist, a therapist, and a mother of twin teen-age boys, I was eager—but ultimately disappointed—to read Jessica Winter's piece on the so-called crisis facing men ([The Weekend Essay](#), November 9th). Her essay elided something crucial: if feminism does not expand its concern to include the well-being of men, it risks further deepening the backlash against women's gains which is already roiling our politics.

Patriarchal masculinity isolates men emotionally and leaves them relationally insecure. The very tools that they need to mature—emotional literacy, empathy, connection—are forfeited in exchange for a ticket to “manhood.” Without these tools, boys and men turn their pain outward, kicking the proverbial dog. We see what that looks like in the news every day.

We need a healthier and more secure model of masculinity. Today’s feminism seems to want this model to be genderless. (For example, Winter describes a male ideal evoked in the book she reviews as “blessedly gender-free.”) We should not proudly celebrate women’s empowerment at the same time that we advocate for boys and men to disavow masculinity; feminism cannot depend on the erasure of male identity. If we don’t help to articulate new, healthier visions of masculinity, then reactionary movements will do it for us. They already are.

*Karin Swann-Rubenstein  
Santa Rosa, Calif.*

## A Language Lesson

I was delighted by Jill Lepore’s article about attempts to find historical precedents for Donald Trump and for the “furor, disarray, and murderous violence” of our political era (“American Frequencies,” November 3rd). I especially appreciated that Lepore described Trump as “the world’s most outspoken troll.” Nowadays, commentators frequently introduce Trump by describing him as a “felon” or a “convicted criminal.”

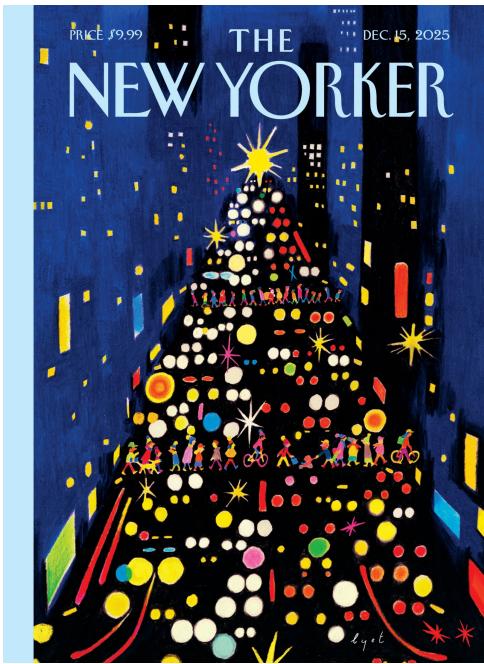
In the United States, there are about twenty-four million people who have been convicted of felony offenses. Not all of their convictions were the result of fair processes. As criminal-justice advocates point out, all too often our system extracts guilty pleas from people who may stand a chance of success at trial but are intimidated by the prospect of mandatory minimum sentences. (There are also other reasons that we may not believe a conviction to be fair, such as the use by police of methods that should qualify as entrapment.) Words like “felon” and “convict” are often used, as in reference to Trump, to signal that someone has inherently low moral

worth. This can contribute to the punishing of people who have already been subject to injustices, and to a stigma that falls especially heavily on those who lack Trump's money and power.

*George Z. Banks  
San Leandro, 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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