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Goings On

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[Hilton Als](#)

Staff writer

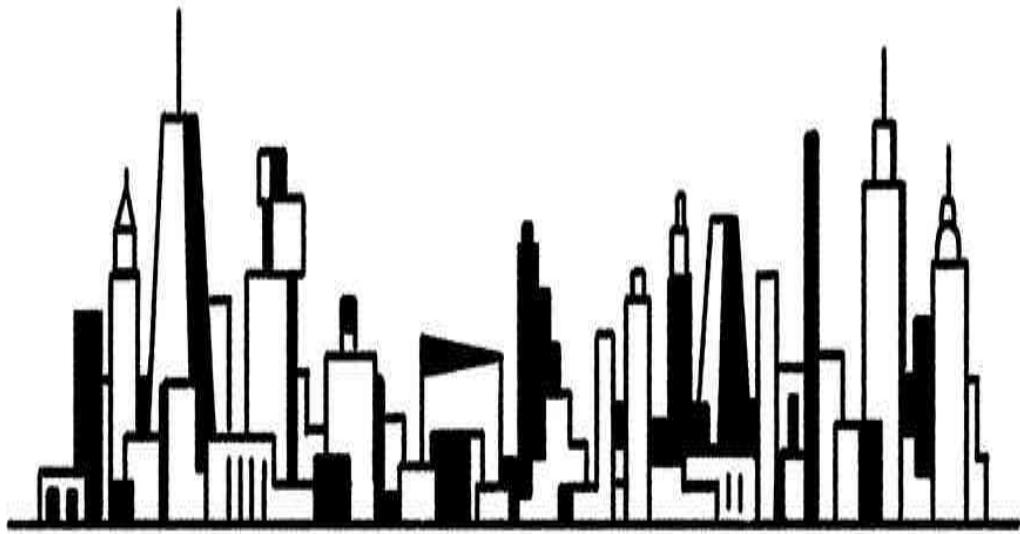
You're reading the [Goings On](#) newsletter, a guide to what we're watching, listening to, and doing this week. [Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

The poignancy at the heart of “David’s Friend”—Nora Burns’s compassionate, more or less one-woman show about her best friend David, whom she met as a teen-ager and who succumbed to *AIDS* at the age of thirty-one, in 1993—is a question: How do we survive immeasurable loss? The play, directed by Adam Pivirotto, is set primarily in late-seventies and early-eighties Boston and New York, amid the cities’ club cultures. With the help of the d.j. and occasional narrator Ricky Roman, it evokes a swirling world characterized by physical freedom and sexuality—a defiantly queer world where a straight cis woman could find herself, and a romantic friendship in the bargain. An indefatigable fan of gay culture and the men who make it, Burns, who plays her younger self more tongue in cheek than not, describes how she supported herself during her college years, dancing at bygone strip joints and delivering naughty telegrams while David tricked, and landed wherever. By the end of this ultimately tender hour-long piece, you’ll miss David, too.



Illustration by Jasjyot Singh Hans

Burns explores this same realm which she found so welcoming in a second brief piece, running in repertory at the SoHo Playhouse with “David’s Friend,” through Aug. 10: **“The Village! A Disco Daydream,”** set in 1979 New York City, in which a college student enters the world of drinking, drugs, and dancing. For years, Burns’s metier has been sketch comedy. As part of the comedy trio Unitard, which features the wonderful writers and performers Mike Albo and David Ilku, Burns has her comedic skills supplemented by good, fast-paced writing. But in these evocative pieces, by slowing things down a bit, she draws our attention to what she hears, as an ever-developing playwright.



About Town

Dance

More than fifty years old and long without its founding members, **Pilobolus** has been a shadow of itself for many years. The gymnastic skill remains high, but the strange poetry is in short supply, too often replaced with cuteness. To the Joyce, the company brings two local premières: “Bloodlines,” a symbiotic, weight-sharing female duet, and “Tales from the Underworld,” a comic-horror piece with music by Stuart Bogie. These are

split between two programs, the second of which looks to be the better bet, as it includes the company classic “Untitled” (1975) and the impressive human shadow puppetry of “Behind the Shadows.”—[Brian Seibert](#) (*Joyce Theatre; July 23-Aug. 11.*)

Folk

In an old [Reddit Q. & A.](#), the singer **Jessica Pratt**—forever being told that she “spoke strangely”—puzzled over her apparent mysteriousness. It’s true that Pratt’s haunting voice and inscrutable accent make her hard to map. In fact, she’s from California, an origin less disguised on her latest album, “Here in the Pitch.” On earlier records, Pratt gravitated toward a soft folk-Americana sound, sometimes labelled freak-folk. On her percussive new release, Pratt lives in the borderlands between genres and personas. The music is as much blues, even bossa-nova, as it is folk, and Pratt is as much L.A. noir ingénue as psychedelic oracle. As always, her betweenness is her allure.—*Leo Lasdun (Bowery Ballroom; July 24-25.)*

Experimental Jazz



Photograph by Tofjan

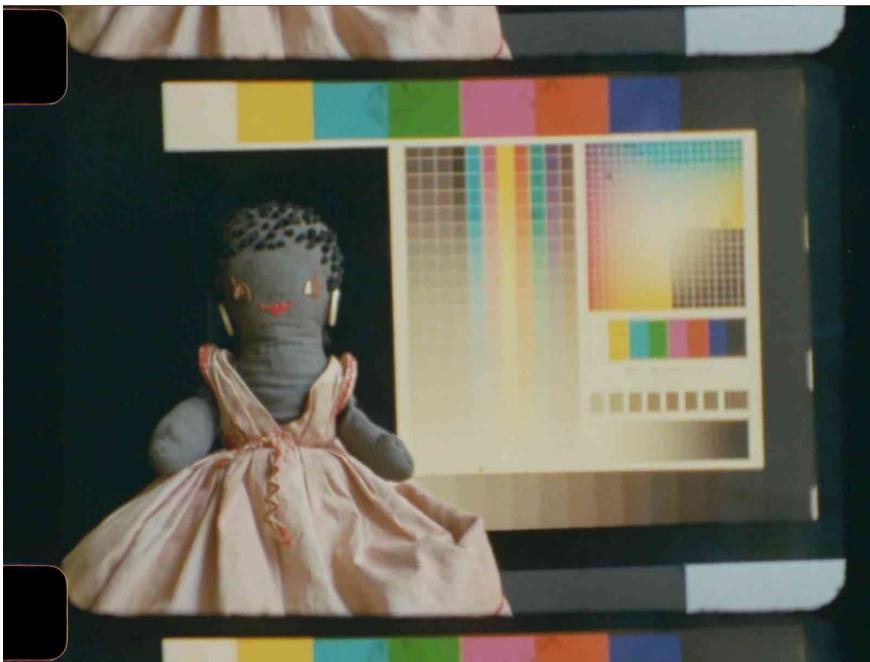
As a teen, the Caribbean Belgian ambient musician **Nala Sinephro** joined the jazz department at an arts high school and discovered the harp. After a

year at the Berklee College of Music, she transitioned into sound engineering. She started and quit a second jazz college in London, pronouncing its lack of racial diversity stifling, before finally identifying her creative community in the Steam Down collective, which promotes spontaneous sound, and includes the multi-instrumentalist Shabaka and the saxophonist Nubya Garcia. Sinephro took its lessons to heart on her début record, “Space 1.8” (2021), a minimalist marvel made with pedal harp and modular synths and composed alongside friends like Garcia—its subtle, rich atmospherics closing the loop on years of formal and independent study.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#) (St. Ann & the Holy Trinity; July 27.)*

Opera

Love, betrayal, religion, murder, innkeepers—what more could one want in an opera? This year, Bard SummerScape honors the German composer Giacomo Meyerbeer with a run of the gripping but seldom staged “**Le Prophète.**” Meyerbeer’s presence, once one of the most visible in the nineteenth-century opera scene, dimmed over time, aided by the Nazi suppression of Jewish works and, to no one’s surprise, prejudiced critiques from Wagner. Directed here by the Hamburg native Christian Räth and performed in French, with English supertitles, “Le Prophète” is a historical yet eternal meditation on the role of fanaticism in the quest for political power.—*Jane Bua (Fisher Center at Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y.; July 26-Aug. 4.)*

Art



A still from "Trompe l'Oeil: Black Leader" (2023).

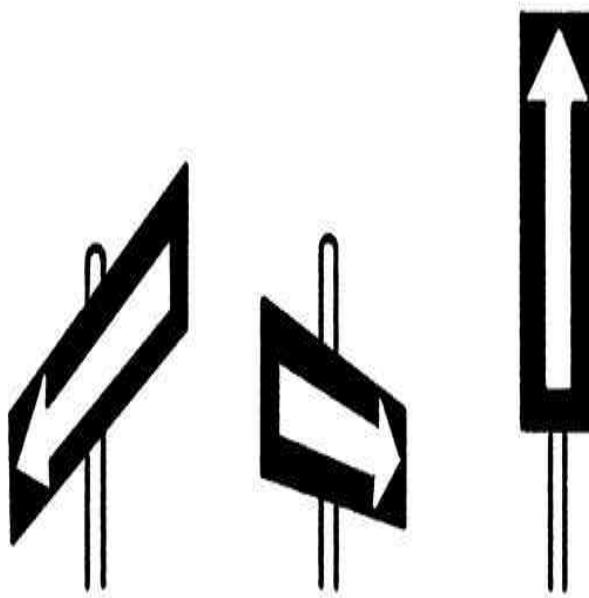
Art work by Ina Archer / Courtesy the artist / Microscope Gallery

The terrific show "**Ina Archer: To Deceive the Eye**" is rough and imperfect, but so filled with verve, imagination, and singularity of vision that to spend time in it is to thrill to a young artist whose roughness is part of her strength. There are drawings, some featuring minstrel figures and done in a style that can recall Andrew LaMar Hopkins and Kara Walker, but it's Archer's manipulated videos of Depression-era musicals featuring Black women in which you feel her eye and mind really take off. It's wonderful to watch her discover what those dancing and singing figures mean to her in her piece "Black Black Moonlight: A Minstrel Show," and how they play when juxtaposed with the famous James Baldwin and William F. Buckley Cambridge Union debate, from 1965. In Archer's short 16-mm. film "Trompe l'Oeil: Black Leader," you see the full seriousness of her view of what the moving image can do, should do.—*Hilton Als (Microscope Gallery; through July 27.)*

Movies

A highlight of the series "Spectacle Every Day: Mexican Popular Cinema" is the director Julio Bracho's "**Take Me In Your Arms**" (1954), which turns a passionate melodrama of thwarted romance into a scathing critique of

inequality, corruption, and machismo. Rita (Ninón Sevilla), a poor fisherman's daughter, plans to marry a union leader, but she is forced to work for a rich man in order to pay off her father's debts. With her dreams shattered, she becomes her boss's mistress in cynical pursuit of wealth and even fame, while getting an eyeful of the dirty deals on which the entire social order depends. Sevilla's fervent and steely performance (complete with singing and dancing in musical interludes) is matched by the lurid intensity of the cinematography, from rapturous closeups to distorted imaginings.—*[Richard Brody](#) (Film at Lincoln Center; the series runs July 26-Aug. 8.)*



Pick Three

The staff writer [Molly Fischer](#) shares great books for new parents.

1. “**The Cazalet Chronicles**,” by Elizabeth Jane Howard, is a five-book saga about an upper-middle-class British family around the Second World War. It’s Hilary Mantel-approved historical fiction—and it’s also totally comprehensible and compelling to a reader temporarily incapable of distinguishing among the Thomases who populate “Wolf Hall.” Also

available as an e-book, for maximum convenience when you're nursing and have only one hand free.

2. It occurred to me, in this period, that I wanted to reread “**Middlemarch**,” and also that I would probably never again have time to do so. The solution: George Eliot’s novel in audiobook form, as read by the delightful Juliet Stevenson—a fine companion during long walks for stroller naps.



Illustration by Millie von Platen

3. At first, I was dubious about the conceit of “**Alphabetical Diaries**,” Sheila Heti’s latest book; it consists of sentences culled from years’ worth of diaries, arranged alphabetically. But I find Heti’s voice irresistible, and when I picked up the book it was thrillingly unlike the formal exercise I’d imagined. Heti’s notes to self capture the texture of daily life, and accumulate an unexpected power. They convey the weight of time, but without any linear narrative—which also makes the book ideal for reading in one- or two-page increments before falling asleep.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [“The Swimmer,” by Irving Layton](#)
- [Ghost-town lore](#)

- [An anti-advice column](#)

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of the director of “David’s Friend.”

By Katie Kadue

By Hannah Goldfield

By Zach Helfand

By Justin Chang

Photo Booth

The Unfiltered Charm of *Jet's* Beauties of the Week

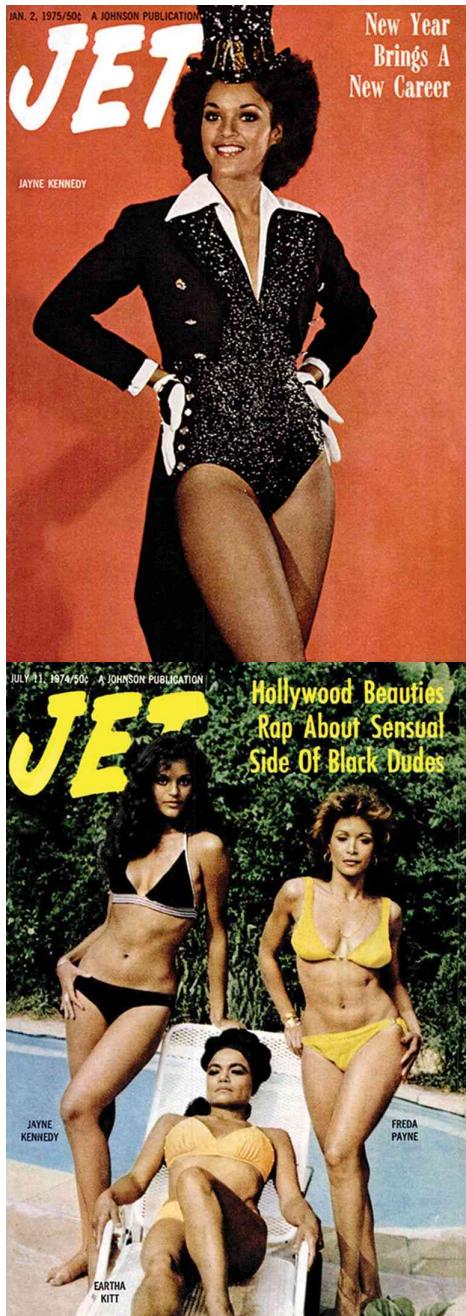
Decades before Instagram, the magazine's legendary column democratized the thirst trap.

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)



Elanda. Photographs by LaMonte McLemore

At any point in the day, I can open my closet, pull out a swimsuit, squeeze into it, pose for a selfie in my full-length mirror, and broadcast the image to the world. It's easy to take for granted just how much the Internet has democratized the thirst trap; with social media, we can each be a part-time model and beach bunny for all seasons. But when I was growing up, in the early two-thousands, the only photographs of young women in bathing suits which I regularly saw were in the summer issues of the teen magazines that arrived on my doorstep. The bikini-clad models on those pages were impossibly thin; they were also, with rare exceptions, white. It was only in 1997 that *Sports Illustrated* featured a solo Black model on the cover of its iconic swimsuit issue, with Tyra Banks baring her washboard abs and breasts that nearly spill out of her top, in a red-and-pink polka-dot two-piece. So much for representation.



In those days, I knew of only one way that a mere mortal could be pictured in a bikini for paying subscribers. It was to submit a picture to *Jet*, a weekly magazine for Black news and entertainment. Each issue included an ad for “beautiful models between the ages of 18-25,” along with instructions to fill out a “coupon” with contact information and “a current snapshot of yourself in a bathing suit.” If the magazine liked your photograph, they would connect you with a professional photographer. From *Jet*’s inception, in 1951, until the magazine ceased its print operation, in 2014, it published pictures

of these women in a column called “Beauty of the Week.” “Every issue of the magazine showcases one of the country’s most beautiful, shapely and radiant Nubian princesses,” *Jet* boasted, referring to the ordinary women of extraordinary confidence—nurses, paralegals, college students, post-office workers—who posed for the magazine. Though the text was essentially decorative, their professions were noted, alongside their hobbies. In Paul Beatty’s “[The Sellout](#),” the narrator’s mother was a *Jet* Beauty of the Week, and all he knows about her is what was included in the small text alongside her “curvy expanse of thighs and lip gloss”; namely, that she was a student from Key Biscayne “who enjoys biking, photography and poetry.”

In an essay, the filmmaker Malcolm D. Lee (“The Best Man,” “[Girls Trip](#)”) recalled ripping out the *Jet* “Beauty of the Week” page and putting it up in his locker. His white private-school classmates gave him grief. They “would say, ‘They’re fat.’ I was like, ‘What are you talking about? That was when I started to understand the different standards of beauty,’ ” Lee wrote. The women who graced page 43 (the “Beauty of the Week” column was typically on page 43) were thin, but curvier than a typical model, and, for decades, their measurements—almost always hourglass—were listed alongside their photos. On their bodies, you could spot faded stretch marks, on their teeth lipstick stains, on their faces an endearing “Am I doing this right?” expression. They kept their wedding rings on. These were real women, not fantasies. Former Massachusetts Governor [Deval Patrick](#)’s mother—a part-time shopgirl at Saks Fifth Avenue—was a *Jet* Beauty of the Week (she borrowed clothes from work for the shoot).

A new book, “[Black Is Beautiful: JET Beauties of the Week](#)” (powerHouse Books), collects some of the pictures that LaMonte McLemore, a vocalist and a founding member for the psychedelic soul band the 5th Dimension, took for *Jet* in the forty-plus years he worked for the magazine as a freelance photographer. *Jet*, which had more than a million subscribers, was the saucy little sister of *Ebony*. Both magazines were part of the publishing tycoon (and fashion mogul) John H. Johnson’s Chicago-based Black media empire. *Ebony* launched, in 1945, as an African American answer to *Life* magazine, catering to the tastes of upwardly mobile Black readers. *Jet* was less buttoned up. In 1975, the magazine published an interview with [Pam Grier](#) on the subject of how “it takes more than one man to satisfy [her],” plus an update on her rumored romance with Freddie Prinze. *Jet* did not feel the

need to present a prudish image of Black people to counteract white stereotypes about their hypersexuality. *Jet* was for Black people who wanted to look at other Black people. In fact, one of its best-known rubrics was a listing of every time a Black character was going to appear on television week by week. *Jet* was also not like the respectable *Ebony*, but it was still respected, especially when, in 1955, it became the first outlet to publish the open-casket photographs of [Emmett Till](#). McLemore, the first African American photographer hired by *Harper's Bazaar*, was so proud to have his name associated with *Jet* that he squeezed in “Beauty of the Week” shoots between 5th Dimension tour stops.

There was an amateurish chaos to the “Beauty of the Week” photos that made them feel charged with erotic possibility. These were “around the way” girls, as the LL Cool J song goes. (The rapper wrote in his 1997 memoir, “[I Make My Own Rules](#),” that he decorated his childhood bedroom with “posters of Bruce Lee and, later, Run-D.M.C. and *Jet* magazine’s Beauty of the Week.”) They looked like someone whom you might catch a glimpse of at the Jersey Shore one day. “Hey, did I see you in *Jet*? ” was a pickup line someone once tried on my aunt.

Though a professional photographer, McLemore knew to make the images look as natural as the beauties he was tasked with shooting. In one of his photos, a woman named Darolyn, clad in a red bikini and matching leg warmers, opts for an asymmetrical pose that makes her chest look lopsided. Another woman named Karen, wearing a gold necklace spelling out her name and a peach crochet bikini, blows soap bubbles from a plastic bottle of the kind I remember buying at the local dollar store in the summer months.

Many of the women were self-styled, donning the sultrier version of their Sunday best. In one photo, a woman named Denise pairs a tiger-print bikini with costume jewelry and pink acrylic nails. Tasha, whose hobby is listed as skydiving, has applied metallic silver eyeshadow that clashes with her gold earrings and matching bikini. When *Jet* did shoot professional models or actresses for the column, the women were still relatively dressed down. In 1971, years before Grier made the gossip pages of *Jet* or landed her signature roles in blaxploitation films, she was an up-and-coming actress who posed for the “Beauty of the Week” column at the urging of her team. She later reflected on the image for ESPN’s Andscape blog, complaining

about the shoot's lack of niceties: "I was ashy, no makeup, my hair was all over the place. I didn't even have polish on my toenails or my fingernails, c'mon."



Denise.



Tasha.

But the lack of polish was what gave *Jet* Beauties of the Week their special charm. By now, we are all too schooled in the art of posing to reproduce the effect. In the age of the smartphone camera, most of us know our good

angles. We can blur away our imperfections using an Instagram filter. The raw appeal of *Jet*'s erstwhile models remains unrivaled. “Black Is Beautiful” captures the quality that made these women most appealing—their confidence that anyone with eyes would want to look at them, au naturel.

By Sally Rooney
By Haruki Murakami
By Edwidge Danticat

The Talk of the Town

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- [My Great-Grandmother, Olympic Golfer](#)
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- [Tilted Axes Wants You for Its Guitarmy](#)
- [The Dog-Bite Lawyer Turned Stay-at-Home Mom Turned Standup Comic](#)

[Comment](#)

Where Do Republicans and Democrats Stand After the R.N.C.?

Biden imperilled his candidacy at the debate because of his inability to speak coherently. At the Convention, Trump was doing something similar, and couldn't stop.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Tribally, Republicans tend toward boisterousness, just as Democrats tend toward self-doubt. Even so, last week's Republican National Convention, in Milwaukee, explored the boundary of how optimistic a political party can be. [Donald Trump](#)'s strategists had let it be known that, even before Joe Biden's catastrophe at the first Presidential debate, they had expected a blowout. Republicans were claiming that congressional districts that voted against them by eleven points or more in 2020 might now be in play. A certain giddiness set in. From the podium in Milwaukee, a veteran congressman opened his address by shouting out "my brilliant, amazing, smoking-hot wife, Renee." Texas's delegates were in white cowboy hats; Wisconsin's, in foam cheeseheads. Lines formed in a sunny plaza outside, where you could buy a Jack-and-Coke for eleven dollars and lob beanbags in

a game of R.N.C.-branded cornhole. If there was no detectable pessimism inside the Convention’s security perimeter, there were also no sustained protests outside it, as if the left-wing activists of the Upper Midwest had stayed home, accepting the inevitability of Trump’s election, too.

What made the Republicans so confident? They had worked diligently to conjure this mood. The Never Trumpers who caused such a ruckus in 2016 have largely left the Republican fold, or been driven out, so the remnant Party was unified behind its nominee. When social conservatives tried to use the Republican platform to call for a federal abortion ban (which begged electoral disaster), Trump himself intervened, and they quickly backed off. Inside the hall, an almost merciless message discipline set in—Republican after Republican made claims that, for instance, the Democratic Party “can’t even define what a woman is,” a reference to liberal support for transgender rights. Anti-immigration has been the [core G.O.P.](#) issue for nearly a decade, but in Milwaukee it suffused everything: J. D. Vance, Trump’s newly anointed running mate, blamed “illegal aliens,” in part, for driving up the cost of housing. But Republicans’ self-certainty didn’t have much to do with any message or policy agenda, or with the Party itself. What fuelled it was the contrast at the top of the ticket, between what they saw as Trump’s strength and Biden’s weakness. “In my mind, the choice is clear,” the head of Ultimate Fighting Championship, Dana White, said, acting as ringmaster as he introduced Trump on Thursday night. “I’m going to choose strength and security.” In Washington, Democrats were trying to maneuver Biden, who was isolating at home with *covid*, out of the race; in Milwaukee, Republicans were calling Trump “a lion.”

Trump had almost died two days before the Convention, at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, when he had turned his head slightly and [an assassin’s bullet](#) had pierced his ear rather than his skull. He had risen shouting, “Fight, fight, fight!”—a display of defiance that, in the moment, seemed as if it might settle the election. But when Trump first arrived at the Convention hall, on Monday night, he teared up as the delegates cheered, his face heavy and emotional, and he remained a lugubrious presence throughout, often sitting subdued in his chair, a rectangular white bandage [covering his ear](#). (“Nice job!” he sometimes mouthed, at the conclusion of another speech praising him.) He looked his seventy-eight years; this was a convention where his glamorous younger wife did not speak, but his granddaughter did.

Understandably, it took a couple of days for the Republicans to figure out how to address the terrifying shooting; the motives of the twenty-year-old gunman were inscrutable, and may have had little to do with electoral politics. Eventually, they seemed to settle on the hand of God. Trump had been saved by “divine intervention,” Tucker Carlson told the crowd. “God Almighty intervened,” another speaker said. “And he is certainly not finished with President Trump!”

The invocation of the divine was exactly what the Party loyalists wanted to hear, and they sat rapt on Thursday night, as Trump devoted the first twenty minutes of his acceptance speech to a weird but genuinely compelling narration of his brush with death. But voters still view Trump unfavorably—his conviction on thirty-four felony counts doesn’t help—so his prospects of regaining the Presidency depend on persuading those who might not be so inclined to attribute his survival to the supernatural. The rest of his prime-time speech was presumably directed at swing voters, but, really, it was hard to know, since it dissolved into a meandering low-energy drone. Trump set himself adrift, veering off the teleprompter for long stretches. He appeared to suggest that the next Republican Convention could be held in Venezuela; he misread a chart, projected on a big screen behind him, to claim that the “lowest level of illegal immigrants ever to come into our country” had occurred during his last week in office (“if you look at the arrow on the bottom”); eventually, he settled into riffs from his rallies, as when he seemed to compare migrants to the “late, great Hannibal Lecter.”

Biden imperilled his candidacy [at the debate](#) because of his inability to speak coherently. Trump was doing something similar, and couldn’t stop. As the minutes ticked by, delegates looked at their phones. Finally, after more than an hour, Trump’s family descended from their box and walked over to the stage—and still he continued. The Obama strategist David Axelrod said on CNN that Trump’s performance might be “the first good thing that’s happened to Democrats in the last three weeks,” and that arguably understated how long it had been.

It is genuinely alarming that a Presidential race in which the stakes are so high has come this far along—early voting in North Carolina begins in less than ninety days—without yet settling on the issues, or perhaps even on the characters, that will define it. Nor has it got past the psychological and

medical dramas of its two aging protagonists. Biden's decline has meant that his signature accomplishments have been under-explained and his opponents under-disputed—one reason that Republicans' confidence was so high in Milwaukee may be that their message has recently been functionally unopposed. Democrats are incurring the costs of incumbency without reaping many of the benefits. Even if Biden is replaced on the ticket, his successor will have a lot of ground to make up in a very short period of time. Trump remains the presumptive favorite.

Yet, as the Milwaukee Convention ended, each party was dealing with the consequences of its choices. The Democrats had committed themselves to a President who struggles for clear political expression; the Republicans had managed to bind themselves to a self-involved man disinterested in making a straightforward political case. The next phase of the election likely hinges less on the predicaments of the candidates than on the decisions of each party regarding what, exactly, to do about them. ♦

By Jonathan Blitzer
By Anthony Lane
By Susan B. Glasser
By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

[Olympics Diary](#)

My Great-Grandmother, Olympic Golfer

In the 1900 Paris Olympics, Michael J. Arlen's ancestor, Princess Daria Karageorgevitch (the former Abbie Pankhurst), took home the bronze, which was then just a handsome bouquet of flowers.

By [Michael J. Arlen](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Once again the Summer Olympics are upon us, with their dazzling athletes and often mindlessly chauvinist television intermediaries, and so perhaps this might be a moment to give a brief shout-out to a now distant family member, my great-grandmother, which is to say, my mother's grandmother, a quite splendid lady I remember (across the haze of many decades) from my childhood, who not only competed in the first Paris Olympics, in 1900, but actually won, or rather placed third, in the new category of women's golf. In later years this would have earned her a bronze medal, though the times being what they were, she told my mother, she was handed instead a bouquet of flowers, and the first-place winner, I believe, received a not ungenerous bottle of perfume. I remember my great-grandmother as fierce and humorous and affectionate and tiny, not much over five feet in height,

which would have still been a few inches taller than I was the last time I saw her, in the summer of 1938, when I was not quite eight and she not quite seventy-eight, at her grand and beautiful Villa Fiorentina, in the hills above Cannes. She was then calling herself Princess Daria Karageorgevitch, with good reason, too, since she had been married to (and then widowed by) Prince Alexis Karageorgevitch, one of the claimants to the Serbian throne.

She had started life as Abbie Pankhurst, in Cleveland, Ohio, around 1860, her father a recent immigrant from England who had done well in shipping on the Great Lakes. At eighteen or so, she married a Mr. Wright, by whom she had a daughter, Harriet (my grandmother), and while the exact details are lost to history the family memory has it that Mr. Wright disappeared somewhere in Montana in the eighteen-eighties, looking for oil or looking for something. At any rate, in due course he was declared dead, at which point she and young Harriet moved east to New York, where, in the first flush of the Gilded Age, she met a Mr. Huger Pratt, a financier of some means, whom she not only married but persuaded to move with her and her child to the new American community at Dinard, a few hours west of Paris. It was at Dinard that she took up golf, with enough enthusiasm and gumption to offer herself in competition at the second enactment of what was then called the “modern Olympics” (to distinguish them from the Games of ancient Greece), at which cricket and croquet were both popular events.

A few years after my great-grandmother’s Olympic-golfing triumph, Mr. Huger Pratt also died (he was an older man, let it be said), leaving the former Abbie Pankhurst with a handsome beneficence, at least for the times, when “billions” was a noun rarely used except in astronomical studies. When I knew her, she was a magical white-haired old lady, who lived about twenty minutes from our own normal-sized house in the hills above Cannes, and whom I would be taken to visit every so often, riding along with my mother in her sporty Model A Ford. My great-grandmother no longer played golf, but she played the harp; indeed, she had always been “musical,” and after her third marriage, as Princess Daria Karageorgevitch, she had apparently become a friend and benefactor to numerous musicians. The great Chopin interpreter Alfred Cortot, the Polish virtuoso Paderewski, and the composer Maurice Ravel were among those who came to visit in the spring, when she would charter a boat and have the harp and grand piano

loaded aboard, and then a bunch of them would sail off across the Bay of Cannes for a “musical excursion” to the Île Sainte-Marguerite, my mother, then a girl, allowed along for the ride since she had some small proficiency on the mandolin.

I remember that in my great-grandmother’s salon was one of the world’s first automatic record players, a Stromberg shipped all the way from Chicago, a huge machine, as big as an icebox, with a plastic hand that was supposed to swivel in order to change the records but, depending on its mood, would as often as not seize the waxen disk and hurl it across the room, as my great-grandmother shrieked with laughter. Luckily (I suppose you could say), she died late in 1938. In 1943, I heard, the Villa Fiorentina became the private residence of a Wehrmacht general commanding a German Army Group. Sic transit, as they say. My great-grandmother had the brightest blue eyes, which I can still almost see in my mind, and I remember that once, when I had been running around in my usual feckless way, chasing the peacocks on her lawn, and was being taken off by some authority to “rest,” she called out, in that fierce Olympic golfer’s voice, “He can rest when he’s older.” True enough. ♦

By Akhil Sharma
By Aysegül Savaş
By Edwidge Danticat
By Shuang Xuetao

[Dept. of Close Calls](#)

Ear Injuries Through History

When a bullet wounded Donald Trump's ear at a recent rally, the former President joined a long list of historical and literary precedents, from Evander Holyfield to Hamlet's father.

By [Zach Helfand](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

After the assassination attempt in Pennsylvania on July 13th, in which Donald Trump was wounded and one rally attendee, a firefighter named Corey Comperatore, was killed, Trump showed up to the Republican National Convention with a bandage covering his injured ear. Excitable empathic delegates soon began sporting their own. A new political symbol had been born: ears. Trump seemed to recognize it immediately. His first statement after the incident: "I was shot with a bullet that pierced the upper part of my right ear." You typically hear of bullets "grazing," but the circumstances allowed Trump to select a word with more lobe-and-cartilage associations. It works—piercing hurts. Grazing is for sheep.

Trump is fortunate in one respect: if you're going to be shot, the ear is not the worst place. ("It felt like the world's largest mosquito," he told Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.) If offered a choice, few people would sacrifice a kneecap or a

finger. A missing nose is too gruesome. A bloody toe is unimpressive. It's true that ears can be messy. "They bleed more than any other part of the body, for whatever reason—the doctors told me that," Trump said in his R.N.C. speech. "So we learned something." But the defiant photograph, with blood trickling down Trump's face—you can work with that. "A lot of people say it's the most iconic photo they've ever seen," Trump told the *Post* earlier this week. "They're right, and I didn't die. Usually you have to die to have an iconic picture."

Until now, ears have never been a marquee appendage. It seems we have more words for the nose than the Inuit languages have for snow: schnoz, honker, beak, snout, smeller, conk, sniffer, snotlocker. Ears are only ever ears. There's a Michael (the Nose) Mancuso and a Jackie (the Nose) D'Amico—but not a single auricularly monikered mafioso. As for eyes, what else needs to be said? According to the *Times*, Trump has taken to marvelling over J. D. Vance, "Those beautiful blue eyes."

Trump's ear may turn out to be the most famous in history. Jesus once regrew a man's severed ear, but you mainly just hear about the time he healed the blind man. For decades, there was an ear-based subway ad campaign—"Torn earlobe?"—but everyone only remembers Dr. Zizmor. Ears get abused in "Reservoir Dogs," "Black Caesar," and "Pineapple Express," and produce jokes that are a little on the nose. (Franco: "He got your ear, man!" Rogan: "HE GOT MY WHAT?") Turgenev wrote a nice ear scene in "Fathers and Sons"; in a duel, a bullet whizzes by an ear, not unlike in Trump's misadventure.

Then there's van Gogh. At least he demonstrated proper ear-bandaging technique. Wrapping an ear, a bendy and floppy thing, is like putting a sweater on a fish. You need another structure as a splint. Van Gogh used his head—in his self-portrait, he wears his gauze like a babushka. Of course, that smushes the hair, which is presumably why Trump opted for a smaller, more awkward covering, like a panty liner, over just the ear, which looks as if someone forgot to snip off his sales tag.

Shakespeare had a thing for ears. The ghost of the king tells Hamlet that Claudius poisoned him. Where? "In the porches of my ears." Strange choice! But "Hamlet" is all about ears. There are around twenty ear or

hearing references in Act I alone. Ears are assailed, done violence, taken prisoner, infected, split, cleaved, and entered as if by daggers; they are attent, foolish, knowing, senseless, and too credent.

Historically, at least one kidnapping (John Paul Getty III's) was escalated via a severed ear, and at least one war (the War of Jenkins's Ear) was started over one. They're a popular tool of punishment, the thing your parents might yank on when you're in trouble. The Code of Hammurabi used the chopping off of ears as punishment for non-ear-related misbehavior—an eye for an eye, but an ear for something else. In Colonial America, ear cropping was often an add-on to pillorying. Reverend Samuel Peters, an early American historian, noted that in New Haven, Connecticut, men were required to keep their hair short. "Such persons as have lost their ears for heresy, and other wickedness, cannot conceal their misfortune and disgrace," he explained. Peters's evidence, alas, is flimsy.

What's the prognosis for Trump's ear? His injury appears to be similar to that of Evander Holyfield, who had the top of his ear gnawed off by Mike Tyson in 1997. It was pretty gross at the time, but Holyfield has recovered. Unless you looked closely, you wouldn't notice anything amiss. Today, he and Tyson are selling weed gummies together, in the shape of ears.

Holyfield and Trump happen to be friendly. Did the boxer have any advice for the candidate? Calls made to Holyfield and his representatives this week went unanswered, or, potentially, unheard. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser
By Benjamin Wallace-Wells
By Eliza Griswold
By David Remnick

[Dept. of Polyphonics](#)

Tilted Axes Wants You for Its Guitarmy

What do you call it when fourteen musicians in a mobile rock band, whose fans include Philip Glass, pop up near Lincoln Center and start playing strange music?

By [Henry Alford](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

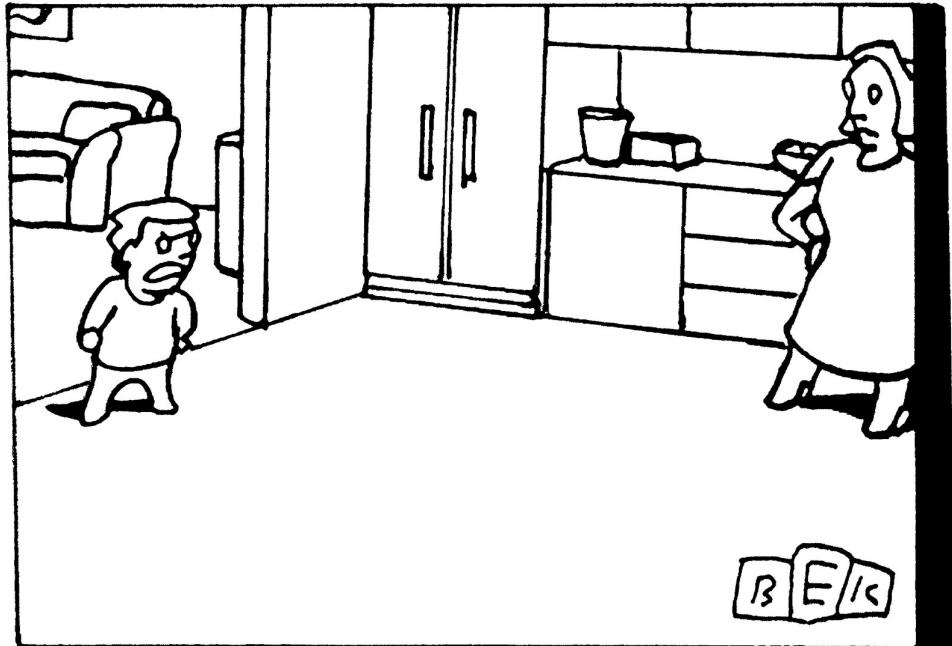
Sometimes when the experimental composer Patrick Grant tells acquaintances about his group, Tilted Axes, they'll respond, "Oh, you're an electric-guitar parade," whereupon Grant will say, "It's not a parade—it's a procession." "What's the difference?" they'll ask. To which Grant replies, "Intention."

If it's ninety-four degrees outside—as it was the other afternoon, when Tilted Axes began playing in Richard Tucker Park, a tiny spot of green just across Broadway from Lincoln Center—the intention had better be dogged. Grant calls the band's performances "tilts," but this one, involving fourteen musicians, was more of a melt. Grant, seven other electric-guitar players, three electric bassists, a keytar player, and two drummers—dressed in black

pants, most of them loaded down with Vox amplifiers slung over their shoulders—celebrated the rising strawberry moon by wending their way through the park, blanketing dozens of unsuspecting pedestrians and park sitters with complicated tunes full of challenging time signatures. Many listeners, on encountering Grant’s “guitarmy” and its wall of sound, smiled and whipped out their cameras; one older woman cautiously rummaged in her handbag for a lozenge.

Since its inception, in 2011, Tilted Axes has given more than seventy performances. Sarah Metivier Schadt, a bass player who flew in from Chicago for the strawberry-moon gig, described a night in 2022 when the group played a section of the opera “Einstein on the Beach” for Philip Glass, its composer, while he watched and waved from the window of a building he owns in the East Village. “It was really scary,” Schadt said. “I mean, if anyone knows whether we suck, it’s him.” They had been planning to play inside Astor Place Hairstylists, but, when Grant heard that Glass had *Covid*, the location was adjusted.

At the performance near Lincoln Center, the Axes played a new, Ramones-inflected version of the Glass piece, seven original tunes, and a cover of “Are You Experienced?” Then, sweating profusely, they trekked north to play “Strawberry Fields Forever” at the Central Park monument of that name, where a group of French tourists politely regarded them with the kind of grimace-smiles that are the hallmark of art appreciation.



"So I can't tell a lie but the Supreme Court gets to do whatever the fuck it wants?"
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

Grant, who is sixty-one, husky, and voluble, is unfazed by onlookers' ambivalent reactions to his polyphonic music. "Working for innovators, like being an assistant to John Cage, or working for Judith Malina and the Living Theatre, I learned, just make stuff. Do stuff. Only half the people will understand what you're doing, so stick with them," he said. The Axes have their fans: the strawberry-moon gig was promoted on social media by Robert Fripp, who formed King Crimson and played with David Bowie, and by the novelist Rick Moody, who wrote, "Best conceptual live-music project of the contemporary moment!" This helps drown out the occasional grumps in the crowd, like the bystander in Düsseldorf, Germany, who yelled, "I do not need this right now!"

After Strawberry Fields, the group returned to Richard Tucker Park to play a few last songs. Because most Tilted Axes performances are conducted on the hoof, the group generally doesn't bother with permits. (Grant said, "Cops will come up to us and say, 'I used to have a Les Paul when I was in high school.' ") The players streamed down Columbus Avenue, serenading passersby with the Tilted Axes theme song; a pedestrian stopped and stared. When the Axes crossed Sixty-sixth Street, traffic momentarily isolated one bass player from the rest of the band, like a feckless baby elephant stranded on the veldt.

By the end of the show, Grant was flushed from the heat, but elated. As he'd put it earlier, "I like to shake people out of the expected by popping up and playing strange music in the middle of their day. I want them to pause and reflect on the beautiful absurdity of just being alive." He went on, "This is sort of a musician's revenge. Most musicians spend their lives putting together shows and hoping an audience will come. But this way we come to *them*." ♦

By Nick Paumgarten
By Corey Robin
By Kelefa Sanneh

[Ba-Dum-Bum Dept.](#)

The Dog-Bite Lawyer Turned Stay-at-Home Mom Turned Standup Comic

Zarna Garg explains how her daughter prodded her into an open-mike night (her go-to: in-law jokes), and she ended up on tour with Tina Fey and Amy Poehler.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Many rising comedians live in hovels, but not Zarna Garg, who recently opened for Tina Fey and Amy Poehler on their national comedy tour. “This is what happens when you don’t marry the artist,” she said the other day, opening the door to her Upper East Side apartment—a wall of windows, a white sectional, a kitchen island the size of a football field. “*Don’t do what you love,*” she said, as she set out a platter of falafel and hummus. “That’s the first mistake.”

Born in India, Garg fled an arranged marriage at fourteen; when she eventually did marry, in the United States, it was for love—“which I still don’t approve of,” she said, “even for myself.” Her husband was in finance and she worked in personal-injury law. “Slip and fall, dog bite,” she said.

“Some people think that stuff is cheesy. I was fascinated. It’s balancing how society works—people with different, competing agendas, figuring out who’s right.” When her husband’s career took off, she shelved her own to attend to him and their three children.

Garg, who wore a floral-print kurta and a maroon cardigan, and had a red bindi on her forehead, said, “They used to call me the Goldman Sachs of mothering. I need to feed people, I can’t help it.”

In 2019, egged on by her teen-age daughter, Zoya, Garg went to the West Side Comedy Club to see if she had what it took. (Zoya wrote about her mom in her college-application essay: “She could make anyone laugh, and I wanted her to be paid for it.”) Garg had never been to a comedy club, but the booker gave her five minutes. “O.K.,” Garg remembers saying. “Let’s go trash my mother-in-law.”

The five minutes went better than she expected. “I remember the shock of people looking at me and me looking at them,” she said, “and thinking, Something’s happening here.”

Club dates followed, as did an Amazon special called “One in a Billion.” Garg has spent much of the past year opening for Fey and Poehler. “It’s interfering with my own tour,” she joked, “but I guess it’s good exposure.” The doorbell rang. It was Adam Triplett, her manager.

“Adam, F.Y.I., I have a falafel sandwich for you,” Garg said.

“I should’ve known,” Triplett said. He wore a beige hoodie and rose-tinted glasses.

“You have to eat something,” Garg said. “Otherwise, I’ll obsess—does he not like my dishes? Did I not get the right thing?”

Triplett had business to discuss. An Indian TV channel wanted more “deliverables” from Garg (ten to fifteen social-media posts) than their check warranted. “I’m not wild about it,” Triplett said. “You know the kind of math I like—less work, more money.”

“Let’s get the easy-money jobs,” Garg said. “The three-day shoot for the million-dollar Super Bowl ad.”

“You do have the following,” Triplett said, noting her two million followers on social media.

“Some would say, focus on one thing and make it spectacular,” Garg said. “Not I. Whatever the opposite of Seinfeld’s model is, that’s what we’re doing. He would be, like, ‘I only write one episode a week.’ We’re gonna bang out three episodes a day.”

She went on, “Seinfeld couldn’t be Seinfeld in 2024. You cannot *not* be on social media. You cannot be, like, ‘Ooh, I’m an enigma’—you’re gonna enigmatically get pushed into the ocean.” She clapped her hands. “Let’s set up the video.”

Garg stood near the kitchen island, where a pineapple and a knife had been set on top of a wooden cutting board, her frequent props. “There’s no deep reason” for the pineapple, she said. “It started off as, what can we do for thirty seconds that’s visually interesting and seems consistent with my life? We can cut up a pineapple.”

She continued, “What are we going to start with? Oh, I know, ‘Saturday Night Live.’” The idea was to riff on how Indians don’t watch “S.N.L.” because they’re too busy doing homework.

An assistant used an iPhone to record, while Garg went into a bit about how Indians always “kill the fun” on Saturday night, stabbing the pineapple with the knife as she spoke. She ad-libbed about her kids taking practice SATs on Saturdays, and how it was her job to be the timekeeper. “Who’s on ‘S.N.L.’?” Garg said. “Brad Pitt? Is he gonna time it for my kids?”

“Brilliant,” Triplett said.

“The comments will be, like, Brad Pitt never hosted ‘S.N.L.,’” Garg said. “It’s good. You give people a reason to get involved.”

She added, “The root of it all is that this conversation is completely real. If these words were bullshit, if I were pretending, forget it.” ♦

By Michael Schulman

By Andrew Marantz

By Mark Yarm

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Reckoning with the Dead at the Sphere

A run of lost Las Vegas weekends for Deadheads prompts a longtime fan to wrestle with what the band has left behind.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)



The Sphere aspires to be an incarnation of our desire to amuse ourselves to death. I was ready to be a guinea pig. Photographs by Michelle Grosskopf for The New Yorker

In May, I came across an ad in the subway promoting the months-long residency at the Sphere, in Las Vegas, of Dead & Company, the current permutation of the Grateful Dead, featuring two surviving members, Bob Weir and Mickey Hart, and the pop star John Mayer. The ad read, in a brassy “Star Wars” font, “Dead Forever.” I remembered what David Letterman said years ago when he saw a billboard in Times Square for the musical “Cats”: “‘Cats: Now and Forever’—is that a threat?”

And yet, a month later, I found myself on the way to Las Vegas, where the band was a dozen shows into thirty at that glimmering new Sno Ball of a hall just off the Strip. Half the seats on the flight seemed to be occupied by fellow-Deadheads, identifiable, as ever, by the hieroglyphs. I had checked no luggage, but I carried some personal baggage. It had been forty years, almost to the day, since I’d caught my first Grateful Dead show. The week of my flight, an elderly evangelist in a sun hat had stopped me in Central Park

and asked, “Young man, what makes you happy?” I paused, then exclaimed, “Jerry Garcia!”

Hardly a day goes by where I don’t cue up an old show, questing for moments of transcendence amid the swill. (The Dead could be great, as Garcia, the front man, once remarked, “for seconds on end.”) Despite broadening taste, periodic bouts of embarrassment, and decades of personal growth and/or decay, my fascination with the music has somehow only deepened. Still, I am an ornery kind of Deadhead, argumentative about eras and keyboardists and sound regimes, cynical about the scene, and uneasy about most of the music that the surviving members have made, in various guises, since Garcia’s death, in 1995. It has almost always left me lukewarm, and yet I have kept going to gigs, large and small, in clubs and arenas, at beaches and bowling alleys, in search of that elusive ecstatic thrill. There is a sense, too, that each swing through town could be the boys’ last. Forever, as they say, is a long time.

The Dead, in their original incarnation, died a few times, or at least nodded off. In 1974, burdened by the high cost of their state-of-the-art sound system and a cocaine-addled touring operation, they performed a series of so-called retirement shows at the Winterland Ballroom, in San Francisco. But the following year they began working up new material and played a handful of Bay Area gigs, and by 1976 they were back on tour. Ten years and some drugs, cigarettes, and hot dogs later, Garcia fell into a diabetic coma, and the music stopped again; for a while, it looked like it might not come back. In 1992, there was another rash of cancellations, as Garcia, not for the first or last time, tried to kick his addiction to opiates. In 1995, he had a fatal heart attack at a rehab facility. Without Garcia, the Grateful Dead ceased to exist.

And yet. In the years that followed, the surviving members reassembled in a variety of configurations: the Dead, the Other Ones, and Furthur, to name a few. They cycled through dozens of replacement guitarists, some of them Garcia imitators, some not. But the absence of their grudging leader and brightest light exposed differences both fresh and latent, and greed and ego frayed their alliances. At various points, members stopped talking to one another; Weir, the rhythm guitarist, and Phil Lesh, the bass player, carried on a kind of cold duel over who’d be the standard-bearer. In 2015, on the fiftieth anniversary of the band’s formation, the jam impresario Peter

Shapiro wrangled the remaining members into a series of stadium concerts, a supposedly final goodbye called *Fare Thee Well*. But, instead of sealing the mine, this extravaganza opened a new vein. Weeks later, Weir announced a new outfit, called Dead & Company, with Mayer—a guitar ace who'd recently become obsessed with Garcia's playing style and songcraft—in the hot spot. Exit Lesh.

Somehow, this iteration, with its winking nod to corporate underpinnings, was the one that went big, the facsimile that pulled in new listeners and sold out stadiums. It became, for some, the real thing, a simulacrum instead of a simulation. I went to see Dead & Co. a few times. Citi Field, Madison Square Garden. They quickly acquired the name Dead and Slow, because of the creeping tempo that Weir, the putative boss, or at least the senior rock star, insisted on. I missed the brawn of the good stuff. Still, there were moments. The other players—Jeff Chimenti, on keys; Oteil Burbridge, on bass; and now Jay Lane, with Hart, on drums—are excellent musicians. I occasionally allowed myself to be carried away. I didn't want to be a buzzkill.

Mayer is obviously a wicked guitar player, supple and slick, an ace as a mimic who also has his own panache. He's bright, and very articulate about his passion for the music of the Grateful Dead. But his blues inflections, his fulsome guitar faces (all that mugging and preening), his designer watches, celebrity girlfriends, and tennis shoes—it can come off a bit twerpy. No one needs him to be a diabetic drug addict, humped over the fretboard, but the contrast is stark, as much in attitude as in style, between the fresh-faced showboat and the beatnik recusant whose Pumas he aims to fill.

Many fans don't seem to mind. Quite a few even love it. Dead & Co. have been at it for nine years, playing two hundred and fifty gigs and selling close to five million tickets. This includes their supposed farewell tour, last summer, another false end with inflated prices. That old reliable illusion of scarcity, or finality, bumped up their average nightly gross to \$4.5 million. The Dead had become fashionable, perhaps bigger than ever—or broader, anyway. The influx of casuals rivalled that of the so-called Touchheads, in the post-coma late-eighties era, following the success of the band's lone Top Ten single, "Touch of Grey." We are everywhere, Deadheads like to say. The

declaration used to suggest infiltration and serendipity. These days, it implies saturation and perhaps even a kind of cultural fatigue.

By now, it's hard to imagine that anyone hasn't heard about the Sphere. You may even know that we're supposed to call it Sphere, without the "the," and that we have mostly decided to ignore this. People like to say that James Dolan, the Cablevision heir and the owner of Madison Square Garden, spent \$2.3 billion to build it, but it was technically a joint project of M.S.G. and the Venetian, which the billionaire Sheldon Adelson sold to Apollo Global Management in 2022, before the Sphere was complete. In other words, though it may be Dolan's pet project, it is also a ripe manifestation of risk capital, a giant mushroom sprouting out of the fungal network of the attention economy. Sphere is now a separate public company, ticker SPHR, whose stock is up eleven per cent in the past year. The aim is to seed more Spheres. London nixed one. South Korea is in play, and Abu Dhabi seems likely.

The Sphere is connected to the Venetian by an air-conditioned passageway. Outside, the building serves as an incandescent orbic billboard, with 1.2 million L.E.D.s, each containing four dozen diodes. Ad space, basically, or an electronic canvas in the round. Inside, it's a performance venue, with about eighteen thousand seats arrayed under a vast dome that doubles as the world's largest and highest-resolution L.E.D. screen. The sound system features some hundred and sixty thousand speakers, which allow engineers to direct discrete sounds at individual seats. The venue can also vibrate those seats and produce smells—an Odorama and an Orgasmatron in one. Dolan has said that he drew inspiration from the Ray Bradbury short story "The Veldt," in which some snotty children, addicted to the verisimilitude of a faux savanna on a virtual-reality screen in their home, wind up feeding their parents to the virtual lions. One way of interpreting this is that Dolan wants to fuck your shit up. Another is that Charles Dolan, his father, might want to stay away.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Last fall, U2 inaugurated the Sphere, playing forty shows, all largely the same in terms of set list and visuals. The wows and the don't-you-wish-you-were-heres made the rounds on social media. Next, Phish did four nights, each with a distinct set list and corresponding graphics. Wowier wows, this time, as the ambitious pairings flirted, conceptually and visually, with something like art, and made it hard for the band to clear much of a profit. Dead & Co. came next: two dozen shows to start. Last month, despite sales being a bit soft, they announced a half-dozen more. Ten lost weekends in all for the Deadheads in the desert, and a gross of more than a hundred million dollars.

Mayer and Dead & Co. are both co-managed by Irving Azoff, a longtime industry heavy and a former C.E.O. of Ticketmaster. (When Azoff's clients the Eagles were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Don Henley said, "He may be Satan, but he's *our* Satan.") Azoff, who also manages U2, has a business partnership with Madison Square Garden. He's got the Eagles doing the next Sphere stint, after Dead & Co. It's tempting to think of Dead & Co. in their Sphere phase as a slick Mayer-and-Azoff concoction, and therefore a perversion of the Grateful Dead's long-standing (or long-stumbling) fail-sideways approach to the music business. As it happens, in 1973, Azoff, just before taking on the Eagles, joined the Dead operation. He lasted little more than a week. "He couldn't stand our laid-back life style,"

Gail Hellund, who ran the band's travel business, told the "Good Ol' Grateful Deadcast," a cultural-history podcast. "He was too L.A. for us. No harm, no foul. Just oil and water."

In May, I participated in a conversation, onstage at the El Rey Theatre in Los Angeles, with the Canadian novelist Ray Robertson, who had published a book called "All the Years Combine: The Grateful Dead in Fifty Shows." We did our jibber-jabber and then took questions. An audience member asked, "What would Jerry Garcia have thought of the Sphere?" Robertson guessed that he'd have hated it. The cash grab, the corporate cheese: anathema to art. I said that, putting aside my general objection to any W.W.J.D. speculation, I wasn't so sure. Garcia loved technology, movies, computers, television, graphic design. He made visual art and was an early adopter of MacPaint. And the Dead had, from their inception, regularly performed in multimedia environments. As the house band at the Acid Tests, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters' LSD happenings, in the mid-sixties, the Dead would play coherent songs or incoherent noise, or nothing at all, while the light shows and other sonic and psychedelic craziness prevailed. Light shows became a mainstay, from the liquid-light oozings in the San Francisco ballrooms to the cutting-edge stage arrays of the band's longtime lighting engineer, Candace Brightman, in arenas and stadiums. The Dead had also been sound-technology pioneers. So you'd imagine that Garcia would relish the opportunity to play inside what Mickey Hart described to me, in a recent Zoom call, as "the belly of a robot, a very smart robot." (Hart, as it happens, designed the sound sixteen years ago for the ersatz volcano at the Mirage casino, which is now slated for demolition. On gig days he sometimes dropped by, in disguise, to savor its last eruptions.)

In the late nineties, the band pursued the notion of a permanent expo not unlike the Sphere, called Terrapin Station, with a theatre-in-the-round and holographic representations of the musicians; it was ultimately abandoned. Still, Garcia had long talked up the idea of a semi-permanent residency someplace, an opportunity to mitigate the rigors of the road. Thirty straight gigs in one hall: he'd dig that, especially if there were ice cream.

My first time in Las Vegas was in the summer of 1986. I was seventeen. I went West ostensibly to look at California colleges and to work on a ranch near Reno. I say "ostensibly" because the actual intention was to catch up

with the Grateful Dead in Ventura, and follow them up to Mountain View—five shows in the group's homeland of California.

I flew to Las Vegas, and two friends, who'd driven from the East Coast, picked me up at the airport. After a couple of hours of wandering the casino floor at the Golden Nugget, we set out at around midnight for the coast. We'd all read and admired "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas." We had no ether or mescaline, but we had beer and some seedy brown weed and a romantic sense of ourselves as renegades crossing the desert at night.

Somewhere around Barstow, the hunger took hold, and we pulled into a Denny's. The counterman asked where we were headed. To Ventura to see the Grateful Dead, we told him.

"Didn't you hear?" he said. "Jerry Garcia is in a coma." He had collapsed a few days after a concert in Washington, D.C.

It was dawn, foggy and gray, when we rolled into the parking lot at the Ventura County Fairgrounds. A few dozen bedraggled and forlorn Deadheads were maintaining a vigil. The shows were cancelled. Later that summer, I saw my first Dead cover band.

This time, I arrived in Las Vegas on a Thursday night. My phone told me that the day was the hottest ever recorded on planet Earth. In Vegas, the temp had reached a hundred and four. I got to the Venetian just as the weekend's first show at the Sphere was emptying out—I had tickets for Friday and Saturday—and thousands of intoxicated enthusiasts were spilling into the ludicrous bong and bustle of the casino floor. I headed upstream, to get a sense of this particular fishery. Generally speaking, it was not a young crowd, or a particularly crunchy one. I saw more canes than dreadlocks. The people skewed middle-aged and heavyset, sporting an infinite array of merch, predominantly store-bought and Sphere-specific, as opposed to the D.I.Y. parking-lot goods of yore. But there were young people, too—converts, families. The crowd, overwhelmingly white, was evidently prosperous, no surprise when you consider the cost of the travel, lodging (presumably no one was pitching a tent on the Strip), and tickets, whose face value, given the fees and so-called dynamic pricing, runs from two hundred dollars to seven hundred dollars. People seemed more weary and dazed than

elated, as though overwhelmed by the sensory experience, the scale of the place, and the distance of the walk along the endless faux-palatial hallways that passed from the Sphere back to the Venetian. At one point, I stopped on a stair, as on a mid-stream boulder, and filmed the procession on my phone. A few people waved; one gave me the finger.

At a bar off the casino floor, I sat down next to a guy about my age who was having a B.L.T. and red wine. He introduced himself as “John from Boston,” though he now lived in Southern California, working as an executive at a company that cleans up environmentally contaminated sites. His first Dead show was at the Boston Garden, in 1980. Ah, yes. I knew the tape. “There’s that great ‘Caution’ meltdown after ‘He’s Gone,’ ” I said. John didn’t recall. He’d gone to see Dead & Co. a few times, too, in various stadiums. He’d paid two hundred and seventy dollars for a seat in the top deck of the Sphere but had moved around to test the sound and had settled into a spot in the wheelchair section. “It was fucking amazing,” he said. “I smoked some weed and had a couple of actual mushrooms.”

His wingman, Matty K., sixty-nine, who had retired after selling a health-care tech business, was out on the floor playing video poker. They’d met years ago, at a bar in California while watching the Patriots on TV, two Massholes in sunny exile. Matty’s first Dead show was Boston Garden, 1973. He carried a laminate of the ticket stub in his wallet, and had flashed it in the bathroom that night, as a kind of urinal V.I.P. card; the guys ahead of him escorted him to the front of the line.

He’d attended upward of a hundred more Dead shows before Garcia died, and yet, he said, “this show at the Sphere was the best show I have ever seen. I was dead sober, not even a beer. It holds up to any Dead show ever.” This was blasphemy, especially from a guy who’d been there for what I considered glory days. But I’d come across the Mayer mania before, and perhaps the Sphere had powers of persuasion I’d not yet encountered.

Prior to my trip, I had imagined Vegas chaos, Fear and Loathing in Middle Age. I had grafted the savage decadence of yesteryear onto the designer-high generation, and worried about Ketamine zombies and fentanyl contaminations. A guy from Philly told me that his friend had a number you could call and within twenty minutes someone would deliver, in a black

garbage bag, a tank of nitrous oxide to your hotel lobby. He and some friends had killed a cannister in their room the night before. But he didn't have the number. In fact, chaos was elusive in this era of perfectly calibrated doses. Chocolates, capsules, mints, seltzers, cookies, cartridges: everything infused with something, save for the B.L.T. on white toast. People were chatty, or weary, or occasionally stumbling, but, to my great relief, I saw no one tumbling down the steep stairs or off any balcony edges, and, perhaps to my disappointment, no one dancing naked atop a bank of slot machines.

At Bar Luca, open to the casino floor, Mike, a life-sciences consultant in Winston-Salem, fed hundred-dollar bills into a video blackjack machine. His wife, Stephanie, who coördinated commercial repossession, talked about their travels to see Dead cover bands—at the Jam in the Sand, the Dark Star Jubilee—and adjacent acts, like the jamgrass guitar whiz Billy Strings. (Strings decided two years ago to stop covering Dead songs. “Too many pigs on the teet,” he wrote.) I know people my age who every winter spend a week on the Jam Cruise, in the Caribbean, bouncing from gig to gig in sparkly costumes, on various powders and pills, and others who, after *Covid* came along, retired and dedicated themselves to following jam bands—a life of leisure and low taxes, golf and Goose.

The Sphere program wasn't just a concert. It was a show, in the Vegas sense, with a concept, a narrative, and a retrospective intention. It called attention to itself. It wasn't the Dead, or even an adulteration of the Dead, so much as a presentation about the Dead, confusingly featuring a couple of its survivors. It brought to mind a Civil War reënactment with a few Vicksburg veterans thrown in for authenticity. Or “Beatlemania,” featuring Ringo. There were other big shows in town, and some Dead & Co. visitors were hitting those, too: a Beatles tribute with Cirque du Soleil (but no Ringo); Adele, live at Caesars. A woman named Gina, from Guadalajara, found herself at a bar at the Venetian among the Dead crowd, after seeing the Adele show alone. She was an executive at Hewlett Packard Enterprise, which had reserved the Sphere for a corporate conference that week. HPE had hired Dead & Co. to play a private set. Gina wasn't very happy about this: “We could have had Imagine Dragons.”

More broadly, the residency served as a pretext for a pop-up exposition called the Dead Forever Experience. It was a Disneyfied immersion in the

band as brand—an unabashed Margaritavilling of the Garciaverse. The centerpiece, at the Venetian, was the band’s vast and shiny merchandise emporium and, one floor up a curved staircase, an exhibition, a mashup of museum and fair. There may be no artists in popular music with a more abundant iconography. Skeletons, skulls, roses, turtles, bears, trains, poker hands, and lightning bolts, plus a near-infinite array of Jerrys, Garcia in all his guises, including the synecdoche of the missing right middle finger: all of it fodder for shop and shrine.

I stopped by the Experience late in the morning. The ground-floor bazaar was bustling. Katie, an attendant at one of the shops, was fine-tuning a display of twenty-five-dollar Dead & Co. coffee mugs. She reckoned that the shop was doing about two hundred thousand dollars in sales a day. “This is nicer than the U2 crowd,” she said. “Tickets are cheaper, so people are happier. And spending more on merch.” She pointed out a couple of guys carrying fancy-looking poster tubes: “Those are professionals, snapping up posters to resell on eBay.” (To foil this behavior, the band had decreed that you could buy only five posters at a time.)

Upstairs, the reliquary attitude was a respite. One wall featured, behind plexiglass, a collection of bootleg cassettes belonging to the band’s official archivist, David Lemieux. Next to that was a miniature replica, built by a luthier in Connecticut, of the Wall of Sound speaker array, from fifty summers ago, out of which issued a playlist presumably assembled from Lemieux’s hissy tapes. Attendees stood in front of it, clutching their poster tubes.

In one corner, visitors were queued up to meet Steve Parish, the loquacious and combative longtime roadie known as Big Steve, who hosts his own talk shows on Sirius XM and YouTube. (In “Long Strange Trip,” Amir Bar-Lev’s 2017 six-part Grateful Dead documentary, Parish is the one who, recalling the old question of who was in charge, says, in his stoner growl, “*The situation is the boss.*”) He was hawking a line of Jerry Garcia Wellness CBD gummies founded by Garcia’s youngest daughter, Keelin, and a New York businessman named Bobby Brahms. (“I’m a former search-engine guy,” Brahms told me. “We did it before Google.”) Brahms said, of Dead & Co., “It’s like going home to your mom’s house, but there are new sheets.”

There was a gallery of Mickey Hart's paintings, swirls of color applied to dynamic surfaces, and a full wall displaying a collage of Dead & Co. audience pictures shot by the house photographer Jay Blakesberg and his mentee Chloe Weir, Bob's daughter. Here and there were snaps of some prominent fans: Andy Cohen, the Bravo executive; Matty Matheson, who plays the handyman on "The Bear"; Bill Walton, the basketball star and perhaps the Dead's most conspicuous mascot, who had died a few weeks before. Not pictured: Martha Stewart and Flavor Flav, who had posted a photo of themselves together at a show the previous week. He wore the merch; she did not.

Nearby was the entrance to "An American Beauty," an exhibition of some hundred Jerry-era photographs, curated by Blakesberg and his daughter. He was shooting the Sphere gigs, and every weekend he hung around his exhibit leading makeshift tours. It presented, chronologically, a sunny and sanguine view of the band's career. I watched as he started talking to a stranger about a picture he'd turned up of Neal Cassady, the Merry Prankster, in red leather boots. (When Blakesberg first discovered it, he said, "I started crying.") Before long, more than fifty curious visitors were following him through the show as he gave his spiel.

Blakesberg, sixty-two and originally from New Jersey, has long curly hair and wore a purple (as in haze) T-shirt with "Owsley" printed on the front—a tribute to Owsley Stanley, the LSD chemist who served as the band's early soundman and financier. "You know how I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be?" he said, as he talked about the old days on tour. "Because I'm still fucking here! And I'm still shooting you weirdos to this day." I met a few of those weirdos, whose earlier, more menacing selves appeared in the exhibit. In the days when I was a kid going to Dead shows, they were the kinds of hard dudes who scared the crap out of me. Russell Levine, sixty-five, bald with a paunch and a camera bag, had attended six hundred and seven Dead shows, starting in 1976, and claims that he didn't pay for a single one of them. By 1982, he was in charge of the band's nightly post-gig hospitality suite back at the hotel: "What happened was, I was a pot dealer, but one night they ran out of beer. Bobby [Weir] told me, 'Never again.' He gave me Jerry Garcia's American Express card: 'Make sure we never run out.' There was some jealousy on the crew, because I had full access and

wasn't a roadie. We'd sneak the tapers' gear in, and they'd give us coke, which we'd share with the band."

By 1992, he was a full-on crackhead. "It wasn't Holiday Inns anymore," he said. "We were staying at the Four Seasons in Manhattan, and suddenly I started crying. I realized I was the loneliest guy in the world. All that cocaine and alcohol, it rewired my brain. When the crowd chanted 'Jerry, Jerry, Jerry,' I thought it was 'Russell, Russell, Russell.' " He quit the Dead, got sober, and now works helping get people into detox in Florida.

His friend R.L., a year younger, wearing a madras Ralph Lauren button-down, white shorts, readers, and a still-devilish pair of eyebrows, was from Hell's Kitchen and had been a coke dealer. He used to hang out with the Westies, the old Manhattan gang, who were scarier even than the hardest of the tour hardos. "We used to think Jay might be F.B.I., taking all those pictures," R.L. said. He reckoned that his show count was north of seven hundred. A third accomplice, named Ignatz, stringy and tall, in a Harley-Davidson Budapest T-shirt, walked up, and the war stories gathered heft. Their Forever Experience was not so much Mom's house with new sheets as a combat zone covered with fresh sod.

Other fans got out while the getting was good, made a life, and now have come back to what might be worth holding on to. Lee Ranaldo, a founder of Sonic Youth, the noise-rock band that some might consider to be the anti-Dead, gets together every year or so with three high-school buddies, fellow-Deadheads. This year, they convened in Las Vegas, with Dead & Co. as the impetus. In the summer of 1974, Ranaldo had driven across the country in a VW bus and caught the Dead in California. "We passed briefly through Vegas, but back then it didn't hold much interest to us, and we just kept on going," he told me. It had been more than a dozen years since his last trip to Vegas, and he found it freshly horrible, some of its vestigial seedy charm now replaced by upscale shops and airless malls. The four friends had attended the Fare Thee Well show in Chicago, but Ranaldo hadn't yet seen Dead & Co. Mayer, from a distance, didn't strike him as a fitting replacement. "It seems, from what little I know, like a disconnect," Ranaldo said.

They stayed at the Luxor. They had a car and hiked in the desert. They went to a Sphere show, on a Friday in early June, which was the first one to sell out. “It’s a strange mix of authentic and ersatz,” Ranaldo said. “That sense of, Is it real or is it Memorex?” About Mayer, he said, “There aren’t too many guitarists who could play the more technical stuff. But he doesn’t have any of the soul Jerry had.” He was taken by Weir: “He was the most interesting person on the stage. He was the only one, maybe except Mickey, not playing a role. The whole thing is in amber at this point, and yet these guys are keeping the songbook alive.”

Two days after the show, Ranaldo and his friends went to check out a Trump rally in a lot off the Strip. It was punishingly hot. Trump talked about sharks and snakes. They were moderately relieved to see no one in attendance wearing a Dead T-shirt.

After I wrote a story in these pages a dozen years ago about the Dead and their legacy, a friend of mine, a fellow-lunatic who’d had some past business dealings with the band, advised me to never again write about or involve myself with the group in any professional way. Better not to mix work and pleasure. But the tractor beam drew me in. I’ve returned to the subject repeatedly, writing liner notes, appearing on podcasts and radio shows, submitting essays to anthologies. My remarks onscreen in “Long Strange Trip” bring me more attention, out in the world, than anything else I’ve done. “You’re *that* guy!” Hey, now. Maybe that guy needs to move on. I suppose I am one of the legions of longtime buffs remade as content creators who are now, in one way or another, profitably engaged in the business of the Grateful Dead. Musicians aren’t the only ones on the teat.

There’s some regulatory capture. The Dead were a putatively leaderless organization, but politics pertained, and now deference to the talent, and to management, casts a pall. No one wants to risk his spot. The money and the status are too dear. One hears squalid tales of sudden ghostings, insiders abruptly forced into exile. It’s sometimes hard to determine who is more ruthless, the industry bosses or the self-centered rock stars—or, as the gossip often has it, their wives. You have to really love the music not to grow disheartened by it all. And the music gets harder to love, or to defend, when it becomes “pretty much just nostalgia,” as Trey Anastasio, the Phish guitarist nine years removed from his own stint as a fake Jerry in the not-

quite-Dead, said in *Rolling Stone* recently. It might be that the old hands' excitement over this particular iteration of the thing has as much to do, consciously or not, with commerce as with taste. It's telling that the two guys who smile least onstage are the original members, and I mean that as a compliment to them. The projection of contentment, by Mayer and the others, can feel performative, self-satisfied, like the arrival onscreen of an ensemble television cast in the first episode of a seventh season.

The Sphere aspires to be a colossus of oblivion, a cutting-edge incarnation of our desire to be amused to death—a brick-and-mortar manifestation of a virtual-reality headset, built to help us achieve “total entertainment forever,” as the Father John Misty song goes. Fattened up and blissed out, floating through virtual space, like the mother-ship émigrés in “Wall-E,” we jam our senses with sounds and visions, to the point of obliteration. Fifty years ago, the philosopher Robert Nozick presented a thought experiment called the Experience Machine. Imagine that you could plug into a device that would stimulate a pleasure response in your brain, delivering the illusion of whatever you deemed most enjoyable for the rest of your life, or longer. Would anyone choose to unplug? I was looking forward to being the guinea pig.

My wingman was a real-estate finance guy who lives in Denver, an old friend with a punk-rock bias, who, despite his contention that the Dead ceased to be interesting in 1971, has never stopped going to concerts. An hour before showtime, we shuffled along the carpeted corridor from the Venetian, spilled out into the heat for a few minutes, then ducked into the orb. The exuberance of the thousands, as they rode escalators into an ambient, crepuscular glow in the Sphere’s cavernous ecto-chamber, was contagious, though the scale of the place felt a little like an affront to the gods. “Reminds me of ‘The Towering Inferno,’ ” my wingman said. We rode to the very top, to take in the enormity from above; the pitch of the stands reminded me of the precipitous upper deck in the old Yankee Stadium—step lightly. Soon we had our seats, our twenty-five-dollar craft beers, and, in spite of our skepticism, that familiar thrum of expectancy. The band went on at seven-thirty-five, right on time, like a puck drop.

The show on the big screen begins with what appears to be the exposed skeleton of the structure itself pulling apart, the seam taking the shape of a

lightning bolt, which gives way to an image of 710 Ashbury Street, the Dead's earliest home, in the Haight district of San Francisco. The vantage then rises above the city and the bay, and then out of the atmosphere and into space—a vision of the heavens that outdoes even the splendor conjured, in planetariums of old, by the double-ended Zeiss Mark VI projector. Nearly every element of the visual presentation—which has a very vague narrative arc, conceived mainly by Mayer, with contributions from Industrial Light & Magic—has appeared on social media. But, unlike the bootlegged audience recordings of bygone concerts, which often capture the spirit of the thing, the phone-cam snippets of this luminous rondure, dwarfing the flea-circus ensemble of the band beneath, fail to capture its empyreal scale and wonder. It's downright beautiful, even between sets, when it exudes a Creamsicle glow, like a foggy twilight on Mars.

All that iconography: it's fodder, too, for the Sphere spectacle. Much of it is cheesy, such as an infinite-seeming gyre of dancing bears, a nightmare for us dancing-bear doubters, but some of the cheese is salvaged by cheek: a skeleton rising from a grave to ride a chopper through a trippy landscape. “When I think of the Grateful Dead canon, I almost think of the visual, aesthetic canon as much as I think of the music,” Mayer told *Variety*. (He also used the term “lookbook.”) You see, but may wish you didn’t, a lot of closeups, at ludicrous scale, of the band members performing. Some things are better heard than seen. (It might get even scarier when the Eagles roll into town.) The musicians were dressed for the cameras in muted blacks and grays. You get the color from the Sphere.

The songs unfurl. Certain numbers go with certain visuals, and so in many ways, unlike anything the Dead have done before, the visuals determine the set, as well as the length of each particular song, a stricture that would be routine for most bands but which for the Dead is almost unthinkable. Still, they hit their marks. It's all tightly choreographed, but the music still feels alive, improvised, viney. A not-unpropulsive jam scored a vista of the desert at night, a gesture toward the group’s 1978 trip to Egypt: a two-hundred-and-seventy-degree view of the Great Pyramids under a lunar eclipse, bats winging in the shadows of the Sphinx. Then, to the delight of the Mayerheads, a wanky “Sugaree,” under a shower of scarlet begonias. “What a showoff,” a guy behind me said.

“Keep showing off,” another responded.

In the vernacular, talking at concerts is known as “chomping.” To go by my own recent experience, there are more chompers than ever, and more people complaining about them.

Night one, set two: Behind me, two young women, thirtyish, were talking, not quietly, about a recent wedding. I noticed it most during the more delicate songs—“China Doll,” “Terrapin Station,” “Dear Prudence.” They kept it up during the Mickey Hart segment known as “Drums”-“Space,” which was arguably the most mesmerizing stretch of the night, owing to the brawn of the subwoofers, the haptic vibrations in the seats, the primal percussive fury, and the spinning fractal kaleidoscopes on the giant screen. It was during “Drums” that I learned a few things from my neighbors about sandals. Near the end of the show, during the quietest part of “Morning Dew,” the Bonnie Dobson post-nuclear-apocalypse folk song that was Garcia’s most formidable showstopper, the two talkers sketched out their summer plans. Who were these barbarians?

“I guess it doesn’t matter anyway,” Weir was singing, with his goofy phrasing and without the Garcia gravitas. Still, it *did* matter. The guy sitting next to me turned toward the talkers and gently asked them if they’d keep it down. I turned halfway around, too, and made a dad gesture, a tamping down of the air with my palm.

“We can’t hear you!” one of them shouted.

“We’re trying to enjoy the show!” the other said.

“What are you, the concert police?”

“This isn’t the opera, dude!”

For the rest of the set, as our vantage descended from space back down to Earth, the Bay Area, and 710 Ashbury, they hissed insults at the backs of our heads. I could feel their scorn scorching my bald spot, like the equatorial sun. Vibe: not good.

The next night, the offenders were drunken dudes: different register and subject matter—golf, blackjack, the scene at the pool at the Wynn—but just as hard to tune out or counteract. Was it the dome’s ambient twilight? Or the clean, near-perfect sound, which provided enough sonic white space for conversation?

If chomping is an epidemic, is there a lab-leak hypothesis? Might it be the edibles? Or have manners slipped? One thinks of the people watching videos in public on their screens with the sound turned up. Everyone is listening when they shouldn’t be, and not listening when they should.

“How was it?” The holdouts in my cohort wanted the crusty bastard’s verdict, as they eyed the surprisingly uncluttered Ticketmaster seat maps of the final weekends of the Sphere run. Amazing, I said. The Sphere is a cutting-edge concert hall, a marvel of engineering and technology, a visual and auditory feast. It was like nothing I’d ever seen, a new frontier of live entertainment, and there were moments on both nights where some combination of sound and screen made me want to call everyone I knew, even those with no affection for anything Dead, and say what my editor had said to me: “Go!” I didn’t say that, as the second night wore on, the fascination abated, and I got used to the big screen. Focussing on the music itself, I thought of that lady in the park asking me what made me happy. Nothing lasts forever.

Still, who could begrudge the carnival atmosphere of the casino, the abundant good cheer and extra oxygen and stale cigarette smoke? With other attendees, my friend and I wondered about which acts might be able both to fill the space and put the whizbang to ambitious use. Tool, Metallica, Beyoncé—the list was short. At 3 a.m., next door at the Wynn, we came across LeBron James at a card table, in sunglasses and a ballcap. My friend tried to take a stool, but security brushed him away. “He was playing War!” my friend said.

My flight the next morning was again full of enthusiasts, whose collective exuberance had given way to exhaustion. Hard to know who’d lost thousands at craps or knocked off a cannister of laughing gas. Costs sunk, experiences had. Our flight soon took us over the Grand Canyon—the real thing, not a simulacrum—and not a single passenger opened a window shade

to catch a glimpse of it, or of New York City, hours later, as we descended at sunset. ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr
By Donald Antrim
By Richard Brody
By Amanda Petrusich

Profiles

An Artist Flowering in Her Nineties

Isabella Ducrot, a painter in Rome, didn't really pick up a brush until her fifties. Four decades later, galleries and museums throughout Europe are celebrating her work.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)



Ducrot, in her apartment in Rome. This summer, she has her first international solo museum show, in Dijon, France. Photograph by Albrecht Fuchs

For more than two decades, Isabella Ducrot, an artist who was born in Naples in 1931, has lived in an apartment on the top floor of the Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, in the center of Rome. When I knocked on her door for the first time, this past spring, she greeted me with an emphatic pronouncement in English: “I must tell you immediately that I have never been so happy in my life!”

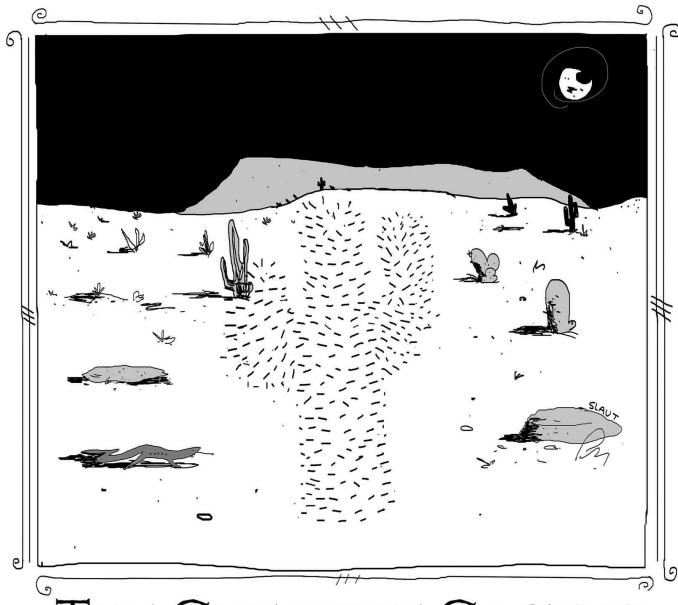
It was a Tuesday evening in April, and I’d landed in Rome just a few hours earlier. Originally, Ducrot and I had arranged to meet for lunch the next day, but when she learned of my schedule she invited me to come over sooner, for a drink and a light dinner, noting in an e-mail that she “would be enchanted” to see me immediately. She opened the door to the apartment—where she lived with Vittorio (Vicky) Ducrot, her husband of fifty-eight years, until his death, in 2022—and I entered a spacious hallway densely

hung with dark, dramatic Baroque paintings. Light shone on them from French doors that led to an expansive terrace. A side table held a vase of roses that were hovering on the edge between bloom and decay. Ducrot, who is tall and upright, grasped my hand more firmly than I would have expected, saying, “Please believe what I tell you. I adored my husband, and I am half a person now that he is not with me. But I am happy—*happy*.”

Only in the past five years has Ducrot, who turned ninety-three in June, become internationally recognized for her art, which she didn’t even begin making until she was in her fifties. When creating her works, she stands and uses a brush sometimes attached to a stick, sweeping loose arcs of ink or paint onto paper or fabric. She often later incorporates scraps of other papers or textiles. Her painted collages usually depict ecstatic figures and stylized landscapes; arrays of ovals or checkered patterns are a recurring feature. Typically made in series, her works are light, energetic, and uninhibitedly beautiful.

Ducrot’s œuvre has been admired in Italy for three decades: in 1993, a tapestry was included in the Venice Biennale, and in 2008 and 2014 she had solo shows at the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art, in Rome. But it wasn’t until 2019 that she was championed in earnest outside the country, when Gisela Capitain, a gallerist in Cologne, Germany, mounted a solo show of Ducrot’s work which featured iterative images of flowers in vases, along with several pieces from a series, “Bella Terra,” each of them depicting a tree and a flowing river. It was as if Ducrot, in her ripe ebullience, had leapt directly into a late-Matisse phase—full of color and shorn of fuss.

This summer, the Consortium Museum, in Dijon, France, is hosting Ducrot’s first international solo museum show, heralding her, counterintuitively, as “a young artist with a young career.” The exhibition includes eleven paintings, on paper, from a series that Ducrot calls “Tenderesses”; they show two figures exuberantly entangled amid a patchwork of patterned blocks. Secured to the gallery walls with pins, the paintings—like the blissful people depicted within them—seem to float unsupported.



THE CHESHIRE CACTUS

Cartoon by Sara Lautman

Since Ducrot's husband died, she has shared her apartment with her housekeeper and two cats. Apart from a daily excursion to her studio, on the palazzo's ground floor, she only occasionally leaves home—a sharp contrast to her earlier life, which was uncommonly adventurous. Vicky Ducrot was the prosperous founder of a luxury-travel company, *Viaggi dell'Elefante*, and the Ducrots journeyed extensively to India, China, Laos, Myanmar, and many other countries, taking with them paying groups of well-heeled and cultured visitors—most of whom already were, or eventually became, their friends—to see architectural sites and to shop in markets. On those trips, Isabella bargained for rare and fragile textiles from merchants in places such as Kashmir and Isfahan, amassing a singular collection. Her treasures range from seventeenth-century Tibetan prayer shawls to fragments of Egyptian cotton dating possibly to the ninth century. Vicky collected Indian miniature paintings, becoming a self-taught expert. On their travels in Yemen, Uzbekistan, and elsewhere, the Ducrots gathered cuttings of wild roses—transporting damp stems in their suitcases before planting them at their country house, in Umbria, where they tended a garden exclusively dedicated to the genus. It still supplies flowers for Isabella's apartment.

Despite her late start, and even later recognition, Ducrot's artistic flowering has been immensely productive. Andrea Viliani, the director of the Museo delle Civiltà, in Rome, which will exhibit a selection of Ducrot's works

alongside examples of historical textiles from its own collection this summer, told me Ducrot is fortunate that her preferred technique and materials remain relatively easy for her to manage, compared with, say, sculpting metal or painting with oils on heavy canvases. “Her work is easy to hold, and easy to paint, and easy to store,” Viliani said. “It is very convenient that she chose something so soft.” Sadie Coles, a gallerist in London who presented a solo show of Ducrot’s work last year, and is currently hosting another, first encountered the paintings in a booth at Art Basel, in 2022. She bought one of Ducrot’s landscapes without knowing anything about the life of the artist. “My initial response was just how *fresh* it was,” Coles told me. “I would never have guessed it was made by a then ninety-one-year-old! There’s a sense of play, of texture, of discovery.” Ducrot’s works, Coles added, “feel so full of sex, intimacy, and erotic charge.”

In an introduction to a catalogue about the “Tenderesses” series, the Italian scholar Emanuele Dattilo writes that people are frequently amazed to discover that the creator of such explicitly sensual works is “a lady who is well over the age of eighty.” Of course, this reaction reveals as much about the limitations of the observer’s imagination as it does about the voluptuous reaches of Ducrot’s. We tend to assign to the elderly—and especially to elderly women—the vague, and often diminishing, attribute of wisdom, thereby suggesting that their own creative, intellectual, or erotic evolution has come to an end, and that their sole remaining role is to give advice to others. Ducrot’s work and life offer an alternative possibility: that an individual might remain wide-eyed and open to experience—in an enduring state of naïveté, and with a capacity to be joyfully surprised—until the very end.

The Palazzo Doria Pamphilj, which was constructed over several centuries and occupies most of a block, remains the home of the aristocratic family for whom it is named. The clan’s most prominent member, Pope Innocent X, was immortalized by Velázquez in a celebrated portrait painted around 1650. This masterpiece is still on display at the palazzo, in one of several splendidly ornate rooms downstairs that show off the family’s art collection.

On our first evening together, Ducrot welcomed me into her apartment’s unfolding series of cozy, inviting rooms, which were filled with overstuffed

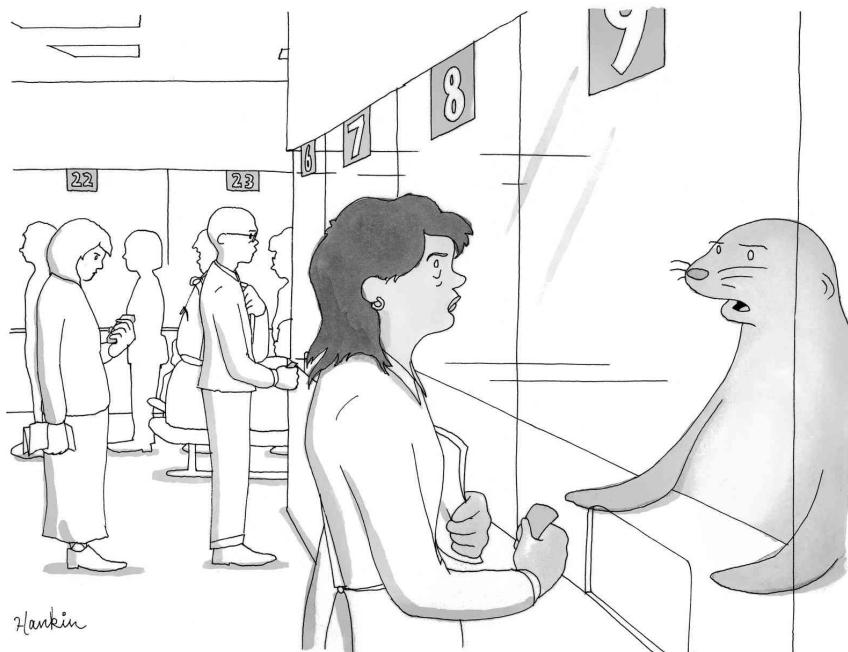
sofas, Art Deco armchairs, and modernist tables by Alvar Aalto. Choice ceramics and glassware were arranged on mantels and tables. There was a yellow ceramic dish by Picasso; a white glazed Ecce Homo made by Ducrot's son Giuseppe, a sculptor who specializes in religious iconography; and a medieval Islamic dish showing a rider on horseback, a gift from her other child, Enrico, who now runs the travel business. Art works by friends hung on the walls. There was a portrait of Ducrot, from about forty years ago, by Maro Gorky, the daughter of Arshile Gorky, and a 1977 pastel drawing of a lotus flower by Cy Twombly, who, along with his aristocratic wife, Tatiana Franchetti, often travelled with the Ducrots. (The Twombly is inscribed "For Isabela.") There were also dozens more Baroque paintings, many dating to the seventeenth century and acquired in the nineteen-eighties and nineties, when such works were unfashionable. A shadowy, thorn-crowned Christ being taunted by a muscled thug, attributed to Annibale Carracci, hung in Vicky Ducrot's still intact bedroom. The prize of the collection—a pallid, recumbent, half-naked Cleopatra, by Artemisia Gentileschi—was on loan to a museum, leaving a ghostly rectangle of space on a wall near the kitchen, where a litter box was discreetly positioned.

Ducrot asked her housekeeper, Shanthi Wijesundara, to pour us glasses of champagne, and we settled side by side on a sofa. She wore an oversized olive-green sweater, wide-legged black satin pants, and chunky pale-pink sneakers; her hair was white and cut in a blunt, chin-length bob with a center part, and around her neck she wore a gold chain with a pendant of green glass. She was chic and easy in her manner, but life at her age is far from effortless, she said. Since Vicky's death, Ducrot has been increasingly dependent upon Wijesundara, who has worked for her for forty years. "She washes me," Ducrot told me at one point. "I am completely in her hands." As we sipped our champagne, Ducrot explained that the happiness she felt was not unqualified. "I am terrified also, naturally, because friends of mine, old people, are dying," she said. "But happiness is another thing. I think I am helped by the words that come to me—words are more generous with me now."

Though Ducrot is best known for her paintings, she has also flourished, belatedly, as a writer of essays and short stories. In "The Checkered Cloth," published in English translation in 2019, Ducrot analyzes a painting of the Annunciation by Simone Martini, the fourteenth-century Sienese artist. Ever

a connoisseur of textiles, she focusses on the exposed lining of the angel Gabriel’s fluttering cloak, which has a checkered pattern—a design that, she argues, has long been associated with women, children, and the insane, rather than with heavenly visitation. In “Twenty-two Places of the Soul,” published in 2022, Ducrot dilates on the “triune” nature of fabric, describing the warp, the weft, and the empty space trapped between them as a metaphor for the Holy Trinity. Elsewhere, she compares weaving to the generative union of masculine and feminine. Every morning, between eight-thirty and ten-thirty, Ducrot writes before descending to her studio. “During the day, I am absolutely normal,” she said. “But in the morning I write very intelligent things.”

Dinner consisted of traditional Neapolitan food: lightly fried arancini with tomato sauce, followed by a savory pie. We ate around a coffee table instead of at her formal dining table, which is more frequently used for laying out her larger works of art. Ducrot keeps it covered with a canvas tablecloth that she has painted with red and white stripes; rather than cleaning it when it gets dirty, she simply adds another layer of paint.



"Wrong window. I'm a sea lion. You need an otter."
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

The meal was the first of several that I shared with her that week. One visitor after another came by, creating an ever-evolving salon. I met her sons, both of whom live in Rome; her older brother, Paolo, who is ninety-

six, and still walks to her apartment from his home near the Piazza Navona (their younger sister, Schatzy, who is ninety-one, lives in Naples); two of Ducrot's four grandchildren; a tax-law adviser and friend of more than thirty years, who travelled with the Ducrots multiple times; and a new art-dealer friend whom Ducrot had warmly absorbed into her circle. All were greeted with porcelain cups of scented tea or chilled champagne in pretty colored glasses.

We also spent many hours alone, during which Ducrot was irreverent, confiding, and emotional, our conversation interrupted only by the occasional wailing of one of her cats, Evita—a diminutive, ancient creature who stiffly roamed the apartment as if lost. “She is the same age as me,” Ducrot said, in a low voice. The cat sometimes unleashed a penetrating yowl that reminded Ducrot of her husband’s final days. “He approached death furiously,” she said. Having witnessed that, she was bracing for similar anguish herself. “I will be more near to Vicky,” she said, explaining that she didn’t mean this in a supernatural way—although she was devoutly Catholic in her girlhood, she no longer believes in an afterlife. She meant that, after a long life with Vicky, she would feel a fitting sympathy with him at the end. “Love is *productivo*—love produces love,” she said.

It became clear that although Ducrot’s late-arriving fame has gratified her, it is also, in a way, meaningless. Adam Weinberg, a former director of the Whitney Museum, is planning a big exhibition of her work at the Madre, a museum of contemporary art in Naples, in collaboration with the Madre’s director, Eva Fabbris. This home-town retrospective—the honor of a lifetime for a younger artist—is scheduled for 2026, and is therefore not something that it makes sense for Ducrot to anticipate. “It is too far away,” she told me. Her words reminded me of the final paragraph in “Women’s Life,” a slim memoir that she published in 2021, which I had just reread on the flight to Rome:

At this stage of life, you can no longer lie. You cannot help but say things that are true. . . . Why the etiquette of silence, the prudence of propriety? You must howl if you seek propriety, consistency and accuracy. Let the truth be sobbed out. Gentle has my time been flowing, whispering to me without malice, “There is no tomorrow, there is no tomorrow.”

When I reminded her of this passage, she said, “It’s very true. Yesterday, I said, ‘I hope that Rebecca is coming before I die.’ This is very logical! I live in a kind of metaphysical way. I am already in another *dimensione*.”

Ducrot grew up in Montedidio, a graceful district of Naples that is the site of the city’s ancient Greek settlement, in an apartment on an upper floor of a palazzo whose hereditary owner, the Principe Gerace, was a client of Ducrot’s father, a lawyer named Nino Mosca. Her mother, Maria Luisa Giordano, was descended from a noble but much reduced family. (It is family lore that when Ducrot’s parents met, in Capri in the nineteen-twenties, her mother may have been working as a courtesan.) Her father’s legal practice didn’t make the family rich, but they nonetheless inhabited bourgeois circles in Naples. Ducrot told me that although the city maintained “medieval” social norms in her youth, with young women requiring a male escort merely to venture outside, “people were fascinated by my mother, because she dressed in a way that was very elegant and very free.” In an act as spontaneous as Ducrot’s own work with textiles, her mother would fashion dresses for Ducrot and her sister by pinning together curtains.

Naples was heavily bombed during the Second World War, and the family left for the relative safety of Sorrento, a seaside retreat along the Bay of Naples, where they occupied the servants’ quarters of a villa belonging to an exiled Russian princess. In the evenings, Ducrot and her mother would have tea with the princess on the terrace and gaze at the city across the bay. “I remember my mother saying, ‘I see a fire—perhaps it is near our house,’ ” Ducrot said. “And our house *was* bombed, and we lost it.” When they returned, after the war, only one corner of the Palazzo Gerace remained standing, its ornate doorways splintered and its windows blown out. “My father asked the Principe, ‘Can I live here with my family?,’ and he said yes,” Ducrot recalled. “*Nobody* would think to live that way.” The family inhabited the ruin “as if it were the Palazzo Doria”; her mother created a bathroom in what had once been the library.

Ducrot was expected to make a suitable marriage upon graduating from high school. Paolo, her brother, told me, “Everybody looked for her at the beginning of parties and dances—she was known as one of the great beauties of Naples.” But when Ducrot was around seventeen, and having an aperitif at the Excelsior hotel, she began coughing up blood. “My mouth was

invaded by warm liquid,” she writes in “Twenty-two Places of the Soul.” “I was able to slip into the next-door bathroom, let that unstoppable hot, flowing matter flop into the sink.” It was tuberculosis—an unspeakable disease in Naples, which had been blighted by the plague in the seventeenth century. Ducrot, fearful of being considered tainted, concealed her condition. Every two weeks, she sneaked off for a treatment that involved injecting oxygen via a syringe into her rib cage. It took fifteen years before she was declared cured.



A work from the series “*Bella Terra*.” Ducrot, in her ripe ebullience, seems to have leapt directly into a late-Matisse phase—full of color and shorn of fuss. Art work © Isabella Ducrot / Courtesy the artist / Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; Photograph by Giorgio Benni

Ducrot was around thirty when she fled the confines of Naples for the freedom of Rome, where “nobody knew anything about me.” (She still relishes the capital’s relative anonymity: “In this palazzo, I know about ten people. I *never* run into them. For me, it’s fantastic.”) She worked as a receptionist at I.B.M., at an office on the exclusive Via Veneto, and fell in with a group of intellectuals that overlapped with the likes of the novelist Alberto Moravia and the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. “They were very chic, very elegant, and very leftist,” she said. “I was not on the right *or* the left—I was nothing. But I was happy with them.” It was the era of Fellini’s “*La Dolce Vita*,” and the women of Rome, married or otherwise, were bolder than those Ducrot had known in Naples. At least at first, she told me, “I was *not* a free woman. I did not have lovers.” When she finally

became involved with a man, a leftist editor, she asked him one day to drive her to church so that she could confess her sins. Ducrot didn't have money to spare, and was of necessity resourceful. When she was invited to a dance at the Palazzo Farnese, one of Rome's grandest palaces, she improvised a dress from a length of fabric, just as her mother had done with curtains.

Vicky, who was working for the airline KLM, not far from Isabella's office, began courting her. Vicky was also from the south of Italy—Palermo, in his case—but he was wealthy: his family owned a furniture company that made fittings for top hotels and luxury transatlantic liners. One day, Isabella joined him, his sister, Sandra, and several of their friends for a walk in the countryside. A man who had brought along his toddler son was flummoxed when the child soiled his pants and began to cry. Isabella swept the boy into her arms, hitched up her skirt, and waded into a nearby pond, washing him clean until he began laughing. Sandra, now a ceramicist who lives in Paris, told me, “She looked like a goddess, and she did the right thing, and so naturally. Vicky was looking at her, too. And I said, ‘You ought to marry this woman.’ ”

A few months later, Vicky proposed. “I was not in love, but I needed to be protected,” Ducrot recalled, adding that he promised her, “You can cry in my arms.” She told me, “This was really what I wanted. He didn't say, ‘You are the best, you are a queen.’ He said, ‘You *are*. And it's my joy.’ ” Her life changed dramatically, in scope and in resources. Vicky's mother gave the newlyweds an apartment in Trastevere, a bohemian neighborhood in Rome, as a wedding gift, and took Ducrot shopping for couture in Paris and for jewels at Bulgari. Sixteen months after the couple's wedding, Enrico was born, with Giuseppe arriving eighteen months after that.

Soon after Ducrot married Vicky, she showed him some autobiographical short stories that she had written, and textile designs that she had drawn. He was kindly but dismissive, she told me, and Ducrot set such projects aside for decades. “I was not offended,” she told me. “He had the feeling that he was protecting me. It was his way to show love.” Instead, she devoted herself to creating a gracious home and to sparking enthusiasms in Vicky, a serial autodidact. She recalled, “Once, I was alone in Florence, and I saw a small Baroque painting, and I called and said, ‘Vicky, I saw a beautiful, interesting painting,’ and he said, ‘Don't buy it, we don't need a Baroque

painting.’’ She bought it anyway, and he went on to acquire more than forty others, and to verse himself deeply in that period of art. Vicky’s introduction to a published catalogue of the Ducrot collection begins with a bracing confession: “To collect, and this can be applied to all kinds of collecting, whether match boxes, playing cards, narwhal teeth or pipes, implies a desire to own and accumulate property, and ultimately is an expression of egotism and vanity.”

Vicky was conservative in his politics, but in other ways he was more permissive than many Italian husbands. “He loved me, and he let me do what I wanted,” Ducrot told me. When she wanted to ride a bicycle around Rome, he told her that it was unsafe, but he turned a blind eye when it became her preferred mode of transportation. Marriage gave Ducrot both security and freedom. “I remember that I thought, Now that I am married, I can fall in love with other people,” she said. “It was very practical.” Once Ducrot entered élite Roman society, she found herself surrounded by other men of intelligence and cultivation. Her marriage was long and successful, but she told me that when her friends wax sentimental about how much she and Vicky must have loved each other she cuts them off—they are missing the point. “I always say, ‘Vicky gave me, for sixty years, every day, something to *eat*.’”

Throughout the Ducrots’ marriage, they spent weeks at a stretch travelling. Isabella estimates that she has been to India sixty times, and also to numerous places now essentially off limits to tourists, including Syria. In Afghanistan, she visited the imperial hilltop retreat of Istalif—“Positano-on-Hindu-Kush,” Vicky once described it in a photo album—and the Buddhas of Bamiyan, whose sandstone robes looked to Isabella “like vortices of lines.” (The Taliban destroyed the Buddhas in 2001.) During these expeditions, it fell to Isabella to insure that tour-group members were satisfied with their hotel rooms, and to supply whiskey sours after a long day of sightseeing. In the course of her travels, she said, “I learned many things, and I developed my sensibility.”

Enrico and Giuseppe occasionally came on these trips, but more typically they were left behind with babysitters. Ducrot told me that she enjoyed her children, but also cherished her life apart from them. “The reality is that I preferred to be with my friends than with them,” she explained. “It was not

my maximum amusement to be with them.” If someone wonders aloud to her if the embrace in a “Tenderesses” painting represents a mother and a child, she quickly disabuses them. She told me, “I always thought that Proust, when the mother went after giving him the good-night kiss, cried *not* because he was so sad that the mother left but because he understood that she was preparing to amuse herself with much more interesting people than himself.”

Among her close friends was Patrizia Cavalli, the poet, who died two years ago. Cavalli once composed a poem for Ducrot titled, in English, “To Weave Is Human,” in which the warp is personified as male and the weft as female. (“She meets him just to leave him, / and leaving him she meets him; / he suffers her, he’s blameless, / and stands firm in his place.”) Tatiana Franchetti, the wife of Cy Twombly and an artist herself, who died in 2010, was the first person to encourage Ducrot to resume a creative life. The very first painting Ducrot made, in the eighties—which, with a few strokes of ink on Chinese paper, depicts two reclining lovers—hangs in her living room. Another female friend who encouraged Ducrot’s nascent vocation was Cristina Bomba, a clothing designer and the owner of a boutique near the Piazza del Popolo. Bomba told me that she was visiting Ducrot’s home to peruse her textile collection when she saw a patchwork children’s blanket that Ducrot had crafted. “I couldn’t sleep that night because I was thinking about this blanket,” she recalled. “Every little piece of fabric was so beautiful, and I was saying to myself, ‘My God, she’s so good, she’s a genius.’ ” Bomba gave Ducrot one of her first artistic commissions: to fabricate a screen for her boutique. The object, for which Ducrot patched scraps of silk and rough linen into abstract geometries, remains in service. “She started to do exhibitions in Italy, but it was very difficult for years,” Bomba went on. “In Italy, you have to be poor and unhappy to be an artist. But she was beautiful, and she was one of the luckiest people in Rome, because she had everything she wanted—so people didn’t believe in her as an artist.”



A work from the "Tendernesses" series. Art work © Isabella Ducrot / Courtesy the artist / Galerie Gisela Capitain, Cologne; Photograph by Giorgio Benni

Ducrot's studio is a bright, high-ceilinged space behind a door that opens onto a colonnaded courtyard. All day long, visitors to the Doria Pamphilj gallery, which is open to the public, walk past it unaware. When I visited the studio, a half-completed "Tendernesses" painting, on Japanese *gampi* paper, lay on the studio's floor. The breasts of a female figure were exposed; a male figure had a peacock-like crest. Her studio assistant of twenty years, Veronica Della Porta, had added a black-and-white checkered background. For the next stage, Ducrot was filling the outlines of the figures with brilliant color: pea green for the woman's skirt and carmine for the man's lanky legs, as though he were wearing the hose of a medieval jester. "Little by little, we go on," Ducrot told me. "And the tenderness comes out." On a worktable lay a smaller painting that looked closer to completion: on paper washed in rose-pink pigment, Ducrot had drawn a couple in a snatched embrace, one with yellow cascading hair, the other with turquoise fronds that radiated outward.

Elsewhere in the studio, cabinets were filled with textiles folded like stacks of laundry. In addition to using scraps from her collection, Ducrot sometimes affixes larger, garment-size pieces to a background, creating imposing shapes suggestive of kimonos or of a sultan's robes. Nora Iosia, Ducrot's studio manager, who has worked with her since 1996, unfolded one such work, which was taller than her. Two pieces of blue-and-white striped Japanese cotton had been placed in bold juxtaposition. Iosia told me that it

had taken time for Ducrot to become comfortable with such experiments. “When I met Isabella, she was very fragile and insecure,” she said. At the time, Iosia herself had recently graduated from college, with a degree in literature and philosophy; her mother, a curator, was familiar with Ducrot and her work. “My mother told me, ‘Isabella is an incredible artist, but don’t ask her to speak, because she doesn’t know the language.’ She needed to find the words.” Until Gisela Capitain, the Cologne gallerist, visited the studio with her director, Regina Fiorito, more than three decades after Ducrot began painting, “nothing happened at all” for her outside of Italy, Iosia said. “Isabella was full of power, and full of desire, and yet *nothing*. It was a kind of waiting for something.”

Ducrot had been a reader since her late teens, when her illness made it impossible for her to do much more than rest at home with a book. In her sixties, she began to study philosophy in earnest, taking classes at the Pontifical Gregorian University, in Rome, and working privately with scholars. With Emanuele Dattilo, she spent long hours discussing Simone Martini, the Sienese artist who inspired her exploration of humble checkered cloth. “I appreciate Isabella’s study method first and foremost,” Dattilo told me. “It is the method of losing herself—exposing herself to a radical *not understanding*, and moving forward with courage. Her study of philosophy is of this kind—getting into it and then seeing what effect certain ideas or certain words have on her, above all emotionally.” Dattilo went on, “What is hidden attracts her, but above all I think what attracts her is a kind of reversal of roles. . . . She continually wants to reverse high and low.”

Ducrot’s work shows a particular interest in ordinary woven materials—the kind, she has written, that are “used to protect, wrap, wash and rub the bodies of new-born babies, of women giving birth, of the elderly, of the sick.” Her inclusion of such fabrics in her art rejects the low esteem in which they are typically held, revealing their inherent dignity. Similarly, in “Women’s Life,” she writes of finally considering “the endemic ignorance that had tormented me for so many years not as a source of shame but instead as an advantage.” That shame had made it difficult for Ducrot to take herself seriously, not just as an artist but as a person. For too long, she looked to others to tell her who she was. “I think life, for women, begins at sixty,” she told me. “Because then we begin to be free.”

The last day that I spent in Rome, I left Ducrot's apartment after we shared a lunch of pink-skinned grilled rouget, sprinkled with herbs, and eggplant that had been reduced in the oven to a deliciously sticky tar. Afterward, she wanted to take a nap, as she does most afternoons; tucked into a corner of her study is a monastic single bed, alongside which hangs a Baciccio painting of Christ as Salvator Mundi—the arrangement resembling the bedchamber of a priest, or perhaps even a Pope. When I returned, a few hours later, Ducrot admitted that she had not slept after all, but instead had sifted through old letters. She had found one from a man she had been deeply in love with during her Naples youth. This man, named Antonello, had come up many times in our conversation, flashing into view like the checkered lining on a cloak worn by an annunciating angel. He had rejected her, she had told me, and it had been a torment.

Antonello had written the letter she was holding when he was in his early twenties and she was eighteen. "It says how desperate he was, because I wanted to leave *him*," she explained. "I had forgotten completely! I remembered that I loved him—that's all." The letter, which ran to several typed pages, subverted the narrative that Ducrot had long told herself about having been spurned. "In that moment, he really loved me," she said, with fresh wonderment. "And I have loved him for years and *years*. So I forgot that he could have loved me." The fabric of her old story was coming apart in her hands.

The discovery felt transformative, Ducrot said. "You came at a moment of my life when there is not so much more to say, and not so much more to feel," she noted. "So, every day from tomorrow, I cannot say another life begins—no, certainly not. But, in a way, perhaps another *meaning* of the life is beginning." Earlier, she had wanted to assure me of how unpredictable a very long life might be; although I told her I'd been happily married for twenty years, she observed, "We don't know what we are going to do in life. Perhaps you will become a dancer, or leave your family, or go off with a man from South Africa"—not exactly conventional wisdom from an elder. Now, she told me, she believed it was possible to fall in love even as one was dying. "I have always thought this—that you are dying in a kind of agony, and you fall in love," she said. "I'm sure it has happened."

The letter in her hand, written on the fragile paper of the past, was the material evidence not just of what she had experienced in her youth but of what was animating her at this moment—our intense, extended conversation. Being very old had heightened her sense of the present. “I am already in love with you!” she told me in greeting, on the first evening I visited. If Ducrot had wisdom to impart, it concerned the trembling imperative of living fully, even without a future. “I think a person of my age cannot *not* be interesting,” she said. “Because we are like prisoners in a jail, and we know that we are in the *braccio della morte*”—on death row. She went on, “This is true of everybody—good people, intelligent people, poor people, rich people. This is an experience, to be so old.”

Lately, Ducrot has developed a new practice in her work. She takes pages of writing by others, which have long been filed away in cupboards and drawers, and sews pieces of them onto the surface of paintings—not for their content, she told me, but because of the beauty of their now illegible calligraphy. In her hands, these texts were transformed from one thing into another, just like the textiles that she once gathered from far-off places. One of Ducrot’s newest works lay on the dining table during my visit, and one morning I snapped a photograph of the painting on my phone. Only later did I take it in more fully: on a large fabric background, she had painted leaf-covered trees and an array of pots containing brightly colored, heavy-headed flowers. Tacked in the middle of the work was a cutout from a piece of paper on which tiny cursive letters had been written; the cutout was encircled by the branching arm of a tree. The leaves were heart-shaped and an autumnal brown, barely still attached to a branch—or perhaps no longer attached at all, but suspended in an ultimate moment of lightness before their fall. ♦

By Margaret Talbot
By Lauren Collins
By Doreen St. Félix
By Michael Schulman

Our Far-Flung Correspondents

A Cursed Ship and the Fate of Its Sunken Gold

In 1746, a vessel called the Prince de Conty foundered off the coast of France. How did its most valuable cargo end up in the hands of a semi-retired Florida couple?

By [Lauren Collins](#)



A kind of gold fever can take hold on digs and dives. "Gold sends people spinning out of control," one archeologist said. Illustration by Vincent Mahé

Nothing made Gay Courter happier than being on a ship. She and her husband, Phil, had travelled the world by everything from hydroplane to hot-air balloon, but something about the sea air and the rocking motion of the water gave her an unparalleled feeling of well-being. In late January of 2020, the Courters embarked on their twentieth cruise together—a two-week tour of Southeast Asia aboard a ship called the Diamond Princess. They began their adventure in Tokyo, where they dined on fugu, the occasionally fatal puffer fish. Gay had a tradition of giving every trip a name. She was calling this one Seventy-five and Still Alive. They assumed that they'd already survived the most harrowing bit.

The Courters live by the water in Crystal River, Florida. They have three children and eight grandchildren. They are semi-retired and own a production company that makes documentary and educational films. Phil builds things and plays the banjo. Gay writes. She is the author of eleven books, ranging from “The Beansprout Book,” which, according to her Wikipedia page, “introduced beansprouts to American supermarkets and the general public,” to “The Midwife,” a best-seller in 1982. Her most recent novel, published in 2019, is set on a cruise ship. According to its promotional material, the book juxtaposes “the sumptuousness of a dream vacation with the horrors that lurk around the bend.”

The Courters have a story for everything. The time they first met, when Phil interviewed at the company where Gay worked. (“He moved in before he even began the job, and we’ve never had a date.”) The time they flew a small plane to their son’s graduation and crashed in a field, provoking an epiphany that led them to adopt their daughter at the age of twelve. The time they got invited to the White House. The time they vacationed with a future serial killer. Gay’s kids call her No-Filter Mom. Get her talking about her childhood—she lived in Japan when she was six, by the way—and she’ll mention that her father once bought an aircraft carrier. “Easy to find under ‘Leonard Weisman’ and ‘U.S.S. Attu,’ ” she told me. One of the first things that comes up when you Google these terms is an article identifying Weisman as a likely member of the Sonneborn Institute, a group of arms smugglers. If Forrest Gump, appearing on the margins of various historical events, were a family, he might be the Courters. Except that the Courters’ stories, however outlandish, tend to be true.

February 2, 2020, was supposed to be their second-to-last day aboard the Diamond Princess. At breakfast, Gay ordered the “famous James Beard French toast,” which she’d been looking forward to the entire vacation. Later, she crushed the trivia contest, leading her team to victory by answering that the largest Japanese population outside Japan can be found in Brazil. She hadn’t yet worked up the nerve to ask for a souvenir photo with Gennaro Arma, the ship’s “devilishly handsome” captain, not wanting to seem like “a dotty old lady.” Still, the couple deemed the trip a success before heading off to see “Bravo!,” widely agreed to be the best show on the cruise.

That evening, as the Courters were packing their suitcases, the ship's intercom crackled on, filling their stateroom with Captain Arma's voice. He announced that he had been notified by Hong Kong authorities that a passenger from the ship had tested positive for *COVID-19*. One of the Courters' friends had been forwarding them articles about the strange new sickness, but this was the first hint that something was amiss aboard the Diamond Princess. Japanese authorities, Arma said, would be conducting a review of the vessel when it docked in Yokohama. "I will keep you updated with the information on the evolution of the evolving situation," he promised, ominously.

The Diamond Princess was the site of a major early *COVID* outbreak and the first cruise ship to be quarantined during the pandemic. More than thirty-seven hundred passengers and crew members were stuck on board for two weeks as health authorities tried to figure out what to do. The Courters attempted to be cheerful. Gay got out her emergency snacks, including a tiny saltshaker that she carries everywhere, because you just never know. But things got scary fast. At one point, the World Health Organization announced that more than half of all confirmed *COVID* cases outside China were aboard the Diamond Princess.

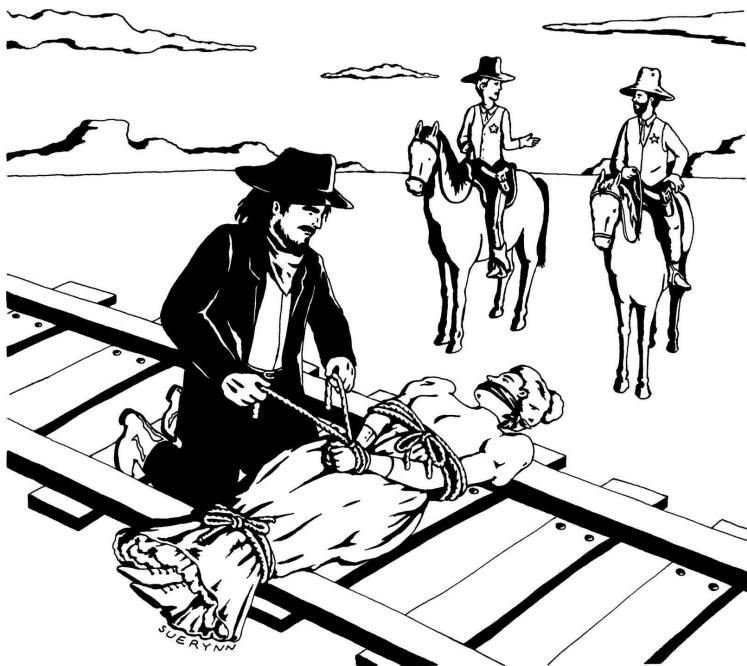
As the virus swept through the decks, the Courters emerged as minor celebrities, lobbying for evacuation in newspaper editorials and on cable news. "I don't think we're safe on this ship," Gay told ABC. "Frankly, it's really creepy. It's like prison camp." Eventually, more than seven hundred passengers contracted the virus, and at least fourteen people died. The Courters finally flew home on a cargo plane chartered by the State Department and were obliged to quarantine on a military base for another fortnight. Home in Florida at last, Gay set to work on a quarantine memoir. She wrote of the shock of being "a carefree cruiser one moment, then held hostage by a foreign government."

To compensate for the ordeal, Princess Cruises gave every passenger a credit to use for another trip. Some had had enough, and declined. But, two years later, in early June of 2022, the Courters flew to England, where they boarded the Island Princess for a two-week tour of Norway. It was a comparatively uneventful outing—glaciers, a fishing museum. Gay named the trip Pining for the Fjords, after a Monty Python sketch.

On June 29th, the Island Princess returned to port in England. That morning, the Courters told me, they received word that ship officials wanted to speak with them. They were asked to hand over their passports, and were escorted off the boat. On land, they were told that they were being arrested on European warrants, in connection with money laundering, organized crime, and the trafficking of cultural goods—gold bars from the Prince de Conty, a frigate that crashed off the coast of Brittany in 1746.

Gold is known as “the king of metals” for its scarcity, durability, and dazzling beauty. Even if it is no longer the most precious of native metals in purely financial terms (rhodium now takes that honor, thanks to the catalytic converter), gold retains its unparalleled primacy in the human psyche. Alchemists believed that they would unlock the secret to eternal life if they could turn lead into gold; imperialists slaughtered millions in pursuit of the substance. The golden calf, the golden fleece, the golden ratio, the golden hour, the golden goose—anything gold is profoundly desirable, sometimes driving its seekers to ruin or madness.

Freud thought that gold brought out something greedy in human nature, likening man’s fetish for it to that of a baby holding on to its shit. On digs and dives, a kind of gold fever can take hold. “Gold sends people spinning out of control,” one archeologist told me recently. The Prince de Conty wreck was perhaps especially susceptible to inspiring gold derangement: a persistent rumor holds that the ship and its treasure were cursed from the start. The legend’s power only deepened with the tribulations of a varied cast of sailors, speculators, divers, looters, and investigators who became obsessed with the ship’s treasure before the gold bars finally pulled the Courters into their thrall.



"But he's always been nice to us."
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

The Prince de Conty first set sail from Lorient on April 2, 1745. Its owner was the French East India Company, established under Louis XIV. The ship was designed to carry six hundred tons of cargo while remaining quick and maneuverable. Its crew of two hundred and twenty-three men included fourteen carpenters, five pilots, a butcher, a baker, a sailmaker, a writer, and a chaplain. Many were teen-agers. The youngest among them was twelve. The chief surgeon carried a trepanation kit, in case he needed to drain blood from someone's brain after a mid-voyage blow to the head.

From Lorient, the Prince travelled south along the western coast of Africa, passing between the Canary Islands and Cape Verde, then swung wide around the Cape of Good Hope before finally arriving, six months later, in the Chinese city of Canton, now called Guangzhou. Having set sail slightly too late in the season, the ship encountered monstrous storms, and lost several men. But a trade voyage was a long-term bet. A vessel like the Prince was the eighteenth-century equivalent of an Amazon truck, its delivery times calculated in years instead of days or hours. In Canton, stevedores loaded the boat with luxury goods: ivory fans, painted silks, wallpapers, porcelain, lacquerware, tea, rhubarb, sappanwood, and sarsaparilla root, prized for its efficacy in treating syphilis.

In the mid-eighteenth century, gold could be bought more cheaply in China than in Europe. Sailors were discouraged from doing side deals at foreign destinations, but the practice was widely tolerated, especially among the officer class, as a perk for having taken on a job that entailed mortal risk. “Everybody who set off on one of these boats did so with the goal of making a fortune,” Brigitte Nicolas, the director of the French East India Company Museum, near Lorient, told me. According to her, gold was “the secret merchandise” of the company’s missions to China, weighing heavily on minds and in pockets. For gentlemen smugglers, the most convenient format was the ingot. Some were shaped like shoes, others in rectangles that recall chocolate bars. Another type was known as “*pain*,” for its resemblance to a baguette. They were all small enough to fit in a palm, and heavy, weighing around thirteen ounces, a little more than a can of soup. One expert estimates that around a hundred ingots were aboard the Prince de Conty as it embarked on its return trip to France.

The homeward voyage was catastrophic. Scurvy set in; English pirates attacked; the ship’s captain, Charles Bréart de Boisanger, was gravely injured in combat. By the time they got close to France, they were “very, very banged-up people,” Nicolas said. On December 2, 1746, after twenty months at sea, the Prince and its crew were several nautical miles off the coast of Brittany, only hours away from completing their mission and returning to land.

Then, in the middle of the night, the wind picked up. Fog rolled in and the sea rose, tossing the Prince violently as rain lashed its threadbare sails. At around 4 A.M., the ship crashed into the rocky coast of Belle-Île-en-Mer, an island in Brittany. The impact was so great that the hull of the boat split in half. “It was a night in Hell,” Nicolas said. Fewer than seventy of the hundred and ninety men who had made it that far survived the wreck.

The French East India Company scrambled to recoup its losses, sending in a salvage team. “We’re pulling out wood and collecting it at the top of the cliff, but this wood is so broken that the majority of it will only serve as kindling,” an architect named Guillois, charged with leading the effort, wrote to the company. Villagers gathered flotsam, laying drenched silks out to dry on the rocks. Guillois warned that locals, “accustomed to pillage,”

might “descend during the night without being spotted,” so the company installed guards in a cliffside cabin to watch over the wreck day and night.

Officials brought in a boat to dredge the area, but the operation yielded little. Undeterred, they ordered a diving bell, the latest technology from Paris. Divers retrieved some copper pots, among other items, but the most valuable cargo remained elusive, save for what seems to have been a small stash of gold found by a twelve-year-old boy, which soon vanished from the site.

During a sea voyage, gold—even if it was illicit—was typically stored in crates like any other commodity. But Captain de Boisanger, exploiting a maritime custom that exempted officers from bodily searches, had decided to carry his ingots on his person, fashioning them into a kind of belt. Other officers presumably did likewise, complicating both their own escapes from the wreck and the company’s search effort. “The total quantity of gold that was on this vessel gives one occasion to think that, even if we don’t find it all, we should at least hope to recover some part,” Guillois wrote. So where, then, was it all? Had it sunk to the bottom of the ocean with the corpses of de Boisanger and his men, or had someone quietly made off with it in the aftermath of the wreck?

In the spring of 1974, Patrick Lizé’s tooth hurt. He went to see a dentist not far from the small Norman village where he lived. While being poked and prodded, Lizé, a swimming teacher, went on about his passion for marine archeology, particularly eighteenth-century shipwrecks. The dentist said that he ought to talk to his neighbor, who had just been diving in the Mediterranean for Greek and Roman relics.

The neighbor was an architect named Jean-Claude Lescure, and the two men bonded over their shared interest. Lizé mentioned that he’d been rummaging through dusty files in the National Archives, scoping out possible shipwrecks. He’d homed in on a promising candidate: the Prince de Conty, which, if he was right, was lying, forgotten and untouched for two centuries, off the coast of Belle-Île. Lizé had unearthed the Guillois report, which inventoried the Prince’s bounty. He also had a plan of the site—“a veritable treasure map, in short,” he later wrote, in a memoir. He and Lescure decided that they and their families would spend their holidays on Belle-Île that summer.

As its name suggests, Belle-Île is beautiful and isolated. The largest of Brittany's islands, it is only about ten miles long and five miles wide. The weather there, in Breton fashion, is infinitely changeable, the emerald seas and sapphire skies of one minute giving way, the next, to a horizonless gray murk. The island is said to have "two faces"—a northern coast with sandy beaches and a far more rugged southern one, with sheer cliffs and a wild, churning sea. The wind has whittled the island's rocks into surrealistic forms. Even in summer, it can blow hard enough that foam sprays over the clifftops, making it look like it's snowing. Claude Monet was so enchanted by Belle-Île that he painted some forty pictures there. He wrote that he felt "powerless to render the intensity" of the ocean.

Lizé and Lescure arrived on the island in August and travelled to the area indicated by the archival documents, a discreet cove known as Port Lost-Kah. (The name means "cat's tail" in Breton.) "We threw on our wetsuits with indescribable impatience, donned our equipment, and jumped into the history-charged water," Lizé later wrote. They dove for twenty-eight days and found nothing of interest. But Lizé was determined, searching, he wrote, "every hole, every fault, every crevice, every crack, lifting every stone." Finally, after nearly a month of failure, they cleared some algae and felt a bulge on the ocean floor: a cannonball! The discovery of some sappanwood and shards of porcelain confirmed that they were hot on the trail of the Prince.

Back home, they plotted a return to the island, this time with heavy machinery. Over a poolside dinner, they pitched the plan to Guy Lépinay, a local notary, who agreed to handle the logistics. "At the beginning, it was just for a laugh," Lépinay recalled, in his own book. "But I thought, Why not?" They pledged to split any eventual spoils three ways. "A desire for adventure was floating in the air," Lépinay wrote.

The group returned to Belle-Île with thermic compressors and a suction dredge. One afternoon, just as Lizé was approaching shore to quit for the day, he spotted a U-shaped metallic object on the ocean floor. It was encased in a hard black crust, but on one extremity he noticed "a little golden collar, neither the presence nor the nature of which I could explain." He took out his knife and shaved off a sliver. On land, he showed it to Lescure. They

agreed: solid gold. The men bought a canvas suitcase at the port, shoved the object inside, and hauled it back to Normandy.

French law requires anyone who discovers “any deposit, wreck, remnant, or item possessing prehistoric, archeological, or historical interest” in French waters to declare it to authorities within forty-eight hours. The rule is meant to insure that cultural property remains intact and accessible, rather than being hoarded away or sold off by profiteers. As Olivia Hulot, an official at France’s Department of Subaquatic and Submarine Archeological Research (*DRASSM*), recently explained, “You can’t just walk into the Louvre and take a painting off the wall because you like it.”

The encrusted object clearly qualified as cultural property, even more so when the treasure hunters cleaned it up, revealing that the shining chunk was actually an ingot stamped with Chinese ideograms. Later, Lizé and Lescure would say that they declared the Prince wreck to a local fisherman, who claimed to represent the maritime authority in Belle-Île. Lépinay says that his partners promised they’d taken care of the formalities, and he took them at their word. Whatever the case, no member of the group notified the relevant officials at *DRASSM* until more than two months later. The men dispute who was in favor of declaring all along and who resisted the idea; in fact, they disagree on almost everything about the whole affair. Lépinay told me that Lizé was “a perfect liar and crook.” Lizé insisted that he was the one who had been cheated, and said that he saw Lescure stuffing ingots into his wetsuit on one dive. “He was very, very naïve,” Lizé’s daughter, Emmanuelle, told me. “It’s a world of sharks—and my father didn’t protect himself.”

When Lizé finally did declare the Prince—behind the backs of his partners—he didn’t let on that he’d found gold, mentioning only “five entirely corroded cannons.” *DRASSM* granted him permission to bring up the cannons, and, in the summer of 1975, he returned to Belle-Île with a new team. According to witnesses, the site quickly degenerated into chaos. People came and went like wired kids at the end of a birthday party, swarming the innards of a piñata. One diver, recalling a “louche” atmosphere, said that he’d seen Lizé come out of the water with ingots on an earlier dive. The journalist Nicolas Jacquard wrote recently, in *Le Parisien*,

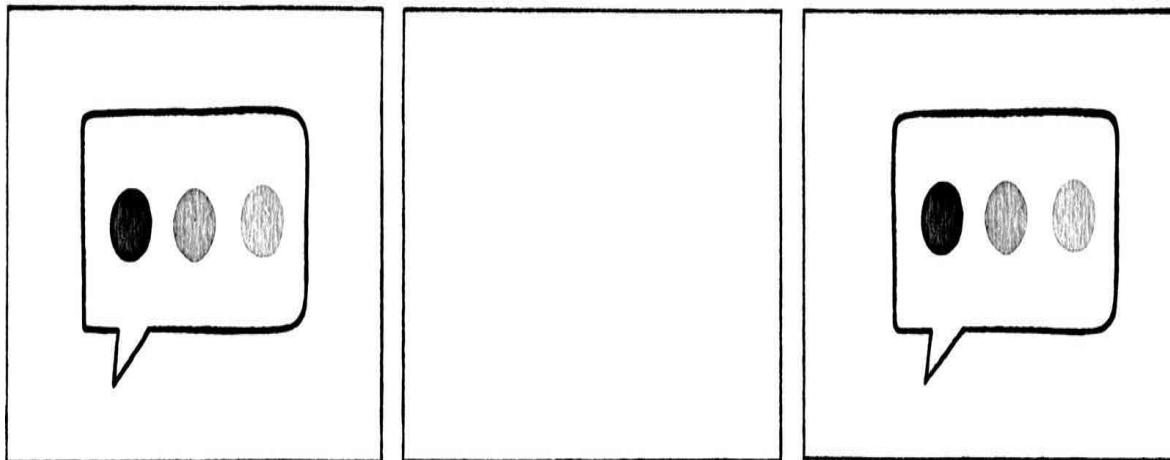
that Lizé and his associates “skin[ned] the remains of the Conty like a band of piranhas would clean a carcass.”

In the meantime, the Lescure family, also on holiday in Belle-Île, was keeping an eye on what Lizé and his new team were up to. Acting on a tip from Lescure, *DRASSM* raided the site and shut down the dive. Lescure’s son Francois, fifteen at the time, was looking on through binoculars from a clifftop as the authorities approached. “They had four black Zodiacs,” he recalled. “It was like a James Bond film.” As he stood there watching, he felt a hand on his back. “Suddenly, this thug arrived behind us,” he said. “He took me by the shoulders, and he said, ‘I’d like to throw you off this cliff.’ ”

Obsequious correspondence flew around the country as the opposing sides tried to persuade the authorities that they were law-abiding citizens who had been caught up in another’s shady scheme. “I now find myself in the position of a villain, when those who point the finger are incapable of raising the same finger to furnish proof with a similar vigor,” Lizé wrote in a pleading missive to the French President’s wife, Madame Giscard d’Estaing. He eventually became a renowned treasure hunter, discovering dozens more wrecks, but a shadow hovered over his reputation. “You understand that this situation is intolerable for the marine archeology devotee that I am,” he wrote to one official. “Who hasn’t committed an error in his life?”

The disputes revived the old notion that the Prince might be cursed. Connoisseurs of nautical arcana knew that, before the frigate that crashed into the rocks at Belle-Île, the French East India Company had owned another ship of the same name, lost off the coast of Louisiana, and that, in 1753, the firm had launched a third Prince, which fell into the hands of English pirates. Proponents of the curse theory pointed to centuries of death, injury, ruination, quarrels, and dreams dashed upon the rocks. Lépinay, reflecting on his own dramas involving the ship, wondered whether it “suffered from a macabre predestiny.” When Lescure died, in a car accident, in 1980, some people in his circle insisted that his proximity to the Prince was somehow to blame.

ANXIETY IN THREE ACTS



Cartoon by Jorge Penné

As rumors circulated—gold stuffed into briefcases, gold stashed in attics and car trunks, gold entrusted to elderly mothers—French prosecutors launched an investigation. They confiscated all manner of booty from the three partners and their various associates in a series of searches, but they were only ever able to recover two ingots. Dozens of names came up in the inquiry, but ultimately the authorities brought charges against just five people, including Lizé and Lépinay. After a trial, in 1983, Lizé was ordered to pay a fine of forty thousand francs for possession of stolen goods, while Lépinay and the others received lesser penalties.

Lizé was devastated by the judgment and its implication that he was a petty thief, rather than a brilliant scholar. “He was humiliated for a little administrative fault,” his daughter said. Lépinay, on the other hand, hardly gave the affair a second thought, considering it “*pipi de sansonnet*”—“starling pee,” or small beans. Both men assumed that the matter was effectively closed.

In the beginning of 1981, excitement swept into western Florida. “French Sailing Family Visits Crystal River,” the *Suncoast Sentinel* announced, introducing Gérard and Annette Pesty and their children, Sylviane (four) and Eric (eight months). They had just arrived on their fifty-five-foot trimaran, the Architeuthis. Gérard was a pharmacist by training, and Annette a

laboratory research assistant. The couple had decided to “cut loose,” the article explained, sailing around the world and recording their experience in books and documentaries. They were now touring North America, having come down to Florida from Canada, via the Mississippi, “to see the manatees—which they pronounce ‘man-atty.’”

Gay recalled, “Once we saw the story about this French couple with similar interests and kids roughly the ages of our kids, we thought, Well, we ought to go meet these people.” One day, the Courters got in their motorboat and zipped out to the middle of the bay, where the Architeuthis was anchored. There they were: Annette with the baby on her back, lifting the anchor; Sylviane doing gymnastics on the rigging; Gérard, streaked with oil and grease, fiddling with the engine compartment. The family struck the Courters as embodying the kind of life they were striving to create—rich in experiences and self-sufficient, but open to the world. “Annette washed diapers, and they were strung on a line,” Gay said. “I was in awe.”

The friendship quickly deepened. By 1984, the families were vacationing together near Great Inagua, an island in the Bahamas known for its flamingos. The Pestys spent summers in France, running their pharmacy, so that they could travel the rest of the year. They often left the Architeuthis in Crystal River, where the Courters took care of the boat and handled various practical matters on their behalf. “It was all very loose and based on trust,” Gay told me.

The Courters speak fondly of this era of “young families doing pretty crazy things”—swimming with humpback whales, flying single-engine planes, “sharing our dreams, problems, children.” One picture from the time shows two sun-kissed, bare-chested kids perched on the crosstrees of a towering mast, with another little boy scrambling to the peak. When the Courters’ cat had kittens, they gave one to the Pestys. “We became their American family, and vice versa,” Gay said. “The connection was deeper than Phil or I have with even our siblings.”

One day in 1986, Gérard Pesty made an impromptu appearance in Crystal River. “He walks in and pops open this briefcase full of gold, and we’re, like, ‘Oh, my God,’ ” Phil remembered. According to the Courters, Pesty had around twenty ingots. He said that they had come from a French

shipwreck and, later, that his sister and brother-in-law, Brigitte and Yves Gladu, a renowned underwater photographer, had found them while diving in Brittany. Pesty's story was a little vague, but Gay and Phil were more amused than anything. "Gérard was a crazy guy with so many irons in the fire," Gay said. Pesty took the ingots out of the briefcase and showed them to the kids. "They were playing with them like Legos," Gay told me. "Honestly, we thought it was cool."

It was an opportune moment to unload a cache of gold. Several months earlier, Christie's had auctioned off treasure salvaged from the Geldermalsen, a Dutch ship that wrecked off the coast of Indonesia in 1752. The so-called Nanking Cargo fetched record prices—nearly forty-three thousand dollars for a "fish dish," eighty thousand for the kind of rare, shoe-shaped ingot that sank with the Prince. Pesty told the Courters that the sale's success had motivated the Gladus to sell their gold. He'd been in Miami, he said, to meet with a rare-coin dealer; before that, he'd visited London, where he had sold three ingots to the British Museum. He asked the Courters if they'd be willing to hold on to the gold while he was in France, since he was hoping to find an American buyer.

If this wasn't a typical day in the Courier household, neither was it totally anomalous. (Ashley Rhodes-Courter, the Courters' adopted daughter, recalls spending her first holiday with the family in the company of a dozen Chinese railroad engineers whom Phil and Gay had invited over for Thanksgiving.) "We did ask a few questions," Phil said. The Courters talked to a customs agent, who confirmed that the antique gold wasn't subject to import duties. On a trip to New York to meet with her literary agent, Gay stuffed an ingot in her purse and went to see an expert at the American Numismatic Society, who vouched for its authenticity. "Our thinking was, Jeez, the British Museum's buying it, so it must be legit," Phil said.

The Courters unscrewed a light fixture and, for a while, hid the ingots in their ceiling. Eventually, they moved them to a safe-deposit box. When Gérard Pesty and Yves Gladu opened American bank accounts, Phil served as a signatory. Every year, he says, he made sure that his friends filled out their tax forms and filed them with the I.R.S.

In 1997, the Courters' younger son joined the Pestys on a trip to Île-à-Vache, an island off the coast of Haiti. Toward the end of the trip, Gérard suddenly became very sick. He was at an airport, trying to catch a flight to somewhere with a better medical facility, when he collapsed into his son's lap and died. Annette had a high fever, and her skin was turning yellow. Someone called the Courters and told them what was happening.

“*Falciparum* malaria!” Gay exclaimed—the deadliest form of the parasite in humans. The Courters managed to have Annette airlifted to Gainesville. “By the time we arrived at the hospital, I was obsessed, hysterical, and screaming, but they listened,” Gay said. After Gérard’s death, the families remained close. The Courters travelled all over the world with Annette and the Gladus, who now had a big boat of their own. Annette started telling people that she was alive only because of the Courters.

By the time Michel L’Hour laid eyes on the Prince de Conty, he had been thinking about the ship for several years. In 1983, as a new recruit at DRASSM, he had testified at Lizé and Lépinay’s trial, trying to explain that shipwrecks were “essential witnesses to the story of humanity, pages of our collective history that deserve to be studied.” The experience left him frustrated. “The trial was very bizarre,” he recalled. “Nobody seemed to give a damn.” Then, in the summer of 1985, L’Hour was tasked with leading one of his first major dives, at the site of the Prince.

At the time, DRASSM was a young organization with scant resources. L’Hour and a colleague camped out on the side of the Lost-Kah cliff, sharing a tent. They didn’t have the budget for heavy machinery, but L’Hour was so determined to succeed that he invited Lizé to the dive, figuring that, despite his conviction, “at the end of the day, he knew the site best.” (Emmanuelle Lizé calls L’Hour a “venal and pretentious” hypocrite, who treated her father as a criminal while capitalizing on his work.) For two weeks, it rained every day. The wind whipped the water so relentlessly that L’Hour’s team might as well have been diving inside a washing machine. It was impossible to anchor a boat, so when their scuba tanks ran out of air they hiked up the slippery cliff in their dive boots, refilled the tanks, and hiked back down.

The site had already been explored—by Guillois, in the seventeen-forties, and by Lizé, in the nineteen-seventies—but L’Hour and his team managed to

salvage some historically valuable items. He was particularly moved by a modest crucifix, which, he wrote, “can only recall to what extent maritime voyages were exposed to dangers that many could confront only by faith.” The team found three ingots—not nothing, but not the breakthrough they had dreamed of. For all his distaste for the “frenetic quest for gold,” even L’Hour, taking the ingots into his hands for the first time, felt a certain magic. He recalled, “It’s crazy, you feel like nothing happened, like no time elapsed, between the guy who touched them in Canton in 1745 and me, holding them now.” In the third week, a major storm hit, sending the team’s Zodiac into the rocks and breaking its propeller, which put an end to the operation.

L’Hour was already one of the world’s leading experts on the Prince, but now the ship became a personal obsession. He nurtured contacts in the treasure-hunting community, developing a reputation as someone who could be trusted with sensitive information. Born in Tunisia, where his father built roads for the French colonial government, he’d been a brainy, taciturn child. “You’re a chatterbox and a lockbox at the same time,” his mother sometimes said. L’Hour leveraged this dual nature in service of the Prince, transforming himself into “a sort of computer,” eliciting bits of gossip and speculation in a seemingly casual manner and then filing them away without a word. “I always had the Prince in mind, but I didn’t talk about it, even if I went back from time to time to dive there, to keep an eye on things,” L’Hour told me. He followed every lead, no matter how far-fetched.

At one point, he received an anonymous phone call asking for a meeting in Paris. L’Hour arrived at a grand café at the appointed hour, where he was greeted by a man who claimed to possess a number of gold ingots purchased from someone who had pillaged the Prince. L’Hour considered himself a pragmatist and hoped that he might broker some kind of deal. But when he reported the availability of the gold to his superiors they told him that a negotiation for the ingots was out of the question. “O.K., we don’t negotiate with terrorists, but the hostage is dead,” L’Hour said recently, still annoyed at the “egghead Parisian” brass. The man walked out of the café, and L’Hour never saw him again.

One day, a source gave L’Hour an intriguing photograph. It showed roughly twenty gold bars strewn across the ocean floor, a few of them nestled

between the legs of rust-colored starfish. “That photo gave me proof of something that I’d known for a long time, which was that at least one person who’d pillaged the site in the seventies hadn’t got caught with his hand in the bag,” L’Hour recalled. For the moment, he couldn’t use the photograph without exposing his source. “But I knew it would come in handy someday,” he said. He put it away in a safe, taking care to lock his office door every day when he went to lunch.

In the course of his forty-year career, L’Hour became a storied figure in marine archeology—“Indiana Jones in a wetsuit,” per one sobriquet. In 2006, he became the director of *DRASSM*. He travelled the planet, excavating wrecks from Gabon to the Philippines, but he never stopped following the Prince. One day in 2017, he received an e-mail from an old contact containing a link to the site of a California auction house called Stephen Album Rare Coins. Alongside Transylvanian ducats and Tibetan srangs, the house was offering five gold ingots—four baguettes and one chocolate bar, estimated to sell for between twenty-two and thirty thousand dollars each. “Nearly identical to the bars from the wrecks of the French East India Company vessel Prince de Conty, and to the Dutch East-Indiaman Geldermalsen,” the catalogue copy read.

L’Hour could not believe what he was seeing. “It was kind of a Christmas present,” he said. The listing even included a link to a 1999 episode of “Antiques Roadshow,” featuring an elegant woman in a gold-buttoned cardigan. She had come with some old porcelain and a pair of gold bars, which she claimed to have found near the Cape Verde Islands, some hundred feet underwater. The program had been shot in Florida. L’Hour detected an accent. “She spoke very good English, but I said to myself, ‘She’s French,’ ” he told me. The woman seemed slightly ill at ease, tossing her head as she spoke, but it was impossible to tell whether her awkwardness stemmed from anxiety at appearing on television, or from speaking in a second language, or from something more profound.

The woman had a photograph to illustrate her presentation. There it sat, propped on a little easel: a print featuring roughly twenty gold bars and a rust-colored starfish, identical to the photograph that L’Hour had stashed in a safe years before. “I was, like, *Putain*, there it is!” L’Hour recalled. He had a strong hunch that the woman was lying about the provenance of the gold, so

he decided to see if a biologist could identify the starfish. The word came back: the species could be found in shallow waters, such as those at the Prince de Conty site, but not in waters as deep as those the woman had described.

L'Hour was sure that the ingots had been obtained illegally, but he didn't recognize the woman. He began going through his old lists of suspects. During the investigation in the nineteen-eighties, police had seized a number of items, including photographs, from Yves Gladu. He had joined Lizé's dive team as an underwater photographer, and his name had come up repeatedly in L'Hour's inquiries over the years, but no one had ever been able to connect him definitively with the plunder of the Prince. L'Hour pulled up the Gladu family's Facebook profiles and discovered that the woman in the television clip was Annette Pesty—the widow of Brigitte Gladu's brother, and the Courters' dear friend.

By now, L'Hour had been tracking the ingots for thirty-five years. A kind of Javert of the Prince de Conty, he had dedicated a lifetime to retrieving the gold bars from oblivion and to protecting the wreck. As late as 2009, he had warned an admiral that the site, "again the victim of systematic pillages," was being seriously harmed "by clandestine acts that seem to me never to have ceased." This was the break he'd been waiting for. He dialled a colleague at the Ministry of Culture and urged him to alert the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Following their arrest in England, the Courters were taken to London for a preliminary hearing. Asked if they would accept extradition to France, they refused. They were granted bail of a thousand pounds each, but they didn't have the cash on hand, nor were they allowed to visit an A.T.M., so they were sent to prison—Gay to Bronzefield and Phil to Wandsworth. Gay, a diabetic, went for hours without food or her medication. Phil was strip-searched.



Cartoon by Sam Gross

In their cells, they tried to grasp the contours of their predicament. They had known that French law enforcement was investigating the provenance of the gold bars, and they had received questions from French authorities via a U.S. Attorney. But they had been assured by their longtime lawyers that they had done nothing illegal. They were advised to only answer questions in exchange for immunity, since the gold wasn't theirs and there was little France could do about it, anyway. They were unaware that a French judge had issued warrants for their arrest and extradition in connection with the trafficking of "national treasure belonging to France." Gay's warrant identified her as the "owner of a King Charles Spaniel" and, rather cruelly, described her as of "great corpulence."

Gay had volunteered as a guardian ad litem in the Florida courts for twenty-five years, and she was terrified by the prospect of extradition to France, fearing that she and Phil would never be able to defend themselves in an unfamiliar legal system in a language they don't speak. "I decided that suicide was the best option if it came to that," she told me. "I think that's the only secret I ever kept from Phil." When their bail came through, they were released from prison, and took an Uber to Cambridge.

The Courters arrived at a house owned by Suzanne and John Curran. "We'd met twenty years earlier on a home exchange," Suzanne recalled. "Then we

sort of kept in vague touch on and off, like you do—Christmas cards and things.” Before their Norwegian cruise, the Courters had stopped by Cambridge for afternoon tea with the Currans. Suzanne said, “We waved them off, and, personally, I thought it was probably the last time we’d see them.” Now the Courters, “completely and utterly shell-shocked,” had become their involuntary house guests for the indefinite future.

For months, the Courters remained in limbo. They accumulated lawyers, eventually racking up more than six hundred thousand dollars in legal fees and living costs, even though they had yet to be charged with any crime. “The injustices of the European warrant system are notorious,” the extradition lawyer Edward Fitzgerald, who represents Julian Assange and briefly worked on the Courters’ case, told me, explaining that France is not required to show evidence in order to request extradition from the U.K., and that a mere accusation of criminal activity can suffice. “The French judge’s decision to issue a warrant was particularly unfair in their case,” he added. (French authorities declined to comment on the case.) The Courters depleted their savings and had to borrow money from friends. That August, they missed the birth of their newest grandson. By October, they had been stuck in England for nearly a hundred days. “They were hollow shells of the people I knew,” their daughter told me.

One day, looking for distraction, Gay and Phil visited the Fitzwilliam Museum. Practically the first thing they saw when they walked into the gallery was Monet’s 1886 painting of a lion-shaped rock on Belle-Île. The Courters had never even been to the island, but now it seemed inescapable. It was as if the curse of the Prince de Conty were taunting them from a gilded frame. They wondered whether Monet had ever felt the ship’s intense aura. “We like to think of the gold under the sea while Monet painted without knowing about the wreck . . . or maybe he did,” Gay wrote to me one day.

In the spring of 2021, French police raided the homes of Annette Pesty and Brigitte and Yves Gladu. According to reporting by *Le Parisien*, when the police entered, Brigitte stepped aside and placed a call to Annette. “They found some grist for the mill,” she whispered, unaware that the authorities had been wiretapping her phone. The searches yielded a wealth of evidence: photographs, bank statements, letters from the Courters detailing the sale of

ingots. The authorities later confiscated the Gladus' forty-three-foot catamaran, purchased, in 2010, for a hundred and eighty-five thousand euros.

At a hearing, Yves Gladu admitted to having made some forty dives at the Prince de Conty site in the nineteen-seventies and as late as 1999. He and his wife kept their ingots in a blue metal box in their attic—a kind of clandestine savings account that they were able to draw on throughout their lives, magicking up money from under the sea. L'Hour told me that he was always suspicious of the way that Gladu, whom he knew fairly well after years of working in the same milieu, clammed up whenever the subject of the Prince arose. L'Hour has said that he believes that Gladu “got his hands on the ship's hold,” which he called “the ‘Mona Lisa’ of underwater archeology.”

Gladu confessed to selling around twenty bars in Switzerland. “They were burning my fingers,” he told the court. Brigitte added that finding the gold “was unexpected, fabulous.” Yet they denied any connection to the hoard that the Pestys entrusted to the Courters. (Through their lawyers, the Gladus declined to comment; Annette Pesty’s lawyer did not respond to a request.) A trial is expected in 2025.

Since their arrest, the Courters had been trying to get a French lawyer. Finally, three months into their detainment, Grégory Lévy and Aurélie Boulbin joined their team. The new lawyers were able to explain some key differences between the American legal system and the French one—the former, for instance, operates on an accusatory model, whereas the latter uses an investigatory one, giving judges wider powers in the evidence-gathering phase. “They had no information,” Lévy said, of the Courters. Furthermore, it seemed that their arrest could have been avoided entirely—it turned out that the French judge had only issued warrants after an offer of immunity, mislaid or misunderstood by the Courters’ Florida lawyers, yielded no response. (The firm did not respond to a request for comment.) The Courters say that they did not know about the offer of immunity until after they hired the French lawyers. Lévy and Boulbin immediately contacted the judge, who agreed to depose the Courters over Zoom. She formally charged them with concealment of stolen goods and money laundering, but retracted the request for extradition. Gay and Phil got their passports back, and, a few days later, flew home.

The Courters, who are now attached to the case as coöperating parties, acknowledge that they failed to ask some pertinent questions about the gold. “Now, looking back, it’s, like, what were we thinking?” Phil said. Gay takes responsibility for what she calls the “‘Antiques Roadshow’ fiasco,” having encouraged Annette to come along to the show after a call from a producer friend. “We had some valuable netsukes, and two matching ivory fans that had been a gift to my father from Madame Chiang Kai-shek,” she recalled. “Annette was staying with us at the time, and I mentioned the gold.” After the program aired, Gay sold three ingots on eBay. “We were getting older and winding down our office,” she told me. “We didn’t want to have to deal with it anymore.”

The Courters say that they have always been truthful about the provenance of the gold, though the head of the California auction house told authorities that Gay “stated that she has been in possession of these bars for approximately 15 years and that they originally were found in the Cape Verde Islands.” The auction catalogue didn’t mention Cape Verde, but made much of the ingots’ likeness to those from the Geldermalsen and the Prince de Conty, without stating directly that they came from the latter wreck. When I asked Gay about this, she said that the auction house had “fudged” the catalogue listing. The Courters’ French lawyers are emphasizing the couple’s guilelessness. “We will try to demonstrate that there was no criminal intention,” Lévy told me. “They sold on eBay. When you want to traffic something, you don’t go on eBay, right?”

The Department of Homeland Security determined that the auction-house ingots rightfully belonged to France, notwithstanding a competing claim from the Chinese government. (David Keller, an agent with Homeland Security, told me that the case almost gave him “an aneurysm.”) At a “repatriation ceremony” held at the French Embassy in 2022, a Homeland Security official said that the department was “proud to have played a role in insuring these artifacts continue to be a part of France’s history for future generations to enjoy.” Yet the British government has remained silent on the three gold bars that remain in the British Museum’s collection. This is despite the fact that, according to the museum’s own Web site, they were acquired from “G Pesty” and came from the Prince de Conty wreck. (“P Courier” also appears on two listings, but the Courters say that this is an error stemming from Phil’s status as a signatory on Pesty’s bank account.) A

spokesperson for the museum declined to answer questions about the ingots, saying only that the museum “is actively seeking a resolution to this matter, and has worked cooperatively with the relevant authorities.”

L’Hour continues to track the ship’s treasure, and, in retirement, has become an outspoken advocate for the prosecution of the “morbidly avaricious crooks” who plundered the Prince. He is the author of a new essay on the ship’s “broken destiny,” recently published to accompany an exhibit at the French East India Company Museum. “At Port Lost-Kah a frozen world demands to be brought back to life to better recount the story of this humanity,” he writes, urging French authorities to fund a new expedition. For him, the Prince was “first a maritime tragedy and then a cultural one,” brought on by “pathological greed.”

Whatever the reason—gold lust, bad luck, a malediction—the Prince de Conty continues to bring ill fortune upon those in its ambit, even two hundred and seventy-eight years after its demise. The Courters have paid a heavy price for what initially seemed to be a casual obligation. They are unlikely to set foot in Europe again—in fact, they have stopped travelling almost entirely.

Phil finds it difficult to talk about what happened. Gay talks about it all the time, spending hours on the Internet, trawling blogs about the intricacies of extradition law. “Was our situation typical or unusual?” she asked recently. “How many people without our privileges or resources are being detained in foreign countries without charges?” Both are dealing with physical and mental-health issues brought on by the ordeal. “It is not an exaggeration to say that nothing in my life prepared me for this, and I am no longer the same person I was,” Gay told me. Because of pending legal issues, the Courters haven’t spoken to Annette Pesty or the Gladus in several years. The Courters consider the loss of their old friends to be as consequential as the blows to their reputations, well-being, and finances. Gay said, “The gold was a tiny fragment of our lives together—meaningless, until it wasn’t.” ♦

By Jessica Winter
By Susan B. Glasser
By Paul Elie
By Nick Paumgarten

By [Dexter Filkins](#)

This summer, I rode south from Beirut on Route 51, the highway that runs along the Mediterranean toward Israel. Beirut is a city of many faiths, but less than an hour to the south is Lebanon's Shiite heartland. Passing the ancient Phoenician city of Sidon, I entered a region where mosques stood in every town. Wall-size portraits depicted the sect's icons, Hussein and Ali, and flags and symbols announced the presence of the Party of God, better known by its Arabic name, Hezbollah. In each village along the route hung banners with the faces of Hezbollah soldiers killed fighting Israel, the group's great enemy. In Seddiqine, men were clearing the wreckage of a home flattened the night before by an Israeli bomb; a Hezbollah flag fluttered atop the rubble. "This is an everyday thing," one of the men told me.

Hezbollah has been in conflict with Israel since the group was founded, in the nineteen-eighties, but in the past year the fighting has grown dangerously intense. On October 7th, Hamas militants surged across Israel's southwestern border and killed more than eleven hundred people. The next day, Hezbollah fired into Israel from the north, launching a volley of rockets that provoked a retaliatory strike. Since then, the shelling and bombing by each side have intensified, stoking fears of an all-out war that would devastate the region.

The farther south I rode, the more ravaged and empty the landscape was. In Tebnine, as a pair of ambulances raced through traffic, I passed a billboard showing seventeen more Hezbollah fallen. "They paid with their lives!" it said. In the village of Haddatha, a cemetery was almost entirely given over to Hezbollah, each tomb set with a portrait of a young man who died in his prime.

A few hundred yards from the Israeli border, I arrived at the hamlet of Rmaych, which stood unscathed in a landscape of rubble and tombstones. Its residents were nearly all members of the Maronite Catholic Church. With no Shiites and no Hezbollah there, the Israeli jets and artillery crews had largely spared the town. "The war is all around us, but it is not here," Father Najib al-Amil, a local priest, told me. He invited me into his living room, where we sat among a coterie of Maronite saints.

The people of Rmaych have a peculiar vantage point on the war. Father Najib pointed south, to a hilltop a few hundred yards away, where an antenna tower marked the Israeli border. Then he pointed northwest, to the neighboring village of Aita al-Shaab. "That's a Hezbollah village," he said. "We are in the middle." Since the conflict began, he said, Hezbollah fighters had twice come into Rmaych, set up Katyusha rocket batteries, and fired into Israel. The last time, in December, an Israeli jet bombed a house in Rmaych that Hezbollah had commandeered. Afterward, Najib sent the group a message that it was not welcome. "We told them, 'We can't prevent you from passing through our town, but we will not let you fire from here,'" he said. "'Put your missiles somewhere else.'"

The Hezbollah men left, but they kept up the fight from Aita al-Shaab, just across the hill. A few hours before I arrived, Najib said, militants there had fired rockets over the border. Israeli bombs landed moments later, exploding so fiercely that the earth shook.



"I can't believe my little girl is all grown and committing to a lifetime of yelling 'What!?' from the other room already."
Cartoon by Teresa Burns Parkhurst

At seventy-three, Najib has seen wars and skirmishes come and go, but he says that the current one is the worst, if only because the resolution is so uncertain. The slope that runs from his village to the border, which once held tobacco fields and olive groves, has been charred by bombardments of white phosphorus, used by the Israelis to deny cover to Hezbollah fighters.

International treaties forbid using white phosphorus against civilians; it burns through flesh and can't be extinguished with water. When chunks of it fell on Rmaych, Najib said, they burned for four days. "There is no business in this town, because no one can go into the fields," he said. Even so, the villagers seemed reluctant to denigrate Israel. "The Israelis have not treated us unfairly," Najib said. As we talked, he also refrained from criticizing Hezbollah. "I need to choose my words carefully," he said, though he allowed, "Hezbollah started this war."

That day, Najib was giving four sermons—including one at the Church of Transfiguration and another at the three-century-old St. George. The villagers were watching him closely, he said: "If I were to leave the town now, everyone would leave." Meanwhile, they stay away from the Israeli border, and also from the village next door. "No one here would dare go into Aita al-Shaab," Najib said. "There are only fighters there."

As we walked out onto Najib's porch, another man introduced himself, though he was too afraid to give anything but his first name, Paul. A few weeks before, he said, he had fled his home in Qaouzah, a Christian village nearby. Hezbollah's men regularly brought rockets to fire into Israel, and Qaouzah was too small to resist. Every Hezbollah volley prompted a nearly instantaneous counterstrike, so Qaouzah was mostly empty, Paul said; he and others returned only to check on their homes and to care for the old people who were too frail to leave. I asked if he would take me into Qaouzah on his next visit. "Do you want to die?" he said.

Paul told me that Qaouzah, like the rest of Lebanon, was held hostage by the possibility of increased conflict. "Hezbollah is going to drag us into a war," he said. The group's leaders have said that they will continue their attacks until Israel halts its operations in Gaza—a condition that Israel has no intention of granting. In the meantime, the cross-border assaults grow more threatening. An open war would be devastating. Hezbollah, a far more formidable and better-armed group than Hamas, is believed to possess at least a hundred and fifty thousand missiles and rockets, many of them capable of hitting targets across Israel. In the inevitable counterstrikes, Lebanon, which has uneasily accommodated Hezbollah since the nineteen-eighties, would likely be destroyed.

Two decades ago, a Western official pulled up in front of a Hezbollah office in southern Beirut and sent his bodyguards away. “My security detail went crazy,” the official told me. Leaving his cell phone behind, he was ushered by Hezbollah members into a car whose windows had been blacked out. After several blocks, the car stopped, and the official was led to another vehicle. He was driven for a while and then switched again—and again. Finally, the car began descending, into what he guessed was an underground parking garage. “We went very far down,” he said. The official was led from the car to an elevator, which went up a couple of floors. The doors opened to reveal Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary-general of Hezbollah. “There he was, just standing there, waiting for me,” the official said.

Nasrallah has spent much of the past eighteen years in fortified bunkers, surrounded by guards. He has been largely in hiding since the last war between Israel and Hezbollah, in 2006—a thirty-four-day spasm of violence that left Lebanon in ruins. During the fighting, Israeli jets flattened most of Dahiya, the part of southern Beirut where Hezbollah has its headquarters. They also targeted Nasrallah twice, missing both times. “The third time, we won’t miss,” an Israeli official told me afterward.

Since then, Nasrallah has made only occasional visits to the surface, appearing mostly in prerecorded videos. Now sixty-three, he has grown gray and pale, his pudgy, bright-eyed face framed by wire-rimmed glasses and a long beard. The group he leads is the dominant force in Lebanon, with a political arm in the parliament and an army recognized as one of the most fearsome in the region. Yet its leaders stay mostly in the shadows. Hezbollah’s black-suited fighters show themselves at funerals for fallen comrades—or in the streets, when they need to flash weapons to get their way.

In its early years, Hezbollah gained a reputation for fostering unrestrained violence, with links to suicide bombings, kidnappings, and torture. But, after the 2006 war, the Western official met with Nasrallah and other Hezbollah leaders, and came away convinced that they had become more reasonable. “Nasrallah never took notes, but the people around him did, and he always followed up,” the official said. “I wouldn’t want to spend a weekend with him, or have a meal. But he’s a smart, rational person.” By most accounts, Israel’s leaders have not tried to kill Nasrallah again. “I think if the Israelis

had wanted to kill him, they would have,” Ryan Crocker, a former American Ambassador to Lebanon, told me. “He’s the devil they know.”

On October 7th, Nasrallah called on other Arab nations to support the Palestinian cause, by “affirming their unity in blood, word, and action.” Yet, at least at the beginning, his organization was measured in its strikes; it expended only a fraction of its arsenal, and refrained from using its long-range guided missiles, which could devastate neighborhoods and institutions across Israel. The Israelis launched counterstrikes in roughly equal measure, emphasizing that the violence was controlled.

But, as the exchanges continued, the destruction steadily increased, with the number of daily strikes on each side creeping up from about ten to, at times, dozens. Israel says that it has killed more than thirty Hezbollah leaders and some three hundred fighters. Its agents have apparently even struck inside Lebanon; in April, a woman lured Mohammad Surur, an important financial facilitator for Hezbollah and Hamas, to a villa outside Beirut, where he was interrogated, beaten, and killed. He was found shot several times, with cash scattered around his body, indicating that robbery was not a motive. The rumor in Beirut was that the assassination was carried out by a secret Israeli unit called Nili, named for a Jewish organization that spied on the Ottoman Empire during the First World War.

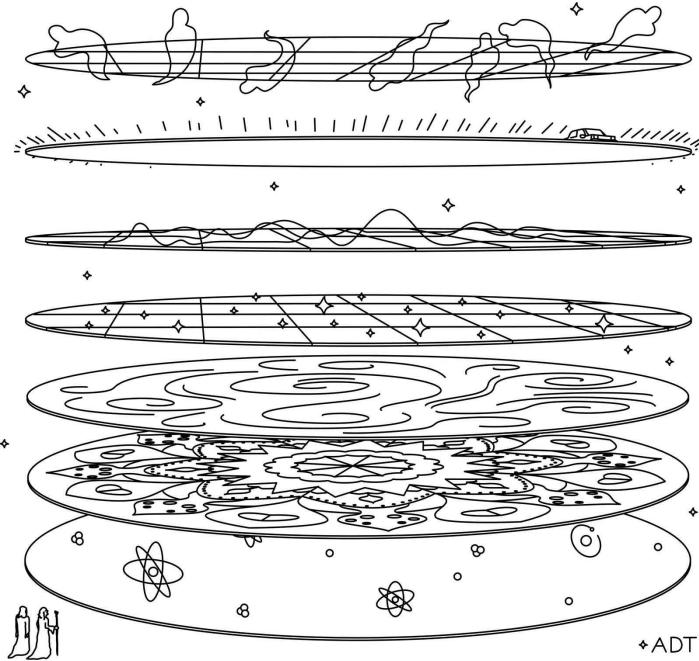
The attacks at the border have forced tens of thousands of civilians to flee, emptying out Lebanese villages and Israeli kibbutzim. Hezbollah’s rhetoric has been increasingly bellicose. A video that the group released recently shows aerial photos and G.P.S. coordinates of Israeli targets—an airport, a seaport, a gas field, and a nuclear-research center—with crosshairs on them. In the video, Nasrallah says, “If a war is imposed on Lebanon, the resistance will fight without restraints, without rules, without limits.”

Israeli officials, after focussing for months on subduing Hamas, say that they are contemplating a decisive pivot toward Hezbollah—what one Israeli general described to me as “the moment of truth.” During the 2006 war, Israel was frustrated by the limits of its intelligence on Hezbollah, particularly on the group’s network of underground bunkers and missile launchers. Now, a second Western official told me, “the Israeli intelligence has significantly improved, in terms of both individuals and infrastructure.”

In a speech this spring, Nasrallah hinted at the extent of his opponents' intelligence gathering. "Your smartphone hears everything you're saying and takes all of your data," he said. "It can find your precise location—which room you're in, whether you're in the front of the car or the back. Does Israel need more than that?" He issued a plea to his followers in the south: "Break your phone, my brother! Bury it. Put it in an iron box and lock it up."

In June, I visited Dahiya, the cacophonous neighborhood in southern Beirut where Hezbollah is headquartered. As I drove, Hezbollah scouts crisscrossed the streets on motorbikes, passing shops and billboards for Botox injections and breast implants. Dahiya has been rebuilt since 2006, and the squat building that was my destination had no Hezbollah markings. My translator, a liberal Christian woman from Beirut, was so oblivious of the conservative parts of her home town that she needed to ask a friend to demonstrate how to wrap her head in a hijab. When we arrived, we left our phones in our car, knowing that we would otherwise have to surrender them. Inside, I met a tall young man named Ali, who grew up in West Africa, where his parents, like many Lebanese, ran several businesses. After a few minutes, Ali led me outside to another car. "Follow me," he said, and we drove to a second building, where he brought me to a room without windows or adornments.

A few minutes later, Naim Qassem, Hezbollah's deputy secretary-general, entered, wearing a white turban. Where Nasrallah is impish and often fiery, Qassem is studious and dour—an unlikely warrior. Before helping to found Hezbollah, he was a chemistry teacher for many years; his four-hundred-and-sixty-three-page book, "Hizbullah: The Story from Within," now in its eighth edition, is the movement's official account of its history and its justifications. Among its central goals, Qassem writes, are to impose an Islamic republic on Lebanon and to destroy the state of Israel: "The implantation of the Zionist entity in the region is illegitimate—a cancerous gland the existence of which is only a prelude to dominion over the entire region."



"Do you remember which plane of existence we parked on?"
Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Qassem, who is seventy-one, sat upright, his feet flat on the floor, and rubbed his hands incessantly. He told me that Hezbollah had entered the war to pressure Israel to drop its campaign in Gaza, which he said was aimed at “exterminating” the Palestinian people. “How can we be silent and watch? We had to resist,” Qassem said. Hezbollah sought to tie up a sizable portion of the I.D.F. on the northern border, and to disrupt life in Israel by forcing mass evacuations. “We do not seek to wage a new war, or expand the war,” he said, “but, rather, to make the Israelis worried about continuing the war in Gaza.”

Initially, he told me, Hezbollah had fired rockets no farther than three miles across the border, and had done no more than match Israeli counterstrikes. But he acknowledged that the conflict was following a logic of its own. “We are actually not confident that we can limit the war,” he said.

Qassem spoke in the rehearsed cadences of a party hack—loyal, without deviations. Halfway into our talk, my translator complained that she couldn’t hear, because her hijab was wrapped too tight. A Hezbollah press officer sitting in on the meeting pulled the cloth back, exposing her ear—a striking provocation in the realm of conservative Islam. Qassem pretended not to notice.

He grew most animated when I asked him about himself. Thirty years ago, he'd traded the quiet routine of a teacher for the life of a militia commander—always in hiding, often underground, constantly contending with the threat of violent death. Did he ever miss his old existence? “I live the best life—I would not give it away,” he said. “Who said we don’t go to the beach and to restaurants? We exercise, we eat whenever we want, and we live life to the fullest.”

And what about his boss, Nasrallah? “He is the happiest man on earth!” Qassem said.

In April, the Israeli defense minister, Yoav Gallant, gave a bluff statement on his country’s position in the conflict. “Half of Hezbollah’s commanders in southern Lebanon have been eliminated,” he said. “The other half are in hiding.” (Hezbollah denied this, saying that only a small number of its leaders had been killed.) When I contacted a Hezbollah field commander, he agreed to meet me only if I concealed his real name and his exact location. A few hours out of Beirut, I arrived at his house, near the Israeli border. Habib, as I’ll call him, greeted me at the door.

Dressed in jeans, a buttoned shirt, and a baseball cap, Habib gave off the confident air of an American military officer in late middle age. He had just finished checking that his men were executing the day’s plans. A woman, her head wrapped in a scarf, brought us water, then left the room without a sound. Lighting a Marlboro, Habib told me proudly that his son was away at college, studying engineering. A few minutes into our conversation, two huge concussions rattled the windows and shook the earth. Habib smiled; the noise came from Israeli jets breaking the sound barrier. “Every day,” he said.

Habib told me that, in the early months of the conflict, it was the Israelis who had increased the intensity of the attacks—but lately Hezbollah had been ratcheting up, too. “The Iranians want us to escalate, so we are escalating,” he said. Habib, who had made several visits to Iran over the years, left little doubt that the clerics in Tehran were ultimately in charge of his troops; Iranian operatives were working alongside Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. “The Iranians control every bullet we have,” he said.

Earlier that week, the Israelis had killed one of Habib's peers, a senior Hezbollah leader named Taleb Abdallah. Habib shrugged when I mentioned it. "It's nothing," he said. "For every man who is martyred, there is another waiting in line to take his place." Recently, Habib told me, he had been helping to plan new missions. He wouldn't give details, so it was impossible to know if he was bluffing, but he said, "We've done very special operations for the Israelis."

Habib joined Hezbollah not long after its founding, in the early nineteen-eighties. He was a teen-ager, one of eight children from an impoverished home. Like many early members, Habib was deeply influenced by Musa al-Sadr, a Shiite cleric who preached a kind of liberation theology. In Lebanon, as in much of the Sunni-dominated Arab world, the Shiites constituted an underclass. "We had nothing," he said. "But after Musa Sadr we had power." Sadr's movement was called Amal, or Hope.

During those years, Lebanon was wracked by a civil war, in which clashes between Christian militias and insurgents from the Palestine Liberation Organization grew into a vicious, many-sided conflict. In 1982, the Israeli military moved into Lebanon in an effort to destroy the P.L.O., whose fighters had killed scores of Israelis. The invading force barrelled all the way to the P.L.O.'s headquarters in Beirut, ultimately sending its chief, Yasir Arafat, into exile. Initially, Habib told me, Lebanon's Shiites didn't mind watching the P.L.O. get hammered. But then the Israelis inserted themselves into the civil war, favoring the Christian militias. The mood turned, and Shiites began forming their own armed groups.

Iran, seeing an opportunity, sent in Revolutionary Guard operatives, who began gathering together local Shiite militias, with the promise of confronting the Israelis. Robert Baer, who was then an officer for the C.I.A., told me that the recruits assembled in the Bekaa Valley, east of Beirut, at a military installation called the Sheikh Abdullah barracks. The alliance that they formed became known as Hezbollah. Its foundational document, the "Open Letter to the Oppressed," is the cry of a downtrodden group vowing to avenge what it saw as years of injustice at the hands of Israel and the West. Its authors pledged to fight until "the Zionist entity" was destroyed.

Abbas al-Musawi, who took control of the group, was a Shiite cleric who had sworn affinity to *wilayat al-faqih*, a doctrine that gave Iran's Grand Ayatollah unlimited power over his followers. "Iran and Hezbollah are totally coördinated in every way," a senior American diplomat told me. "They sing from the same song sheet."

As Lebanon's Shiite militias coalesced into Hezbollah, they launched a spectacularly brutal campaign of political violence, led by a bloodthirsty commando named Imad Mughniyah. Suicide bombers killed more than a hundred people in two bombings at an Israeli military headquarters in Tyre, and fifty-eight soldiers at the French Army's barracks in Beirut; an assault on the U.S. Marine barracks there left two hundred and forty-one dead. In 1983, a truck bomb went off at the American Embassy. Ryan Crocker, then a young Foreign Service officer, was in his office on the fourth floor. "There was a brilliant flash of light and then a very powerful wind," he told me. Crocker shared the floor with the C.I.A.; seconds after the blast, he went into the hallway to check the damage. "Where the C.I.A. station was supposed to be, I was looking at the Mediterranean," he said. Sixty-three people were killed.

More than a hundred Westerners were kidnapped in the area during those years. Baer told me that when he worked for the C.I.A. in Lebanon he received daily transcripts of Hezbollah's intercepted radio chatter. One of the speakers was Hassan Nasrallah. "We knew that Nasrallah was in touch with the kidnappers," Baer said. "He was in the circle that was coördinating them."

Among those kidnapped were William Higgins, a U.S. Marine colonel working for a United Nations peacekeeping force, and William Buckley, the C.I.A. station chief; both were tortured and killed. After Buckley's death, the agency's director, William Casey, sent a team to Lebanon to eliminate Hezbollah leaders wherever they could find them. "We had authority, direct from Casey, to kill every one of them," John Maguire, a former C.I.A. operative, said. In 1985, Hezbollah-aligned militants hijacked a T.W.A. passenger jet and took it on a zigzagging odyssey across the Mediterranean. Maguire and others spent weeks following the plane, intending to retake it. Yet each time the C.I.A. team prepared to storm the plane it took off, he said. Years later, he learned that the team's movements had been relayed to the

hijackers by Soviet intelligence officials, likely working in concert with American double agents. The hijackers killed a Navy diver named Robert Stethem, but ultimately released the other passengers and escaped.

Habib told me that he wasn't involved in the kidnappings; he had focussed his energies on attacking Israelis. In 1985, the I.D.F. retreated from Beirut to a "security zone," a miles-wide strip north of the border, and Habib fought them there for years. He recalled mounting several ambushes, including one that killed three Israeli soldiers. He also fought a proxy army of local combatants whom Israel had recruited from Christian villages. "They killed a lot of Shiites," Habib said. "You name it, they did it."

Habib told me that, in his younger days, he moved to Asunción, Paraguay, on orders from Hezbollah. Though he was happy to show off his fluent Spanish, when I asked about his activities in Paraguay he would say only that he "worked as a businessman." South America—particularly the "triple frontier," where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet—has long been regarded not just as a center for drug smuggling and money laundering but also as an important base for Hezbollah. In the nineties, Buenos Aires was the scene of two bloody bombings linked to Hezbollah: one at the Israeli Embassy, which killed twenty-nine people, and another at a Jewish community center, which killed eighty-five. During his time in Paraguay, Habib said, he was detained and questioned by American agents, though he declined to say why. He was ultimately released. After several years, he returned to Lebanon and rose through the ranks.

In 1990, after fifteen years of fighting, the civil war came to an end. Lebanese leaders, most of whom had built their own militias, agreed to share power among the country's various sects. Under the agreement, the militias were required to hand over their weapons—and they all did, except Hezbollah. The Israelis were still occupying a swath of southern Lebanon, and Hezbollah insisted that it needed to keep its arms. "The feeling at the time was that they were still fighting the occupation," Marwan Hamadeh, a former cabinet minister, told me. "But it was understood that once the Israelis withdrew this reason would dissolve."

In 1992, Hezbollah fielded candidates in Lebanon's first postwar elections. It had built an extensive network of schools and health clinics, and there were

hopes that it would evolve into an ordinary political party. That same year, Israeli helicopters fired on a convoy in southern Lebanon and killed Musawi, the group's leader. His job went to Nasrallah, a thirty-one-year-old cleric from a slum in a Beirut neighborhood called Karantina—a former quarantine site. Habib was not surprised by the appointment. "It was an Iranian order," he said. Nasrallah had distinguished himself as charismatic and studious. Perhaps decisively, he had also spent two years studying in Qom, the holy Shiite city in Iran.

As leader, Nasrallah quickly dispelled any hope of peace. Baer told me, "The Israelis killed Musawi because he was dangerous, and what they got in his place was someone far more dangerous." One of Hezbollah's first acts under his leadership was to plot the assassination of Crocker, the American Ambassador, presumably because Nasrallah blamed the Americans for Musawi's death. Crocker told me the C.I.A. informed him that a suicide bomber planned to crash a vehicle—a yellow car—into his convoy. Crocker hurried out of the country and returned only after the government of Syria, which had occupied parts of Lebanon since early in the civil war, promised to insure his safety.

Several Lebanese officials described Nasrallah as a devoted family man. In 1997, one of his sons was killed fighting the Israelis, which has since become a main source of his credibility. One of Nasrallah's pleasures, a Lebanese leader who knows him told me, is studying religious texts. Western officials also note his asceticism. "He's married to the cause, it seems," Crocker said. Occasionally, Nasrallah ventures aboveground to play soccer in an indoor stadium near the group's headquarters. Qassem told me that his boss favors the Brazilian national team.

In speeches and interviews, Nasrallah is gleefully combative, often speaking in colloquial Arabic, rather than in the formal diction favored by other leaders in the Arab world. He makes a point of demonstrating how closely he studies his enemies, often turning their words against them. In 2018, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu ordered a sprawling military operation to uncover Hezbollah tunnels in Israel. Nasrallah told an interviewer that Netanyahu had succeeded only in frightening his own citizens. If he himself wanted to convince Israelis that Hezbollah was capable of an invasion, "it

would require hard work,” he said, grinning. “But Netanyahu . . . spared me these efforts.” He added, “May he keep talking!”

In 2000, Israeli soldiers, after eighteen years in southern Lebanon, finally retreated across the border, in a procession of tanks and troop carriers. Nasrallah became a hero across the Arab world. “They forced the Israelis out of Lebanon under fire,” Baer said. “No one had ever done that.” For Israel, the myth of its invincibility—built up in a five-decade run of victories over Arab states—was shattered.

The premise of Hezbollah’s armed campaign was effectively gone. But Lebanon, with a weak central government and a tiny, ill-trained Army, was too feeble to disarm the militia, which had the backing of the Syrian Army. “Hezbollah said no,” Hamadeh, the former cabinet minister, told me. “This is when the big divorce started in Lebanon.”

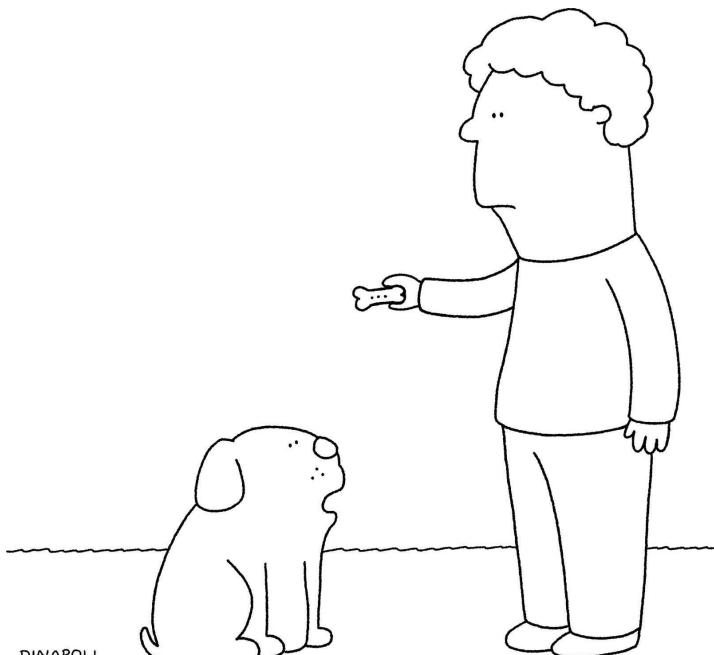
In July, 2006, Hezbollah fighters slipped across the border and kidnapped two Israeli soldiers. In exchange for their return, they demanded the release of several Lebanese prisoners. Instead, Israeli forces struck aggressively. They fired rockets and artillery, and, after Hezbollah responded in kind, they sent in the Air Force. A week into the campaign, General Amos Yadlin, the head of Israeli military intelligence, told his country’s leaders that nearly all Hezbollah’s most advanced rockets were destroyed or disabled. But Hezbollah was still bombarding northern Israel, killing civilians and forcing tens of thousands to evacuate. “I said, ‘It’s time to finish the war,’ ” Yadlin told me in Tel Aviv. He recommended either halting the air campaign or mounting a ground invasion of southern Lebanon. Israel’s leaders ordered the invasion. “The Prime Minister vowed to destroy Nasrallah, to destroy Hezbollah,” Yadlin said. In retrospect, he added, this seemed like too much to promise.

The I.D.F. soldiers had to make their way through rocky, unfamiliar terrain, where Hezbollah fighters mounted ambushes and then escaped to hidden bunkers. (After the war, I toured one abandoned bunker, a warren of bunk beds and storage rooms buried under a hundred feet of rock. Fortified with steel girders, it had survived with no apparent damage.) The fight that Yadlin had urged leaders to finish quickly lasted more than a month. Hezbollah fired some four thousand rockets, hitting cities across northern Israel. A

former I.D.F. officer who joined the fighting told me that the problem was the invasion had no clear purpose. “Hezbollah started the war, and we had to do something about it, without knowing what that something was,” he said.

Finally, the two sides agreed to a ceasefire: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701, which called for Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters past the Litani River, which winds across Lebanon north of the Israeli border. They were to be replaced by fifteen thousand soldiers from the Lebanese Army and as many as fifteen thousand U.N. peacekeepers.

For both sides, the evident lesson was that the war had been a mistake. Israel had lost a hundred and twenty-one soldiers. And, though Hezbollah had avoided destruction (“winning by not losing,” as Yadlin put it), as many as seven hundred of its fighters had been killed. In Lebanon, nearly a thousand civilians had died, and much of the country was in ruins.



DINAPOLI
“When you say ‘Speak,’ are you looking for something of substance, or just, like, ‘Woof?’”
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

In a speech televised a few days after the fighting ended, Nasrallah admitted that he had miscalculated in sending his men to kidnap Israelis. “If I thought on July 11th that there was even a one-per-cent chance that the capturing operation would lead to the kind of war that unfolded, would I still carry out such an operation? Absolutely not,” he said. More important, he seemed to have sobered about the realities of war. “I believe that Nasrallah knows that

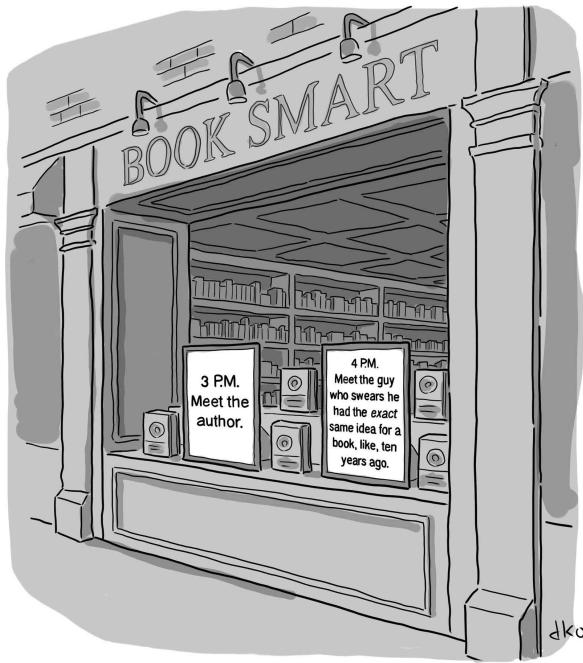
the destruction of Israel is completely impossible,” the Western official told me.

Still, even as the border went quiet, Hezbollah began a remarkable military buildup. With Iran’s help, it expanded its arsenal to include long-range, precision-guided missiles, capable of destroying Israeli ports, airports, and electrical grids. Hezbollah became the spearhead of an ambitious campaign to project Iranian power throughout the region. The vision—guided by the Quds Force, the foreign arm of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard—was to strengthen local Shiite militias, often at the expense of the states where they were based; they would surround Israel with hostile forces and protect the Iranian regime from attack. As native Arabic speakers, Hezbollah fighters could operate abroad more easily than their Persian-speaking patrons. At Iran’s behest, they fanned out from country to country, becoming embroiled in a series of conflicts that ultimately had repercussions around the world.

On a previous visit to Lebanon, I attended a funeral for two Hezbollah soldiers who had been killed while fighting abroad. At the ceremony, held in the Bekaa Valley, not far from the base where the group had formed, the head of Hezbollah’s executive council declared that the deaths were to be celebrated. “You can’t have dignity without young blood,” he said. Portraits of the young men hung above the crowd, and a brass band bleated out upbeat music, like a Sousa march at a football game. To emphasize Hezbollah’s resolve, hundreds of soldiers marched in precise formation, unsmiling and staring straight ahead, with their rifles across their chests, their fatigues pressed, and their boots gleaming. On orders, they jerked their heads to the right and left.

Hezbollah has few tanks and no air force; it relies on missiles, drones, and a deep reserve of fighters. Its leaders claim to have a hundred thousand troops. Western officials estimate that the real number may be closer to sixty thousand, divided among active fighters, reservists, and villagers who might be willing to pick up a gun if called upon. The core of the force is composed of fighters who are recruited as young as grade-school age, then trained and indoctrinated for years before being deployed to protect Shiite interests in Lebanon or abroad.

In 2011, as the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad was threatened by a popular uprising, Iran called for help to save him. During the next few years, Nasrallah sent in thousands of fighters, declaring that he would “not allow Syria to fall into the hands of America or Israel or infidels.” Habib, the commander I met in southern Lebanon, was among them. He fought on the decisive battlefronts of Palmyra and Homs, where he sustained an injury that left a long, twisting scar. Habib told me that three thousand Hezbollah fighters died in the mission to save Assad—losses so severe that, according to Western officials, Hezbollah had to loosen its recruitment standards to accommodate mercenaries and others.



Cartoon by David Ostow

The rebels in Syria had their own source of foreign reinforcements: Hamas. Remarkably, that meant fighters from Hezbollah and Hamas faced one another on the battlefield. “We don’t like Hamas—they fought us in Syria,” Habib told me. But now, in the conflict with Israel, things were different, he said: “They are not our allies or our friends, but they are fighting our enemy.”

Even in 2024, with the rebels in Syria mostly subdued, hundreds of Hezbollah combatants were still operating there. Israeli officials said that Iran had mounted a long campaign to “Lebanize” Syria, by attempting to build a Shiite militia similar to Hezbollah, with fighters principally from

Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Since 2016, Israel has carried out hundreds of air strikes in Syria. In April, one of them killed Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, who oversaw Iranian efforts in Lebanon and Syria, and who reportedly served on Hezbollah's leadership council. His death prompted Iran to fire more than three hundred missiles and drones at Israel.

Though Syria was Hezbollah's most intense foreign entanglement, it was just part of the group's effort to expand Iran's sphere of influence. In Iraq, the Quds Force and Hezbollah propped up Shiite forces so powerful that, as a former American official told me, "they have captured the state." With sympathetic regimes in Iraq and Syria, the Iranians came to dominate an unbroken string of weak or failed states, known as the Axis of Resistance, which stretches hundreds of miles from their border to the Mediterranean. That has allowed Iran to transport material—including missile components—overland.

During my recent visit to Lebanon, I met a Hezbollah commander who had been active in several of these foreign conflicts. Normally based in the Bekaa Valley, the commander, whom I'll call Hassan, had come to Beirut to visit an ailing relative. He was too worried about being seen with an American to meet in public, so we talked in a car, parked under a tree in view of the Mediterranean. Hassan, who appeared to be in his forties, told me that he'd been with Hezbollah since 1994, when his family moved to Beirut after being forced to flee their village near the Israeli border. "You can join when you're seven years old," he said. He was now overseeing antitank- and anti-aircraft-missile teams, and had two teen-age sons enlisted in the group. He had fought the Israelis in 2006, firing at Merkava tanks; in Syria in 2011; and in Iraq in 2014, helping to drive *ISIS* from its stronghold in Mosul.

In 2017, Hassan went to Yemen, where the Houthi tribal militia had overrun the capital three years before. The Houthis adhere to a faith only distantly related to Shia Islam, but they attracted support from Iran and its allies. In less than a decade, Hezbollah operatives helped turn a ragtag contingent of men in pickup trucks into a formidable army wielding sophisticated weapons; Hassan trained them to use Russian-made Kornet antitank missiles. After Hezbollah began rocketing Israel in October, the Houthis

joined in, launching the first of dozens of attacks on oil tankers and cargo ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. The vessels were forced to sail thousands of miles around Africa, disrupting global shipping. “The Houthis are scarily effective,” Hassan said. Last week, they carried out a drone strike in Tel Aviv.

Hassan spoke with the assurance of someone engaged in what he believes to be a great cause. He told me that he and most of his comrades were eager for a showdown with Israel, to prove to the world how overrated its military is. “The Israelis are still living in 1967,” he said. “That’s over. We can put a missile into the flat where Bibi is meeting with his ministers.” He brushed aside concerns of a counterattack, describing a vast network of protective tunnels. “We have tunnels for cars, tunnels for trucks, tunnels for railroad cars,” he said. I asked Hassan how the war between Hezbollah and the Israelis could ever be resolved. “Very simple,” he said. “When they leave on the same boat they came in on.”

With a promontory on the Mediterranean and eighteen official religions, Beirut is one of the world’s most dazzling and sophisticated capitals. But strife and dysfunction, long bearable parts of life there, have driven the city to paralysis. Electricity sometimes runs for only an hour a day; trash piles up in the streets for months on end; and poverty, once mostly invisible, reveals itself in the homeless people who roam the streets. Residents of Beirut used to speak proudly of their resilience. These days, the word is regarded as a sour joke.

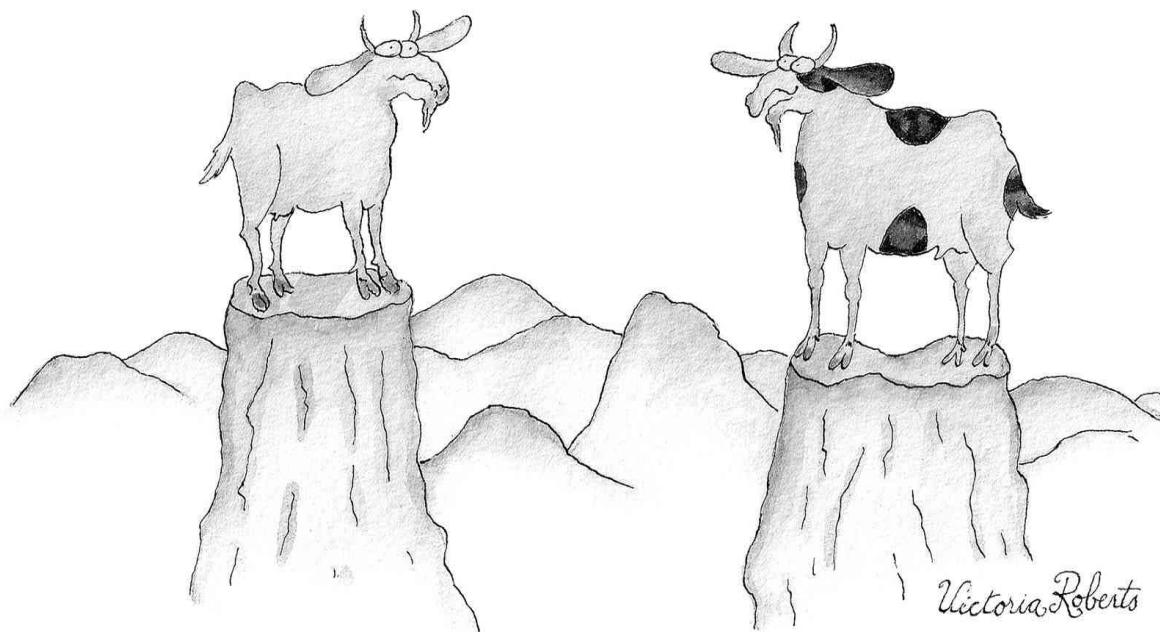
Amid these problems, Lebanon has been without a President and a functioning legislature since 2022. According to the constitution, parliament elects the President, and the candidate favored by Hezbollah—with Iran’s backing—has been unable to secure the necessary votes. Hezbollah’s elected representatives are seen as unusually competent (“some of the hardest-working people in parliament,” a cabinet member told me), but their main task is to secure a head of state sympathetic to their priorities. Whenever members of the opposition move to elect a President on their own, the Hezbollah representatives and their allies walk out of the chamber, making a quorum impossible. Since 2022, this drama has repeated itself dozens of times. The former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora told me, “Parliament is unable to exercise even its most basic powers.”

The hollowing out of the Lebanese state dates to at least 2005. That Valentine's Day, a truck bomb exploded in downtown Beirut, killing Rafik Hariri, the charismatic and pro-Western former Prime Minister, and twenty-one others. The assassination set off a popular uprising against Hariri's presumed killers: Hezbollah and its Syrian backers, who still maintained thousands of soldiers in Lebanon.

Within two months, the Syrians departed, and the demonstrations were hailed as a turning point for Lebanon. Instead, Hezbollah used the tumult to secure its power. At least two Lebanese officials who tried to investigate Hezbollah's role in Hariri's murder were murdered themselves. When an international tribunal indicted four members of the group, Nasrallah threatened to ignite a civil war, and he refused to turn over the suspects. In 2008, after the government tried to curtail Hezbollah's power, Nasrallah ordered his fighters to fan out across western Beirut. Lebanese leaders backed down, signalling that they would henceforth leave Hezbollah alone.

The group's growing presence in domestic politics failed to normalize it. In August, 2020, a warehouse at the Port of Beirut, holding an estimated five and a half million pounds of ammonium nitrate, exploded, sending out shock waves so intense that some ten thousand buildings were damaged or destroyed. Hezbollah had substantial control over the port, and a long list of politicians knew that the ammonium nitrate was stored there. But, when a Lebanese judge began to look into the explosion, Hezbollah's supporters led a march to the Palace of Justice to demand that he stop. They made a point of passing Ain el-Remmaneh, the Christian neighborhood where the civil war began, in 1975. "What they were saying was 'If this investigation goes ahead, we're willing to go to war,'" Michael Young, a Lebanese columnist and an editor at the Carnegie Middle East Center, told me.

As the official investigation stalled, private citizens took up the inquiry. One of the most prominent, an activist named Lokman Slim, raised questions about who was responsible for the explosion. "The first accused is the group with the greatest influence—by that I mean the Hezbollah militia," he told the TV network Al-Hadath in January, 2021. The information he'd gathered suggested that Hezbollah had imported the ammonium nitrate, a key component in bombs, in order to ship it to Syria.



"How about I jump over, say, this evening, around eight?"
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Three weeks after Slim’s TV appearance, he was found dead in an abandoned car in southern Lebanon, shot five times in the head and once in the back. His murder has not been solved, and Hezbollah denies involvement. But his wife, Monika Borgmann, told me, “Hezbollah killed Lokman,” pointing out that Hezbollah supporters had previously showed up at their home and accused him of treachery. Borgmann counts him as the eighteenth prominent Lebanese to have been assassinated since 2005.

To many, Slim’s murder was emblematic of a larger collapse. Less than a year before, the country’s banking system had imploded. The troubles were traced to the central bank, whose governor, Riad Salameh, had thrown open the public treasury to a succession of Lebanese governments. Some eighty billion dollars—considerably more than the national G.D.P.—went missing. The prevailing belief was that the treasury had been looted by political parties, including Hezbollah. As with the port explosion, official investigations went nowhere. “The political class protected itself,” Patrick Mardini, a Lebanese economist, told me.

In the ensuing crisis, the country’s G.D.P. dropped by half and its poverty rate tripled—an economic collapse that the World Bank ranks among the worst in centuries. For months, protesters demanded that the entire political establishment be swept away. While most of the country’s leaders

disappeared from view, Hezbollah stepped forward. As demonstrators chanted, “Revolution!,” the group’s fighters went into the streets to beat them. Nasrallah gave a scolding speech to those who, “at this bad and sensitive time,” wanted to overthrow the existing order. He told them, “Listen to this advice from me: you are wasting your time, you are exhausting yourselves, you are exhausting the country, you are wasting the country’s time.” Decades earlier, Hezbollah had built its reputation as a vanguard for the oppressed. Now it was a defender of the status quo—in which, not incidentally, it was the most powerful force.

During my visit, there were widespread grumblings that Hezbollah might be dragging the country into a war. Some, especially members of Lebanon’s Christian community, even suggested that an Israeli strike would be welcome. “I think if the Israelis attacked Hezbollah, a lot of people would cheer,” a guest said at a dinner party that I attended. Others spoke in darker terms, arguing that Hezbollah’s takeover of the state had irreparably widened sectarian divisions. “The social contract in Lebanon is broken—none of the communities coöperate anymore,” Young, the Carnegie editor, told me. “If the Israelis attack, and they destroy Lebanon, I think there’s a good chance Lebanon will never come together again.”

Last October, when Hezbollah followed the Hamas attacks by sending rockets into northern Israel, leaders in Jerusalem feared they were planning to do more. Cabinet ministers began preparing for a broad strike on Hezbollah targets in Lebanon—especially the group’s long-range missiles. But American intelligence showed that Hezbollah had made no substantial preparations for further strikes, so the U.S. pressed Israel to reconsider. A senior American official told me that President Biden and others were on the phone all night, trying to talk the Israelis down. There were moderating voices in the cabinet, too: Netanyahu’s recently formed unity government included two new ministers, who opposed the operation. At the last moment, as the planes were in the air, Israel called off the strike. “We were very, very, very close,” a senior Israeli official who regularly attends cabinet meetings said.

In the following days, as Hezbollah’s bombardments continued, the Israeli government ordered the area near the northern border evacuated. Since then, some sixty thousand displaced Israelis have been living at government

expense in private homes and apartments in other parts of the country. In Lebanon, about ninety thousand civilians have fled the area. Both sides of the seventy-five-mile-wide frontier have been largely depopulated, except for soldiers.

During my visit, I went to Malkiya, an Israeli kibbutz a couple hundred yards from the border. Before the war started, Malkiya had a population of about five hundred, and was surrounded by vineyards and fruit trees. Now it is nearly empty, the fields blasted. Itai Kroiz, the kibbutz's leader and an I.D.F. soldier, drove me around in a golf cart. "Here, on your right," he said, gesturing at a collapsed home, "that was hit by a rocket." He pointed out farms and orchards burned by Hezbollah attacks. "The rockets came yesterday, and the day before, and the day before," he said. A little farther along was the Malkiya Travel Hotel, where tourists from Israel's cities used to come to enjoy the countryside. "It's empty, of course."

Kroiz came to Malkiya in 2014, drawn, like many Israelis, by the area's pastoral atmosphere and affordable homes. "It was a dream to live in a place like this," he said. Kroiz could often see Hezbollah fighters across the border, driving in their pickup trucks. "They would take photos of us," he said. Sometimes Israeli planes would bomb them, but mostly the border was quiet. Then came the attacks in October, and the order to evacuate. "People come every now and then to check on their homes and their trees, but it's a ghost town," Kroiz said.



"I miss Jennifer."
Cartoon by Roland High

The mass evacuations have created a painful dilemma for Israel's leaders. The temporary housing is costing more than a hundred million dollars a month, and the government has effectively abandoned a large part of its own territory. "It's not sustainable," a member of the Israeli cabinet told me. "People need to go home."

At a café in Tel Aviv, I met Shay Levy and Alona Govrin, who had fled Malkiya with their two young children on October 7th. Since then, they have been living in a government-funded two-bedroom apartment. Levy, who used to lead tour groups to the Balkans, has been giving lectures about the region at community centers; his wife, Malkiya's former director of cultural projects, has been working as a nutritionist. Their son, Kerem, was in kindergarten in Malkiya when the family had to leave; he recently completed the school year in Tel Aviv. "Most of the time, we are O.K.," Govrin told me. "We have our lives."

But the family's future is uncertain. Just before the October 7th attack, they bought a plot of land in Malkiya, where they were planning to build a home. A similar parcel in Tel Aviv is far beyond their means, and they worry that the threat of war makes it impossible to sell their lot at home. "We don't know if we will go back to Malkiya," Govrin said. "How could we ever feel safe? Maybe it's over for that place."

Nasrallah has said that, once the Israelis end their military operations in Gaza, Hezbollah will stop shelling. But, even if he honored that pledge, few Israeli officials believe that a ceasefire alone would persuade the evacuated citizens to return to their homes. Israeli officials have contemplated sending the military to clear the Hezbollah fighters from southern Lebanon. Such an operation would be fraught with risk, and at least in the short term it would make matters worse.

U.S. officials have been trying to broker an agreement that would secure the border without an invasion. The deal, outlined by Amos Hochstein, an American negotiator, would resemble Security Council Resolution 1701, the accord from 2006 in which Hezbollah agreed to withdraw to the Litani River. But that agreement didn't stick; after the war, Hezbollah fighters returned. Until shooting started last October, they moved freely along the border, effectively barring the Lebanese Army and the U.N. from places they didn't want them. American officials say that, this time, they're hopeful they can induce Hezbollah to back off. Since October, Israeli air strikes have destroyed billions of dollars' worth of Hezbollah towers, bunkers, and other infrastructure—effectively razing everything aboveground, according to the senior American official. Hezbollah's leadership in the field has been similarly diminished. “The Israelis are killing a lot of colonels,” a former senior U.S. military officer told me.

For Israel, the central problem inherent in a peace deal is that the Hezbollah fighters aren't merely stationed in southern Lebanon—they live there. “Who will make sure the Hezbollah fighters don't sneak back in, like they did so many times before?” Eyal Hulata, a former Israeli national-security adviser, said. “Even if we could find a solution, there won't be anyone to verify it.”

In recent years, both Israel and Lebanon have demonstrated willingness to compromise. In 2022, Hochstein and French diplomats brokered a deal in which the two countries successfully delineated their maritime border, an issue made especially sensitive by expectations of substantial offshore natural-gas reserves. Officials in Lebanon and Israel told me that Hezbollah ultimately approved the arrangement. “Hezbollah signed off on a document that has the word ‘Israel’ in it fifteen times,” Hulata said.

The Western official who has met Nasrallah told me that he has no intention of goading the Israelis into a big fight. He drew a contrast with Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader. “Sinwar doesn’t care about the Palestinian people who have been killed,” he said. “Nasrallah would never have ordered the October 7th attack. He doesn’t want to see Lebanon destroyed.”

Some officials in Israel have signalled wariness of an all-out conflict. “We don’t have to solve every problem at once,” the cabinet member told me. “If we can enter into a serious diplomatic process, I think there is a good chance we can avoid a war.” Others offered less optimistic predictions. The senior Israeli official told me, “Would we prefer to have a full-scale war with Hezbollah right now? I would prefer not to. For now, we would prefer to finish with Hamas.” Yet he was resigned to the idea that there would be a showdown eventually. “We will go to war with them one day—maybe a year, maybe two years,” he said. A second senior American official, who meets often with Israel’s leaders, told me he worried that they might be overconfident about their ability to keep a conflict under control. “The Israelis think they are the masters of the military-escalation ladder,” he said. “But all you need is one mistake—and there’s an all-out war.”

Such a war could wreak terrible destruction. In April, when Iran and its allies launched more than three hundred drones and missiles, Israel’s air-defense network was able to almost entirely thwart the attack. But Hezbollah’s participation was relatively minor. Some Israeli officials I spoke to envisioned a war on four fronts—with Hamas to the south, the West Bank to the east, Hezbollah to the north, and Iran. “If Iran had fired more missiles and Hezbollah had unleashed a major barrage, the Israeli defenses would have been overwhelmed,” James Jeffrey, a former U.S. special envoy in the Middle East, told me. “This is the nightmare scenario. It’s existential.”

A recent paper, from the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism at Reichman University, in Herzliya, estimated that, even without Iranian assistance, Hezbollah could fire three thousand missiles a day into Israel for weeks on end. The senior American official noted that Israeli leaders believe they could destroy most of Hezbollah’s long-range missiles in a week to ten days. But in that period, he added, Hezbollah would be firing missiles every day. A former American military officer familiar with Israel’s preparations told me that its leaders would likely prioritize defending such sensitive

installations as seaports, electrical plants, and the nuclear reactor at Dimona, leaving population centers more open to attack. “There would be many civilian deaths on both sides,” he said. “Much of Lebanon would be destroyed.”

For some Israelis, that scenario is reason enough to consider a far-reaching strike against Hezbollah—and to argue that such an attack should have launched even before October 7th. “We would have had complete surprise,” Jacob Nagel, a former Israeli national-security adviser, told me. “We could have neutralized the threat. Now it’s too late—Hezbollah has moved everything. We have to find it all again.”

How Tehran would react to such an Israeli strike or an invasion is unclear, but the fear in both Tel Aviv and Washington is that a war would draw in Iran, and possibly the U.S. “We don’t believe Iran wants a big war,” the second senior American official said. But no one really knows. In June, Iranian officials said that if Israel launched a major campaign in Lebanon it would provoke an “obliterating war.”

In any event, as a former Israeli official told me, the prospect of eliminating Hezbollah’s missile forces entirely from the air is probably an illusion. The group maintains anti-aircraft missiles that could menace Israeli jets, and some of its missile installations would almost certainly survive a first strike. To fully secure the northern border, “there would have to be a ground invasion,” Hulata, the former national-security adviser, said. Israel has about half the weapons needed to neutralize Hezbollah’s missiles and push back its ground forces without risking heavy casualties, the former American military officer told me. To fully restock its arsenal would take roughly twelve months if the U.S. keeps supplying arms at the current rate.

A final variable is Israel’s national psyche, which was profoundly damaged by the government’s failure to protect the country on October 7th. In the week I spent there, the resolve to subdue Hamas appeared undiminished, but a mood of self-doubt seemed to grip the country. In one conversation, I asked a senior Israeli national-security official how he could be sure of Hezbollah’s condition. “We are confident,” he said—and then stopped himself. “But we are not bragging about our intelligence. Especially not after October 7th. We have good capabilities, but we must be humble.”

On the ground, Hezbollah seemed anything but humble. The group's ultimate dream is not just to thwart the I.D.F. in southern Lebanon. It is, in the words of its founding charter, Israel's "final obliteration from existence and the liberation of venerable Jerusalem from the talons of occupation." When I asked Habib, the Hezbollah commander, about the possibility of pulling back from the border in order to stave off a war, he nodded in the direction of Israel. "The only direction I'm going is that way," he said. ♦

By Doreen St. Félix
By E. Tammy Kim
By Isaac Chotiner
By Clare Malone

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Writing Prompts for New Parents](#)

By [Cora Frazier](#)

Take a walk in your neighborhood while pushing your baby who refuses to nap in a stroller. Name five things you see, four things you hear, three things you smell, two things you touch, and one thing you taste. Repeatedly pick up the pacifier from the trash-strewn sidewalk and rub it with a disinfecting wipe. Taste is the hardest one!

Sitting in the kitchen while your baby naps, think about the last misunderstanding you had. Turn down the sound on the baby monitor and write about the misunderstanding from the other person's perspective. Then write about the misunderstanding from your own perspective before the baby's wails become loud enough to prompt a "checking in" text from your downstairs neighbor. Take your time with this one.

Write a story about an underground tunnel that leads someplace unexpected while you sit between a radiator and a diaper pail.

Using a piece of scrap paper you got from the recycling because your laptop is out of battery and the charger is in the nursery, write an acrostic poem using the name of your favorite flower. Turning over the paper to the side that says "We ❤ Our Customers," rewrite each line of the poem backward. Pick up a call from the pediatrician, who confirms that the toothpaste to brush the baby's single tooth should not contain fluoride. Hang up and rewrite every other line forward. Forget whether the pediatrician said the toothpaste should contain fluoride or should not contain fluoride. Call the pediatrician back. Lose the scrap paper in the vacuum cleaner when your spouse vacuums up crushed Doritos.

Write a physical description of a character who will later betray your protagonist, while deciding whether you should clean up the mashed avocado smeared on the underside of your laptop now or later. Remember that you ran out of disinfecting wipes. Realize that it is only eight-ten in the morning.

Think about the scariest moment of your life. Encourage your baby to do his physical-therapy exercises while you write about the moment as though it just happened. Insure that your baby is alternating picking up objects with his right hand and his left hand. Insure that he doesn't roll off the rug and

onto the hard surface of the floor as you write about the moment (the scariest one of your life, remember?) from the distance of many years. Choose which point of view you like better, as your baby hits you in the knee with a rattle covered in so much spit that the spit is somehow inside the rattle.

Contemplate what the philosophers get wrong about the nature of time. Ignore the fact that your baby's diaper features a pattern of turtles wearing glasses.

Put away all distractions, except for your baby, who is making tiny bite marks with his single tooth on the pieces of his wooden stacking toy. Sit down at your desk, or, in your case, the floor, and just let go, writing every thought that comes to mind as your baby begins to cry because you are preventing him from gnawing on the legs of the coffee table. Commit to your own authentic voice, without judgment or memories of the money you still owe on a high-tech bassinet. While beginning the second load of laundry that day, reread what you wrote and highlight common themes with different colored highlighters, or squint at the page, trying to make out what it says because it has become wet.

Write at least two paragraphs about a baby who rolls around ripping up tissues, as you answer the buzzer to receive a mysterious stranger. He says he's your best friend, whom you lost touch with years ago, but he looks totally different. What could this be about?

Your grandfather's will contains nothing but a single key. While wondering what it opens, write a short story about a baby who likes to suck on charging cords.

Realize that your shadow has become separated from your body and is now walking around on its own. Describe (1) the smell of formula, (2) the pluses and minuses of a crib vs. a pack 'n' play, or (3) a baby who says only the consonant sound "d." But you may be distracted by your suspicion that the "shadow self" is willing—even eager—to do wicked deeds. Return to the description that you chose, but find yourself unable to concentrate on the unfamiliar details. Who has time to write about caring for a baby, anyway, when you're busy with real-life tasks, like preventing your shadow self from concocting poisons?

Think about what your life would be like if you became a pirate. Keep thinking about that as you clean your baby's belly button. ♦

By Irene Pujadas
By Weike Wang
By Cressida Leyshon
By E. L. Doctorow

Fiction

- “Abject Naturalism”

[Fiction](#)

Abject Naturalism

By [Sarah Braunstein](#)



Photograph by Holly Andres for The New Yorker

The baby's father left before the Cesarean incision had fully healed, when it was still a raised red line, tender to the touch, glistening with Vitamin E oil. Perfidy! This from a man who'd once said he'd die without her, who'd written her piles of letters after she'd rejected him, back in graduate school —though graduate school makes it sound more serious than it was. They'd gone to a university to become fiction writers. The degree took two years. During this time, Toni slept with several of her peers but not with the man who eventually became her child's father. He left letters in her mailbox about how much this pained him. But he was too odd, she thought, terribly intense, with a work ethic that made her ashamed of her own and a burrowing gaze that at once flattered and repelled. He was skinny and had a ponytail. He carried a briefcase. He didn't die for lack of her, despite what his letter warned.

It wasn't until a decade had passed, when she was working as a waitress in a small New England city and had just broken up with a bartender named Dusty, when she had given up writing, all early sense of specialness

evaporated, that she decided to reach out to him. He was happy to hear from her, her old suitor said, thought about her sometimes, wondered how she was. Was she still writing fiction? Now and then, she lied. He'd always loved her prose style, he told her. He himself had two novel drafts and was finishing a Ph.D. in a city a few hours away. The next weekend, she took a train.

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The briefcase had become a rugged leather saddlebag. He'd grown into the weirdness, cut his hair and gained some weight, a humanizing softness. She found he was easier to talk to than he'd been when he was twenty-four. There was too much sex at first to get any writing done, but she hoped the urge might return. Being with him, she began to feel that little kick, a sensation in her wrists, her fingers, an idea that shows up first in her palms. It was hard to pinpoint where this urgency resided, or what use she might make of it. She worried that what she really wanted was to be adored—not to write but for him to tell her about what she'd written, to praise it, as he had done in school.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Sarah Braunstein read "Abject Naturalism."](#)

None of that happened, because she got pregnant, an accident that disrupted everything spectacularly. She expected shock, sure, but after the shock—something. Maybe she wanted to be swung around, have her belly kissed, but what he said was this: “I’ve always been so fond of you, but I never wanted to be a father.”

“Fond? But I was your white whale. I was your Beatrice!”

She saw in his expression that she'd made a terrible mistake. All the years of rejecting him, and in the end he dashed. She hadn't wanted a baby in any conscious way, but the moment she saw the test result she knew—a drilling knowledge—she'd keep it. She could drop certain pretenses now. During her second trimester, she trained to become a phlebotomist. He put some money into an account, for college. He gave her some money, too, but not very

much, because he didn't have very much. "If you do this, Toni, you're going to be on your own," he said, and she made him put it in writing.

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When the baby was only a few weeks old, something lucky happened. A friend had a friend who was renting a cool apartment at the top of a hill in a newly hip part of their city. The friend had gotten into grad school and was moving to Chicago. Wasn't Toni always talking about finding a new place? Toni couldn't afford to buy a house, not in that hip neighborhood or anywhere, but the deal on the rent would let her live among the gentrifiers for a while, in this up-and-coming district overlooking the actual ocean.

Toni toured the apartment the next day, the baby in her car-seat carrier, her Cesarean incision smarting but so subtly she could almost forget about it. The landlord was a bearded beatnik, a vestige of another era, who'd bought several ramshackle structures for a song in the sixties and liked to curate an assortment of interesting tenants. Like a rabbit warren, Toni thought, six small rooms, wide wooden floorboards, a tub on avian feet, porcelain sinks and clanking radiators. Nothing was square or plumb, there was no dishwasher, but it was only three blocks to a coffee shop, another five to a wine bar called Moon Under Water, and one day, when the baby was older, they could walk together to the new elementary school, certified green and —because it served students from the housing project at the bottom of the hill, many of whom were immigrants or asylum seekers—impressively diverse.

She and the baby moved in, and she painted the rooms, and the years passed. She stopped doing blood draws, worked her way up to administrative management at the hospital. Her child qualified for Gifted and Talented, a letter that came in the mail said.

•

The child had been given the name Amalie, but a few months after she turned seven she said, in a grave, flinty, fully assured voice, "I want you to call me Nancy."

Toni refused. Even so, Amalie began to write “Nancy” on the top of her assignments at school. Her friends, even the teacher, began to call her by this wrong name. Amalie liked when people complied. But she was gentle about it, had a savvy sort of guilelessness, with her big eyes and long dark lashes that made Toni think of a cartoon llama. By nine, she was Amalie again. She was studious, quick to anger. She cut the tags out of every shirt. Hated anything nubby. Hated crumbs in the butter. She collected seedpods, which turned to dust on her dresser, and the carapaces of odd bugs.

•

One day, she said she was going out by herself. “I’m old enough,” Amalie said. “I want to jog. Alone.”

“No,” Toni told her.

“I’m *ten*.[”]

It was true, ten. Toni’s heart seized whenever she said it—gruesome, how fast a decade could pass.

“I’ll take you for a walk.”

“Alone. And I want to jog. For the children.”

The students in the school district had been given digital wristbands that counted their steps; if one took a certain number of steps a day in America, a child in Africa would be given a tube of peanut paste. That hadn’t sounded right, but a brochure affirmed it.

“It’s the difference between life and death,” Amalie said.

“That’s not quite accurate.”

“It is!” She waved the arm that wore the wristband, then tried another strategy: “It’s safe. Lucien and Violet and Hollis are allowed.”

All true. “You can’t go past the firehouse.”

“I know. I promise.”

She allowed Toni to apply sunscreen to her face. Then Toni led her to the door and said, “Not past the firehouse. Come home in half an hour.” Amalie nodded solemnly, tapped the face of her big black watch.

“Don’t talk to anyone, all right?”

“Why would I talk to someone?”

She ran off, sprinting, as if she might be chased.

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

When it’s your own baby, every loping shadow in every bush is a sociopath with a jar of baby teeth on his mantel. He lived in the perimeter of her thoughts, this man and his jar. But not really. Only sometimes. She had seen too many serial-killer movies. That bartender she’d dated, Dusty, had a library consisting mostly of books about the Zodiac Killer. She blamed Dusty, in part, for her paranoia, and she also blamed whomever Amalie’s elementary school contracted with for picture day. When you ordered prints from that photography company, it sent you—gratis, like it or not—a demented little card with your child’s face and address, which you were supposed to keep in your wallet and give to the media and the police if your kid disappeared. It actually said this on the back of the card: *In the event of your child’s disappearance . . .*

Twenty minutes passed. I should not have let her go, she thought. She is too curious. She has no father. No man has imprinted. She’s vulnerable.

But she came back whole. A knock, and when Toni opened the door she found her daughter breathing heavily and standing next to a glossy black telescope on a tripod stand. “A man gave it to me,” she said.

“A man?”

“It needs to be cleaned. We can see Saturn’s rings!”

“Which man?”

“It needs a new—I forget the word.” She wiped her brow. “He told me. He said to look on eBay. He said I could buy the part for cheap.”

•

From the months in which she and Amalie’s father had negotiated the end of their relationship, one conversation stood out. She was newly pregnant—not showing, but her waist was distended, her face puffy—and perhaps for this reason when he said, “I’m in love with another person,” it was so jarring she saw actual stars in her peripheral vision. When she began to cry, he said, “Listen, no. I made that up. That’s not true.”

“It’s not? Is there a woman?”

“No,” he said. “Not really.”

“No, or *not really*? ”

“I don’t want a family. I don’t want a wife or a child. I want my central relationship to be with texts.”

“Texts?”

“I need to organize my life around my work.”

“You’re in love with a book?”

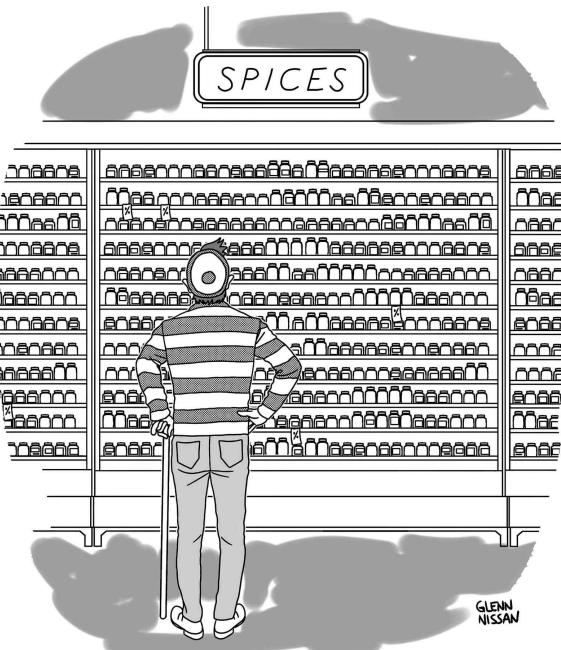
“Not a book.”

Soon, he got a teaching job at a prestigious university. Then he began to publish his novels. Toni read them in hardcover at the public library, in a room full of homeless people, the body odor amplifying her sense of punishment. She thought of the books as his ex-wives. He was prolific. No one who resembled Toni or Amalie appeared in the pages. The novels had bold, handsome covers and often featured protagonists who were writers themselves. How did he get away with that? She had been told in school not to do that, to stop being so clever.

Amalie knew her father was an author. She spoke of him as an abstract, a concept—"my biological father"—as if she were the child of a sperm donor. She was not especially curious, not yet. But one day she would read his books. That was coming. Toni did not like to think about it. She didn't seek out his reviews, though she could read them without having a panic attack, if she happened upon them in the *Times* or in waiting-room magazines. She'd stopped Googling him long ago, after she read an article in their alumni magazine with the headline "The Author's Retreat: A Place for Plotting." His living room had wall-to-wall bookshelves, a giant window through which you could see a span of darkly pink extraplanetary sky, and Barcelona chairs. She felt immensely jealous. To be free of children is truly to be free, she knew that now.

•

She found the telescope guy on the street that ran parallel to theirs, Beckett Street. Amalie had pointed out where he lived. It was a solid square house, shabby but not dingy, a single-family. A small yard, no landscaping but a lone pot of geraniums on the front porch. When Amalie was at school, Toni went to confront him. "Confront" is too strong a word. She had a point to make.



"Cardamom... cardamom..."
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn and Colin Nissan

A doorbell coated in rust. She knocked instead and he came to the door. Before he spoke, she could tell he was a local, one who would be displaced. He had a wide, ruddy, pleasant face. Mid- to late sixties. Gray-brown hair, white at the temples, and a pair of black glasses over his T-shirt collar, pulling it down so she could see his chest hair, silver and feathery.

“You gave my daughter a telescope—” she began.

“A telescope?” He raised a finger, tapped his lips. She thought he was going to deny it, but he said, “Annie? Emily?,” and now she wished for a fake name.

“*Amalie*. ”

He snapped his fingers. “Right, yes, Amalie. Did you get it to work? It needs a new—”

“What message are you sending her?”

He blinked.

“I’m sure you don’t mean any harm. But consider the precedent.” She spoke with effortful neutrality. “You sent her the message that it’s safe to talk to men she doesn’t know.”

“Did I?”

“And it might have been safe in this case. That doesn’t mean next time, or on the next street, it will be.”

He took the glasses off his shirt, put them on. “I think you might have misunderstood. I was only setting out a bunch of trash on the curb. She skipped by. It was going to the dump, right? I told her she could take it or it was trash.”

He spoke carefully but without condescension; she could hear years of smoking.

“I figured a kid her age might like a thing like that, you know? That’s all I did. I’m not a predator.”

She did not like that word: “skipped.” “Skipped,” “predator,” these words she didn’t approve of, but then he smiled and she saw his crowded teeth, the white of bleaching products.

“Thirty seconds, I swear. Our whole interaction.” He held up his right hand. She began to feel sheepish.

“It’s my policy that you’re dangerous,” she told him. “Until I have evidence to the contrary. It’s not personal. Do you have a daughter?”

“A niece.”

“How old?”

“Grown. But she’s fine. She works in security. I’m Marco.”

“Toni.”

“You want to come in? Cup of joe?”

She saw into the house behind him, plush red seventies-thick carpet, a couch with wooden armrests and yellow-daisy upholstery. She said she had to go to work. She’d be late. She was walking away but then turned back and said, “She was *jogging*, for the record. Amalie doesn’t skip.”

“Roger that,” he said, saluting her.

•

She was paranoid. She was projecting. She met at the wine bar with her friends Lucy and Katherine, who were a decade older, and they told her she had overreacted, but she cut them off—“I know, I know, I’m crazy.”

“*Not crazy!*” they said in unison, each stroking one of her hands, which lay flat on the table. She sat upright, like a person taking a pledge, like it was a deposition.

“Lots of mothers go through this,” Katherine said, stroking. “When Sadie got boobs, it fucked me up. I wept in the changing room at Macy’s.”

Lucy said, “My sister had an actual breakdown when Coco got her period.”

“Amalie’s not going through puberty.”

“Of course she is.”

“A puberty of *will*,” Toni said, and they told her it was the same thing, all of a piece. But Amalie was so little-girlish, her body concave and lithe in the way of a child. She didn’t even need deodorant yet.

“It’s happening,” they promised her.

“I’m not afraid of her period.”

“Boobs are triggering, too.”

“They get those nubs.”

“Pubes.”

“Right, that’s the order.”

“You sound like perverts,” Toni said, “worse than any man,” and they laughed but she was not joking, there was something sick in this hypervigilance, hungry and wistful and canny and boundaryless—and suddenly she felt shame for how she had treated the telescope guy.

•

The next day, she dropped by again. She had only ten minutes to spare before she was due at work. Today, his T-shirt was gray. Salt-and-pepper shadow on his face, darkest on his chin. “I was rude,” she said.

“It’s understandable.”

She looked hard at him. “You’re too *nice*.”

“You’re a mother. That’s how I see it. You’re allowed to overreact.”

She felt he’d accepted her apology before she’d fully made it. She said it was true, yes, she’d overreacted, she was a single mom—but she wished she’d been allowed to apologize fully.

“Coffee?” He pantomimed a mug in his hand, a swig. She saw an agility in his body, lightness despite his size. “You want to apologize inside?”

“I’ll be late to work.”

He dropped the mug. “Where’s that?”

“The hospital.”

“Doctor?”

“Administration.”

“Forms,” he said sympathetically. “I don’t envy you.”

“They’re not bad. I used to take people’s blood.”

“You prefer forms to blood?”

“The money’s better.”

He said he was retired. But once he’d built houses. “I messed up my back bad. A beam fell on me. Traction for three months. I sued a giant. Talk about forms.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It turned out O.K.” He made the rubbing gesture with his fingertips that meant money. He added, “I barely limp. I’m not addicted to pills. Only Tylenol, swear on my mother’s grave. No one can believe it. Show a doctor at your hospital my X-ray. Tell him only Tylenol and see what he says. Or she. Tell me what she says.”

Lightness in her chest when she drove away. John Lennon singing. In the middle of the night, he calls her name.

•

That night, she said to Amalie, “Never tell a man you don’t know your name.”

“What? I never would tell a man that.”

“No, I mean never give your name to a man you don’t know.”

Amalie thought about it. She didn’t speak.

Toni said, “Did you tell the man who gave you the telescope your name?”

“No.”

“I think you did.”

Amalie’s expression didn’t change. She turned her head to the side, like a rabbit listening. Toni didn’t say anything more—the weirdness of her syntax felt like warning enough.

•

A few days later, a package arrived. It was the telescope part. He had bought them a present—had figured out where they lived. It wouldn’t have been hard. She held it, her heart beating in her neck. It had been a long time since she’d received mail from a man. This was just a piece of square plastic with an angled mirror, but it returned something to her. And then Amalie walked into the room and said, “I know I should have asked you first. You were in the shower. I found it on a Web site. It was easy. Just four ninety-nine. I used your credit card.”

Her credit card?

“Amalie! That’s—that’s—” The only word that came to mind was “criminal.” “That’s not O.K.,” she said, but the girl’s face remained placid,

indifferent, and so Toni said, “That’s criminal, Amalie—*criminal*,” and saw a flash of surprise.

•

This time, she had forty-five minutes before she had to go to work. He seemed surprised to see her. The white T-shirt again, and he was clean-shaven. He invited her in. His kitchen had an old linoleum floor, a white countertop speckled with inky gold. All the appliances were fifty years old except for the coffee machine, which was the kind that ruins the environment with its plastic pods. A Brooklynite would gut the kitchen in a second. They sat down in green molded-plastic chairs.

“You really had a fire under you,” he said.

“I’m prone to worrying.”

“You’re suspicious. That’s a good thing. My mother was never suspicious. Not a whit.”

“A whit?” She liked that word.

“Not a crumb. It was different back then. I don’t think our mothers worried so much.”

He was brought up here, in this house, him and his sister and his mother. He could not imagine his mother tracking down a neighbor and yelling about danger.

“I didn’t yell.”

“You didn’t.”

“I hope I didn’t.”

“You didn’t yell—*my* mother yelled. But she had to. She had no idea where I went. Who I talked to. We were all just let loose. All the neighborhood kids. We got back in time for dinner, mostly.”

He handed her a bag of potato chips. She took a few.

“No camp, no programs. We were wild. Scrappy. Same exact place. Not too long ago.”

She said it might as well be a different country now—the watching eyes, the schedules, the helmets and knee pads and consent forms.

When he got up to brew another cup, she saw evidence of the injury, but faintly; it was more a hitch than a limp. He moved gracefully, poured a mug of water into the machine’s reservoir. He was tall, on the edge of burly, but had a way of gliding. She sat close enough to the fridge that she could read its magnets—there was one that said “A minute on the lips, a lifetime on the hips.” It held a reminder card from the dentist. She read his last name. Now she could Google him. She felt sad that she could Google him. She wouldn’t. She’d spare one person in her life.

•

That same day, driving to pick up Amalie from aftercare, Toni saw children playing in the street at the bottom of the hill. How had she failed to account for them, these dozens of children who parted to make way for her car? They rode their bikes in the streets, helmetless. Of course, Toni did not judge the parents. These families brought different traditions and practices. Many had fled true danger. But why had she not thought of them when she and Marco were talking?

Amalie’s elementary school was diverse, dozens of languages spoken there, but the playground nearest their house was generally occupied by white children. Once, she’d asked Amalie, “Do the African children play by themselves at school?” Amalie considered the question for a good while. All she said was “Halima is really annoying.”

•

On the fifth night, Toni broke down and gave Amalie the telescope part. Amalie tried to install it, but it turned out that she’d purchased the wrong size—it was too big for the hole. “Serves you right,” Toni said tenderly, and

gave her a squeeze. Amalie was so disappointed she cried. She hardly ever cried. She looked so helpless, like a kid lost at a fair, shamed by the spectacle, adorable despite every intention. Toni measured the telescope several times, got her credit card, and ordered the correct part. She paid for expedited shipping.

“Three to five days?” the girl sniffled, and Toni said yes, three to five, and Amalie let her mother wipe her eyes, and let her do a French braid and tie a yellow ribbon at the end.

Later that night, Toni called Lucy and said, “I’m not going to Google the telescope guy.”

“What if he’s an offender?”

“He’s not. I trust my gut.”

She Googled him. His full name, city, and state. She found a White Pages listing with his address, which she already knew. An obituary for a woman who’d died a decade ago, who was perhaps his mother . . . yes, Helen Lorraine, survived by two children, Marco and Loretta, and a granddaughter. She was described as a homemaker and a long-standing member of a bridge club. Toni saw Marco’s features in the woman’s square, serious face. No crime, no red flag. She closed the computer. She imagined a group of boys roaming the neighborhood; she put them in clothes like they wore in “The Outsiders,” greaser gear, Levi’s and dingy white T-shirts. Poor white boys. Working-class boys before they worked. It was classist to be turned on, she thought, but also not to be.

•

Now she had two hours until she had to be at work. This time, he brought them coffee in his living room. It had ancient carpeting and furniture, but the TV was new, as was his armchair. “A smart chair.” He showed her the hidden panel—a hatch for power, USB, a dial for lumbar support. There was even a refrigerated compartment where one could store drinks. “From the manufacturer of those Japanese toilets. You know those toilets?”

She did. There was an elaborate toilet at Yosaku, her favorite restaurant in town; it caressed you with a stream of warm water, a sensation so much like urination that she felt dirtier for having pressed the button. He said he'd never tried sushi but he liked Japanese gadgets. Looking at them in magazines, knowing how they worked—he liked that. He was thinking of ordering a toilet for himself.

Toni said, "We ordered the telescope part. She can hardly wait." He smiled. He had an uncomplicated warmth to his face, like an elementary-school teacher. They drank more coffee and he served a sleeve of Ritz and told her about a kid called Tato, a friend back in the day, two streets over.

"What kind of name is that?"

"Short for Potato. His real name was Richard."



"And how is it the next night, eaten cold, in the dark, directly out of the tinfoil, while standing over the kitchen sink?"
Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

The neighborhood wonder. At nineteen, he went to Hollywood to try his luck and actually landed a part on a soap opera, a real part. Everyone followed the show vigilantly, all its twists, cheered whenever he came onscreen.

“The day after Thanksgiving, Tato died of a drug overdose in a shitty motel on Sunset Boulevard. Died in real life. Not on the show. Some of the guys kept watching anyway. They got hooked on it. ‘Westerly.’ ” He hummed its theme song, which she vaguely recognized. She wanted to know who else didn’t survive their adolescence. He shook his head.

“That’s no talk for you,” he said.

“I can take it.”

He wanted to tell her—she could see a hunger to reminisce. She liked the way he told her the scary bits so calmly.

“There was Jimmy Tampuco. Overdosed in his basement. Your girl won’t do drugs. I can tell she won’t. Oh, and Sissy LaDuke. That was sad. She won the jump-rope contest in elementary school. She was drunk. That might make you feel better.”

“Drunk in *elementary school*? ”

“In the crash, later. Your girl won’t drink. Amalie isn’t like that.”

“How do you know?”

“You can tell,” he said. “She’s—” He paused. “Clean. Maybe that’s not the right way to say it.” She pictured a white sheet on a clothesline, shuddering in the wind. She liked that he said it, even as she understood it was problematic, implying as it did that there could be dirty children. And what would make a child *dirty*? And whose fault would it be?

•

She let Amalie out on her own again. She didn’t return with a gift this time, swore she hadn’t spoken to a soul. Toni felt better, proud of herself for overcoming her paranoia. She let her out the next day, too. But that night something happened that scared her all over again. At two in the morning, Toni woke up, got up to pee. As a matter of habit, she poked her head into Amalie’s bedroom, and saw her bed was empty. She searched the apartment, calling for her. Thought to call the police but could not find her phone. It

was not on the nightstand. Or in her purse. She called louder, ran to the front door, saw Amalie in the yellow beam of a street light, in her tie-dyed nightgown, an arm stretched to the sky. She held an illuminated object in her hand, moved it as a person sways a lighter at a concert.

“What are you doing?”

Amalie spun, clutched the phone to her chest. “Don’t be mad. It was free.”

“I couldn’t find you!”

An app, she explained. You held your phone to the night sky and it named all the stars for you. You looked at the sky through the screen, as if the phone were a window, and each star was labelled, and dotted lines connected the stars into constellations, which were labelled, too.

“But you can’t leave the house in the middle of the night! You scared me, honey!”

“I was ten feet away,” Amalie said steadily. She came to her, took her hand, said, “The app was free, Mama.”

“You don’t know who might be roaming around at night,” Toni said, when she’d got Amalie back into bed, when she was sitting on the edge of the bed, tucking her in again.

Amalie said, “What do you mean? No one was out there. *Who* are you talking about?,” and since that was not a question Toni could answer she began to name the things she would take away from the girl if she did not comply. Screen time. Jogging. The special magnifying box into which she put live bugs and her bloody scabs.

•

The sunroom next. He was showing her the house in this way, a cup of coffee in each spot. Wicker furniture with firm, pink-pastel cushions. A ceiling fan spun brown parchment blades. Looks exotic, he told her, but it came from Lowe’s. A bookshelf contained spy thrillers and Stephen King. The Danielle Steels had been his mother’s. He gazed at her in a way that was

—well, that was loving. That word felt accurate. How would she explain that to Lucy and Katherine? She would tell them straight: he looks at me like he loves me. But they would burst out laughing, because she wouldn't be able to say it straight. From brain to mouth, in that nanosecond, it would become distorted with irony. She could only *think* it unironically. So she did. He looks at me like he loves me. She felt her cheeks grow warm. She could feel her heart in her ears, as if she'd plugged them. His mouth did not frighten her. Did she want to kiss it? Maybe not yet. But she would contentedly share a straw with him, or an apple.

She told him some more things about herself. She told him her childhood fantasy was to become a writer. She'd written stories on a secondhand typewriter about people who were way worse off than her, and on the basis of these she'd got a scholarship to the state university, and then to graduate school.

“What did you want to write?”

“Scary things.”

“Like Stephen King?”

“Scarier.”

“Than *that*? ”

He looked at her like such a thing was not possible.

“A different kind of scary. Funny, too.”

“Dark comedy?”

“I couldn’t do it. I quit.”

“Of course not,” he said, chuckling. “You’re a nice person.” Then he said, “But why not?”

“I guess I didn’t have the discipline. And I could never end things right.”

“Huh.”

“Amalie’s father is a writer,” she offered next, because then she wouldn’t wonder anymore how much she would tell him. “He’s famous. In certain circles, I guess. He’s written many books. He’s won awards. I met him in graduate school.”

Marco did not look impressed by this or ask his name.

“Does he see her?” he wanted to know.

“He put money in an account for her college. I asked him to give up his parental rights.”

“And he did it?”

“In a snap.”

“A snap?”

She snapped her fingers.

“A fool,” Marco said, thumped a fist like a judge’s gavel on his broad thigh.

Marco told her he’d come close to having a kid. A long time ago. He’d been in love with a woman named Diane. She worked in a sandwich shop owned by her father. When he picked her up after a shift, she smelled like spicy meat. She had extremely long hair. Crystal Gayle hair. Did Toni know her? The old country singer? Hair nearly to the floor, long and straight, like a cape. Diane kept it in a braid at work, wrapped all around her head, kind of like a turban, because you couldn’t let a customer find hair like that in a sandwich.

“Talk about a health-code violation. She washed it twice a month. It took twelve hours to dry. Hey, can you find me a picture of her? Of Crystal Gayle? I’d like to see her.”

She called up a photograph of the country singer from the phone sitting on her lap. He looked at it for a while, then returned the phone and said, “We

thought about having a kid. It was on the table. But she didn't want to. That's what she decided in the end. It was the right decision for her. I respect her for it."

Their stories had a kind of symmetry, were inversions of each other. That's what he was telling her. The room overlooked a fenced-in back yard. There was a hammock on a metal stand, an overgrown brick patio. The light was a deep, dappled green that made her eyelids and limbs grow heavy, a spontaneous fatigue like Dorothy in the field of poppies.

•

The newspapers began to speak of a housing crisis. Her landlord always swore he wouldn't raise the rent. "Not on you and Amalie. Never would." One day, he added, "But when I die—well, you're on your own, my friend."

"You can leave me this house in your will," she'd replied, a joke, but his face got serious and he told her it was going to his son. They both knew his son would sell to a developer or a Brooklynite. Her landlord was getting older. He'd had a knee replacement and might need to do a hip. It struck her, one day, that she thought more about her landlord's health than about her own parents'.

Young couples kept moving into the neighborhood. They drove Subarus or Audis or Teslas or vintage, gas-guzzling Mercedes-Benzes in white or butter yellow. "I work remotely," everyone said. Or "I'm a consultant," no further explanation, as if she should know what that meant. Young chefs, screenwriters, environmental lawyers, medical-marijuana growers, beer brewers, everyone so exceedingly passionate, alert with creativity, everyone—all of a sudden—younger than her. She felt like a fraud in their company. She only dressed like a member of the creative class.

Once, her imagination had been like a puppy that wanted to lick everything. In college, she didn't go out on the weekends, preferring to stay in and write. Late at night, she would read what she'd written to the girls who remained in the dorm, who'd show her the goosebumps on their arms as proof of the excellence of the story. She didn't get the same reception in her M.F.A. program. The first fiction she shared was about a girl who shoplifts a box of

tampons. It's meant to be a rite of passage, but she gets caught and arrested and bleeds everywhere. The story ends with the cops calling her mother. The girls in the dorm would have had goosebumps. But her teacher stared at the place where the ceiling met the wall, tapped his long fingers on the table, said, "There is so much writing that could be good but isn't."

A long pause.

"Why is this?" he asked the class.

They guessed: Passive voice? Poor characterization? Disharmony between form and content?

"No," he said. "It's because it doesn't take responsibility for itself."

•

The new telescope part arrived, the right part. She hoped. Toni gave it to Amalie after dinner. The girl squealed and raced to the telescope, but she couldn't get it to fit. It seemed to be the correct size but it wouldn't slide in. They searched for a button, a lever, some trick. Went online. There were people on YouTube demonstrating every conceivable thing in the universe but not how to make this eyepiece fit in this telescope, and by then it was getting late.

"Time for bed, honey. We'll do it tomorrow."

"We're close. Please!" She had written a list of features of the night sky on a piece of notebook paper and held it up now, her forehead clenched. "Tomorrow, it's going to rain. Tomorrow, there's an eighty-per-cent chance of rain."

"The sky isn't going anywhere, is it?"

Amalie began to cry but recovered quickly. She wiped her face with a handful of toilet paper, rubbed her eyes, and took stoic, heartbreakng breaths, like a businesswoman in a bathroom stall. Her restraint destroyed Toni. Amalie fell asleep with the tattered edge of her old security blanket gripped in her hand.

Toni would get her girl's telescope working. Wake her before dawn. That was the idea—to surprise her, wake her up, show her the sky. But she couldn't figure it out. She played with it for a while, drank a glass of wine, finally gave up.

•

Once not long ago Toni had a dream in which she was renting the same apartment but the other bedroom, Amalie's orange room, was an office full of *Ikea* furniture. No Amalie. She had not been born. The walls were white. The books in the office were arranged by color, a trend Toni scorned in waking life. That was the whole dream. She had woken flooded with dread. Amalie! On the nightstand, she'd spotted proof of the child's existence—a drawing the girl had recently done, a bird with a deformed beak. Evidently, Amalie had predicted her mother's critique, because upon giving her the drawing Amalie had said, "Its beak is *supposed* to be like that." She'd been reading about the animal deformities following Chernobyl. All kinds of deformities, she explained. "Weird beaks on the birds. Extra legs on deer. Twisty spines. Long necks. No necks."

"No necks?"

"Anything can go wrong," her daughter said brightly.

Now Toni turned on the bedside light. She looked at that bird drawing. The bird's beak was twisted in a way that made it seem like it would be difficult for it to eat. It had lopsided, querying eyes. Then Toni had an idea. If she thought about it too much, she wouldn't do it. She got out of bed. She left a note on the kitchen counter. "Ran an errand! Back shortly. Go back to sleep. love, Mom." Amalie wouldn't wake, hardly ever woke in the night. It would only be five minutes. Ten, tops. That episode in the street had been an anomaly.

•

She saw herself from above—a woman jogging. A woman in black leggings and a slouchy gray sweatshirt and no bra, holding a telescope out in front of her like a baby that is not her responsibility. Help. There were no lights on in

his house. She'd hoped that he would be reading in bed or playing solitaire downstairs in the special chair, which had a removable desktop. Then she could say, I remembered you're a night owl. I saw a light.

In the darkness, her fist made a frightened sound. Finally, the light above her head came on. His face was reddish, cleanly shaved, his hair in surprising disarray and longer than she'd expected.

"Toni, you all right?"

"Hello, Marco. I'm fine. I'm really sorry to wake you. I need to get this thing to work. I can't get the new part in, and tomorrow it's going to rain. There's a storm coming."

He shook his head. He rubbed his right eye with the heel of his hand.

"You apologize too much."

He was wearing a blue velour robe. She could see the soft rise of his pectorals, the outline of his abdomen under the robe. He looked at the telescope and frowned. Looked at the night sky. He didn't look at her.

"Come in," he said finally. They didn't go far—just into the foyer. He bent down, careful to keep his robe closed, and examined the telescope. There was a hidden button on the base.

"Here," he said. "Underneath. See?" The part slid in, easy as pie, once you pushed this button. "Ta-da."

He stood, smiling. She felt suddenly embarrassed. She said, "I hope you don't misunderstand."

"Misunderstand?"

"It's late."

He looked at her squarely.

“I just want to make Amalie happy. I want to surprise her before daybreak,” she said.

“My doorstep, in the middle of the night. Don’t misunderstand?”

“You gave it to her. Where was I supposed to go?”

He tightened his robe. “You want a cup, Toni?”

“I won’t go back to sleep.” She shook her head. “I should go. She might wake up.” But she was only a block away. Two minutes. Less if she jogged. She had left the note. “One cup. You have decaf?”

They sat together on the stoop, mugs in their hands. It felt less rule-breaking on the stoop. She wasn’t in a man’s house, only outside her own. They watched the spastic display of moths in the street light. An upstairs light came on in the house across the street. Light from these two sources fell onto Marco’s face like powder, softening his complexion. She admitted that she’d Googled him.

“I’m flattered you did that. Not too newsworthy, you see.”

“I read your mother’s obituary.”

“You did? I wrote that.”

“It was lovely,” she said softly. That wasn’t quite true. She had felt nothing of the woman’s essence. But the writing was clear, said what it meant, and that was more of a feat than anyone realized.

“What about you, Toni? What would I find if I looked you up?”

She felt mildly disappointed that he hadn’t. “Nada.”

He leaned back, clasped his hands behind his head, so that his elbow lightly touched her shoulder. “Your parents are alive?”

“Nominally.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“They fight all day.”

“Too bad,” he said, bringing his hands back to his lap. “A shame.”

In graduate school, she had written a story loosely based on her parents, in which a couple has to contend with a skunk in the basement—their failure to contain the animal leads them to pitch a tent in the back yard. The same teacher said the story suffered from abject naturalism. The plausible was described plausibly, credible things occurred in credible order. Toni felt this was the worst thing that could be said about a story, the worst way you could live a life.

Marco went on. “I’m dyslexic. That’s why it took me so long to write the obituary. That’s why I didn’t graduate from high school. I could only read in a totally silent room, and then it was exhausting.”

He pointed to the lit room on the second floor of the house across the street. “There,” he said. “That room.” The house they faced had a sporty Volvo in the driveway, an amazing garden, raised beds and trellises. He gestured to the telescope. “You should look, but from upstairs. We have to be higher. You can see the book titles.”



"Now that you've stayed up all night trying to cram everything you need into a carry-on, and now that you're reconciled to the fact that your hair dryer had to stay behind, and now that you've frantically rushed through the airport with your cumbersome luggage in tow and made it through security and to the gate just in the nick of time, we're going to make you check your bag anyway. Don't worry, though—it's complimentary."

Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

“You can?”

“And their moles.”

“Jesus, Marco.”

“You don’t approve?” He kept his eyes on the window. “I gave it away, anyhow.”

“That’s what you were using it for? Spying on your neighbors?”

He laughed. “What—you’re allowed, but I’m not?”

What did he mean, *allowed*? She thought of her own girl, alone at home. She said, “You have a niece, Marco.”

“I do.”

“She works in security.”

“She does.”

She kissed him. First a peck, then deeper. He kissed her back. He did not seem surprised to be kissing her, nor did he hesitate. Beneath the coffee, his mouth tasted pleasantly herbal. They brought the telescope upstairs. There was wainscoting in the bedroom. There were those old-fashioned on-off light switches, with two black buttons, one above the other, that make such a satisfying sound when you press them.

•

When she got home, she found Amalie in the exact same spot, drooling on her pillow. All that time, which felt enormous, like hours, had actually been fifty-two minutes.

She had put her eye to the telescope, allowed Marco to adjust it. The man across the street had been reading a book in bed, a slim light clamped to the

headboard. He had curly blond hair. A person asleep next to him. A lump with black hair. Toni did not know if the lump was a man or a woman. The reading man occasionally, absently, rubbed his genitals. The book he was reading was called “Screenwriting.” That was it. Nothing else happened. The dullness of the scene, the abject naturalism, aroused her.

“This is what you do, Marco? Watch them?”

“Sometimes.”

“And what else?”

“What else?”

The whole time, Amalie slept. Now Toni shook her shoulder until she sat up, still asleep. A hank of hair clung to the side of her mouth. She wasn’t awake yet, her eyes strange and empty, like a ghost who would haunt this place when it became a condo, and Toni couldn’t bear it, said, “Baby, baby, wake up.” Amalie let herself be pulled up. Her nightgown was hitched into her white underpants. Toni pulled it down and pulled the hair from her mouth, led her into the hall. Only when she opened the front door, when cool air rushed at them and she saw the telescope standing in the street, pointing virtuously upward, did she really wake up.

“I fixed it.”

Amalie made a sound. A joyful yowl, feline, so quick and piercing that something screeched back in alarm. Then she surged for the telescope, took it in her hands. She knew where everything was up there. Her patience was enormous. Her focus.

•

She was a polite kid, considerate—she didn’t forget Toni.

“You want a turn?”

“Later, honey. Not now. You look now.”

Toni felt strange. She'd sneaked out like a teen-ager and come home different, out of joint, as if she'd lost her virginity.

"I see a satellite," Amalie announced, but Toni's focus was earthbound. She was planning something in her head. She felt it all there, laid out. A structure she could borrow. A new sense of urgency.

"I see Mars."

"That's amazing, honey."

He would be another set of eyes. He would keep an eye. The moment she decided, she decided everything. Where she'd put her bureau, which room Amalie would get. Where Toni would set up a desk. Where she would try one more time. Slow down, she told herself, but then she thought, Why should I slow down? She had been too humble, too modest. The edges of the sky lightened. A seam appeared in the horizon, and they went inside. In the apartment, Amalie hugged Toni around the waist—hugged her hard, encircling her totally, the way she had as a toddler. She made a move to return to bed, but Toni took her wrist and said no.

"No?"

"Let's end the night in a doughnut shop."

"It's the morning already!"

But that was what Toni wanted. Like in graduate school. Like the early-morning diner after the first time you've been with someone. Coffee after a hookup. So that she could linger in this state, so that Amalie would remember it longer. They drove to the Christmas-themed doughnut shop off Exit 5 and Toni ordered half a dozen, what the hell, to celebrate.

"To celebrate? What are we celebrating?" They sat across from each other in a hard plastic yellow booth. On a shelf above them, several mechanical Santas were frozen in hip gyrations.

"You!" Toni said, lifting her coffee.

The girl made a doubtful face, blinked her red-rimmed eyes. There was still a faint indentation around her eye socket, from the telescope.

“You and the cosmos, honey. The sky. That’s what.”

“Oh,” Amalie said, taking a large bite.

Toni allowed Amalie a few sips of coffee. Sugar granules sparkled on her cheeks. People came and went. Mostly old men.

Toni said, “We should thank the man who gave you the telescope.”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to talk to him.”

“I checked him out.”

“You did? When?”

An elderly man in a stained shirt and green-tinted glasses—looking toward Amalie—smiled and pressed a button on a Santa across the room, the tallest Santa, who began to gyrate and sing. He was trying to please her, the only child in the place. Amalie winced like a woman with a hangover, looked out the window. The Santa crackled dementedly.

Toni said, “We should give him a doughnut.”

“*Him?*”

She thought Toni meant the man who started up the Santa.

“Marco.”

“Wait. Who’s *that*? ”

“The man who gave you the telescope. His name is Marco.”

Amalie stopped eating. She blinked her long lashes.

“Why?”

“It would be nice.”

Amalie thought about it. “A lemon,” she said finally, looking into the box at the remaining doughnuts. Lemon were her least favorite. Then she tapped her watch, reminded her mother it was a school day. As they were leaving, she passed the man who had made the Santa dance, and he put his hand out, the way one does for a high five, a meaty palm, but Amalie sailed by, did not pause.

Amalie my anomaly, her mother thought. Good girl. Just like that. In the parking lot, a big black bird tore at a garbage bag. Empty cans skidded across the pavement. A storm was coming, like Amalie had said. They were stuffed to the gills with sugar and caffeine. The school nurse would call in two hours. By that point, Toni would have called in sick herself, would be home napping. But before the nap. Before Amalie throws up in the coatroom. While the sky is so lovely and strange and their glucose levels have not yet plummeted—she feels entitled to everything she wants. Ambition is ascendant. Danger everywhere, but it’s not—look at that—in this story. In this story, no one lays a finger on any child. The wind lifts Amalie’s hair. Toni lets her ride in the front seat. When she starts the car, the radio is already playing the right song, Freddie Mercury announcing a homicide, and they sing together, and it ends just when she pulls up to the school, as if God himself had set the needle down. ♦

By Willing Davidson
By Shuang Xuetao
By Rebecca Mead
By Oleh Sentsov

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Books

When Yuppies Ruled

Defining a social type is a way of defining an era. What can the time of the young urban professional tell us about our own?

By [Louis Menand](#)



In the nineteen-eighties, a certain group of young professionals exemplified the idea that it wasn't just O.K. to be rich; it was good to be rich. It justified the American way of life. Illustration by Rui Pu; Source photographs from Getty

In 1979, an article by Blake Fleetwood in the *Times Magazine* [reported](#) a surprising phenomenon: young people were moving to big cities like New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. This was news because America's metropolises, New York especially, had been given up for dead, gutted by white flight, a deteriorating economic base, and financial mismanagement. In the nineteen-seventies, New York had lost eight hundred thousand people, ten per cent of its population. Yet the evidence suggested, Fleetwood wrote, "that the New York of the 80's and 90's will no longer be a magnet for the poor and the homeless, but a city primarily for the ambitious and educated—an urban elite." It was an uncannily accurate call.

Those "ambitious and educated" gentrifiers were the young urban professionals, the yuppies. The term first appeared in print in 1980, in a [Chicago magazine piece](#) by Dan Rottenberg. Rottenberg said that he had

heard the word being used around Chicago, possibly in real-estate circles, but, wherever it came from, “yuppie” was an inspired coinage, in an etymological line of descent from “hippie,” “Yippie,” and “preppie,” a similarly irresistible neologism.

After the word appeared in a Chicago *Tribune* column by Bob Greene, in 1983, “yuppie” took off. (Greene, too, claimed that he had heard it from someone else.) The column was syndicated in two hundred newspapers, and, overnight, the world turned yuppie. Gary Hart, running for President in the Democratic primaries, was the yuppie candidate. Jay McInerney’s “[Bright Lights, Big City](#)” was the yuppie novel. Lawrence Kasdan’s “The Big Chill” was the yuppie movie. [Madonna](#)’s “Material Girl”—“The boy with the cold hard cash / Is always Mister Right”—was the yuppie anthem.

What We’re Reading

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Presiding over it all was [Ronald Reagan](#), elected to a second term in 1984. He carried forty-nine states and won the popular vote by eighteen percentage points. But, in a preëlection poll, his margin among eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-olds making more than twenty-five thousand dollars a year (seventy-five thousand today) was twenty-four points. If Reagan was not the yuppie

President, he was the yuppies' President. *Newsweek* named 1984 "The Year of the Yuppie."

The demographic that the term was intended to pick out—professionals under forty living in cities—was fairly small in 1984, something like 1.2 million people. But there were not a lot of bona-fide hippies in the nineteen-sixties, either. In 1967, only one per cent of college students said that they had tried LSD, and in 1969 *Newsweek* estimated that there were ten thousand people living in communes—probably a lowball estimate, but, whatever the number, it was not huge, and communes tend to have a short life span.

Hippies and yuppies signified not as political constituencies but as social types. A social type stands for something that people think is important to identify either with or against. As with the Swiftie. There are people who really want to be Swifties, and there are people who can't believe that there are people who really want to be Swifties. But, no matter how little you care about Swifties, you have to have an opinion. Even professing indifference is an opinion. And your view on Swifties says something about you. You're the kind of person who says whatever it was you just said about Swifties—or yuppies or hippies. It all hangs together.

Underneath your indifference or disapproval or feeling of superiority about the social type that you are disidentifying with lurks, inevitably, the secret fear that those people are riding the crest of the wave. Right now, all things considered, it's probably better to be a Swiftie. You're part of something greater than yourself, and the world has organized itself to make you happy. In 1984, maybe it was better to be a yuppie.

In the nineteen-eighties, the yuppie served this self-definitional function—am I pro-yuppie or anti-yuppie?—exceptionally well. It enabled people to orient themselves to the times. Far more people hated yuppies, and everything the yuppie stood for, than wanted to be yuppies, of course. The term itself is a put-down. It's close to "puppy," and no one wants to be a puppy; everyone wants to be the big dog. But more people had contempt for hippies in the nineteen-sixties and beatniks in the nineteen-fifties—or have today, for that matter, for Zoomers—than aspired to be beatniks or hippies.

“Beatnik,” too, is a put-down, a mashup of “Beat” and “Sputnik.” (Both are “far out.”) “Hippie” is a dismissive diminutive of “hipster.”

Social types are also useful as personifications. You know a hippie or a yuppie by sight. They wear a certain kind of shoe, eat a certain kind of food, drive a certain kind of car. LSD was the hippie drug, associated with dropping out. The yuppie drug was cocaine, associated with life in the fast lane. Terms like “hippie” and “yuppie” come fully loaded. They provide a completely accoutred objective correlative to a certain package of tastes and attitudes. If they luck out, they come to stand for an era—usually, since we have ten fingers, a decade. When we think of American life in the nineteen-eighties, we think of the yuppie.

Tom McGrath’s [“Triumph of the Yuppies: America, the Eighties, and the Creation of an Unequal Nation”](#) (Grand Central) is an entertaining recap of that period. McGrath doesn’t offer a novel sociological interpretation of the yuppies. What he has to say about them would have been conventional even during their time. His research consists of interviews with veterans of the decade, his citations are mainly to magazine articles, and his stories are taken from the headlines. You have seen this movie before. If you’re old enough, you were in it. It’s fun to rewatch, though.

“What I want to see above all,” Reagan said the year before he was reelected, “is that this country remains a country where someone can always get rich.” The remark seemed to capture the spirit of the age. It wasn’t just O.K. to be rich; it was good to be rich. It justified the American way of life. Young people who had money were unashamed about it. The well off talked openly about how much they were making and how much their houses cost.

People went around saying, “He who dies with the most toys wins,” a pronouncement attributed to Malcolm Forbes, who certainly had a lot of them. People said it in a way that suggested they didn’t really believe it, but it wasn’t clear then what they really did believe. The culture didn’t seem to be offering many alternatives.

You can dispose of discretionary dollars in various ways. If you were a yuppie, you spent them on yourself. You consumed conspicuously. That’s what the yuppie-haters hated most about the yuppies. You bought things you

didn't need and paid extra for the brand: Sasson jeans, Frette linens, Cross pens, Rolex watches, Perrier water, Aprica strollers. Faux high-end imports emerged—Grey Poupon mustard (then owned by RJR Nabisco), Häagen-Dazs ice cream (invented in the Bronx). People bought "The Official Preppy Handbook" not as a joke but as a how-to guide. Brooks Brothers enjoyed a revival thanks to younger shoppers. Food became a highly cathected consumable. People swapped out their Crock-Pots for Cuisinarts. The word "foodie" was coined in 1980, by the restaurant critic Gael Greene, in *New York*.

The more entrepreneurial yuppies colonized abandoned row houses and warehouse loft spaces, and used some of their leisure time to work out. Fitness and self-care were big. But yuppies devoted most of their leisure time to networking. They spent money in places that catered to a clientele of the similarly situated, people who worked late and dined late—in New York, restaurants such as Le Madri and the Quilted Giraffe, where you could order a "beggar's purse," filled with beluga. McGrath names Cent'Anni, on Carmine Street, as a yuppie favorite. The Odeon, in Tribeca, certainly was. In "Bright Lights, Big City," the protagonist and some friends snort cocaine in its restrooms.

The yuppie strode forth from the economic wreckage of the nineteen-seventies: two oil crises, mortgage rates at thirteen per cent, a huge loss of manufacturing jobs in major industries like steel and cars, a stock market in the doldrums. When the economy recovered, in the early nineteen-eighties, it was easy for people to feel rich without feeling guilty. They had seen what it was like to worry about money. Spending it felt liberating.

Still, it's a little unfair to blame the yuppies for the shameless fascination with wealth in that decade. After all, it was also the time of Michael Milken and the junk bond; T. Boone Pickens and the leveraged buyout; Ivan Boesky and the insider-trading scandal. It was the time of Donald Trump the real-estate mogul and "The Art of the Deal" (1987), and of those enormously popular prime-time soap operas about the rich: "Dallas" (1978-91), "Falcon Crest" (1981-90), "Dynasty" (1981-89). Ninety million Americans watched the climactic "Who shot J.R.?" episode of "Dallas." The most gloriously shameless show of them all was Robin Leach's "Lifestyles of the Rich and

Famous” (1984-95). In 1984, it was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Informational Special.



"Are you cold? Here, take my leaf!"
Cartoon by Patrick McKelvie

And the fitness bug was not confined to yuppies. Exercise became a major industry after 1980. Millions of Americans got into it. They joined health clubs—Wellbridge, in Colorado; the Family Fitness Centers, in California; the East Bank Club, in Chicago; the Vertical Club, in New York. Equinox was founded in 1991. For the mass market, there were Jane Fonda’s workout videos and, on television, the deeply annoying yet insanely popular Richard Simmons (recently deceased). Much of this is covered in McGrath’s book, but none of it happened because young urban professionals were buying upscale strollers. It was a binge economy. The yuppies were just along for the ride.

McGrath is insistent, even a little overinsistent, on making sense of the yuppies as baby boomers. The idea is that, having been dissidents and countercultural idealists in the nineteen-sixties, the boomers flipped in the nineteen-eighties to embrace capitalism and materialism. McGrath presents this less as a sellout than as a colorful new chapter in the history of postwar America as the pig passes through the python.

But, once you do the math, it doesn't make a lot of sense. The baby boom began in July, 1946, and ended in December, 1964—representing approximately seventy-six million people. Almost none of those people were actively involved in the political, social, or cultural changes of the nineteen-sixties. They were much too young. It's the difference between listening to the Beatles and being [the Beatles](#). Most of the baby boomers had nothing to do with the civil-rights movement or the launch of the women's-liberation movement, and only a few who were born before 1950 had much to do with the antiwar movement. When the first U.S. combat troops were deployed to Vietnam, in 1965, the oldest baby boomers were nineteen, and still in college. The youngest were not yet one, and teething. On the other hand, the yuppies, if we define them as people between twenty-five and thirty-nine in 1984, were indeed baby boomers. The yuppie, not the hippie, is the baby boom's contribution to postwar American social history.

McGrath frames his book with the story of Jerry Rubin as the model of a nineteen-sixties person who became a nineteen-eighties person. Rubin was famous as a co-founder, with Abbie Hoffman, of the Youth International Party, the Yippies, in 1967, and as a leading participant in several iconic Vietnam-era protests, including the mass march on the Pentagon, in 1967, and the demonstrations at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, in 1968. He was one of the Chicago Seven, whose trial arose out of those demonstrations, and was convicted, in 1970, of crossing state lines to incite a riot. (All the convictions were overturned on appeal.) Not one of the defendants in the Chicago Seven trial [was a baby boomer](#). Rubin was born in 1938. Hoffman was born in 1936.

In the nineteen-sixties, Rubin and Hoffman had got into the New York Stock Exchange and thrown dollar bills on the trading floor to watch the traders scramble to pick them up. That kind of prank had become tiresome by the nineteen-seventies, a decade unfriendly to political activism and countercultural antics, and Rubin found himself with less demand for his work than he would have liked. In 1980, he published an Op-Ed in the *Times* announcing that he had taken a job on Wall Street as a securities analyst. He had realized, he said, that “money is power.” After the piece appeared, he passed the exam to become a stockbroker.

In fact, McGrath says, Rubin never actually bought or sold stock for a client. Instead, he and his wife, Mimi, began hosting networking parties, first in their East Side apartment, and then at the midtown night club Studio 54. Guests were required to pay an eight-dollar entrance fee and to deposit their business cards at the door; the Rubins used the cards to develop a giant Rolodex of the well off and the well connected. They envisioned creating a national chain of networking salons, but on October 19, 1987—Black Monday—the stock market crashed. The Dow lost 22.6 per cent of its value, and the Rubins' capital was wiped out.

Black Monday conventionally brings down the curtain on the yuppie era. “After a decade of putting its faith wholeheartedly in free enterprise and free markets, of focusing on achievement and success and money and materialism,” McGrath writes, “the country was ready to slow down again, to get back to normal. Just as the stock market crash of 1929 had ended one hyper-capitalistic era and launched something new, the crash of 1987 would do the same.”

That’s how the press read the signs, too. “*Yuppies’ last rites readied*” was the headline in the *Times* after Black Monday. “*Sunset for Yuppies*” was the headline in *USA Today*. Obituaries for the yuppie began to appear—notably (and strangely unmentioned in McGrath’s book), Hendrik Hertzberg’s classic “[The Short Happy Life of the American Yuppie](#),” in *Esquire*. The yuppie, Hertzberg said, was “the collective projection of a moral anxiety. We loaded onto him everything we hated about the times we had been living through. . . . Then we strung the little bastard up.” It was over.

As for the Rubins, they eventually divorced. Mimi would marry the former owner of Studio 54, Mark Fleischman. Jerry moved to California, where he got involved in the nutrition-supplement business. McGrath says that he was “very successful.” Then, in 1994, he was struck by a car and killed while crossing Wilshire Boulevard. The newspapers made a point of informing readers that he had been jaywalking.

What had happened? It was no mystery, even in 1984, that the various displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption that the young urban professional was made to stand for masked a much grimmer economic reality. The yuppies were, after all, just a tiny sliver of even the baby-boom

population, most of whom were not dining at the Odeon or hanging out at Studio 54. McGrath makes this point, but so did Hertzberg, and so, even, did *Newsweek*, in its “Year of the Yuppie” issue, in 1984—which, discounting the snideness that used to be standard news-magazine tone, was largely celebratory. “The glamour of this group,” the magazine commented, “obscures a more significant trend toward *downward mobility* among their peers.”

And not just their peers. The Congressional Budget Office reckoned that, between 1977 and 1988, the years of the Reagan recovery, the bottom eighty per cent of American families experienced a drop in income. The income of the lowest decile fell by more than fourteen per cent, that of the second lowest by eight per cent, and so on. But incomes for the top decile rose by more than sixteen per cent; for the top five per cent of households, they rose by twenty-three per cent; and for the top one per cent they rose by almost fifty per cent. In 1973, the median household income was \$26,884; in 1987, it was \$25,986.

What Americans were seeing was the fracturing of the middle class. Effectively, the middle of the middle was dropping out, and a wealth-and-income gap was now growing between the top ten per cent—the upper middle class and the super-rich—and the rest of the population. The yuppies were on the far side of this divide. People hated them because they resented them. (Weirdly, then as now, they did not resent the super-rich.)

Growing inequality after the nineteen-seventies was a reversion to the norm. Historically, the relative equality of wealth and income between top earners and the middle class in the decades after the Second World War was an anomaly. But it seemed normal, as most things do when you are living through them, and it was a little startling to see class reassert itself in the nineteen-eighties in the form of the young professionals.

Where did those young professionals come from? The answer is: the university. They were products of the higher-education industry. In the nineteen-sixties, college enrollment doubled. More people were coming out of college than the workplace needed, and one response was to stay in school. Between 1971 and 1986, the number of bachelor’s degrees awarded increased by eighteen per cent. But the number of M.B.A.s awarded

increased by eighty-five per cent, the number of M.D.s by ninety-two per cent, and the number of law degrees by a hundred and forty per cent. Those were the yuppies.

In the nineteen-seventies, the so-called college premium, the difference in average income between people with a college degree and people with only a high-school diploma, was thirteen per cent for men and twenty-one per cent for women. By 1993, the over-all premium was fifty-three per cent. Today, it's about seventy-five per cent, reflecting the wage gap between workers in the knowledge economy and workers in the less résumé-intensive precincts of the service economy.

So what has actually changed? In the upper middle class today, life is the same as it was in the nineteen-eighties, only more so. Tastes are no different. San Pellegrino may be preferred to Perrier, Lululemon has superseded designer jeans, and so on. But urban professionals, young and not so young, have largely the same life styles that they had during the Reagan Administration. Gut renovations, boutique gyms, and destination dining have not disappeared.

If nineteen-eighties capitalism now seems somehow Paleolithic, that is in part because it was so brazenly amoral. Upper-middle-class people today care about the environment, about issues such as gun control and access to abortion, and they have a pretty good understanding of the concept of privilege. People don't feel guilty about having more money than they need, but they would be unhappy to be told that they are irresponsible with it. There is more virtue-signalling today, but there is also more virtue. People don't find menu items called "beggar's purses" amusing. That's "["Succession"](#)" stuff.

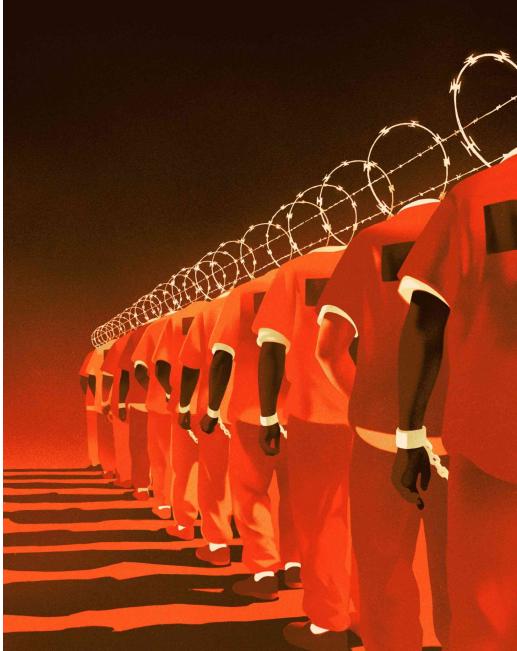
"Succession" really was a throwback to Southfork and the Ewings. Maybe the show was popular because it helped the well off to feel "We're not *that* bad." But the image of greed it presented has not gone away. Its epitome in the nineteen-eighties was Donald Trump, a man born without a conscience. And he hasn't gone away, either. ♦

Books

Should We Abolish Prisons?

Our carceral system is characterized by frequent brutality and ingrained indifference. Finding a better way requires that we freely imagine alternatives.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)



Criminal punishments once taken for granted—as public hangings were—may come to be regarded with repugnance. Illustration by Harol Bustos

Every age treats its penal system as natural, inevitable, and regrettable. When men were hanged in the public square, intellectuals explained that the practice was as helpful to the hanged as it was instructive for the audience. [Samuel Johnson](#), as instinctively humane a man as might ever be found, was indignant when, in mid-eighteenth-century London, hangings—often for crimes as petty as pickpocketing—were moved from Tyburn, today's Marble Arch, to more discreet premises inside Newgate Prison. "Sir, executions are intended to draw spectators," he said. "If they do not draw spectators, they don't answer their purpose. The old method was most satisfactory to all parties; the publick was gratified by a procession; the criminal was supported by it." Public hangings were simply part of street life. Pickpockets attended the hangings of other pickpockets in order to pick pockets.

In retrospect, the hangings are only very partially described as justice done, and much more accurately described as power and class hierarchy enforced. To those born poor, a life of thievery seemed as rational as any other; if it led to the gallows, this was, as horrible as it sounds, a reasonable risk. There were men of the cloth and higher ranks executed—the famous Dr. William Dodd, a friend of Johnson's and a confidant of the King's, was hanged for forgery, in 1777—but mostly just to *décourager les autres*.

Yet the spirit of abolition eventually grew to the point that in the West we now have zero public executions—even prison hangings have been replaced by pseudo-medical procedures—and we are appalled when we learn of them taking place as an instrument of political persecution in Iran. What we do have, however, is incarceration on a scale that, despite recent efforts at reform, boggles the mind and shivers the heart. More people are under “correctional supervision” in the United States today than were in the Stalinist Gulag at its height.

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In response, a movement has begun for the abolition of prisons—not for prison reform, with fewer inmates in better institutions, but for the outright

elimination of incarceration, on the implicit model of the earlier abolition of such things as public hangings, torture, and slavery. Championed most effectively by Angela Y. Davis's "[Are Prisons Obsolete?](#)" (2003), the cause may seem no more realistic than the defund-the-police movement that sang so loudly four years ago, at a cost to progressive candidates. Indeed, in a political moment like this one, worrying about the niceties of progressive reform at all may appear as self-distracting as a beachgoer worrying about sandcastle architecture as the sea pulls back on the brink of a tsunami.

But the process of reform continues through periods of reaction. It was during the worst of the reactionary times in England, after the French Revolution, that [Wordsworth](#) wrote his poem "The Convict," which in a small way advanced a case that even killers had a claim to compassion and rehabilitation. "My care, if the arm of the mighty were mine," the poet writes, viewing the condemned man, "Would plant thee where yet thou might'st blossom again."

The argument against prisons can be made as a question of right and wrong, or as a question of effective and ineffective policy. "Mass incarceration as a strategy to address violence is failing," Danielle Sered writes in "[Until We Reckon](#)." "When we admit to that failure, we become responsible for trying something different. We are not a people who are taking a medication that is working and considering an experimental new drug. We are a people who are taking a medication that is barely scratching the surface of our symptoms and generating compounding side effects that are becoming increasingly unbearable." A better prescription, in her view, is an approach to justice that's "survivor-centered, accountability-based, safety-driven, and racially equitable."

Anyone reading the recent books on prison abolition will be reawakened to the frequent brutality, grotesque ironies, and ingrained indifference of our carceral system. Sered writes movingly of a poor Black family in East New York for whom violence and imprisonment have become commonplace. ("Elwin didn't know what they were talking about but right as Elijah said yes, he saw one of the other young men flash a gun. Elwin had buried two of his friends in the past two months. He was consumed with grief, but the main feeling he had wasn't sorrow, but fear. He had come to think that his death by violence was imminent, maybe even inevitable.") Davis, in her

original work and in many essays since, writes with particular intensity of the sexual humiliations and assaults that women inmates face. Meanwhile, “[Abolition Labor: The Fight to End Prison Slavery](#),” a new collection by Andrew Ross, Tommaso Bardelli, and Aiyuba Thomas, offers sage advice from long-term prisoners on the closed circles of long-term imprisonment. “You don’t have to be a criminal to be in an Alabama prison, but by the time you leave, you have been well groomed in criminality,” the inmate Kinetik Justice is quoted saying. “When you steal sugar or chicken from the kitchen, you are stealing from the general population. When you steal the sugar, who loses the cake? It’s not the warden’s cake. It’s not police cake. It’s our cake. You are stealing from us to sell it back to us.”

As the authors of “Abolition Labor” emphasize, the work that Davis has pioneered belongs to the legacy of the great Black intellectual and activist [W. E. B. Du Bois](#)—in its shrewd and impassioned observation of minute social detail, and in its feeling for the hidden racial hierarchies of American society. It is also Du Boisian, it must be said, in the way that it gravitates toward class and economic explanations for phenomena not always well suited to them. Davis and others insist that the real villain of mass incarceration in the U.S. must be late capitalism or neoliberalism. In truth, we could empty our prisons tomorrow, and Apple and Google and Amazon and the rest atop the high heap of American enterprise would scarcely notice.

The authors of “Abolition Labor” are determined, similarly, to prove that the exploitation of prison labor—which is nonunionized and generally unprotected even by minimum-wage law—serves the sinister ends of capital. We’re assured that “the prospect of such a cheap, immobile labor pool in close proximity to domestic markets was enticing to the private sector,” which came to view it as “another foreign country, full of cheap and subservient labor, and near at hand.” Yet, they finally concede, “less than 1 percent of incarcerated people are employed today by private companies.” Products from prison labor may slip into the supply lines, but corporations, as a rule, would prefer that they didn’t, since this results in more bad publicity than profit. Inmate labor tends to be done in the service of prisons themselves or government clients like state D.M.V.s. (There’s also the private-prison business, but it’s a shrinking one and houses a small fraction of the incarcerated population.) Plenty of penitentiaries, certainly, were built

with local economic motives in mind—ironically, providing employment for the guards in depressed localities to oversee prisoners doing exploitative labor. But these are the kinds of public works that, in other forms, win progressive approval.

There are, in any event, a great many free-market countries in the world, and very few are marked by overstuffed prisons. Mass incarceration remains a distinctively American problem. On the other hand, plenty of *anti*-capitalist societies have turned to mass incarceration—we speak of the “American Gulag” in honor of another, and nobody looks to Pyongyang for models of penal enlightenment. (Only this month, Amnesty International protested the use of prisons in Cuba as a means of stifling dissent.) Pre-capitalist societies lacked mass imprisonment, but then—what with all the beheadings, beatings, and banishments—the people they considered criminals weren’t around long enough to be imprisoned.



A more abstract argument, derived from Michel Foucault and often cited in the new polemics, holds that incarceration itself is a capitalist-Enlightenment legacy—that the idea of locking people away in an enclosed plant where they do meaningless work is an expression of the capitalist ethic, as much as public hangings were of the feudal one. In the earlier case, punishment was geared toward sporadic displays of terror to enforce the King’s dominion

over the population; in our own case, punishment aims to enforce standardized behavior and the rule of the bourgeoisie. Prison is a kind of black-comedic version of a factory: in contrast to the catch-as-catch-can prisons of preindustrial times, everyone is assigned a role and compelled to conformity through regimentation or isolation. The true “profit” made is in the destruction of rebellious spirits. Whatever truth there is in this view—originally directed not at industrialism but at Benthamite forms of utilitarianism, a very different thing—conceptual genealogy probably won’t dismantle the modern prison.

The current system of American imprisonment does reflect the specific circumstances of American life and, in particular, the long wake of Reconstruction. If the link between neoliberalism and mass incarceration seems tenuous, the argument that incarceration is a mechanism that preserves racial hierarchy is unhappily convincing. Incarceration, in Michelle Alexander’s now famous formulation, acts as [the new Jim Crow](#). In New York State, Black people make up around fifteen per cent of the over-all population and almost fifty per cent of the prison population. It is difficult to believe that a future historian will look at these figures and see the abstract workings of justice, any more than we believe that the poor pickpockets of Johnson’s time had dark hearts instead of empty stomachs.

Wherever we place the blame, what is to be done? All the books make a case for a new system. Perhaps surprisingly, Davis’s proposed model of rehabilitation for prisoners caught in the drug wars is the Betty Ford Center, once known as a drying-out clinic for the rich and famous. Her point is rationally made—what is available to the rich ought to be available to the poor as well, and the model we accept when a President’s wife needs rehab should also be offered to an unemployed teen-ager. This would involve huge public costs, but the public costs of prisons are already formidable, and it is more expensive to lock a man up for thirty years than to send him to rehab for six months.

Sered, for her part, is devoted to the practice of “restorative justice.” She is the director of the Common Justice program, which seeks to replace trials and prisons with family circles and compassionate understanding, bringing together those injured with those who injured them, in search of a rational bargain with respect to goods and emotions alike. She tells many moving

and persuasive stories of harm short-circuited and offenders kept from prison by restitutive work—none more peculiar and touching than that of a mugger who found himself teaching boxing to his onetime victim.

Sered's points are sometimes vitiated by the weight of her pieties; her prose suggests someone constantly looking over her shoulder, like a driver going well below the speed limit but still glancing back nervously in fear of a traffic stop, or, anyway, reproach from a captious political ally. What sin might this next sentence commit? For all that, Sered rather overlooks the question of how restorative justice may favor better-resourced offenders. She views it as a kind of people's justice, seeping upward from Indigenous and marginalized communities robbed of wealth but rich in social capital.

Yet the logic, in pre-state societies, is that if you steal my cattle or kill my son we can enter a cycle of revenge and counter-revenge, or else you can give me restitution for the cattle you stole or the son you killed. Those with more resources could buy more justice—that is, safety from revenge. One reason to promote the modern rule of law is that it aims to reserve retribution for the state, diminishing the crevasse between the people who can pay restitution and those who can't.

The procedures that Sered advocates have genuine value in part because they aren't simply reducible to material transactions. In the real world, though, the material part of restoration goes a long way. A version of restorative justice, narrowly considered, is the essence of every billionaire's divorce settlement. White-collar crime is most often punished by steep fines, which is often taken to be a reparative act: your money will go to prison in your place. Indeed, it's instructive to watch what happens when the wealthy become caught up in the hyper-punitive system that they can normally escape. We, too, have our Dr. Dodds, arousing our Tyburn yearnings. And so [Elizabeth Holmes](#), the Theranos founder and a young mother, is sentenced to eleven years, and [Sam Bankman-Fried](#), the FTX founder, gets a quarter century—in both cases for nonviolent crimes that caused harm but not physical injury. In the first instance, the financial victims were chiefly people like [Rupert Murdoch](#) and [Betsy DeVos](#), who should have known better, and, in the second, nobody appears to have been left poorer at all. Their reckless and illegal conduct calls for sanction and penalties, but people

will entrust neither with their money again. Restorative justice for their crimes seems a far saner alternative.

Citing those sentences as an example of the evils of incarceration is, I know from experience, unpopular among the same people who are inclined to be sympathetic to those for whom Davis and Sered so eloquently argue. But we cannot pick among the people we would protect to accord with our own preferences. In Bruce Norris's beautiful play "Downstate," we're asked to extend our sympathies—almost impossibly, one might think—to a group of convicted child molesters sharing a halfway house in Illinois. As each character talks about inclinations and urges succumbed to, they come to seem more human than their pursuers, who, out of pointless panic, prevent them from shopping at the local supermarket. Progressives may struggle even more with mercy toward moneyed malefactors. After all, high-class culprits like Holmes and Bankman-Fried are the rare privileged people who have had a taste of what poor people deal with all the time—talk about justice for all! Can we possibly exempt [Ghislaine Maxwell](#), Bernie Madoff, and others of our Gilded Age goniffs? To ask Angela Davis to hold a place for the banner "Free the Mar-a-Lago One!" seems a little, well, rich. Yet, if the logic of decarceration is to be applied, it ought to be applied—and will have more power if applied—impersonally.

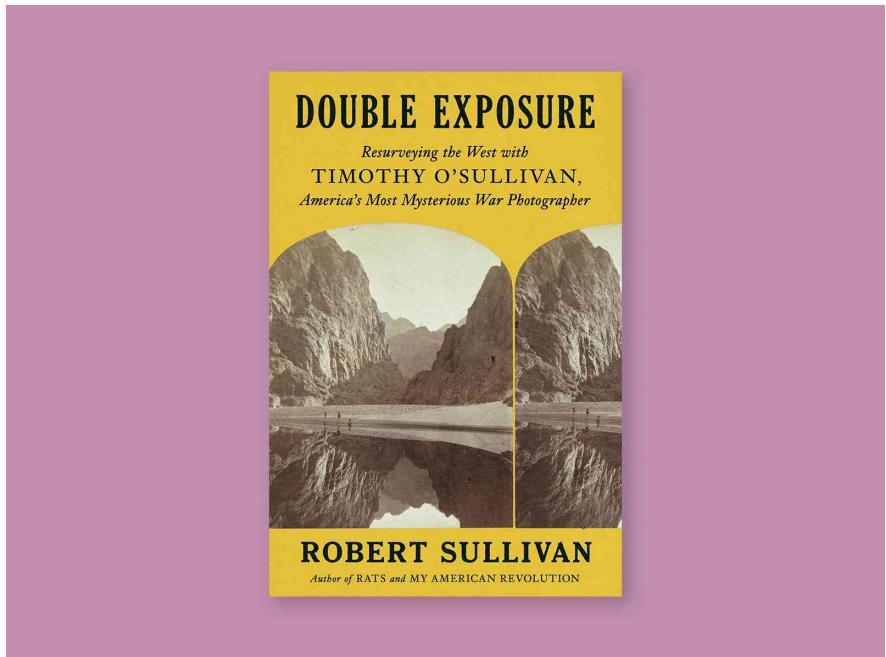
Prison abolition reflects an admirable impulse, forcing us to reëxamine our premises as radically as those eighteenth-century men and women were forced to examine theirs. Yet experience shows that in this country the most effective social way to humanize the punishment of crime is to reduce the *incidence* of crime. Even [Donald Trump](#), as President, moved toward criminal reform in a time of largely receding violence. That reduction happened, in the past three decades, for mysteriously complex reasons, but one has only to witness how the public responded to the sudden increase in homicides which started in 2020, if now substantially curbed, to see how hypersensitive popular attitudes are. Dismiss this as paranoia or failure of reporting—viewers of TV news who don't live in cities have a disproportionate sense of the violence to be found in them—but anxiety over social disorder is a fact of democratic political life that cannot be wished away, and it tends to erode the kind of political power that remains the one means toward reform.

At a deeper level, it's odd to see prison abolitionists like Davis argue, in effect, for transforming prisoners into patients. Treating their actions as mere symptoms diminishes their humanity, their claim to moral agency. It also reminds us that, not that long ago, patients were being reimagined as prisoners. When the deinstitutionalization movement began, Ivan Illich was there to tell us of iatrogenesis, insisting that hospitals produced as much illness as they cured, while Thomas Szasz and R. D. Laing argued for the madness of thinking that madness was a special neurological condition, rather than an understandable response to the horrors of existence. Yet decades of deinstitutionalization have seen a rise in chronic homelessness and mass incarceration, neither of which benefits the intended beneficiaries.

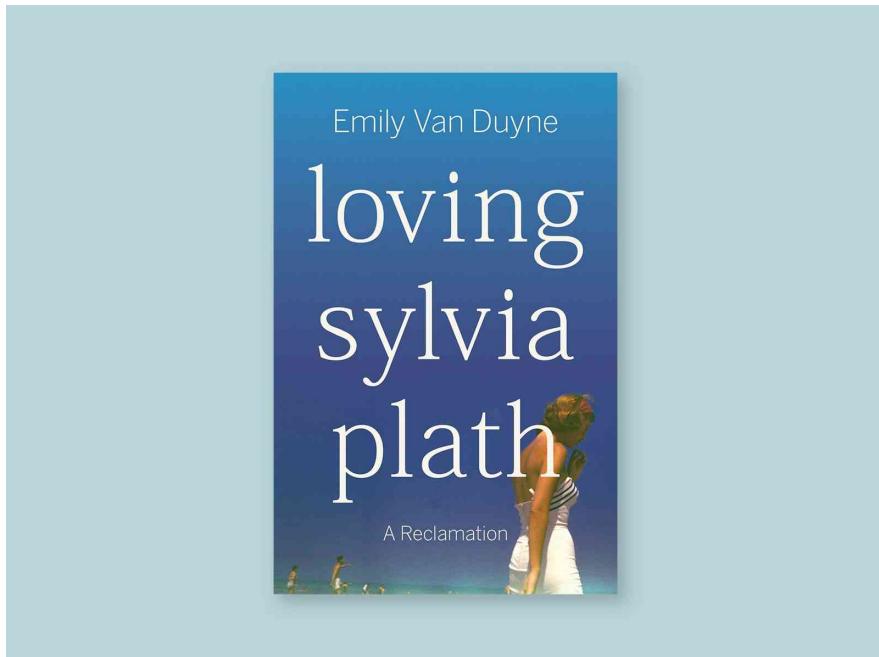
A truly equitable society that invested properly in public health—that assured access to preventive care, community wellness programs, and outpatient management of complex conditions—would keep people out of hospitals. The rate of hospitalization can and ought to be reduced. Should this make us hospital abolitionists? Prisons need to be humanized, but that does not mean that there are no humans in need of imprisonment. Evil exists. Pursuing the recent history of hanging, one reads of a Brit hanged for murder in Singapore—a man who, equipped with a stun gun, befriended tourists under the pretense of being one himself, battered them to death with a hammer, and then dismembered their bodies before stealing their credit cards to buy appliances. He himself thought that he deserved to hang. On the other hand, today one can follow the Instagram page of Adam Roberts, a New York man who, struggling with a serious drug addiction, murdered his father and mother, was sentenced to life, and now works inside as a dog trainer and an articulate chronicler of his activities. Evil exists, but those who perform evil acts need not be themselves wholly evil and incapable of rehabilitation.

There is no plausible world without sanctions for violations of the social covenant. Public order can be, as the abolitionists warn, a form of class policing; it is also a necessity for civil peace. Finding the honest space between these two truths is the key to opening prison doors. If we are to plant human beings in places where they might blossom again, we need to build better gardens. ♦

By Justin Chang



Double Exposure, by *Robert Sullivan* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Beginning in 1867, the photographer Timothy O'Sullivan explored the American West as part of government-sponsored geological surveys. He was already known for his images of Civil War battlefields, which defined the conflict for many Americans, and the photographs he took during his later travels attest to the nation's transformations following the war. Retracing O'Sullivan's itinerary more than a century later for this study, Sullivan deftly takes up such themes as the political power of both photography and geology, the United States' tortured racial hierarchies, the exploitation of natural resources—including land, gold, and silver—and the dispossession of Indigenous communities.



[**Loving Sylvia Plath**](#), by *Emily Van Duyne* (Norton). This impassioned reassessment of Sylvia Plath’s life and work blends feminist theory and biography to challenge various narratives that have dominated criticism of the poet since her suicide, in 1963. One focus is Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes, whom Plath accused of violence; for decades following her death, Van Duyne argues, Hughes shaped Plath’s legacy in an effort to obscure this history. Many of Hughes’s misdeeds (burning Plath’s journals, altering the manuscript of “Ariel”) are well-trod territory, but Van Duyne’s approach, in which she shows how certain publishers, critics, and biographers helped maintain some version of Hughes’s account, feels fresh and vital.

[**What We’re Reading**](#)

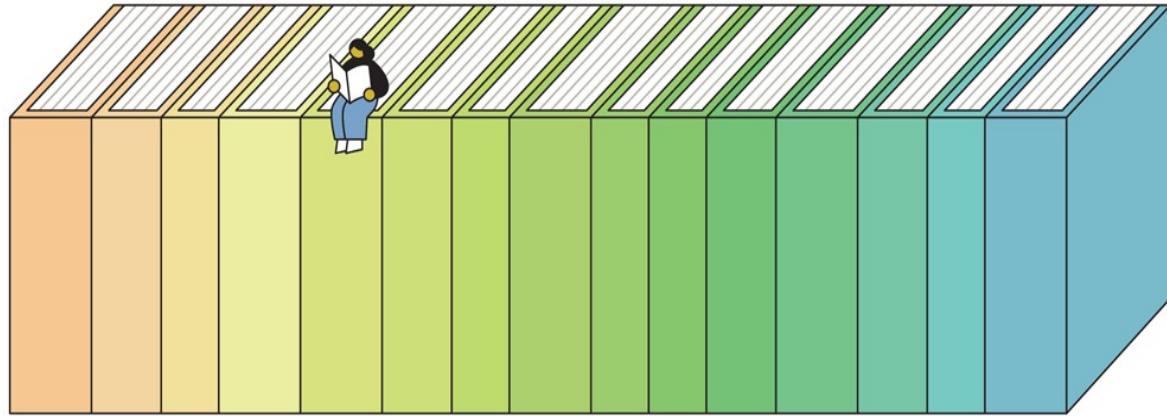
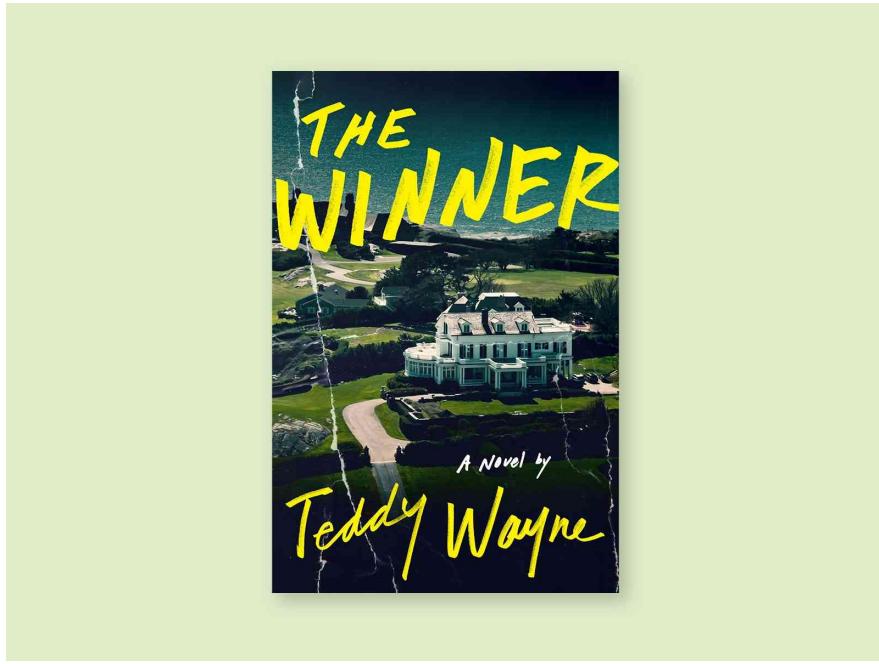


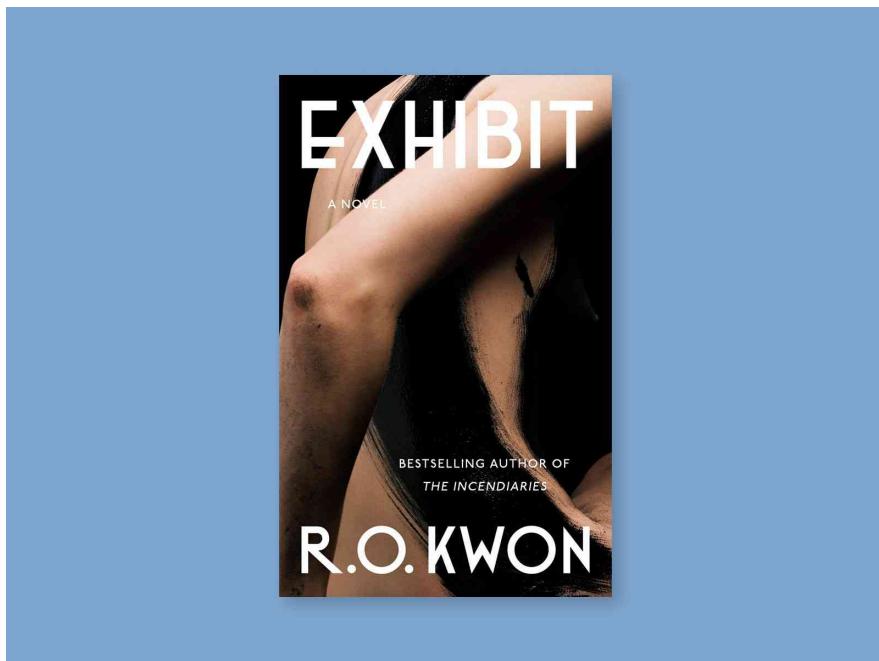
Illustration by Rose Wong

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The Winner, by *Teddy Wayne* (Harper). The protagonist of this page-turning novel of ruthless ambition is Conor O'Toole, a debt-laden striver newly graduated from law school, who lands a summer job giving tennis lessons in a wealthy gated community in Massachusetts. Fit and handsome,

with “a certain Kennedy-esque air,” Conor soon attracts the attention of a rich divorcée twice his age, who lives in the largest house in the compound and offers to pay him double his hourly rate for services on and off the court. Conor’s situation becomes more complicated still when he falls in love with a young aspiring novelist with a trust fund. The longer Conor lives among the privileged élite, the more he yearns for “the money and the real estate and the bone-deep confidence” of his new neighbors. Risky and violent decisions ensue.



Exhibit, by R. O. Kwon (*Riverhead*). In this novel of ardor and tested fidelity, Jin, a photographer, finds her life at a standstill. Her search for a new subject for her work sputters, and she fights with her husband because he wants a child—a change of heart following the couple’s earlier agreement. At a party, she meets a ballerina recovering from an injury. The two women, both at loose ends, embark on a secret, sadomasochistic relationship. As Jin finds ecstasy in being dominated, she questions her identity, her cultural background, and her truest desires. Kwon’s poetic prose gilds a narrative that tightly weaves together myth, self-exploration, and artistic ambition.

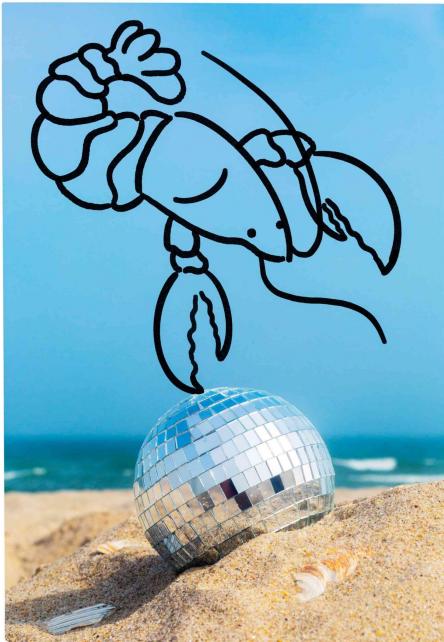
By Katie Kadue
By Richard Brody

On and Off the Menu

Tea and Beachside High Jinks in Provincetown

The town's restaurants evince a singular mix of gay utopia and New England kitsch.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)



"No matter how gay you can be on the streets of West Hollywood and Chelsea, it's nothing like this," one regular visitor said. Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

In summer, life in Provincetown, Massachusetts, is idyllic and fairly simple: among the few decisions a visitor has to make is whether to attend Tea (short for Tea Dance), a party held daily from 4 to 7 P.M., on the enormous pool deck of the Boatslip, a hotel and beach club in the town's West End. Every day around three-thirty, a migration begins: bodies, in various states of undress and drag, drawn, as if by magnets, down Commercial Street. At the height of the season—during Bear Week, in July, or Carnival, in August—the deck might be hundreds deep, bass thumping, drinks sloshing, and the possibility of friendship, or more, palpable in the air.

Attendance was sparse on the sunny Tuesday I went to Tea, this past June, but a handful of people were grooving blissfully below a disco ball on the dance floor. Near a spirited group of young men wearing brightly colored

jumpsuits, including one patterned with eggplants, I chatted with Jeremy Hobson, a public-radio journalist who spends part of the year in P-town, as it's affectionately known. "I would say this is, if not the center, one of two or three centers of gay America," Hobson said. "No matter how gay you can be on the streets of West Hollywood and Chelsea, it's nothing like this. You could walk down the street in a jockstrap and nobody would bat an eye."

Provincetown, also called Land's End, sits at the northernmost tip of Cape Cod, a spit of sand which resembles the fist at the end of a flexed arm. In 1620, it was the site of the Mayflower's initial landing, a distinction that is often overshadowed by nearby Plymouth, where the Pilgrims settled instead. By 1899, Provincetown was home to a small population of New Englanders, who had displaced the Wampanoag and Nauset tribes, and to Portuguese immigrants working as whalers and fishermen. That year, an American painter named Charles Hawthorne chose it as the location for the Cape Cod School of Art. The town was in shambles then, after a disastrous storm sank much of the local fishing fleet, leaving behind widows eager to offer room and board to visiting artists, writers, and actors—many of them left wing, radical, and from New York. By the nineteen-twenties, Provincetown had a reputation as a haven of freedom and acceptance, and by the sixties it was a premier destination for gay tourism. In 2010, census data showed that Provincetown had the highest percentage of same-sex couples of any municipality in the country.

No one visits Provincetown for the food, exactly, but its restaurants evince a singular mixture of gay utopia and New England kitsch. There's a bakery called ScottCakes, which exclusively serves vanilla cupcakes with pink buttercream frosting; at a sandwich shop called Pop+Dutch, you can order the Celine Dijon, a spectacular play on a jambon-beurre, with sweet, nutty brown butter instead of fresh. For lunch one day, I went to the Mayflower, which has been open since 1929. It struck me as a place where my Waspish, buttoned-up grandparents would have felt right at home, but also as gloriously campy and frozen in time, with a full bar slinging Painkillers and cheap Martinis; baked potatoes sweating under a heat lamp; a row of wood-trimmed vinyl booths beneath fading caricatures of long-gone local celebrities. I ordered the lobster club sandwich, the Portuguese baked scrod, and the questionably named "Indian pudding," an unsightly brown scoop of

spiced cornmeal porridge that was warm and shockingly delicious, a perfect foil to a dollop of cold, rich vanilla ice cream.

My culinary tour guides were Andrew Spena and Bill Clark, a married couple in their thirties who are Provincetown regulars and New York restaurant veterans, part of the team behind the bygone but beloved MeMe's Diner. "One of the first things someone told me when I came to town was 'It is your sacred duty, as someone who loves Provincetown, to bring someone along and show them why you love it,'" Spena said, over drinks at the Red Inn, an elegant converted nineteenth-century boarding house. It wasn't for everyone, the couple allowed. "This town is very self-selecting," he continued. "A lot of people come here and don't like it, especially New York gay guys—" "If they don't go to the beach, and they just get a hotel room and go to the pool," Clark added.

Like Palm Springs or Miami, P-town has pools and parties, but its appeal is less conventional: one gets the feeling that there are untold delights on the other side of every dune, through every grove of pines. In a guide Spena sends to first-time visitors, he recommends hiking out past the salt marshes of Herring Cove in search of Boy Beach, where, he writes, "the further you walk, the gayer and nakeder it gets." Provincetown is "by nature a destination . . . not en route to anywhere else," the novelist Michael Cunningham, who has been going there for forty years, wrote in his book "Land's End." "One of its charms is the fact that those who go there have made some effort to do so."

If P-town has a destination restaurant, it is Sal's Place, which came highly recommended by all the tastemakers I consulted, including Spena and Clark, who held their wedding reception there in 2021. It was founded in the sixties, in a former fishing shack on an old wharf in the West End, by Salvatore Del Deo, a painter with a reputation as a showman: he'd keep bottles of wine in trapdoors in the ceiling, rigged by wire to drop in front of unsuspecting guests. It "was part restaurant, part performance space, part artist retreat and cultural mecca," Del Deo's son, Romolo, who is also an artist, told me, of the original Sal's. After his father sold it, in the eighties, Romolo said, the culture of the restaurant was "run down into the ground, to the point where the old place was barely recognizable." But in 2016 Siobhán Carew, a brilliant, imperious Irish restaurateur from Boston, became its third

owner. Carew “reprised and embraced this spirit of improvisation, community, and legacy,” Romolo told me, though her reign has been polarizing.

Sal’s is a “de-facto clubhouse for the town,” according to the renowned designer Ken Fulk, who owns several historic houses there. “You live in a place where all the people you love are literally within arm’s reach. You don’t have to make a plan. Sal’s distills that down into a microcosm.” And if one of the West End’s essential charms is its density—the chance to peer into the windows of the tightly spaced cottages and glimpse someone’s view of the harbor, an inviting dinner scene, or a marble bust on a pedestal—Sal’s indulges the voyeur’s fantasies, inviting you down a narrow alley, past stacks of lobster pots, and into what feels like the home of a chic, bohemian friend. The tiny main dining room, through the galley kitchen, is ineffably romantic, with sheer curtains and soft lighting, exposed beams and understated furniture, fresh flowers and carefully placed nautical antiques.

And yet the sense of closeness can become suffocating. In 2020, under the auspices of a *COVID*-era permit, Carew put tables directly on the beach, behind her neighbor’s landmarked house. They were the best seats in town —“the tables would come and go with the tide, and people would be literally up to their knees in the water,” Fulk recalled—and became a source of great enmity. After the neighbor, who had meticulously refurbished his home, sued, in 2021, a land-court judge issued an injunction banning the beach seating. Though it was temporarily stayed, the same judge eventually ordered Carew to pay nearly a hundred grand, in 2022, for violating it. An alarming video that made the rounds through town in 2020 captured Carew screaming expletives at another neighbor in regard to a separate dispute. The entire restaurant, packed with customers, was privy to the tirade, but to some Carew’s rage seemed to just be part of the scenery. One guest cried out, “We love you, Siobhán!”

“Siobhán is a mystery and a powerhouse, and she will do whatever she wants to do, whenever she wants to do it,” Jake Hetnarski, a young chef who has done pop-ups in Provincetown, including a dinner hosted by John Waters at the dump, told me. “But, no matter who you are, if you show up, she will seat you. There’s always room for you at Sal’s, which is funny because there’s never room for you at Sal’s.”

When I visited in June, Sal's wasn't open yet; in 2023, Carew began transferring the whole operation to West Hollywood in the off-season. I returned to P-town shortly after she did, in July. There were no tables on the beach, so I sat on the restaurant's narrow deck (the subject of yet another feud), where the harbor view was unobstructed, the salt breeze fragrant. A handwritten, photocopied menu offered food that skewed Italian and, given the embarrassment of atmosphere, turned out to be better than necessary: a lovely linguine vongole, a sweet-fleshed, pepper-crusted swordfish piled with a shrimp-and-calamari stew and shoestring fries.

Carew's prices are high—forty dollars for eggplant parm—but she has a reputation for being generous, comping appetizers or drinks and sometimes not charging anything at all. At a table near mine, an older man with an astonishingly unlined and tanned face asked about an A.T.M.—Sal's is cash only—and Carew waved her hand dismissively and told him to come back and pay tomorrow. When a server presented my bill, Carew appeared out of nowhere and snatched it from the table, snarling through gritted teeth, “I told you not to drop this!” Later, she joked that she'd fired the waiter.

Carew's enemies argue that she antagonizes for sport, plays the victim, and plies people with free food and drinks to garner sympathy—but none of them would speak on the record. “Provincetown likes an underdog,” Fulk told me. When I asked Carew delicately about the controversy, she said, “The whole thing is fucking bizarre. A wealthy entitled bullying campaign.” The notorious video, she claimed, was taken just after she'd had back surgery, still hazy from general anesthesia. “All I'm interested in doing is what I do best,” she continued. “Every version of hospitality there is.” And what about those freebies, I asked—did she worry about her bottom line? “Hannah,” she replied, “knock it off.” ♦

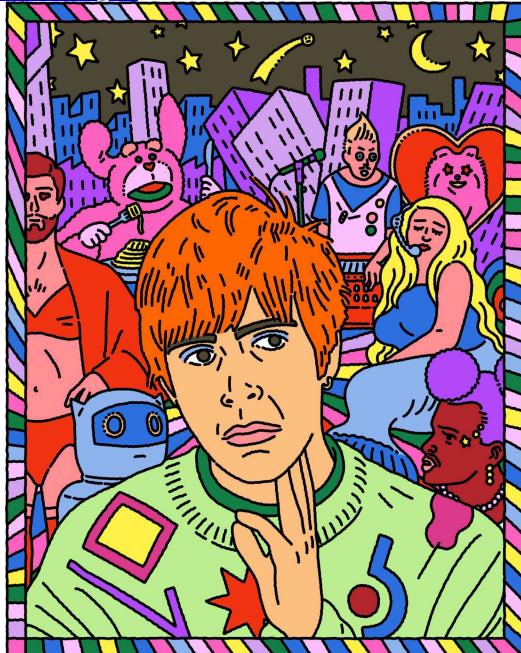
By Helen Rosner
By Naomi Fry
By Ian Frazier
By Laura Preston

On Television

Julio Torres’s “Fantasmas” Finds Truth in Fantasy

In the comedian and writer’s new HBO show, guest stars and surreal distractions provide witty symbolic keys to serious themes.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



It's rare that a series with overt political messages also manages to be deeply funny. Illustration by Jim Stoten

Early in the first episode of the brilliantly allegorical new HBO show “Fantasmas,” written and directed by the thirty-seven-year-old comedian and writer Julio Torres, an artist also named Julio—quirky and creative, soft-spoken and slightly sad—is making an informal presentation to a crayon company. He wants to make a crayon that is perfectly clear. If you used it on a piece of paper, nobody but you would know that your marks existed. Your sentence or drawing or deeply coded message would stay hidden forever. The executive he’s pitching sounds intrigued by the weird idea. Julio wants to name this new “color” “fantasmas,” but the exec thinks he should drop the “S.” It’s just one crayon, after all.

This fleeting bit makes for a zany opening, one that prepares you for the bizarre precision of Torres’s vision. He likes surreal situations and

befuddling outcomes. Nothing in the work he makes—including the show “Los Espookys,” which he co-created and starred in, and his film from last year, “Problemista”—is ever quite straightforward. He’s clearly writing under the influence of the world we all share, but he filters its details through an odd, fertile, conscience-stricken imagination, downbeat but full of saturated color. In 2019, Torres released a comedy special called “My Favorite Shapes,” in which he stood behind a conveyor belt as various toylike items glided before him, one by one, and he imbued them with anthropomorphic verve, offering, along the way, a veiled story of his life as a Salvadoran immigrant.

In “Fantasmas,” the clear crayon—there but not there—is a witty symbolic key to the show’s serious themes. Lots of other things about Julio’s life are like this: sort of perceptible, but only if you know where and how to look. He has a manager named Vanesja, for instance, played by the mononymic artist Martine. The “J” in her name is silent. We learn early on that she’s really a performance artist intensely immersed in the work of playing his manager, but she’s so lost in the role that nobody, not even Julio, can really tell the difference. She’s a sharky, brassy business type who’s always suggesting ways for him to sell out and betray his stubborn principles. She has other clients, but it’s not clear whether they’re in on the joke.

There’s an app on Julio’s phone called Chester. It’s a queer alternative to the more corporate rideshare platforms. Really, though, it consists of just one guy, named, you guessed it, Chester (the very entertaining Tomas Matos), who drives around Torres’s alternative-reality version of New York City talking flamboyant waves of shit and consistently making people late. Julio, at home in an apartment he seems destined to lose, is attended to by a round blue robot called Bibo (voiced by Joe Rumrill), an Alexa with agency, bad at service work but fine as company. Bibo wants to be an actor.

Julio’s big problem has a similarly indeterminate relationship to reality—he has a small brown mark just under his jawline. It appears as an attractive birthmark; its squiggly outline looks like the arbitrary border of a landlocked minor country. Eviction notices are piling up in his apartment, but he ignores them, preferring to obsess over the mark, which he fears may be malignant. The mark may be an actual problem, but it may also be a coping mechanism for Julio, whose real trouble is how the mandates of capitalistic existence are

incompatible with a life devoted to art. Either he's sick or the economy's just getting him down. In this story, it's hard to tell which is worse.

Julio keeps reaching out for medical help, hoping to soothe his possibly hypochondriacal mind. He goes to a doctor who shrugs him off—he looks at the thing and says it's probably fine. Not good enough. Julio wants a biopsy. But in order to get one—or, really, to do anything in this society—Julio needs something called “proof of existence,” an official form of identification that he's hesitant to get. Almost everybody has it, but Julio has a mostly inarticulate aversion to the idea of giving his “existence” over to the bureaucracy of a phantasmic government whose ill intent he can't see but always feels. He dreams anxiously, about swiftly shrinking rooms. The only way to get an exception from the I.D. mandate is to take some kind of debasing job. Vanesja is trying to get him to write a script for the online shoe store Zappos. When he finally takes the meeting, the company exec—played with broad bluster by Natasha Lyonne—keeps swatting away his ideas. They both know what kind of bullshit she wants. Finally, he unveils a humiliation sure to turn her on: “How I Came Out to My Abuela.”

Ta-da, there you have it, one sure way for a working artist to survive: exploit every possible facet of your identity, then do it again. At a photo shoot for a different, equally abject gig, Julio stands in a sombrero, too depressed to smile or put a twinkle in his eye. Somebody sticks green-screen tape over his mouth. They'll fix it in post. Julio keeps thinking about undergoing a procedure offered by a brother-sister team of telephone scammers which would sever his soul from his body. He'd make himself a ghost, a clear crayon of a kind, finally free from society's objectifying perceptions.

“Fantasmas” is strange and sorrowful, but it's also deeply funny in a way that series with overt political messages rarely manage to be. It's full of short, intense digressions that often feature guest stars, showing off Torres's talent for tightly structured silliness, which he honed as a writer for “Saturday Night Live.” One of these is a mini-documentary about the letter “Q,” which comes too early in the alphabet to be surrounded by his equally weird colleagues “X,” “Y,” and “Z.” “Q” is an angry, lonely sort, isolated among normie letters, when he's really the kind of punk act that should go on after dark, with a crowd that's already drunk and ready to get weird. When “X,” “Y,” and “Z” come along, “Z” gives him props for being a

boundary breaker, but it's already too late for him to gather his laurels. It's an under-sung artist's classic tale gone alphabetical.

There's also a bit about a "Real Housewives"-like group of women—Emma Stone and Rosie Perez, both bewigged, are among them—who argue over a "void" of infelicitous "negative space" in the design of a restaurant. Soon they discover how trapped they are under the reality-TV lights.

Torres is a flexible performer. Sometimes he tends toward glittering, winking, otherworldly fantasy—fun with a knowing, cutting edge. Here, though, he's downright jaded. Julio has a permanent sulk on his face and a worrying stoop in his gait. One of his many distractions is a constant attempt to find an oyster-pearl earring that he lost at a party. If he can get it back, he can prove, by way of comparison, that the mark on his face has grown. It's a sad quest. Most of the show seems to be shot on a claustrophobic soundstage—Julio doesn't see the sky or feel the sun.

His bad mood is warranted: who can focus on work under stressful circumstances like these? Torres has managed to make a show that feels true, personally and sociologically, without pedantic attachment to any set of specific facts. Sometimes when people say a piece of art has "a mood" or "a vibe," they mean it underhandedly—the thing in question has a nice flow but feels a bit hazy, unmoored by concrete conditions. But Torres's mournful vibe is well earned, and, even if he sets it in a bizarro version of reality, you know exactly what he's talking about.

Life everywhere seems increasingly intent on forcing people of good will into awkward and untenable choices. You want creative fulfillment and freedom from money worries and some free time for friends—and a clear conscience to boot? Grow up, buddy. Welcome to the world. ♦

By Charles Bethea
By Andrew Marantz
By Inkoo Kang

By [Richard Brody](#)

Some first-generation disaster films were real-life disasters for their actors. D. W. Griffith's 1920 melodrama "Way Down East," featuring the climactic rescue of a woman being carried off on an ice floe in raging currents, was filmed in a real river after a real blizzard. The movie's star, Lillian Gish, suffered frostbite that afflicted her for the rest of her life, but she did not quit taking physically risky roles. For Victor Sjöström's 1928 drama "The Wind," Gish was placed in the Mojave Desert: "Sand was blown at me by eight airplane propellers," she later wrote in her autobiography, and she was "in danger of having my eyes put out." The Biblical flood in Michael Curtiz's 1928 film "Noah's Ark" was so intense—Involving at least six hundred thousand gallons of water—that the movie's star Dolores Costello was knocked unconscious and reportedly caught pneumonia; extras in the scene were rumored to have been killed.

The development of special effects and specialized stunt performance, which made swift advances in the nineteen-thirties, was a mark of progress. Neither life nor limb should be risked for the making of a movie. But the result is that we no longer experience onscreen disaster as viscerally as we did the freezing waters of "Way Down East." Modern audiences are in the know about the trickery that simulates great dangers. Films must find creative ways to arouse thrills. "Twisters," like its 1996 predecessor, "Twister," features little onscreen that's likely to terrify viewers; the tornadoes in question look like what they are—elaborately artful illusions. Instead, both films pound the audience into nerve-jangled exhaustion with their sheer quantity of storms, featuring a roaring soundtrack and percussive musical scores so relentless that one imagines timpanists in the fields beating madly alongside the whirlwinds, like the Count Basie Orchestra playing in the desert as the sheriff rides by in "Blazing Saddles." "Twisters," directed by [Lee Isaac Chung](#), tweaks the original premise and introduces new characters yet remains conspicuously derivative. The movies' family resemblance includes a basis in survivor's guilt and an element of romantic comedy. But, more than its predecessor, the new film moves the fear factor out of the sensory realm and into the emotional one.

The 1996 movie begins with a girl named Jo seeing her father die while trying to save her and her mother from a tornado. Then the story flashes

forward to Jo as an adult (played by Helen Hunt), working as a tornado tracker. She's on a mission to test and deploy, in the funnel of a tornado, a system of sensors that will lead to an improved early-warning system, of the sort that might have saved her father's life. With the new "Twisters," the protagonist, Kate Carter (Daisy Edgar-Jones), has been given more direct moral responsibility for a tragic accident in her past. At the start of the film, Kate is a university student in Oklahoma with a preternatural feel for predicting the weather and a good head for science. She is leading four other students in a tornado-tracking expedition in order to perform an experiment that aims, she says, at "taming the tornado" by releasing polymers up its funnel. But, in the course of their effort, three of her friends are killed.

Five years later, Kate is working in New York as a behind-the-scenes meteorologist for a TV station when the only other survivor of her ill-starred expedition shows up: Javi (Anthony Ramos), who, in the intervening years, has become a military radar expert. He now runs a startup that's working on 3-D imaging of tornadoes, and he invites Kate back to Oklahoma for a week during peak storm season so that she can guide his team in surrounding the funnels with portable radar devices. Though Kate has sworn off tornado tracking, she realizes that Javi's project may save lives and agrees to the short-term collaboration.

In the decades between the making of "Twister" and "Twisters," tornado chasing turned into a [social-media](#) spectacle, a phenomenon that the new film uses as a crucial plot point. The meeting place for Javi's team is swarming with amateur trackers who are in it for the lulz, plus a professional of the same ilk: Tyler Owens ([Glen Powell](#)), a trained meteorologist turned swaggering social-media star, who calls himself a "tornado wrangler" and hawks T-shirts emblazoned with his own face. Kate quickly deems him a frivolous and self-promoting interloper. Tyler, a populist adventurer whose team is filled with skilled but unpretentious hell-raisers, disdains the well-funded and scientist-staffed expedition of which Kate is a part.

Then Kate learns that there is more to Javi's company than meets the eye. His scientific research isn't entirely disinterested. It is funded by a real-estate shark named Marshall Riggs (David Born), who buys land from people who've lost their houses in tornadoes. (Riggs uses Javi's data to reach disaster sites ahead of his competitors.) Kate's confidence in Javi is

shaken, and, as he shrinks in her eyes, Tyler comes to seem like more than just a publicity hound. Powell, irrepressibly but self-consciously charming, is a precise fit for the role of a preening showman endowed with untested depths of character. The romantic outcome is foreordained: the story, like that of any other squabbling-opposites-attract rom-com, will rest on how Tyler and Kate overcome their mutual disdain.

There's an ethical dimension to "Twisters" that's emblematic of our times. The earlier film depicted tornadoes uninhibitedly, not with a graphic view of the gore that they leave behind but without compunction about making them look awesome and even, at times, a bit funny, as in the famous shot of an airborne cow. "Twisters," by contrast, makes tornadoes look awful. Whatever terrifying beauty they may present is subordinated to the widespread destruction that they cause. Tornado tracking is portrayed less like a dangerous sport than like war journalism, a job that inherently involves large-scale societal issues and is bound up with the death and the misery of others. Engaging in it as a fun hobby comes off as oblivious, even sinful. Tyler, a professional who ought to know better, has some serious reforming to do, and Kate's quest gives him the chance to do it.

Javi's radar project promises only a better early-warning system. But Kate, starting with her calamitous school experiment, has something altogether more ambitious in mind. Rather than merely interpreting tornadoes, her goal is to change them, using chemicals to diminish their force and render them less dangerous. Tyler comes to recognize the good that Kate is trying to do and becomes her most devoted collaborator.

"Twisters" features a teeming cast of secondary characters, including Sasha Lane as a rocker-styled drone operator, David Corenswet as a laconic scientist with a mean streak, and Maura Tierney as Kate's steadfastly confident mother. Chung guides the actors into vigorous and vivid performances, but the characters serve as little more than adornments for Kate and Tyler's main drama. Ramos plays the conflict-ridden Javi with a sense of hectic urgency and inner turmoil. He has said that he'd planned to use a Southern accent in the role, but that [Steven Spielberg](#), one of the film's executive producers, wanted him to use what Ramos calls his own "New York, Northeast, Latino dialect." But nothing in "Twisters" suggests how Javi got from city life to storm chasing, and the other character arcs are

similarly sketchy. We don't learn how Kate feels about having moved away from Oklahoma, or what, if anything, Tyler hoped to get out of his social-media stardom, or, for that matter, what pretty much anyone thinks, or has to say, about anything other than the action at hand. The script, by Mark L. Smith, based on a story by Joseph Kosinski, leaves the characters hollow, and it's Edgar-Jones's performance that suffers the most for it. Kate's invention, passion, and pain are at the center of the plot yet are given little room for expression. Even more than "Twister," which provided a hint (however slight) of romantic backstory in the tale of a failed marriage, "Twisters" keeps a rigid barrier between the characters' private thoughts and their public actions.

This impersonal exaltation of heroic exploits leaves an unexplored dilemma at the foundation of the film. A key detail, in the traumatic opening sequence, raises questions about the ethics and the risks of scientific inquiry. When Kate, Javi, and their schoolmates manage to release a load of polymer up a tornado's funnel, they notice that, instead of shrinking, the tornado grows. The scene introduces the harrowing possibility that the test has not only failed but has actively caused harm. Yet in the course of the movie Kate, for all her guilt over her friends' death, never once considers that her approach to taming the tornado might actually have made her a Dr. Frankenstein of meteorology whose miscalculations created a more monstrous storm. If she harbors a scintilla of self-doubt or a glimmer of scientific conscience on this subject, the film never suggests it. Instead, she serves as a porcelain heroine who awaits only a white knight to boost her confidence and to further embolden her spirit of experimentation. For all its concessions to modern times, "Twisters" doesn't make much progress at all. ♦

By Richard Brody
By Inkoo Kang
By Richard Brody
By Richard Brody

Poems

- “[Mother](#)”
- “[Hummingbirds](#)”

By [Jim Moore](#)

My friend and I had a cat we called Mother.
I took the couch; my friend got the one bedroom
because he often had sex and needed
that private darkness. I had not yet had sex
of my own volition. No one knew
I had been raped. I was so unknowing
I barely knew it myself, how lost I was
to myself. I was maybe twenty. We loved that cat
that had wandered into our lives, rubbing our legs,
needing love and milk and a safe place
to sleep like any creature arriving on this earth
from God knows where and God knows why.
One hot August day I was sitting outside
when Mother joined me and sat on my lap,
a thing she had never done before.
And that was where she died. I called Jeff,
who had gone to a motel somewhere
with his girl of the moment. "Mother died,"
I said. There was a long silence, then
he whispered quietly, "Oh, no,"
as if he wanted to keep his sorrow to himself.
Many years later I told my actual mother
about the rape. She cried a little and was angry
on my behalf. I was calm. Relieved.
Then life went on, as it does,
without much of a pause. I was not healed
by telling her, I am sorry to say.
I am still not, at seventy-nine. The beautiful gray sky
of a rainy May day, and the lindens
coming into flower. That smell!
You and I both love it. (Did you know
all along I was writing this poem to you?)
Often at night we walk to the river
and stare down into the black current

which has reached flood stage
and carries everything before it.

By Irene Pujadas
By Mary Norris
By Edwidge Danticat
By Ayşegül Savaş

By [Campbell McGrath](#)

The moon, the ocean—some things never change.
At first the hummingbirds shared the feeder
but then some began to chase the others away,
keeping all the sugar water for themselves.
The baby calls the rainbow a *rainbow*
and the lighthouse a *nighthouse*.
Who could question the full moon
for seeking to guide us
across the ocean on a path of wavering golden light?
Some things never change. And then they do.

By Caitlin Reid
By Paul Noth
By Kate Chin Park
By Paul Noth

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