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NEW YORKER



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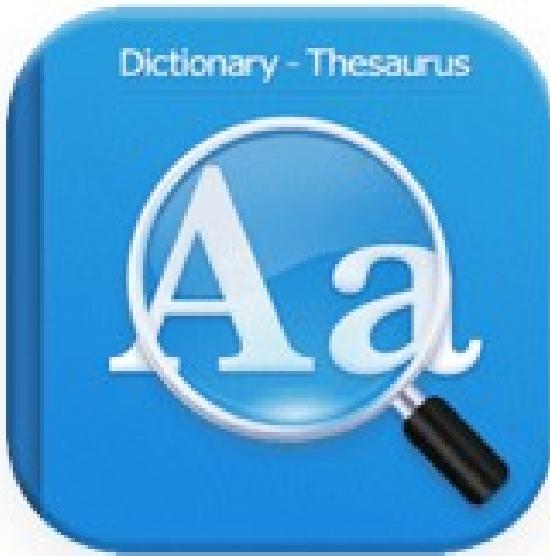
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Goings On

- [The Press-on-Nail Renaissance](#)

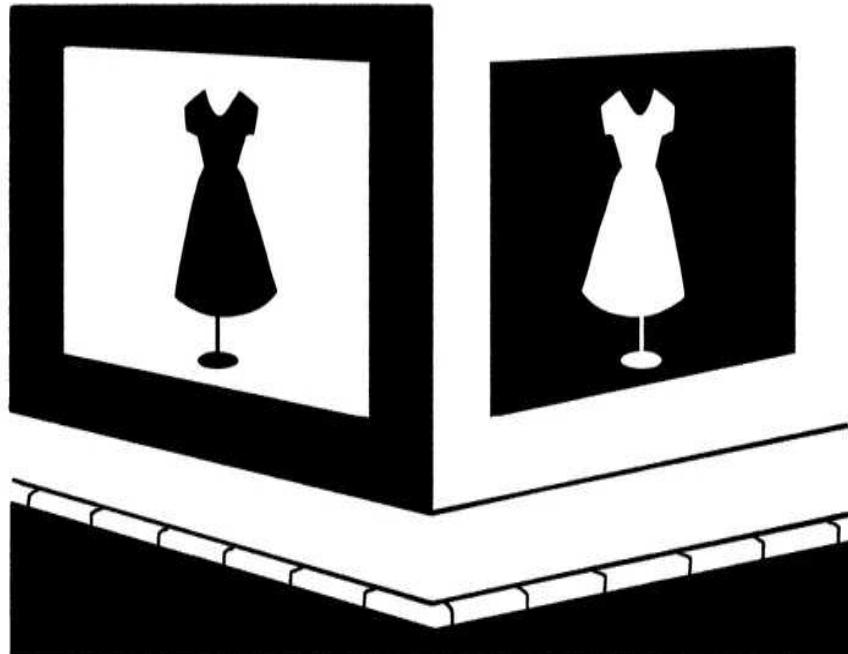
Goings On

The Press-on-Nail Renaissance

Also: Elizabeth Marvel and Amber Iman star in “The Ford/Hill Project,” American Ballet Theatre dances Dostoyevsky, Hilton Als picks Lower East Side galleries, and more.

October 11, 2024





On and Off the Avenue

Rachel Syme surveys the press-on-nail renaissance.

For a little under a year, in 1987-88, Dolly Parton had her own variety show on ABC, called, fittingly, “Dolly.” The show lasted just twenty-two episodes, but it gave us one of the most charming encounters in pop-culture history (and one of my favorite [clips](#) circulating around the Internet): Parton and the singer Patti LaBelle sat together, in matching bespangled black dresses, and “played” their acrylic nails like percussion instruments. Parton demonstrated to LaBelle how she likes to strum one plastic-tipped hand across the other, creating the clacky sound of a washboard. LaBelle quickly joined in, and together they sang “Shortnin’ Bread,” accompanied only by their own manicures. Artificial talons have never produced something more authentically wonderful.

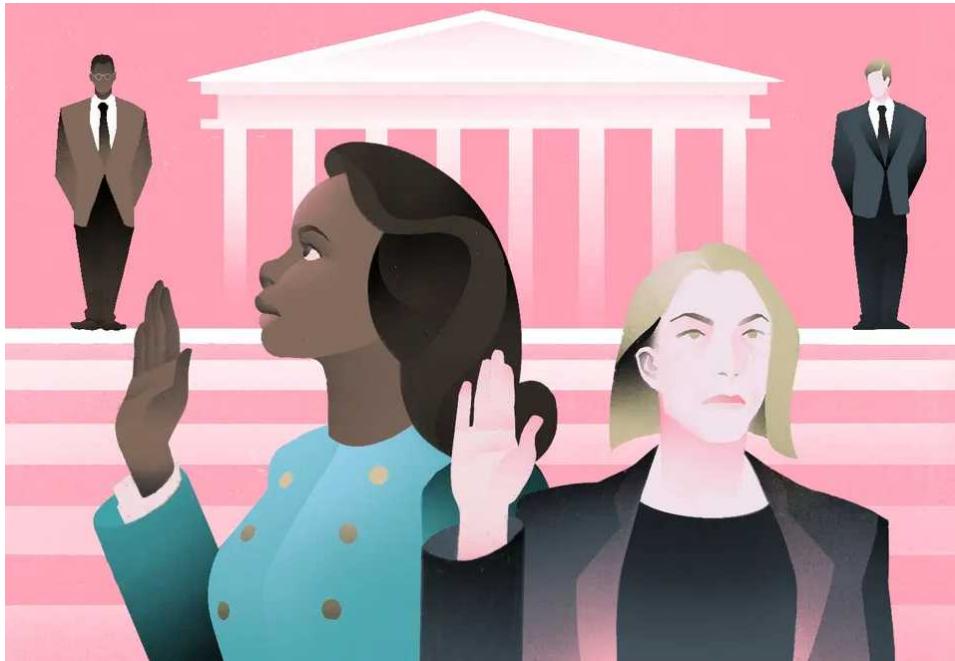


The eighties were a big decade for acrylic nails, and particularly for “press-ons”—a set of gleamy prosthetic claws that people could apply in the comfort of their own homes, for far less than they might spend at a salon. The leading brand was Lee Press-ons, pioneered in California in the mid-seventies by a pharmaceutical executive named Henry Lee. A *Washington Post* reporter covered the phenomenon, writing that the boomlet was a harbinger of “the ’80s commitment to the art of self-maintenance.” When interviewed about the sudden demand for his signature product, Lee joked, “I’m afraid the FDA’s going to start calling them a drug.”

Nearly four decades later, press-ons are back in style—and arguably better than ever. We are, in fact, living through a new golden age of fake-nail technology. Glue-ables have come a long way since the flimsy supermarket tips I grew up with; the latest innovations are more durable, more fashionable, and (to echo Lee) even more addictive than their predecessors. There are near-countless styles, colors, shapes, and lengths available, ranging from fifteen to thirty dollars—my favorites come from [Glamnetic](#) (known for their festive seasonal “drops,” such as snow-flocked tips for winter), [Chill House](#) (an N.Y.C.-based spa that moved into the nail space in 2020 with “Chill Tips,” which come in *de rigueur* patterns like periwinkle checkerboard), [Olive & June](#) (whose “Instant Mani” sets are a breeze), [Static](#) (great for elegant basics, like beige and cherry red) and [Rave Nailz](#),

from the nail artist Braelinn Frank. (I'm partial to her "Rodeo French" style, a kicky spin on a French manicure in which the half-moons are saddle brown.) Even the longtime drugstore brand [Kiss](#) has stepped up its offerings. (The Olympic gymnast Suni Lee wore the brand's newly released gel French tips when she competed in Paris this summer.) I usually apply my press-ons on the subway—it takes ten minutes, and it's quite meditative—and with proper application, each set can last up to two weeks (though I keep a tube of nail glue with me, in case of any pop-offs). I like to think that Dolly would approve.

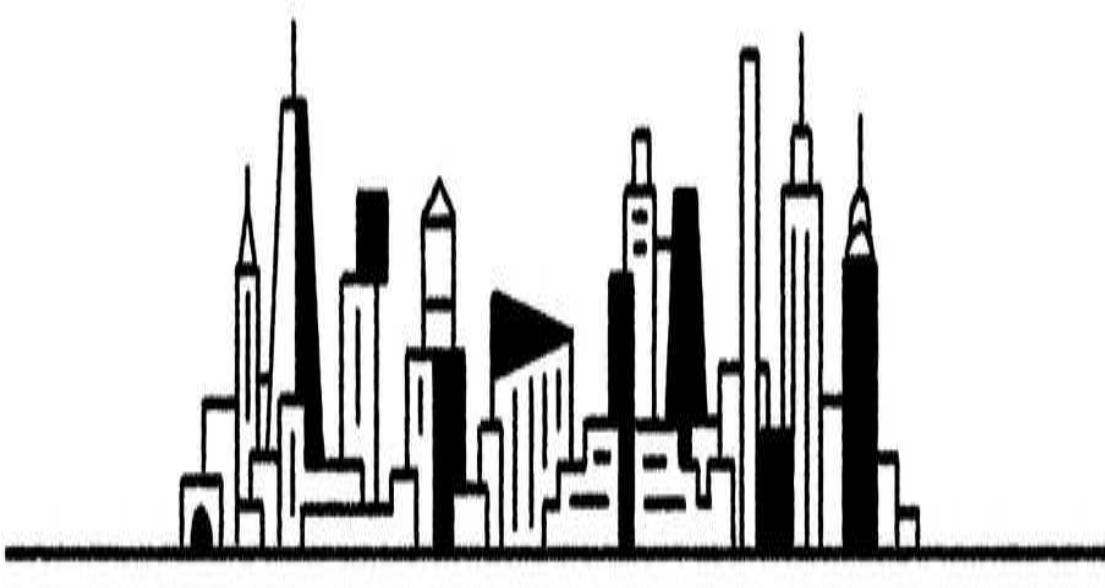
Spotlight



Off Broadway

During a Supreme Court Justice's confirmation process, the prospective lifetime appointee undergoes a questioning period that has become increasingly theatrical. The theatre in question is, occasionally, Greek tragedy. In "[The Ford/Hill Project](#)," Lee Sunday Evans stages two gripping, traumatic testimonies—Anita Hill's revelations about harassment by Clarence Thomas and the sexual-assault accusations by Christine Blasey

Ford against Brett Kavanaugh—by using verbatim text from their respective Senate hearings. Elizabeth Marvel co-conceived the event and plays Ford, with similarly stunning talents in other parts: Amber Iman, a Tony nominee for her work in “Lempicka,” plays Hill, and Dylan Baker and Eric Berryman give voice to the many men arrayed against them.—[Helen Shaw](#) (*Public Theatre, Oct. 16-20.*)



About Town

Indie Rock

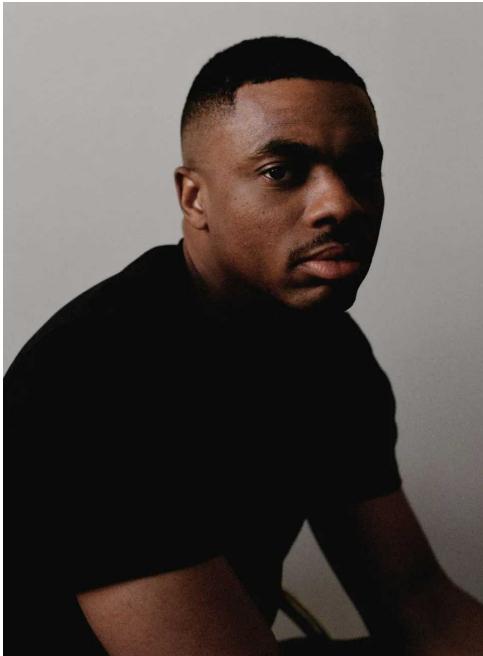
Perhaps befitting a group of Irishmen who opened their pandemic breakthrough album, “A Hero’s Death,” with a song featuring the declarative couplet “I don’t belong to anyone / I don’t wanna belong to anyone,” the members of **Fontaines D.C.** have now shaken off some of the flinty post-punk roots that brought them renown far beyond their beloved Dublin City (that other D.C.). What’s surprising, however, is the degree to which “Romance,” the band’s new record, retains the essence of their lead vocalist Grian Chatten’s boldness while inviting in arena-ready melodic and production flourishes. It sounds like growth rather than transformation,

which could explain why “Starburster,” their subtle wink at hip-hop, caught on as a summer single.—*K. Leander Williams (Brooklyn Paramount; Oct. 15-16.)*

Off Broadway

The musical adaptation of the 2012 movie “**Safety Not Guaranteed**” (music and lyrics by Ryan Miller, of the band Guster; book by Nick Blaemire) is an odd, contradictory experience: its events, even when directed cleanly by Lee Sunday Evans, are thinly sketched and rather awful, but Miller’s shiny rock score jumps with wall-to-wall feel-good energy. Three Seattle journalists think they’ve found a quirky cover story when Darius (Nkeki Obi-Melekwe) stumbles across a want ad for a time-travelling companion; staking out the deluded Kenneth (Taylor Trensch) prompts all three into various kinds of out-of-town romance. Focus only on the puppyish, frolicking performances and five-alarm voices and your heart will rise; concentrate on what’s actually being said—Kenneth is unwell, and the reporters are stalking him—and it sinks again.—*H.S. (BAM Strong; through Oct. 20.)*

Hip-Hop



The Long Beach rapper **Vince Staples** has always been a bit of a casual comedian, but he made an official transition earlier this year with the surrealist Netflix satire “The Vince Staples Show.” The series, which follows a fictional version of its titular star, bears striking similarities to his best music—slightly off-kilter, ruthlessly caustic, employing sharp eyes and a piercing wit to survey the tragedies and absurdities of SoCal gang culture. His most recent album, “Dark Times,” balances dual roles as reticent observer and snarky hood celebrity, capping his thrilling run to becoming an unlikely leading man.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)* (*Terminal 5; Oct. 18.*)

Classical

After a buzzing opening night complete with an indiscreet bait and switch—Josh Groban headlined after an ever-busy Cynthia Erivo had to withdraw—next up for the **New York Philharmonic** is a celebration of Afromodernism. The ensemble, led by the conductor Thomas Wilkins, spotlights works by Black artists, both current and antecedent, which explore facets of the African artistic diaspora. The program includes the New York première of Nathalie Joachim’s Freedom Movement-inspired cello concerto “Had to Be,” with the soloist Seth Parker Woods, as well as David Baker’s jazz-infused “Kosbro” (short for “Keep on steppin’, brothers”) and Carlos

Simon's "Four Black American Dances." William Grant Still's sweeping Symphony No. 4, "Autochthonous," closes the show.—*Jane Bua* (David Geffen Hall; Oct. 17-18.)

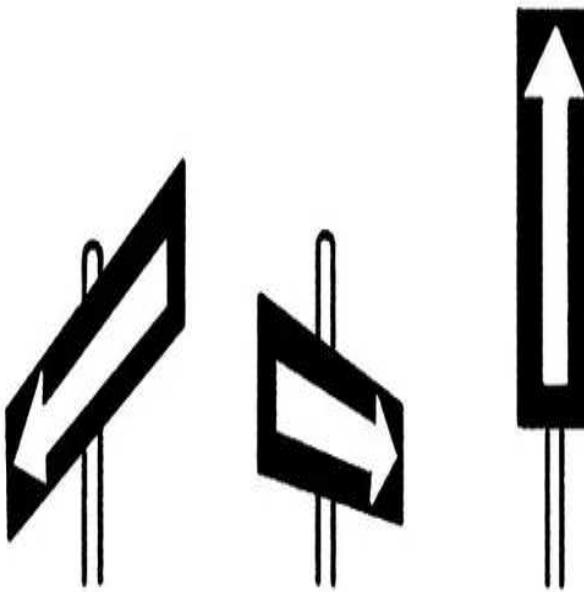
Ballet



American Ballet Theatre's fall season combines older works with something new: a full-evening story ballet based on—believe it or not—Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "Crime and Punishment" (Oct. 30-Nov. 3). The choreographer, Helen Pickett, is a veteran of William Forsythe's experimental troupe Ballett Frankfurt and of the Wooster Group. And from the archives, the company brings back the ethereal dream ballet from Petipa's "La Bayadère," known as the "Kingdom of the Shades," first staged for the company fifty years ago, by the recently defected Russian ballerina Natalia Makarova (who will be honored on Oct. 23). The new ballets include premières by Gemma Bond and Kyle Abraham, and a quirky duet set to music for the *shamisen* (a Japanese banjo-like instrument) by Alexei Ratmansky.—[Marina Harss](#) (David H. Koch Theatre; Oct. 16-Nov. 3.)

Movies

In “**Joker: Folie à Deux**,” the director Todd Phillips’s overblown and undercooked musical sequel to “Joker,” the abused and aggrieved wannabe comedian Arthur Fleck (Joaquin Phoenix), following the first movie’s killing spree, is imprisoned in an asylum, where he falls for the patient Lee Quinzel (Lady Gaga). When Arthur stands trial for murder, his lawyer (Catherine Keener) portrays him as delusionally split into two personalities. Arthur denies this and wants to take responsibility for his crimes—but Lee is in love with his Joker persona. The idea is clever, even moving, but it remains undeveloped; instead, Phillips stages garish and clumsy production numbers, never lets Gaga cut loose vocally, pushes Phoenix through showy antics, and adds horrific brutality for shock value. The superb cast is left flailing in a void.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In wide release.*)



Pick Three

[Hilton Als](#) on a cluster of exciting downtown galleries.

On a little stretch of Henry Street near the Manhattan Bridge, several galleries have sprung up, reflecting their founders’ curiosity, taste, and commitment to showing work you wouldn’t find anywhere else.

1. At **56 Henry Street**, the gallerist Eleanor Rines has put up early models constructed by the artist Laurie Simmons, which she used in photographs of pre-“Barbie” scenarios about gender and isolation. The models are brightly colored and viewed from above, like those one might see opening a science-fiction flick. But here the horror is quiet.



2. Down the street is the artist Jack Pierson’s **Elliott Templeton Fine Arts**, a jewel box of a space devoted to delicate ideas strongly executed. Up now are prints from a research project called “The Posture Study,” by the psychologist and eugenicist William H. Sheldon (1898-1977). The images show naked or semi-naked young men in a study that was conducted in higher education, where body shapes and presentation were thought to betray an aspect of character. Shot in black-and-white, the white men stare straight ahead, their faces blank of meaning while they’re being sized up, photographically speaking, to represent not a cross section of American life but its presumed center: the white male.

3. “We Can Grow or Wither,” the artist Josie Love Roebuck’s show at **LatchKey Gallery**, founded by the gallerist Amanda Uribe in 2018 to support emerging artists, celebrates the lives of women. Pieces made up of brightly colored fabric deal with the domestic, with portraiture, and with the artist’s joy in creating, all at once.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [In defense of fridgescaping](#)
- [New Bon Iver, just in time](#)
- [The case of Jack Nicholson's missing baby teeth](#)

The Talk of the Town

- [What the Polls Really Say About Black Men's Support for Kamala Harris](#)
- [James Dyson Moves Beyond the Air-Whooshing](#)
- [What Does Your Doorman Say About You?](#)
- [A Tattoo Homage to Norma Desmond](#)
- [How Much of the Dare Is Enough of the Dare?](#)

Comment

What the Polls Really Say About Black Men's Support for Kamala Harris

After the 2016 election, progressives blamed white women for Hillary Clinton's loss. This year, Black men have come under special scrutiny.

By Jelani Cobb

October 13, 2024



In early October, just before [Kamala Harris](#) spoke at the Dort Financial Center, in Flint, Michigan, the N.B.A. Hall of Famer Magic Johnson took the stage to offer a few insights about the candidate and her campaign. The choice of Johnson, who is a Michigander, to introduce Harris made sense for several reasons. He has been an advocate for people with [H.I.V./AIDS](#)—he has been H.I.V.-positive for more than thirty years—and Harris helped spearhead a Biden Administration effort to end the epidemic by 2030. He is a co-chair of the Athletes for Harris coalition. And, since he officially retired from basketball, in 1996, he has become known nearly as much for his shrewd investments in movie theatres and sports franchises as for his prowess as a point guard. In Flint, Johnson congratulated the Detroit Tigers

on their playoff run, praised Harris for her economic proposals, and then spoke about a specific sliver of the electorate. “Our Black men, we gotta get ‘em out to vote,” he said. “Kamala’s opponent promised a lot of things last time to the Black community that he did not deliver on, and we gotta make sure we help Black men understand that.”

Johnson was addressing a concern that has been alternately murmured and shouted in Democratic circles as Election Day nears: that Democrats are vulnerable with one of their most loyal constituencies, African American men. The statistical stalemate that the two major-party candidates have been locked in has led to a kind of obsessive demographic slicing in an effort to predict the election’s outcome. In the traumatic wake of the 2016 contest, progressives blamed white women, more than fifty per cent of whom, initial reports alleged, had voted for [Donald Trump](#), compared with forty-three per cent for Hillary Clinton. (Subsequent analysis revealed the numbers to be closer to forty-seven per cent for Trump and forty-five for Clinton, but it was still a win.) This year, Black men have come under special scrutiny as the potential weak link.

A headline from a “PBS NewsHour” story in August noted that “Trump Is Gaining Ground with Some Black Men.” The same month, *Mother Jones* ran a story titled “I Spent a Week with Black MAGA. Here’s What I Learned.” A *Times* piece led with “Black Men Rally for Kamala Harris and Confront an Elephant in the Room.” Trump himself weighed in, noting, “I seem to be doing very well with Black males.” In fact, according to a recent A.P.-NORC poll, only one in ten Black voters thinks that Trump would “change the country for the better,” and eight out of ten have a somewhat or very negative view of him. Trump won fourteen per cent of Black male voters in 2016, according to Pew, and just twelve per cent in 2020. But there was enough concern among Democrats that the Harris campaign gave a spot on the final night of the Democratic National Convention to the comedian D. L. Hughley to make the least common form of an endorsement speech: an apology.

Hughley confessed that, because Harris had been a prosecutor, he made assumptions about her, and “often repeated them to a lot of people.” But, he added, “I was wrong. And I’m so very glad I was wrong, because, Kamala, you give me hope for the future.” He said that Harris had contacted him to

discuss his doubts, and that he had then educated himself about her record as a public servant. He now describes himself as a “loud advocate” for Harris. The radio host [Charlamagne tha God](#) offered a similar conversion narrative. After previously lamenting Harris’s relatively low profile in the Biden Administration, he said during a CNN interview this summer that he’d held “an unrealistic expectation” of her as Vice-President. He cites Harris’s support for mental-health funding and her economic plans as reasons that he now endorses her. This week, he is scheduled to air a special show with Harris as his guest.

Whatever the perceptions, though, Harris is doing better with Black male voters than [Joe Biden](#) was earlier this year. According to a recent Pew survey, seventy-three per cent will vote or are leaning toward voting for her. Even in mid-July, before Biden dropped out of the race, Harris’s favorability rating among Black voters in battleground states exceeded his by five points. A more recent poll from Howard University found that, in swing states, eighty-eight per cent of Black men over fifty and seventy-two per cent of those younger say they will likely vote for her. Still, Terrance Woodbury, who leads HIT Strategies, a firm that has done extensive polling on this part of the electorate, has pointed out that the issue goes far beyond Harris as a candidate, or—as [Barack Obama](#) chided last Thursday, at a campaign field office, before he spoke at a Harris rally in Pittsburgh—the reluctance that some Black men may have to vote for a woman for President. (It’s worth remembering that Black men voted for Clinton in 2016 at a level that surpassed white women by thirty-six points.) Woodbury notes that “Democrats have experienced erosion—a two-to-three-point erosion amongst Black men—in every election since Barack Obama exited the political stage. This is not just a Kamala Harris problem. This is a Democratic Party problem.” A higher share of Black men than Black women identify as conservative. The declining number of Black male Democratic voters, like the Party’s diminishing appeal to Latino and working-class white voters, may portend an ongoing realignment. Or it may, as Woodbury contends, simply reflect the Party’s failure to craft messages that appeal to this part of its base.

Accordingly, the Harris campaign has been preparing a package of policy initiatives that relate to the issues—entrepreneurship, homeownership—that consistently emerge in focus groups with Black male voters. But there is

another dynamic that warrants mention: Trump's bombastic allure skews disproportionately male, and although young voters generally support Democrats, there is some evidence that young men may be a stealth asset for him in November. (Stephen Miller, Trump's erstwhile immigration czar, recently advised young men that proudly displaying their *MAGA* sympathies is the best way to impress women.) And Trump is more popular with Black men under the age of fifty than with any other segment of African Americans.

The election will turn upon a multitude of dynamics, some too subtle to be apparent ahead of time. In Flint, Magic Johnson worried that Black men might not understand that Trump hadn't kept his promises to the Black community. But comparatively few of them have found the siren song of Trump appealing. Should Kamala Harris not prevail in November, it will not be the fault of any single faction of the electorate. She will receive a large majority of Black men's votes. Whether that—and the turnout among the other parts of her coalition—will be enough to win her the Presidency remains to be seen. ♦

Innovations Dept.

James Dyson Moves Beyond the Air-Whooshing

At his new flagship store in SoHo, the British billionaire and vacuum magnate celebrates futuristic headphones and mushroom-enhanced hair-styling products.

By Sarah Larson

October 14, 2024



On a recent morning, James Dyson, the seventy-seven-year-old British billionaire and vacuum-cleaner magnate, sat at a long table in a glassy second-floor office overlooking his brand-new Dyson retail store on Mercer Street, in SoHo, and gestured toward recently exposed brick walls. “It’s a decommissioned fire station,” he said, pulling up a time-lapse video showing architectural renderings of the building, beginning in 1854. “There used to be a statue of a fireman on the roof. I’d like to get it back.” Like his first inventor’s studio, near Bath—a back-yard outbuilding where he famously constructed five thousand one hundred and twenty-seven prototypes of his first cyclonic vacuum cleaner, finally cracking it in 1983—the firehouse

originally accommodated horse carriages. “A coach house, exactly,” he said. “So,” a full-circle moment: “returning to a coach house.”

The full circle of Dyson’s career, incorporating an ever-intensifying whirlwind of products and ideas, has itself been cyclonic. Since the early years, when he first appeared on television with his vacuum, explaining that he just thought things should *work* properly, Dyson has cornered the market on lavishly nifty devices that swirl or blow air, with science-inflected narratives and luxe pricing. He’s also opened a university, championed Brexit, exchanged pointed texts with a Prime Minister, and ventured into farming. His company, which employs more than fourteen thousand people, is still privately owned; Dyson likes independence of all kinds. His son Jake is now chief engineer.

That night, a launch party on all three floors of the old fire station would celebrate Dyson’s latest innovations, including a new, non-air genre: hair-styling products, which he calls “formulations,” infused with the power of mushrooms. Beyond him, a wall-size video showed luscious, coruscating hair and floating fungi. A typical styling product (“I call it, rather rudely, varnish”) is “crystalline in nature,” Dyson said, frowning. The hair “feels crunchy and crispy, and it breaks, and the crystalline things shatter if you move, and there’s no movement and no life, and it doesn’t feel soft and it doesn’t feel shiny.” Not so with his formulations, Dyson Chitosan. “The oyster mushroom happens to have this rather complex macromolecule that has sort of a triodetic form,” Dyson said. “It forms a net around whatever it touches, and it allows it to flex, but the net returns it to what you set it in.” He demonstrated one serum’s distinctive bottle, which emits a precise .22-millilitre blop of goo when the user depresses it. “It sheers in your hands,” he said. “And if I now run that through my hair, then I’ve applied it.” He and a visitor sheered .44 millilitres’ worth and applied it. The hold was subtle, the scent pleasing.

Dyson sat beside a hefty Dyson air purifier that resembled an oscillating zero. “It’s sniffing the air all the time,” he said. “Leaving it on auto is the best thing you can do, because if it just smells something awful”—smoke, formaldehyde, a “smelly candle”—“it switches itself on. So we’re doing the thinking for you.” (Did sales skyrocket during last year’s smoky wildfires? “Yes, thank you very much! I’m sorry about the fires.”) Their new hair

dryers think for you, too. “Scalp health is important,” Dyson said. He picked up an orange-and-blue Supersonic Nural. Nearing the scalp, it reduces its heat, “so however hard you try, you can’t overheat your head and damage your skull.” If people insist on thinking for themselves, they can. “There is a lot of sense in the appliance knowing what it should be doing, but you can take over if you think it doesn’t. They don’t have total control over you.” A car’s climate control is better on auto, he said; so, too, with appliances, especially since the advent of A.I. learning. “We’ve got to learn to let ourselves go and let the product do it for us,” he said. “Because it jolly well *should* be doing it more intelligently. We’re at a crossroads—probably past it, actually—where we think we can provide what you want better than you can.”

Dyson now shares responsibilities with Jake. “He’s doing the headphones, for example”—air-purifying headphones, and *non*-air-purifying headphones that monitor noise pollution—and I’m doing beauty, for some reason.” Their farming venture includes a twenty-six-acre greenhouse for strawberries, improved by waste heat from anaerobic digesters. “There are no chemicals involved,” Dyson said. “We release bugs that kill bugs. We send robots up and down with ultraviolet, to kill mold and bacteria. They’re perfect strawberries.” Generally, “I think we should be growing food, being self-sufficient. We want to make it more interesting with robots, drones. We’re picking strawberries with robots. We want to fuse our engineering knowledge with farming knowledge and make great, good, wholesome food.”

At the party, boldly fashionable young guests (spike heels, short shorts, butterflies dyed into hair, a dog-shaped valise, a leather poodle skirt) admired Airwrap stylers, danced in air-purifying headphones, straightened hair samples, drank white wine near images of damaged follicles, ate hors d’œuvres served on spikes, and operated a cordless vacuum that shone green light to reveal invisible dust. Jake discussed headphones; James ran Chitosan through his hair, to whooping. He also showed the fire-station illustration from 1854. “This chap on the top here, with his fireman’s hose,” he said. “If you know anything about his whereabouts, please let me know.” ♦

An earlier version of this article used an incorrect spelling for the Supersonic Nural.

Book Report

What Does Your Doorman Say About You?

According to a new memoir by Stephen Bruno, who stands sentry at a building on Park Avenue, there are just three topics of conversation among doormen: baseball, women, and Puerto Rico.

By Zach Helfand

October 14, 2024



According to “Building Material,” a new memoir by Stephen Bruno, a Park Avenue doorman of twenty years, nearly every conversation among doormen can be classified into one of three categories: “Baseball, women, or Puerto Rico.” A doorman’s skill can be measured by the fluency with which he moves between genres. “Only a doorman of the highest caliber can segue from the Big Ass Walking By to a monologue covering an unrelated topic,” Bruno writes. “ ‘Look at that nice ass’ has never been followed by a pinch of the chin and ‘that gets me thinking.’ ”

But could three doormen, gathered at a bar, expand their conversational repertoire? The other day, Bruno met Paul and Nik, also doormen at his Park Avenue building, at Bloom's Tavern. The occasion: publication day for Bruno's book. After the bar, they'd head to the building, a few blocks away, where a resident was hosting a book party.

Bruno, who had tattooed forearms and neatly pomaded hair, is of Ecuadorian and Puerto Rican descent. Nik—black shirt, very broad chest—is Albanian. The Latino doormen and the Albanian doormen have been in a cold war. Nik is the building's new super—a doorman turned boss—but he's all right. "We campaigned for him," Bruno said.

The memoir touches on doorman classics—the upstairs-downstairs dynamic, the uniforms, the reading of residents' mailers, the end-of-year tip—but the doormen are the stars. Bruno has stories about a not-clandestine-enough liaison between a man on the fourteenth floor and a man on the seventh, and a woman who would call the lobby complaining about ghosts in her apartment, but he left those out.

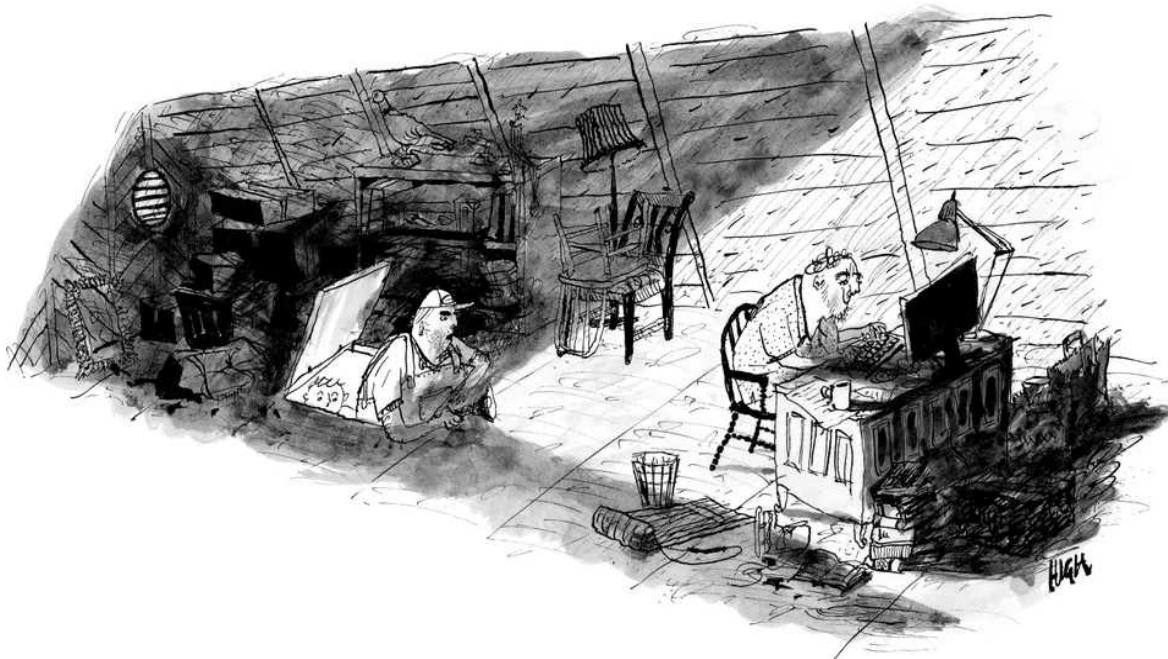
As a doorman, Bruno writes, "you're like a fish meant to stay the size of your tank." He put himself through college at John Jay and got an M.F.A. at Hunter while working the door—a fish who learned how to jump. "I don't believe in the starving artist," he said. "I'm writing a book during my shift. Essentially, I'm getting paid to write."

"You probably wrote half your book on your overnight shift," Nik noted.

Overnights are usually reserved for the newest doormen. Nik said, "One year, when I was doing the overnight on New Year's Eve, which is the worst overnight, I had a girl come and put her ass cheeks on the glass."

"Doesn't sound like the worst," Bruno said.

"Hurricane Sandy, we got stuck for five days," Bruno said. "We had food being delivered from the tenants—with silverware!"



The trio set off. At the building, the doorman on duty, Neil, directed them to the service entrance. "He's sending us around the corner!" Bruno said. But he was just busting their chops.

In the host's apartment, more doorman buddies awaited: Manny, Andrew, George. They wore open collars, undershirts, and chains. Residents and book-world friends wore dresses and sports jackets and ate egg-salad sandwiches cut into triangles. Fish of a different tank. Paul appeared holding a book. "I got it signed," he said.

The group greeted two residents: "Hello, Mr. Ahamed, hello, Mrs. Ahamed."

"Hello, Stephen, hello, Nik."

Paul stood around for a moment, clutching his book, until Mr. Ahamed brightened: "Paul, I didn't recognize you out of the uniform!"

"We're both writers," Mr. Ahamed's wife, Meenakshi, said, of herself and her husband. The couple had read an early draft and offered feedback.

Were the residents nervous about the exposure? "No," Meenakshi said. "Most people in the building are super friendly. Even the gossip columnist." She went on, "Cindy Adams. She lives in the penthouse with her dog."

She didn't make the book, though: "I like my job," Bruno said. ♦

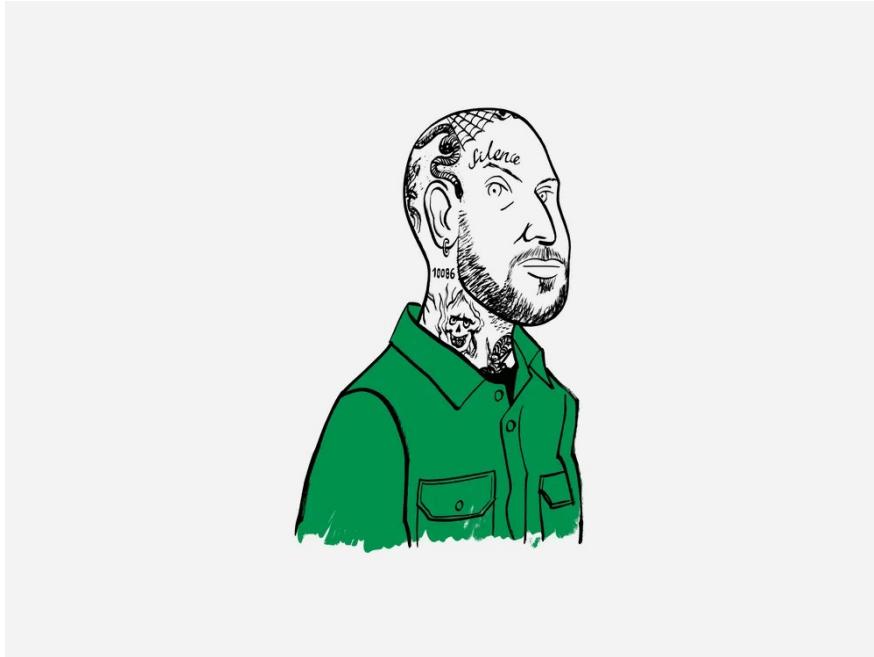
The Boards

A Tattoo Homage to Norma Desmond

Jamie Lloyd, the very inked director of the new Broadway revival of “Sunset Boulevard,” gets a new tattoo inspired by the show.

By Michael Schulman

October 14, 2024



The British theatre director Jamie Lloyd got his first tattoo eleven years ago, when he was in Los Angeles workshopping a new musical. He missed his two small sons, George and Lewin, so he got their names inked on his left forearm. When his third son, Jack, was born, he returned to L.A. and added him. Now he's tattooed all over: the top of his head (the Japanese Buddhist deity Fudo Myo-o), the front of his neck (two skulls, one smiling and one scowling, like the comedy and tragedy masks), his fingers (spectral flames), above his right eyebrow (the word “silence,” an ode to the power of stillness and to the pregnant pauses of Harold Pinter).

Lloyd, who was born in a seaside town on England’s southern coast, started his tattoo habit relatively late in life. “My father had tattoos on his arms. He was a truck driver,” he recalled recently. “I remember always being slightly

embarrassed of my dad's tattoos for some reason. At my graduation, I said to him, 'Wear long sleeves.' Times have changed." Lloyd, a punky forty-three-year-old, is unlike the stereotype of the gentlemanly London stage director, and his stripped-down, cold-blooded versions of the classics—Ibsen's "A Doll's House," starring Jessica Chastain; Pinter's "Betrayal," with Tom Hiddleston—have electrified the West End and Broadway. His latest import: a bloody, minimalist take on the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical "Sunset Boulevard," starring Nicole Scherzinger as the murderous silent-movie queen Norma Desmond.

Before a rehearsal one morning, Lloyd stopped at a building in the financial district to add one more tat to his ensemble: "10086," the address of Norma's mansion on Sunset Boulevard. "Something amazing about a tattoo is the way it ages," he said. "It always looks better when it's settled into the skin." In that sense, a fresh tattoo was not unlike a show settling into previews, and "Sunset Boulevard" had just played its first two. Lloyd took an elevator up to a "wellness floor," which had a coffee bar and sleek offices for acupuncturists and nail technicians. There he met Keith (Dez) Hernandez, a tattoo artist he'd discovered on Instagram, whose studio was decorated with graffiti canvases and overlooked the East River. "This is, like, the nicest tattoo studio ever," he said.

Dez, a Bronx native (his father, a Mets fan, named him after the famous first baseman), looked over Lloyd's illustrated body. "You have space?" he asked. "You're more tatted than I am!" Lloyd had two potential spots for "10086": behind his right ear or above his right collarbone. He wanted the number in an Old English-style font. Dez's studio manager, who goes by Paz, pulled up options on a laptop, and they chose one called Victorian Text. Pointing to the deity on Lloyd's cranium, Dez asked, "How painful was that?"

"Not so bad," Lloyd said. "The fingers were the worst."

Dez said that he got his first professional tat at eighteen and started tattooing others about a decade ago, out of his apartment in the Bronx. He'd recently done a house call for Jalen Brunson, the point guard for the Knicks. "I actually like the theatre," he told Lloyd. "I've gone to—whaddayacallit? —'Jersey Boys' a few times." He was amazed by how Broadway performers

have to be “perfect every time.” Another parallel with tattooing? “Well, when you mess up you just make it *look* like it’s perfect,” he said. The two men bonded over the assumptions that people make about them because of their tattoos. “I’m staying in the East Village, and this guy came up to me the other night, convinced that he knew me from prison,” Lloyd said.

Paz printed out a stencil for the number, and Dez affixed it to each potential spot. He advocated for behind the ear. “It looks like it was meant to be there,” he said. Lloyd trusted him—he sees tattooing as a collaboration, akin to how he works with actors: “I basically give them a level of freedom to do what they want to do.” (Next fall, he’s directing “Waiting for Godot” on Broadway, starring Alex Winter and Keanu Reeves, a.k.a. Bill and Ted.)

“I’m ready, bro. Let’s get it!” Dez said. Lloyd lay on his side on a foldout table, and Dez got to work with a buzzing tattoo pen. Despite the sting, Lloyd felt his eyelids droop. “It’s kind of nice to have a little rest,” he said. “I’ve been so busy.” After twenty-five minutes, Dez showed him his newest tat in a mirror and said, “I like it there, brother.”

“Yeah, it’s cool!” Lloyd said, beaming. He invited Dez to come see “Sunset Boulevard,” then went to catch a car uptown to rehearsal. Would Norma Desmond ever get a tattoo? Probably not, Lloyd reasoned, “unless it was her own portrait.” Then he reconsidered: “Or her eyes. One of my favorite moments is when she says, ‘I can say anything I want with my eyes.’ ” ♦

Invitation Only

How Much of the Dare Is Enough of the Dare?

The musician, a Charli XCX and Billie Eilish collaborator, throws a thirty-six-hour live-streamed party for his new album, “What’s Wrong with New York?”

By Holden Seidlitz

October 14, 2024



On a recent Monday at 1 P.M., the Dare, a musician known to his loved ones as Harrison Patrick Smith, put on a pair of black sunglasses with great ceremony. He was in a room above a bridal boutique in the Chinatown micro-neighborhood known as Dimes Square, and a batch of groupies, mostly college girls, were waiting to meet him. They’d queued for hours to be the first ones into Smith’s temporary interactive shrine to himself.

Smith, who is twenty-eight, wore a trim black suit—his usual uniform—that, with his mop of hair and haphazardly spaced teeth, evoked the British Invasion. (Smith grew up in a suburb of Seattle.) As the the girls poured in,

he stood in front of a mural emblazoned with the words “What’s Wrong with New York?”—the title of his new album.

A man with a handlebar mustache materialized next to him, balancing a camcorder on his shoulder. “The Dare Museum is live,” Smith’s manager, Bryce Segall, announced, then added, more quietly, “If it isn’t the Dare Memorial.”

The installation would be open for thirty-six hours, and attendees could preview Smith’s unreleased music, fondle props from his videos, purchase his friends’ wares (smash burgers, fifty-five-dollar decorative keys), and talk to the man himself. The proceedings would be streamed live online for the duration. The first visitors would be kicked out by 8 p.m., at which time they could keep watching “invite-only” parties on their laptops, as the space filled with new guests.

Smith had devised the idea for the museum after watching a 2009 documentary called “We Live in Public,” about a dot-com maverick who invited more than a hundred scenesters to cohabit with him in an underground terrarium in Manhattan, where the goings on were filmed and broadcast internally at all hours. “They made it two or three weeks, and then everybody started going insane,” Smith said. “At the beginning, everybody’s having a really good time. Like, woo-hoo! A week of debauchery where everybody’s fucking and watching each other fuck and shooting guns in the basement.” He went on, “My original plan was to do a month, using the record label’s money. But they were, like, ‘How about two days?’ ”

Smith recently produced Charli XCX’s “*brat*” bonus track, “Guess,” and its Billie Eilish remix. Two years ago, he released “Girls,” his first single as the Dare, in which he enumerates, over an electroclash synth line, the types of girls he likes (dopers, gunslingers, police-haters, girls who are pregnant or gluteously unendowed, liars, academics). Republic Records, whose artists include Taylor Swift and Drake, came knocking. The label released his album “The Sex EP,” which Pitchfork described as music “you would not want to have sex to.”

Smith said, “When I made ‘Girls,’ I was, like, ‘Is this too bro-y and too masculine?’ But the girls were, like, ‘We love this!’ ” The people at

Republic Records are apparently delighted by Smith's female fan base. He recalled them telling him, "Guys don't buy merch, they don't talk about music online, they don't show up to concerts."

Eying the squealing superfans, Segall remarked on Smith's rapid ascension. "We were watching the numbers go up on his Instagram," he said. "And I was, like, 'Did I just ruin his life?'"

At eight, as the first wave of guests was departing, a twenty-three-year-old named Dani Zipkis, in a sheer black dress onto which she had affixed a "*The Dare*" bumper sticker, was filling red Solo cups with orange juice and tequila. "I've never bartended before," she said. "I did this to get me and my friends on the list."

Just before eleven, Smith asked Zipkis for another vodka-cranberry. Glancing up at a camera that was tracking his movements, he said that the virtual panopticon hadn't rattled him. "I actually keep forgetting," he said. "Everybody's on camera all the time nowadays."

Segall, blocking two girls in miniskirts vying for Smith's attention, asked him to post the event's address on Instagram, to get the next wave of revellers in. "I have to promote this to my Close Friends now," Smith said to his admirers. "Are we not your close friends?" one said, stroking his chest, as Smith flattened himself against the wall.

After the girls left, a studio hand whispered to a security detail, "Make sure you're *really* checking their I.D.s."

Twenty-four hours later, the party was still raging. Attendees, in a Y2K blur of fur, pleather, and studded denim, screamed as Smith slithered onto a makeshift stage. His set featured an anthem of inclusivity called "You're Invited." He moshed and poured Bud Light into his mouth from a can.

After the set, Smith disappeared, and the disappointed masses swirled about like flameless moths. Behind a curtain, label reps were hovering over some after-party snacks. One of the suits grabbed a pizza box and slipped it into a utility closet.

Inside, crouched between a vacuum cleaner and a rack of coats, was Smith, wearily biting into a slice. Outside, his own voice blasted through the speakers. ♦

Reporting & Essays

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Reflections

How Alarmed Should We Be If Trump Wins Again?

Even many of the ex-President's opponents haven't grasped the scale of the man's villainy.

By Adam Gopnik

October 14, 2024



A long trip on an American highway in the summer of 2024 leaves the impression that two kinds of billboards now have near-monopoly rule over our roads. On one side, the billboards, gravely black-and-white and soberly reassuring, advertise cancer centers. ("We treat every type of cancer, including the most important one: yours"; "Beat 3 Brain Tumors. At 57, I gave birth, again.") On the other side, brightly colored and deliberately clownish billboards advertise malpractice and personal-injury lawyers, with phone numbers emblazoned in giant type and the lawyers wearing superhero costumes or intimidating glares, staring down at the highway as they promise to do to juries.

A new [Tocqueville](#) considering the landscape would be certain that all Americans do is get sick and sue each other. We ask doctors to cure us of incurable illnesses, and we ask lawyers to take on the doctors who haven't. We are frightened and we are angry; we look to expert intervention for the fears, and to comic but effective-seeming figures for retaliation against the experts who disappoint us.

Much of this is distinctly American—the idea that cancer-treatment centers would be in competitive relationships with one another, and so need to advertise, would be as unimaginable in any other industrialized country as the idea that the best way to adjudicate responsibility for a car accident is through aggressive lawsuits. Both reflect national beliefs: in competition, however unreal, and in the assignment of blame, however misplaced. We want to think that, if we haven't fully enjoyed our birthright of plenty and prosperity, a nameable villain is at fault.

To grasp what is at stake in this strangest of political seasons, it helps to define the space in which the contest is taking place. We may be standing on the edge of an abyss, and yet nothing is *wrong*, in the expected way of countries on the brink of apocalypse. The country is not convulsed with riots, hyperinflation, or mass immiseration. What we have is a sort of phony war—a *drôle de guerre*, a sitzkrieg—with the vehemence of conflict mainly confined to what we might call the cultural space.

These days, everybody talks about spaces: the “gastronomic space,” the “podcast space,” even, on N.F.L. podcasts, the “analytic space.” Derived from some combination of sociology and interior design, the word has elbowed aside terms like “field” or “conversation,” perhaps because it’s even more expansive. The “space” of a national election is, for that reason, never self-evident; we’ve always searched for clues.

And so William Dean Howells began his 1860 campaign biography of Abraham Lincoln by mocking the search for a Revolutionary pedigree for Presidential candidates and situating Lincoln in the antislavery West, in contrast to the resigned and too-knowing East. North vs. South may have defined the frame of the approaching war, but Howells was prescient in identifying East vs. West as another critical electoral space. This opposition would prove crucial—first, to the war, with the triumph of the Westerner

[Ulysses S. Grant](#) over the well-bred Eastern generals, and then to the rejuvenation of the Democratic Party, drawing on free-silver populism and an appeal to the values of the resource-extracting, expansionist West above those of the industrialized, centralized East.

A century later, the press thought that the big issues in the race between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy were Quemoy and Matsu (two tiny Taiwan Strait islands, claimed by both China and Taiwan), the downed U-2, the missile gap, and other much debated Cold War obsessions. But [Norman Mailer](#), in what may be the best thing he ever wrote, saw the space as marked by the rise of movie-star politics—the image-based contests that, from J.F.K. to Ronald Reagan, would dominate American life. In “Superman Comes to the Supermarket,” published in *Esquire*, Mailer revealed that a campaign that looked at first glance like the usual black-and-white wire-service photography of the first half of the twentieth century was really the beginning of our Day-Glo-colored Pop-art turn.

And our own electoral space? We hear about the overlooked vs. the élite, the rural vs. the urban, the coastal vs. the flyover, the aged vs. the young—about the dispossessed vs. the beneficiaries of global neoliberalism. Upon closer examination, however, these binaries blur. Support for populist nativism doesn’t track neatly with economic disadvantage. Some of Donald Trump’s keenest supporters have boats as well as cars and are typically the wealthier citizens of poorer rural areas. His stock among billionaires remains high, and his surprising support among [Gen Z](#) males is something his campaign exploits with visits to podcasts that no non-Zoomer has ever heard of.

But polarized nations don’t actually polarize around fixed poles. Civil confrontations invariably cross classes and castes, bringing together people from radically different social cohorts while separating seemingly natural allies. The English Revolution of the seventeenth century, like the French one of the eighteenth, did not array worn-out aristocrats against an ascendant bourgeoisie or fierce-eyed sansculottes. There were, one might say, good people on both sides. Or, rather, there were individual aristocrats, merchants, and laborers choosing different sides in these prerevolutionary moments. No civil war takes place between classes; coalitions of many kinds square off against one another.

In part, that's because there's no straightforward way of defining our "interests." It's in the interest of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs to have big tax cuts; in the longer term, it's also in their interest to have honest rule-of-law government that isn't in thrall to guilds or patrons—to be able to float new ideas without paying baksheesh to politicians or having to worry about falling out of sixth-floor windows. "Interests" fail as an explanatory principle.

Does talk of values and ideas get us closer? A central story of American public life during the past three or four decades is (as this writer has noted) that liberals have wanted political victories while reliably securing only cultural victories, even as conservatives, wanting cultural victories, get only political ones. Right-wing Presidents and legislatures are elected, even as one barrier after another has fallen on the traditionalist front of manners and mores. Consider the widespread acceptance of same-sex marriage. A social transformation once so seemingly untenable that even Barack Obama said he was against it, in his first campaign for President, became an uncontroversial rite within scarcely more than a decade.

Right-wing political power has, over the past half century, turned out to have almost no ability to stave off progressive social change: Nixon took the White House in a landslide while Norman Lear took the airwaves in a ratings sweep. And so a kind of permanent paralysis has set in. The right has kept electing politicians who've said, "Enough! No more 'Anything goes'!"—and anything has kept going. No matter how many right-wing politicians came to power, no matter how many right-wing judges were appointed, conservatives decided that the entire culture was rigged against them.

On the left, the failure of cultural power to produce political change tends to lead to a doubling down on the cultural side, so that wholesome college campuses can seem the last redoubt of Red Guard attitudes, though not, to be sure, of Red Guard authority. On the right, the failure of political power to produce cultural change tends to lead to a doubling down on the political side in a way that turns politics into cultural theatre. Having lost the actual stages, conservatives yearn to enact a show in which their adversaries are rendered humiliated and powerless, just as they have felt humiliated and

powerless. When an intolerable contradiction is allowed to exist for long enough, it produces a Trump.

As much as television was the essential medium of a dozen bygone Presidential campaigns (not to mention the medium that made Trump a star), the podcast has become the essential medium of this one. For people under forty, the form—typically long-winded and shapeless—is as tangibly present as [Walter Cronkite](#)'s tightly scripted half-hour news show was fifty years ago, though the D.I.Y. nature of most podcasts, and the premium on host-read advertisements, makes for abrupt tonal changes as startling as those of the highway billboards.

On the enormously popular, liberal-minded “Pod Save America,” for instance, the hosts make no secret of their belief that the election is a test, as severe as any since the Civil War, of whether a government so conceived can long endure. Then they switch cheerfully to reading ads for Tommy John underwear (“with the supportive pouch”), for herbal hangover remedies, and for an app that promises to cancel all your excess streaming subscriptions, a peculiarly niche obsession (“I accidentally paid for Showtime twice!” “That’s bad!”). George Conway, the former Republican (and White House husband) turned leading anti-Trumper, states bleakly on his podcast for the Bulwark, the news-and-opinion site, that Trump’s whole purpose is to avoid imprisonment, a motivation that would disgrace the leader of any Third World country. Then he immediately leaps into offering—like an old-fashioned *a.m.-radio* host pushing Chock Full o’Nuts—testimonials for HexClad cookware, with charming self-deprecation about his own kitchen skills. How serious can the crisis be if cookware and boxers cohabit so cozily with the apocalypse?

And then there’s the galvanic space of social media. In the nineteen-seventies and eighties, we were told, by everyone from [Jean Baudrillard](#) to [Daniel Boorstin](#), that television had reduced us to numbed observers of events no longer within our control. We had become spectators instead of citizens. In contrast, the arena of social media is that of action and engagement—and not merely engagement but enragement, with algorithms acting out addictively on tiny tablets. The aura of the Internet age is energized, passionate, and, above all, angry. The algorithms dictate regular mortar rounds of text messages that seem to come not from an eager

politician but from an infuriated lover, in the manner of Glenn Close in “Fatal Attraction”: “Are you ignoring us?” “We’ve reached out to you *PERSONALLY!*” “This is the sixth time we’ve asked you!” At one level, we know they’re entirely impersonal, while, at another, we know that politicians wouldn’t do this unless it worked, and it works because, at still another level, we are incapable of knowing what we know; it doesn’t *feel* entirely impersonal. You can doomscroll your way to your doom. The democratic theorists of old longed for an activated citizenry; somehow they failed to recognize how easily citizens could be activated to oppose deliberative democracy.

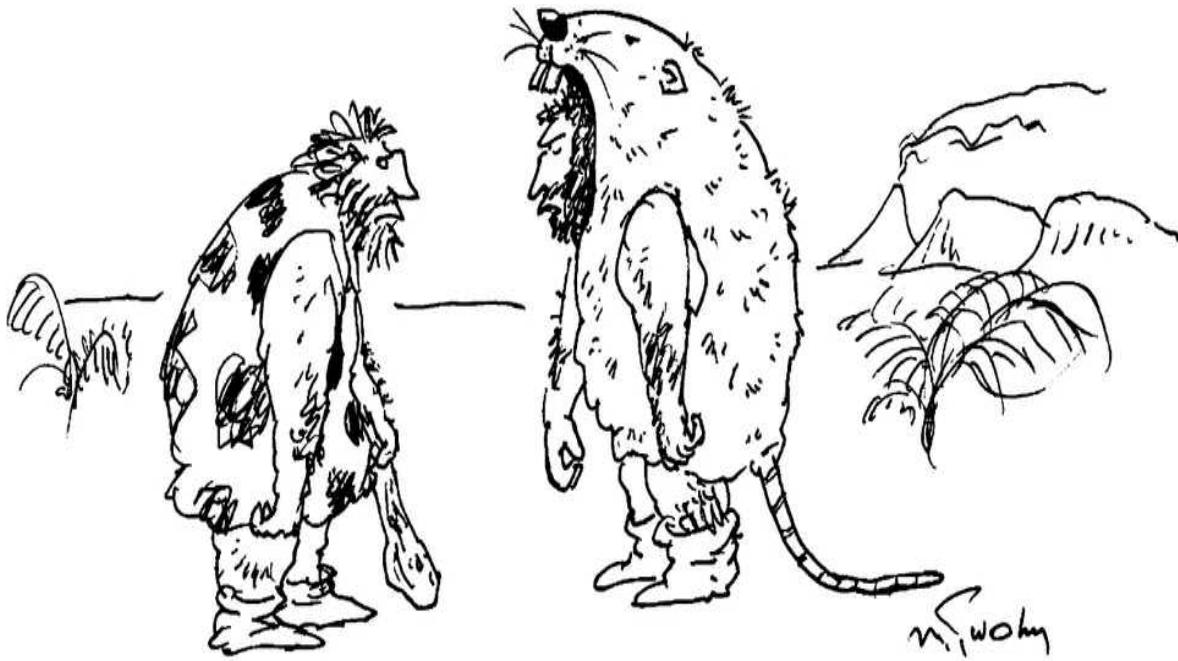
If the cultural advantages of liberalism have given it a more pointed politics in places where politics lacks worldly consequences, its real-world politics can seem curiously blunted. [Kamala Harris](#), like [Joe Biden](#) before her, is an utterly normal workaday politician of the kind we used to find in any functioning democracy—bending right, bending left, placating here and postponing confrontation there, glaring here and, yes, laughing there. Demographics aside, there is nothing exceptional about Harris, which is her virtue. Yet we live in exceptional times, and liberal proceduralists and institutionalists are so committed to procedures and institutions—to laws and their reasonable interpretation, to norms and their continuation—that they can be slow to grasp that the world around them has changed.

One can only imagine the fulminations that would have ensued in 2020 had the anti-democratic injustice of the Electoral College—which effectively amplifies the political power of rural areas at the expense of the country’s richest and most productive areas—tilted in the other direction. Indeed, before the 2000 election, when it appeared as if it might, [Karl Rove](#) and the [George W. Bush](#) campaign had a plan in place to challenge the results with a “grassroots” movement designed to short-circuit the Electoral College and make the popular-vote winner prevail. No Democrat even suggests such a thing now.

It’s almost as painful to see the impunity with which Supreme Court Justices have torched their institution’s legitimacy. One Justice has the upside-down flag of the insurrectionists flying on his property; another, married to a professional election denialist, enjoys undeclared largesse from a plutocrat. There is, apparently, little to be done, nor even any familiar language of

protest to draw on. Prepared by experience to believe in institutions, mainstream liberals believe in their belief even as the institutions are degraded in front of their eyes.

In one respect, the space of politics in 2024 is transoceanic. The forms of Trumpism are mirrored in other countries. In the U.K., a similar wave engendered the catastrophe of [Brexit](#); in France, it has brought an equally extreme [right-wing party](#) to the brink, though not to the seat, of power; in Italy, it elevated Matteo Salvini to national prominence and made [Giorgia Meloni](#) Prime Minister. In Sweden, an extreme-right group is claiming voters in numbers no one would ever have thought possible, while Canadian conservatives have taken a sharp turn toward the far right.



What all these currents have in common is an obsessive fear of immigration. Fear of the other still seems to be the primary mover of collective emotion. Even when it is utterly self-destructive—as in Britain, where the xenophobia of Brexit cut the U.K. off from traditional allies while increasing immigration from the Global South—the apprehension that “we” are being flooded by frightening foreigners works its malign magic.

It’s an old but persistent delusion that far-right nationalism is not rooted in the emotional needs of far-right nationalists but arises, instead, from the

injustices of neoliberalism. And so many on the left insist that all those Trump voters are really [Bernie Sanders](#) voters who just haven't had their consciousness raised yet. In fact, a similar constellation of populist figures has emerged, sharing platforms, plans, and ideologies, in countries where neoliberalism made little impact, and where a strong system of social welfare remains in place. If a broadened welfare state—national health insurance, stronger unions, higher minimum wages, and the rest—would cure the plague in the U.S., one would expect that countries with resilient welfare states would be immune from it. They are not.

Though Trump can be situated in a transoceanic space of populism, he isn't a mere symptom of global trends: he is a singularly dangerous character, and the product of a specific cultural milieu. To be sure, much of New York has always been hostile to him, and eager to disown him; in a 1984 profile of him in *GQ*, Graydon Carter made the point that Trump was the only New Yorker who ever referred to Sixth Avenue as the “Avenue of the Americas.” Yet we're part of Trump's identity, as was made clear by his recent rally on Long Island—pointless as a matter of swing-state campaigning, but central to his self-definition. His belligerence could come directly from the two New York tabloid heroes of his formative years in the city: [John Gotti](#), the gangster who led the Gambino crime family, and [George Steinbrenner](#), the owner of the Yankees. When Trump came of age, Gotti was all over the front page of the tabloids, as “the Teflon Don,” and Steinbrenner was all over the back sports pages, as “the Boss.”

Steinbrenner was legendary for his middle-of-the-night phone calls, for his temper and combativeness. Like Trump, who theatricalized the activity, he had a reputation for ruthlessly firing people. (Gotti had his own way of doing that.) Steinbrenner was famous for having no loyalty to anyone. He mocked the very players he had acquired and created an atmosphere of absolute chaos. It used to be said that Steinbrenner reduced the once proud Yankees baseball culture to that of professional wrestling, and that arena is another Trumpian space. Pro wrestling is all about having contests that aren't really contested—that are known to be “rigged,” to use a Trumpian word—and yet evoke genuine emotion in their audience.

At the same time, Trump has mastered the gangster's technique of accusing others of crimes he has committed. The agents listening to the Gotti wiretap

were mystified when he claimed innocence of the just-committed murder of Big Paul Castellano, conjecturing, in apparent seclusion with his soldiers, about who else might have done it: “Whoever killed this cocksucker, probably the cops killed this Paul.” Denying having someone whacked even in the presence of those who were with you when you whacked him was a capo’s signature move.

Marrying the American paranoid style to the more recent cult of the image, Trump can draw on the manner of the tabloid star and show that his is a game, a show, not to be taken quite seriously while still being serious in actually inciting violent insurrections and planning to expel millions of helpless immigrants. Self-defined as a showman, he can say anything and simultaneously drain it of content, just as Gotti, knowing that he had killed Castellano, thought it credible to deny it—not within his conscience, which did not exist, but within an imaginary courtroom. Trump evidently learned that, in the realm of national politics, you could push the boundaries of publicity and tabloid invective far further than they had ever been pushed.

Trump’s ability to be both joking and severe at the same time is what gives him his power and his immunity. This power extends even to something as unprecedented as the assault on the U.S. Capitol. Trump demanded violence (“If you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore”) but stuck in three words, “peacefully and patriotically,” that, however hollow, were meant to immunize him, Gotti-style. They were, so to speak, meant for the cops on the wiretap. Trump’s resilience is not, as we would like to tell our children about resilience, a function of his character. It’s a function of his not having one.

Just as Trump’s support cuts across the usual divisions, so, too, does a divide among his opponents—between the maximizers, who think that Trump is a unique threat to liberal democracy, and the minimizers, who think that he is merely the kind of clown a democracy is bound to throw up from time to time. The minimizers (who can be found among both Marxist *Jacobin* contributors and Never Trump *National Review* conservatives) will say that Trump has crossed the wires of culture and politics in a way that opportunistically responds to the previous paralysis, but that this merely places him in an American tradition. Democracy depends on the idea that the socially unacceptable might become acceptable. Andrew Jackson

campaigned on similar themes with a similar manner—and was every bit as ignorant and every bit as unaware as Trump. (And his campaigns of slaughter against Indigenous people really were genocidal.) Trump’s politics may be ugly, foolish, and vain, but ours is often an ugly, undereducated, and vain country. Democracy is meant to be a mirror; it shows what it shows.

Indeed, America’s recent history has shown that politics is a trailing indicator of cultural change, and that one generation’s most vulgar entertainment becomes the next generation’s accepted style of political argument. [David S. Reynolds](#), in his biography of Lincoln, reflects on how the new urban love of weird spectacle in the mid-nineteenth century was something Lincoln welcomed. [P. T. Barnum](#)’s genius lay in taking circus grotesques and making them exemplary Americans: the tiny General Tom Thumb was a hero, not a freak. Lincoln saw that it cost him nothing to be an American spectacle in a climate of sensation; he even hosted a reception at the White House for Tom Thumb and his wife—as much a violation of the decorum of the Founding Fathers as Trump’s investment in Hulk Hogan at the [Republican Convention](#). Lincoln understood the Barnum side of American life, just as Trump understands its W.W.E. side.

And so, the minimizers say, taking Trump seriously as a threat to democracy in America is like taking Roman Reigns seriously as a threat to fair play in sports. Trump is an entertainer. The only thing he really wants are ratings. When opposing abortion was necessary to his electoral coalition, he opposed it—but then, when that was creating ratings trouble in other households, he sent signals that he wasn’t exactly opposed to it. When [Project 2025](#), which he vaguely set in motion and claims never to have read, threatened his ratings, he repudiated it. The one continuity is his thirst for popularity, which is, in a sense, our own. He rows furiously away from any threatening waterfall back to the center of the river—including on Obamacare. And, the minimizers say, in the end, he did leave the White House peacefully, if gracelessly.

In any case, the panic is hardly unique to Trump. Reagan, too, was vilified and feared in his day, seen as the *reductio ad absurdum* of the culture of the image, an automaton projecting his controllers’ authoritarian impulses. Nixon was the subject of a savage satire by [Philip Roth](#) that ended with him running against the Devil for the Presidency of Hell. The minimizers tell us

that liberals overreact in real time, write revisionist history when it's over, and never see the difference between their stories.

The maximizers regard the minimizers' case as wishful thinking buoyed up by surreptitious resentments, a refusal to concede anything to those we hate even if it means accepting someone we despise. Maximizers who call Trump a fascist are dismissed by the minimizers as either engaging in name-calling or forcing a facile parallel. Yet the parallel isn't meant to be historically absolute; it is meant to be, as it were, oncologically acute. A freckle is not the same as a melanoma; nor is a Stage I melanoma the same as the Stage IV kind. But a skilled reader of lesions can sense which is which and predict the potential course if untreated. Trumpism is a cancerous phenomenon. Treated with surgery once, it now threatens to come back in a more aggressive form, subject neither to the radiation of "guardrails" nor to the chemo of "constraints." It may well rage out of control and kill its host.

And so the maximalist case is made up not of alarmist fantasies, then, but of dulled diagnostic fact, duly registered. Think hard about the probable consequences of a second Trump Administration—about the things he has promised to do and can do, the things that the hard-core group of rancidly discontented figures (as usual with authoritarians, more committed than he is to an ideology) who surround him wants him to do and can do. Having lost the popular vote, as he surely will, he will not speak up to reconcile "all Americans." He will insist that he won the popular vote, and by a landslide. He will pardon and then celebrate the [January 6th](#) insurrectionists, and thereby guarantee the existence of a paramilitary organization that's capable of committing violence on his behalf without fear of consequences. He will, with an obedient Attorney General, begin prosecuting his political opponents; he was largely unsuccessful in his previous attempt only because the heads of two U.S. Attorneys' offices, who are no longer there, refused to coöperate. When he begins to pressure CNN and ABC, and they, with all the vulnerabilities of large corporations, bend to his will, telling themselves that his is now the will of the people, what will we do to fend off the slow degradation of open debate?

Trump will certainly abandon Ukraine to Vladimir Putin and realign this country with dictatorships and against *NATO* and the democratic alliance of Europe. Above all, the spirit of vengeful reprisal is the totality of his beliefs

—very much like the fascists of the twentieth century in being a man and a movement without any positive doctrine except revenge against his imagined enemies. And against this: What? Who? The spirit of resistance may prove too frail, and too exhausted, to rise again to the contest. Who can have confidence that a democracy could endure such a figure in absolute control and survive? An oncologist who, in the face of this much evidence, shrugged and proposed watchful waiting as the best therapy would not be an optimist. He would be guilty of gross malpractice. One of those personal-injury lawyers on the billboards would sue him, and win.

What any plausible explanation must confront is the fact that Trump is a distinctively vile human being and a spectacularly malignant political actor. In fables and fiction, in every Disney cartoon and Batman movie, we have no trouble recognizing and understanding the villains. They are embittered, canny, ludicrous in some ways and shrewd in others, their lives governed by envy and resentment, often rooted in the acts of people who've slighted them. ("They'll never laugh at me again!") They nonetheless have considerable charm and the ability to attract a cult following. This is Ursula, Hades, Scar—to go no further than the Disney canon. Extend it, if that seems too childlike, to the realms of Edmund in "[King Lear](#)" and Richard III: smart people, all, almost lovable in their self-recognition of their deviousness, but not people we ever want to see in power, for in power their imaginations become unimaginably deadly. Villains in fables are rarely grounded in any cause larger than their own grievances—they hate Snow White for being beautiful, resent Hercules for being strong and virtuous. Bane is blowing up Gotham because he feels misused, not because he truly has a better city in mind.

Trump is a villain. He would be a cartoon villain, if only this were a cartoon. Every time you try to give him a break—to grasp his charisma, historicize his ascent, sympathize with his admirers—the sinister truth asserts itself and can't be squashed down. He will tell another lie so preposterous, or malign another shared decency so absolutely, or threaten violence so plausibly, or just engage in behavior so unhinged and hate-filled that you'll recoil and rebound to your original terror at his return to power. One outrage succeeds another until we become exhausted and have to work hard even to remember the outrages of a few weeks past: the helicopter ride that never happened (but whose storytelling purpose was to demean Kamala Harris as a woman),

or the cemetery visit that ended in a grotesque thumbs-up by a graveside (and whose symbolic purpose was to cynically enlist grieving parents on behalf of his contempt). No matter how deranged his behavior is, though, it does not seem to alter his good fortune.

Villainy inheres in individuals. There is certainly a far-right political space alive in the developed world, but none of its inhabitants—not Marine Le Pen or Giorgia Meloni or even [Viktor Orbán](#)—are remotely as reckless or as crazy as Trump. Our self-soothing habit of imagining that what has not yet happened cannot happen is the space in which Trump lives, just as comically deranged as he seems and still more dangerous than we know.

Nothing is ever entirely new, and the space between actual events and their disassociated representation is part of modernity. We live in that disassociated space. Generations of cultural critics have warned that we are lost in a labyrinth and cannot tell real things from illusion. Yet the familiar passage from peril to parody now happens almost simultaneously. Events remain piercingly actual and threatening in their effects on real people, while also being duplicated in a fictive system that shows and spoofs them at the same time. One side of the highway is all cancer; the other side all crazy. Their confounding is our confusion.

It is telling that the most successful entertainments of our age are the dark comic-book movies—the Batman films and the X-Men and the Avengers and the rest of those cinematic universes. This cultural leviathan was launched by the discovery that these ridiculous comic-book figures, generations old, could now land only if treated seriously, with sombre backstories and true stakes. Our heroes tend to dullness; our villains, garishly painted monsters from the id, are the ones who fuel the franchise.

During the debate last month in Philadelphia, as Trump’s madness rose to a peak of raging lunacy—“They’re eating the dogs”; “He hates her!”—ABC, in its commercial breaks, cut to ads for [“Joker: Folie à Deux,”](#) the new Joaquin Phoenix movie, in which the crazed villain swirls and grins. It is a Gotham gone mad, and a Gotham, against all the settled rules of fable-making, without a Batman to come to the rescue. Shuttling between the comic-book villain and the grimacing, red-faced, and unhinged man who may be re-elected President in a few weeks, one struggled to distinguish our

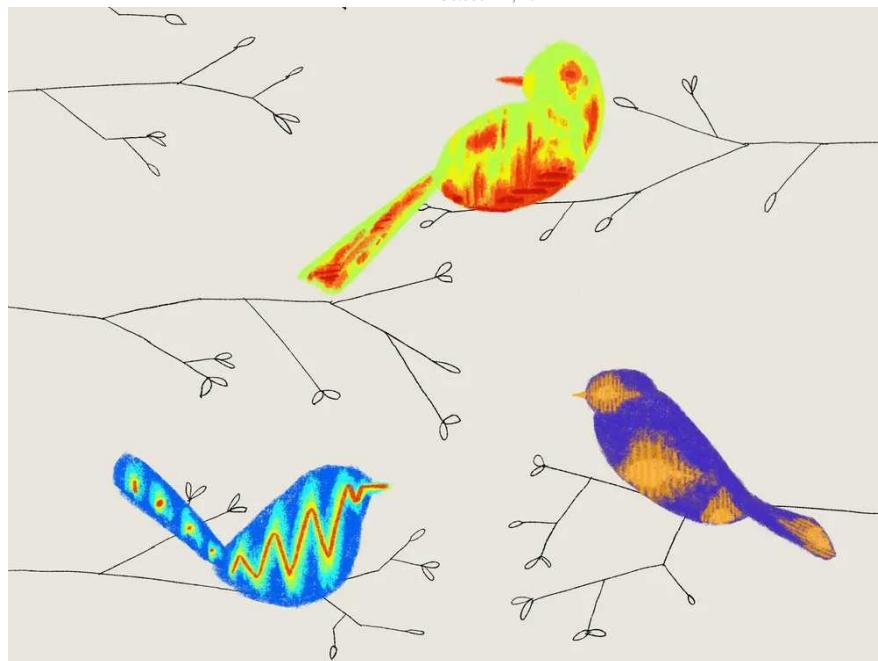
culture's most extravagant imagination of derangement from the real thing. The space is that strange, and the stakes that high. ♦

How Scientists Started to Decode Birdsong

Language is said to make us human. What if birds talk, too?

By Rivka Galchen

October 14, 2024



On a drizzly day in Grünau im Almtal, Austria, a gaggle of greylag geese shared a peaceful moment on a grassy field near a stream. One goose, named Edes, was preening quietly; others were resting with their beaks pointed tailward, nestled into their feathers. Then a camouflaged speaker that scientists had placed nearby started to play. First came a recorded honk from an unpartnered male goose named Joshua. Edes went on with his preening. Next came a honk that was lower in pitch than the first, with a slight bray. Edes looked up. As the other geese remained tucked in their warm positions, incurious, Edes scanned the field. He had just heard a recorded “distance call” from his life partner, a female goose whom scientists had named Bon Jovi.

Edes and his fellow-geese live near the Konrad Lorenz Research Center for Behavior and Cognition, which is named for a Nobel laureate whose imprinting experiments, in the nineteen-thirties, convinced goslings that he was their mother. (They took to following him in a downy line.) Greylag geese in the area have been studied continually ever since. The director of the center, a biologist and bird ecologist named Sonia Kleindorfer, showed me footage of Edes to demonstrate the subtlety of goose communication.

Geese maintain elaborate social structures, travel in family groups, and can navigate from Sweden to Spain. In a fight, an unpartnered greylag goose has a higher heart rate than a partnered one, and the heart rate of a recently widowed goose can remain depressed for about a year. These birds have things to discuss. Still, geese are not the Ciceros of the bird world. A lyrebird sings long, elaborate songs; ravens really can say “nevermore.” Geese are known for nasal honks. How much nuance can there be in a honk?

Greylag geese, it turns out, have at least ten different kinds of calls. “We are completely underappreciating the way they communicate,” Kleindorfer told me. “They give a departure call when they leave, and a contact call after they arrive. They know if their allies are there, if the bold geese are there. There is so much information that geese are getting from calls.”

Bird vocalizations are usually divided into songs and calls, but these are wobbly categories. What is designated a song in one species may be shorter in duration than what, in another species, is termed a call. Onomatopoeic groupings such as *tseets*, *chirrups*, *rreeyoos*, *seeew-soooos*, and *dahs* are also indeterminate: people transcribe the same sounds in different ways, and no bird version of the Académie Française exists to adjudicate. The vocalizations of birds are fundamentally incommensurate with human ones. We have a larynx and two vocal cords; they have what’s called a syrinx, which is a bit like having two larynxes that you can use at the same time.

Kleindorfer, the daughter of a mathematician and an actress, looks like a cross between a hiker and the film star Sophia Loren. From February to April, she researches Darwin’s finches in the Galápagos; from September to December, songbirds in Australia; and, for the rest of the year, the geese outside her office door. Early in her education, as an undergraduate at the University of Pennsylvania, she was taught that “male songbirds sing,

females don't, and if females do sing it's an error." The attitude at the time, she told me, was that "females are drab, inconspicuous, and quiet." A few years after earning a Ph.D. in zoology at the University of Vienna, Kleindorfer took a job as a research biologist at Flinders University, in Australia, where songbird species originally evolved. "Imagine my surprise," she told me. "I heard all these females singing songs as complex as the male songs." Much of her ensuing career has focussed on bird vocalizations that were either underappreciated or unknown.

Kleindorfer decided to study bird eggs and early development, which were then neglected research topics. "Maybe this was because only females have eggs and I was a woman in science," she told me. "I don't have a better reason." Kleindorfer had noticed that mustached-warbler chicks seemed to respond to the alarm calls of adult warblers, even though the thinking at the time was that such calls were directed at other adults, or possibly at predators. "If I put a snake nearby, the parental alarm call made the chicks in the nest jump," she said. "If I put a marsh harrier"—a hawklike predatory bird—"nearby, the response to the parental alarm call was that the chicks would duck." The chicks were responding appropriately to different alarm calls—a satisfying finding.

Kleindorfer also studied the superb fairy wren, a songbird that weighs about as much as a walnut and sports a flirty, upright tail. Despite their fanciful names, fairy wrens are commonplace in Australia. They are socially monogamous but sexually promiscuous—they are essentially in open marriages—and they bring up their young collectively. Arguably, they have even more to chat about than geese do. Fairy-wren nests are about the size of cupped human hands, built to contain pale, speckled eggs that are smaller than thumbnails. Kleindorfer and her team wired up nests with cameras and microphones and soon discovered something that they hadn't known to look for. "The mothers in nests were producing an incubation call—a call to the eggs," she told me. It was like a lullaby. Why would a mother bird make any sound that could attract predators to the nest? "Songbird embryos don't have well-developed ears, so this was completely unexpected," she said. "That started a twenty-year project—why is she calling to the eggs?"

The team compared incubation calls to the begging calls of young chicks. "It was very odd," Kleindorfer recalled. "Each nest had its own distinct begging

call.” What’s more, each begging call matched an element from the mother’s incubation call. This suggested, startlingly, that birds could learn a literal mother tongue while still in ovo. (Humans do this, too; French and German babies have distinct cries.) Even “foster” chicks, who as eggs were physically moved from one nest to another, learned begging calls from their foster mothers, rather than from their genetic mothers. This was big news in the ornithology world. “The paradigm of how songbirds learn—after hatching, from their father’s song—was overthrown,” she said. The same process was soon documented in more songbird species.

Language is often cited as the quality that distinguishes us as humans. When I asked Robert Berwick, an M.I.T. computational linguist, about birds, he argued that “they’re not trying to *say* anything in the sense of James Joyce trying to say something.” Still, he and Kleindorfer both pointed out that humans and songbirds share a trait that many animals lack: we are “vocal learners,” meaning that we can learn to make new sounds throughout our lives. (Bats, whales, dolphins, and elephants can, too.) “To me, the most amazing thing is that every generation of vocal learners has its own sound,” Kleindorfer said. “So, just like our English is different from Shakespeare’s English, the songbirds, too, have very different songs from five hundred years ago. I am sure of it.” We humans have long tried, often mistakenly, to differentiate ourselves from nonhuman animals—by arguing that only we have souls, or use tools, or are capable of self-awareness. Perhaps we should see what the birds have to say.

Animals have prominent speaking roles in many of our oldest stories. Eve has a memorable conversation with a snake. In Norse mythology, two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, serve as spies to the god Odin, whispering to him the news of the world. In many cultures, the “language of birds” refers to a divine or perfect language—the language of angels. In the scientific realm, however, the notion that nonhuman animals use language is often seen as foolish or naïve. Some birds may be excellent mimics, like parrots, but they can also mimic chainsaws or barking dogs; scholars don’t usually consider imitation a form of understanding. The prevailing dogma is that birds sing either to impress mates or to defend their territory. (I suspect that most of human communication could also be slotted into those categories.) In college, I was taught a stranger but similarly diminishing idea: that

songbirds sing in the morning to burn fat, so that they are light enough to fly around during the day. Apparently, this idea is no longer taken seriously.

Even among species we view as being closer to ourselves, such as primates, scientists have tended to talk about “communication” instead of “language.” But it’s tricky to say where the line is, or what we mean by “communication,” since even bacteria communicate, as Berwick pointed out to me. “I think it’s best to think of language not as speech but as a cognitive ability in the mind that sometimes leads to speech,” he said, giving the example of inward conversations we have with ourselves. The linguist Noam Chomsky has said, “It’s about as likely that an ape will prove to have a language ability as there is an island somewhere with a species of flightless birds waiting for humans to teach them to fly.” Chomsky’s 2017 book on the evolution of language, co-authored with Berwick, is titled “Why Only Us.”

Over the years, however, some researchers have looked closely at the contexts in which certain animal vocalizations are made. In the late nineteen-seventies, two primatologists, Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth, were studying vervet monkeys in Kenya. Vervets have dark faces and pale fur; they are about the size of a small backpack and are hunted by pythons, eagles, and leopards. Cheney and Seyfarth documented something remarkable: one recorded vervet vocalization made vervets look up, presumably for eagles; another made them look down, presumably for pythons; and a third sent them running up into the trees, a good defense against approaching leopards. Young vervets sometimes use these calls faultily, perhaps sounding a leopard alarm for a warthog. But they get better as they grow up. They learn.

A newer generation of scientists has been trying to understand bird vocalizations. The alarm calls of Siberian jays can be said to have been partially translated. One of their screeches indicates a sitting hawk (which prompts other jays to come together in a group), another a flying hawk (jays hide, which makes them difficult to spot), and a third a hawk actively attacking (jays fly to the treetops to search for the attacker, and possibly flee). When cheery birds known as tufted titmice make a piercing sound, other titmice may respond by collectively harrying an invading predator. Some birds even lie. Fork-tailed drongos—common, innocuous-looking

little dark birds that live in Africa—sometimes mimic the alarm calls of starlings or meerkats. Duped listeners flee the nonexistent threat, leaving behind a buffet for the drongo.

Upon seeing an owl, a chickadee might sound a loud *chick-a-dee-dee-dee*, adding *dees* in relation to how dangerous the predator is perceived to be. This call is also understood by nuthatches, which will join in to mob and harass the predator, forming a kind of defensive alliance. If you record an Australian bird warning of a nearby cuckoo—cuckoos leave their eggs in the nests of other species and often kill their step-siblings—birds in China will understand the call.

Kleindorfer considers Cheney and Seyfarth, the primatologists, to be important sources of inspiration. After she moved to Australia, she and her colleagues built up a sound library of Australian songbirds. They also made recordings of quieter, familial bird sounds, such as the incubation calls. Each family unit, they discovered, had its own “familect,” a system of sounds that chicks learn from their parents. Curiously, chicks seemed to adopt sounds sung either by their mother or by their father—but they avoided the sounds used by both parents. If the mother sings ABCXYZ and the father sings ABCGHI, then the chicks tend to sing the sound units X, Y, Z, G, H, and I. It’s as if the young birds separate themselves from their parents by not speaking the shared sounds, but also stay close to their parents by learning what’s unique to Mom and unique to Dad. When female chicks grow up, they are attracted to mates whose repertoire is familiar (he’s one of us!), but not too familiar (he’s not my brother or dad).

Birds in general are turning out to have intellectual abilities far greater than most people had imagined. It’s not just that parrots and crows can do math as ably as young children, or that scrub jays cleverly cache and then uncache their food to fool other jays. Even inconspicuous and uncelebrated birds are capable of learning, and of sharing their learning with others. In the nineteen-twenties, tits from Swaythling, England, figured out how to open the caps of milk bottles, and by the late forties tits across Ireland, Wales, and England had learned the trick. If language is more a capacity than it is a speech act, it seems possible that birds possess it.

In 1889, Ludwig Paul Koch, an eight-year-old boy in Frankfurt, Germany, received a present from his father: an Edison phonograph and some wax cylinders for recording sounds. The oldest known audio of birdsong is young Koch's recording of his pet white-rumped shama, a smallish songbird with a dark head, an orange body, and feathers that resemble a white bustle on its glossy black tail. A shama sings like a small chamber orchestra, with slippery, percussive, and sweet sounds in phrases of varying lengths. Many similar recordings followed. In 1929, the Cornell Library of Natural Sounds —now the Macaulay Library—was started with a few hard-won recordings of a sparrow, a wren, and a grosbeak. (Cornell is to ornithology what the Juilliard School is to music.)

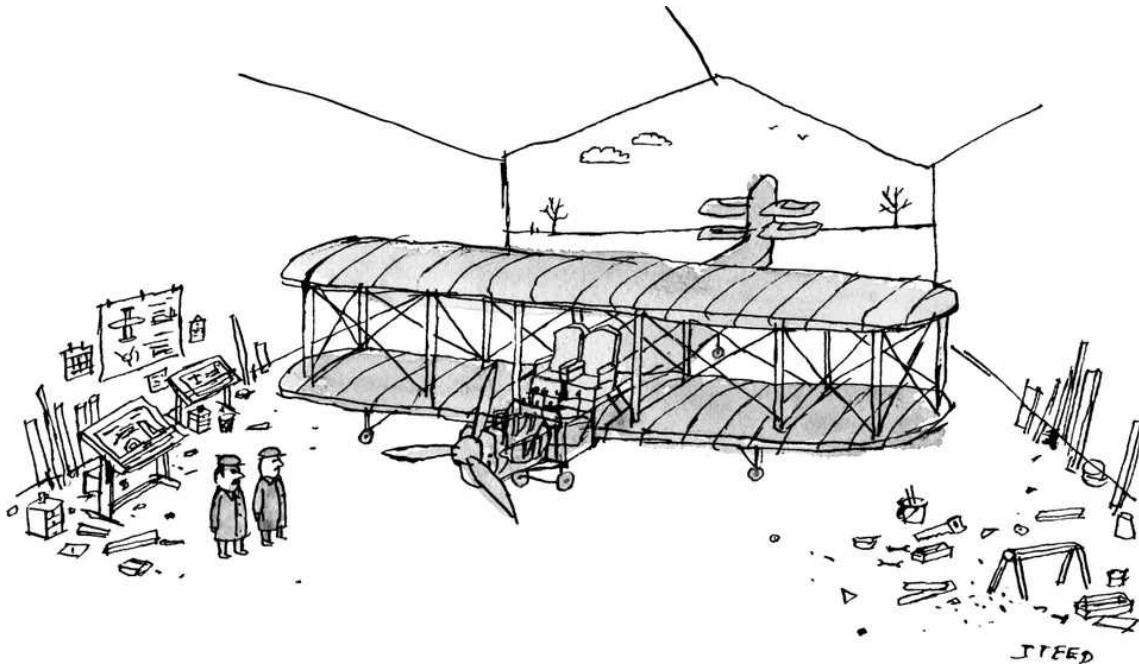
Koch, who was Jewish, became a professional musician but fled Germany in the nineteen-thirties. In England, he became a beloved presence on BBC radio. Sounding like a singsong, sanguine sibling of Werner Herzog, he guided Brits through the charms of birdsong. (A yellow icterine warbler, he told listeners, “frequently called me by my Christian name . . . Ludwig, Ludwig.”) Koch often expressed the hope that such recordings might be used for science. Many years later, they were.

In 2010, Grant Van Horn was an undergraduate at U.C. San Diego and working in a computer-vision and machine-learning lab led by the computer scientist Serge Belongie. The lab was looking for a good data set to train an image-recognition program. At the time, Van Horn told me, many of the top images on Flickr, the popular photography Web site, were of birds. Van Horn was no birder, but he wanted to see if he and his colleagues could teach a computer program to distinguish between closely related species, such as a house wren and a marsh wren. As it turned out, they could.

The lab’s work soon attracted the attention of ornithology researchers at Cornell. Van Horn recalls them telling him and his colleagues, “in the nicest possible way, ‘Look, guys—this data set is quaint and poorly constructed, and the species that you chose to study make no sense. Do you want to effectively redo this whole process, but do it in collaboration with us?’ ” When Van Horn visited Cornell, the scientists took him out birding every morning and evening, and he remembers wishing that he could take their expertise back to California with him. The collaboration eventually helped the Cornell Lab of Ornithology develop Merlin Bird ID, an app that could

reliably identify several hundred species of bird from photographs. It proved immensely popular—but the Cornell team had always had larger ambitions. “They kept asking, ‘How can we do this with sound?’ ” Van Horn recalled. That was what the scientists were most interested in. But he assumed that auditory recognition was outside his expertise—until, out of curiosity, he attended a workshop on audio-related machine learning.

“I kind of had an epiphany,” Van Horn said. Sound recognition often relied on spectrograms, visual representations of sounds similar to what you see in audio-editing software. Mike Webster, an animal-communication expert at Cornell who directs the Macaulay Library, and who worked on Merlin, told me, “When people figured out how to visualize sound—how to actually take measures of it—that led to just an explosion of research and understanding about how and why birds communicate with each other.” Much of the work in sound recognition, Van Horn realized, was actually visual: “I thought, Let me bring these computer-vision skills to bear.” An early test could differentiate between recordings of alder flycatchers and willow flycatchers.



In 2021, the number of bird recordings in the Macaulay Library, many of which were submitted by citizen scientists, reached a million. That same year, Cornell released Merlin Sound ID, which was originally trained on around two hundred and fifty hours of bird sounds, as well as on background

noises (whistling wind, passing cars), all manually annotated by experts. At first, Sound ID could identify about three hundred different North American birds, with a bias toward those found around Cornell. Three years and a million additional recordings later, Sound ID can now very accurately identify about fourteen hundred species. The lab hopes that number can grow to roughly eight thousand, out of around eleven thousand known bird species.

Amateurs now have a remarkable ability to recognize the birds that are cooing or chirping—which has generated more interest in birds and directed more citizen-science recordings to the Macaulay Library. But decoding the bird vocalizations is another matter. One problem is that certain sorts of recordings are more plentiful than others. “Most of our database is songs,” Webster said. “We can now understand songs at a level that we couldn’t before.” Alarm calls are also relatively easy to capture. But something like nest chatter, which is quieter and less predictable, is more elusive: “There are whole categories of bird communication that we’ve hardly even started to look at.” Webster isn’t expecting there to be straightforward translations of birds’ sounds into human language; animals live in perceptual worlds that are just too different from our own. Still, he sees machine learning as a powerful new tool. “There are a lot of people who have dreams of using A.I. to allow us to decipher what animals are saying,” he told me.

After three decades of research, Webster is preparing to retire. When I asked him what he hoped the next generation of scientists might learn, he thought for a moment. “Well, social birds. They are constantly chatting to each other,” he said. “Making little noises. Often very quietly. It’s like they’re having a whisper conversation. What in the hell are they saying to one another? I’d really like to know.”

Until my eleven-year-old daughter became interested in birds, I barely knew a starling from a sparrow. She once asked me, incredulously, “You’re saying you can’t tell a male sparrow from a female?” For a long time, we lived just east of the Lincoln Tunnel, where “birds” meant pigeons and seagulls, but within weeks of moving to Brooklyn we saw a red-tailed hawk on a lamppost. My daughter began talking about dark-eyed juncos and tufted titmice and peregrine falcons; we started visiting bird sanctuaries, and I eventually outgrew my favoritism toward mammals. Like millions of others,

we started to use Merlin Bird ID. Usually, we heard birds before we saw them. Some local sparrows nesting in a hollow pole on our block sounded like Laurel and Hardy bickering.

“Anthropomorphism” is a familiar term that describes a common error: the assumption that animals have human qualities. A less familiar term, “anthropectomy,” also describes a kind of error—that of baselessly assuming animals *don’t* share certain qualities with us. Which kind of error is a person more likely to make? Or are these not errors but, rather, starting points, with someone like Jane Goodall starting from the premise that 98.7 per cent of our DNA is shared with chimps, and someone else starting from the fact that we humans have sequenced our own DNA and no other species has even invented pliers? Since we’re still arguing about what language is, it’s difficult to say which assumption about animal language is more presumptuous.

Toshitaka Suzuki first started to wonder if birds speak their own language during his last year of college, at Toho University, in Tokyo. He was on a hike in the forests of Karuizawa when he witnessed what struck him as a strange drama among some common Japanese tits, birds that resemble chickadees. One tit called out *dee-dee-dee* near some scattered sunflower seeds; other tits flew over and began to eat. “Then one bird called out *hee-hee-hee*, and the birds all flew off into nearby bushes,” Suzuki recalled. He could see no reason for them to abandon their feast.

Seconds later, a sparrow hawk swooped in; all of the tits had escaped safely. “I thought, Maybe *hee-hee-hee* means ‘Hawk incoming, run away!’” Suzuki said. He already took birds seriously and knew a lot about them; he had studied under Hiroshi Hasegawa, a scientist who was central in bringing the short-tailed albatross back from near-extinction. But Suzuki had thought of bird vocalizations as, for the most part, emotive, like music, or as a kind of beautiful nonsense. He has now devoted eighteen years to researching tits and their communication. “I couldn’t have imagined how long I would be studying tits, because I love other animals as well,” Suzuki told me. Like many researchers, he hopes that the more we understand birds the likelier we are to protect them.

In April, 2023, at the University of Tokyo, Suzuki founded what he calls the world's first laboratory specifically devoted to animal linguistics. He argues that more work should be done to explore what cognitive abilities underlie human language—and then to investigate whether these abilities are present in animals. (In many ways, this approach mirrors the work of Berwick and Chomsky, but leads to different conclusions.) Some are skeptical of his push to compare animal communication to human language. “It’s just so far removed from the complexity of human language that it doesn’t make sense to use the same word,” Todd Freeberg, an animal-communication researcher at the University of Tennessee, told me. When a chickadee amplifies a call by adding *dees*, some researchers might say that they are engaging in referential signalling, by adjusting their call to the seriousness of the threat. But Freeberg points out that extra *dees* could also be a result of heightened arousal, in general—less a conscious message than a physical response.

Like Kleindorfer, Suzuki took an interest in nests. Early on, he showed that chicks in nesting boxes respond to a call associated with crow sightings by crouching, and to a call associated with snakes by fleeing the nest altogether. The arc of Suzuki’s research has, to some extent, followed a series of arguments about what qualities are required for communication to rise to the status of language. Humans are noted for their ability to form a mental image—a concept—of what they are communicating. Suzuki designed an experiment in which he played a variety of calls and moved a stick in a variety of ways; only when he played a snake-alarm call and moved a stick in a snakelike way did the birds tend to react as if a snake were present. To him, this suggested that they had some concept of snake-ness. (He said that the experiment was inspired by the way that humans perceive shapes in clouds.)

In a 2023 study, Suzuki showed that tits responded differently to a recorded ABCD call than they did to a remixed version of the call, such as DABC—a potential challenge to linguists who see sophisticated syntax as being unique to human language. (Studies of southern pied babblers and of chestnut-crowned babblers also have interesting syntax results.) Symbolic gestures—also often considered unique to humans—were addressed in a particularly adorable Suzuki paper, in 2024. His team watched mated pairs of tits as they entered their nest boxes. The opening to each nest box was small, allowing only one bird at a time to pass. But sometimes one bird, usually the female,

fluttered its wings in what seemed to be an “after you” gesture. The other bird would then enter the box first. The fluttering didn’t point at the nest box. In Suzuki’s view, this suggested that the flutter was not a simple indication but, instead, a symbolic gesture—another item crossed off on the unique-to-human-language list.

Perhaps the nest-box study needs to be replicated; perhaps there are alternative interpretations of the results in the concept and syntax studies. Suzuki is open to such critiques. But he is also skeptical of many prominent ideas in linguistics, such as Chomsky and Berwick’s argument that a slight evolutionary change in the brain unlocked a new linguistic capacity in humans: the unique and powerful ability to connect individual units in a hierarchical and expressive way. (Suzuki thinks that language more likely emerged bit by bit.) By Suzuki’s latest count, the tit’s vocal repertoire has more than two hundred distinct calls and phrases. He has many more experiments to conduct.

Recently, my daughter and I took an early-morning trip to Little Stony Point, in the Hudson Valley, and met up with two people who have no particular need for an app like Merlin Bird ID. Andrew C. Vallely does field-ornithology work for the American Museum of Natural History; he’s become friends, by way of bird-watching, with Jeffrey Yang, an editor at New Directions Publishing. Yang had been seeing a lot of migrating warblers, which had flown well over a thousand miles—did we want to come try our luck? At his suggestion, I warned my daughter that there was no telling whether we’d actually see any.

About five minutes down the trail, in a not particularly distinguished wood (we could still hear cars and an excavator across the river), we saw a kingfisher diving and an adolescent eagle on a bare tree. As we walked, stopped, walked, stopped, we repeatedly heard what sounded like the call of a red-tailed hawk. But it soon became clear, at least to Vallely and Yang, that it was a jay mimicking a hawk. “They do that sometimes,” Vallely told me.

“To scare away other predators?”

“That’s one thought,” he said. “Vocal mimicry can be pretty mysterious.”

We heard the “tea kettle tea kettle” call of a Carolina wren; it sounded like a game of marbles to me. We saw a warbling vireo, a Cape May warbler, a blackpoll warbler, and a black-and-white warbler—birds so small that it was difficult to fathom how far some of them had travelled to be there. We heard little chips that sounded like a window being cleaned; a crickety decrescendo that was not made by crickets; a sound like a trill running into a wall; a high-pitched three-fast-one-slow, like a child playing Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. We encountered forty-four species by Yang’s able count, and at the very end we saw a Swainson’s thrush, who apparently wasn’t in the mood to show off. Bird-watching, I thought, is a misleading term. So much of the fleeting, present-tense pleasure of it is bird-listening.

The quiet of the pandemic brought natural sounds to the foreground for Maddie Cusimano, who was then a graduate researcher of auditory perception at M.I.T.’s Center for Brains, Minds, and Machines. “Like a lot of people, I had the sense of getting to know the birds around me for the first time,” she told me. Two doves were often visible from her window; she read that, in some dove pairs, one bird sings to the other in the mornings, and in the evenings the roles reverse. Cusimano was familiar enough with machine learning that, when she tried out bird-identification apps, she thought, I could help make this kind of thing.

Cusimano is now a senior scientist specializing in A.I. research at the Earth Species Project (E.S.P.), a nonprofit dedicated to “using artificial intelligence to decode non-human communication.” E.S.P.’s current efforts examine such species as zebra finches, crows, and beluga whales, but its early work has been preoccupied with preliminary challenges: the “cocktail-party problem” of picking up individual sounds in a noisy environment; how to correlate particular noises with the precise contexts in which they occur. “It’s like we want to write the Magna Carta, but first we need to make the quill,” Katie Zacarian, the organization’s co-founder and C.E.O., told me. Zacarian isn’t expecting a Google Translate for animal languages, but she does believe that we can understand animals better. She remembers that, as a kid, people often brought her father, an entomologist, pictures and specimens and asked: What is this? Her mother was a researcher and an administrator of multilingual education programs. “There’s this underlying current, in their work, of decoding,” she told me.

When I talked to Cusimano, on Zoom, she pulled up a collection of sound files of crows. Her data set comes from Daniela Canestrari and Vittorio Baglione, researchers at the University of León, in Spain, who have been studying Spanish carrion crows for more than twenty-five years. Cusimano has spent countless hours sitting in San Francisco, listening to these birds, and can sometimes guess which one she's hearing. "This is maybe what you expect a crow to sound like," she said, playing me two caws. "But then there's also this," she said, playing a whispery rasp. "Some sounds are very long." She played a ghostly *oooo*. "Then these two sounds, which you would never think were coming from crows." One sounded like the click of a computer mouse; another sounded froggy. Her favorite recording reminded me of a duck's quack. "I love these sounds," she told me.

One ambition of Cusimano's work is to find correlations between these varied vocalizations and the precise contexts in which they occurred. Research partners recently identified a quiet grunt that is most often made right when an adult crow returns to a nest—perhaps a way of saying, "Wake up!" A small bio-logger on the back of a crow can provide audio along with other data—a bird's-tail view. "You hear their wingbeats, you can hear their friends calling, and them calling back to their friends," Cusimano told me. The data feels intimate: "You hear baby chicks a distance away, then you hear the bird take off, and the chick sounds are getting louder. And then the crow lands in the nest. You're in the middle of this crow family."

Can a machine be trained to distinguish individual birds by the sounds they make? Can it pick up on vocalizations across individuals which share similar functions? Machine learning is excellent at detecting correlations, but some are irrelevant and even misleading. Cusimano developed an algorithm to distinguish among caws made by various crows, which had names such as Naranja, Rosa, and Azul. She seemed to have succeeded. Then she realized that the computer might be categorizing the sounds based on distinctive background noises, which corresponded to the placement of the recording devices. "The algorithms can pick up on tiny little clues that confound the actual problems we want to find answers to," she said.

Those who live and work alongside animals, whether they're scientists or not, often think, as a matter of course, that animals can speak with one another, and in depth. Instead of being surprised by the discovery of each

“unexpected” animal ability, maybe we should be surprised that humans have such low expectations. Many of us laugh—or shake our heads sadly—when we read that Descartes supposedly threw a cat out of a window to see if it would show fear, as a sort of test for consciousness. (He believed that nonhuman animals were senseless automatons.) Yet many of us would also consider it a wonder that, according to a recent study, elephants seem to have distinct names for one another, which their elephant friends and family use among themselves.

When I started researching this story, I was amazed by each additional avian accomplishment that I learned about, especially in small, ordinary birds. It wasn’t only that they communicated this or that to one another but that they were full of concerns—that they were at the center of their own worlds. But shouldn’t I have intuited that this was the case all along? I had baselessly assumed that birds had little on their minds. The other day, my daughter and I were walking to her soccer practice, passing by sparrows and also people. “We know almost nothing about birds,” she told me. “There’s so much we don’t even notice.” She thought for a moment. “I think they have just as much language as we do, but a lot of it is in their mind. So we don’t hear it.” ♦

The Political Scene

Kamala Harris's Hundred-Day Campaign

Three months ago, the Vice-President was fighting for respect in Washington. Can she defy her doubters—and end the Trump era?

By Evan Osnos

October 13, 2024



When Joe Biden called Kamala Harris on the morning of Sunday, July 21st, she was in the kitchen at the Vice-President's residence, a turreted mansion on a hill in Northwest Washington. Harris was wearing sweatpants and a hoodie from her alma mater, Howard University. Her husband, Doug Emhoff, was in Los Angeles, but the house was bustling with relatives. She had just finished making bacon and pancakes for two grandnieces before sitting down with them to work on a jigsaw puzzle.

Biden was calling from isolation, both literal and political; he had spent the previous night socially distanced at his vacation house in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, recovering from *COVID* and absorbing the reality that he had lost

the confidence of the Democratic Party. Twenty-four days earlier, Biden's addled performance in a televised debate with Donald Trump had sparked a frantic effort to replace him at the top of the ticket. On the phone, Biden told Harris that he was ending his bid for reelection. More to the point, he said that he would be endorsing her as the Presidential nominee.

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Harris was grateful—though it wasn't clear that Biden's support would suffice. Last year, one poll found that she had the lowest approval rating of any Vice-President since its records began. At least half a dozen other prominent Democrats—including Cabinet members and the governors of Michigan and Pennsylvania—were seen as potentially stronger contenders. During the uncertain weeks when Biden was deliberating over whether to drop out, strategists and pundits had imagined selecting a candidate through some kind of primarylike contest—composed, perhaps, of town halls and an open convention. One typical proposal warned that handing Harris the nomination without a fight would “set her and the Party up to fail.” But Harris was accustomed to facing resistance. At an event in D.C. last spring, she told the audience, “Sometimes people will open the door for you and leave it open. Sometimes they won't. And then you need to kick that fucking door down.”

By the time Biden announced his withdrawal, that Sunday afternoon, a scramble was already under way, largely out of public view. Bakari Sellers, a former South Carolina state representative who helped Harris secure the nomination, told me that her team saw value in moving swiftly. “We weren't going to do this bullshit that other people were asking for,” he said. In his view, an open convention was a way to “skip over Kamala.”

After Biden's call, Harris had summoned aides to her house, and a dozen or so people gathered around a table. She sat beside Tony West, her brother-in-law and unofficial consigliere, who had served as the third-ranking official in Obama's Justice Department. In the hours that followed, her team undertook an operation that was less an improvisation than a culmination of

years spent cultivating allies, including some forty-seven hundred delegates to the Democratic National Convention.

Ever since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, in 2022, Harris's staff had been taking greater pains to plan and track her encounters around the country—photo lines, meet and greets, and other occasions of well-managed access—with an eye toward soliciting help to mount a campaign in 2028. Now, on a radically truncated schedule, they opened spreadsheets and started making calls. Harris took the biggest names: Barack Obama, Bill and Hillary Clinton, the top Democrats in the House and Senate, and the heads of the Congressional Black Caucus, the Hispanic Caucus, and the Progressive Caucus. She talked to the leaders of major unions and to advocates for abortion rights, the environment, and gun safety. She also called potential opponents—Josh Shapiro, Gretchen Whitmer, and a handful of others. Several asked her a version of the same question: “Do you think there should be some kind of process?” Harris said that she was open to it but added, pointedly, that she was already seeking pledges from delegates. In other words, good luck with your town halls.



Not everyone signed on to her candidacy right away. Obama released a statement voicing confidence in “a process from which an outstanding nominee emerges.” The former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, the Senate

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, and the House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries praised Biden—while conspicuously saying nothing about a successor. But, around the country, activists who favored Harris were coordinating. Mini Timmaraju, a delegate to the Convention and the head of the abortion-rights group Reproductive Freedom for All, told me, “My phone was ringing off the hook from people, like, ‘Women of color, we’ve got to stand together for Vice-President Harris. If they don’t consolidate around the Vice-President, we’re going to create trouble.’” Harris called Timmaraju from her table to ask her to pledge support. “I was so excited, I was, like, ‘Yes! Hell yes,’” Timmaraju recalled. Then, realizing that she had just shouted at the Vice-President, she added, “I’m sorry I yelled at you, Ma’am.”

By 10 P.M., the table was littered with half-eaten pizza and salad, and Harris had called more than a hundred people. Several Democrats who might have challenged her, including Whitmer, Shapiro, and Mark Kelly, the senator from Arizona, had promised their support. Aides estimated that they’d have pledges from a majority of Convention delegates within forty-eight hours. Harris was on track to be the first Democratic nominee since Hubert Humphrey, back in 1968, to secure the nomination without winning a primary. As Sellers put it, “We ended up having an open convention. It was just the shortest open convention in the history of mankind.” Harris never had time to change out of her sweats.

By the following morning, with a hundred and six days until the election, she had endorsements from a majority of Democrats in Congress, two large unions, and a growing number of state delegations. Some worried that the choice was hasty. Mike Murphy, an anti-Trump Republican strategist, tweeted, “Dems would be well advised to slow down and think this through.” *The Atlantic* ran an essay by Graeme Wood titled “Democrats Are Making a Huge Mistake.” The Washington Post columnist Perry Bacon told colleagues, “To be totally honest here, my worry is that it seems like Trump is likely to win.” But Harris’s allies in Washington believed that she was being underestimated, just as many of them had been. “There’s a whole universe of us in this town that nobody saw,” Timmaraju told me. “For so long, our interactions and engagements just weren’t considered relevant for political prognosticators.” She added, “Look who organized and mobilized within twenty-four hours!”

David Axelrod, who was the chief strategist for both of Obama’s Presidential campaigns, told me, “There was an argument that she would be strengthened by a competition, but she showed a mastery of the internal politics, which is one test of a potential candidate. People respond to competence, and that was a very competent operation.” He compared it to a rapid military strike. “She didn’t get handed this nomination,” he said. “She took it.”

In two days, Harris signed up more than fifty thousand volunteers. On CNN, the commentator Van Jones said, “You can do your whole career and not get fifty thousand volunteers.” By the following Monday, the number had reached three hundred and sixty thousand. There was a cascade of fund-raising video calls, organized by demographic, starting with #WinWithBlackWomen. The one arranged for white women—“Karens for Kamala,” as one organizer joked—broke the record for history’s biggest Zoom. In Florida, at the Villages, a retirement community known as a pro-Trump stronghold, Harris supporters staged a parade that an organizer on the scene solemnly called the “largest golf cart caravan for a Democratic candidate in nearly a decade.”

Harris’s sudden arrival at the forefront of American politics summoned the prospect that, as John F. Kennedy put it in 1961, the “torch has been passed to a new generation.” But it also evoked a less often cited part of Kennedy’s formulation—his description of Americans as “tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace.” In the past eight years, Democrats, like the rest of the country, have witnessed too much tumult—Trump, Charlottesville, *COVID*, George Floyd, January 6th, the end of Roe—to expect easy success.

Annette Gordon-Reed, a Harvard law professor and historian, watched the surge of enthusiasm and was reminded of the power of contingency—the politically crucial alchemy of timing, biography, and context. She told me, “The electorate was perfectly positioned to accept an individual who could be portrayed as a harbinger of the new when lots of people were feeling stuck, as if our politics would be nothing but unbridled nastiness from now on.”

Yet Harris treated the moment gingerly. Unlike Obama, she did not give a big speech on race; unlike Hillary Clinton, she didn’t dress in the white of

Seneca Falls. Since Clinton ran in 2016, the number of female governors has doubled; some six hundred more women now sit in state legislatures. Harris, though, trod so carefully on matters of identity that at times one could lose sight of the fact that a woman descended from Jamaican and Indian immigrants, and married to a Jewish man, was being regarded as a plausible candidate for the Presidency. “Harris doesn’t emphasize it, but her appearance alone carries the message,” Gordon-Reed said. “Something has changed in this country when a person like her can be in this position. That is inspiring to many people. Of course, to a substantial segment of the population, it is alarming. And we see where the alarm about having had a Black President has taken us.”





By gaining the nomination so late, Harris spared herself the obligation of courting the orthodox wing of her party in primaries. But a short run has risks; it left her little time to explain what she believes and what she would do in office. Temperamentally, she preferred to disgorge policy points than to explore her thinking with reporters. Early focus groups showed that voters had only vague impressions of her, and Republicans were racing to shape them, calling her a “D.E.I. hire” and “Comrade Kamala.”

In fact, Harris has never been a favorite of the left, and progressives in Congress, such as Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, had fought to keep Biden in the race, assuming that a Harris Administration would not give their priorities as much attention. For as long as Harris has been in politics, she has been motivated less by ideology than by a practical ambition to widen the perimeter of power, to make insiders out of outsiders—including, not incidentally, herself. Rather than try to upend the system, she has vied to run it.

As the campaign enters its final weeks, neither Harris nor Trump has a decisive advantage. She is ahead by roughly 2.5 per cent nationally, but it’s not clear that the margin is wide enough to win the Electoral College. (Democrats have secured the popular vote in seven of the past eight Presidential elections, but lost the electoral vote, and the White House, in

two of them.) Harris is desperately trying to hold together an anti-Trump movement that sprawls from “Cheney to Chomsky,” as Maurice Mitchell, the national director of the Working Families Party, told me. “Her challenge is to make sure that none of the factions flee,” he said, “and, at the same time, to win over new people.”

Harris relied on friends and allies to secure the nomination, but she will need a coalition of strangers to win the election. Ron Klain, who worked alongside Harris as Biden’s chief of staff, suspected that the result would come down to what he called “the stretch of I-76 that goes from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh.” It’s full of small former steel towns, home to older white voters who helped Biden defeat Trump in 2020. There are places like that all over Michigan and Wisconsin, Klain added: “Her ability to make those people comfortable, and hold on to those people that Biden had, is going to be critical. Familiarity is very important. It hasn’t been a part of her brief until now, and it has to become one.”

Until Harris seized the nomination, she was fighting for basic respect. During the G.O.P. primaries, Nikki Haley roused audiences by saying that the prospect of a Harris Presidency “should send a chill up every person’s spine.” Republicans mocked Harris’s laugh and the Old World aphorisms she got from her mother. (A ubiquitous clip showed her channelling a maternal scolding: “You think you just fell out of a coconut tree?”) The left-leaning media were hardly kinder. In May, “The Daily Show” excerpted some of her moonier comments, such as “It is time for us to do what we have been doing.” To explain her oblique style, the show conjured Harris’s “Holistic Thought Advisor,” who described her manner of speaking as “a work of modern art that you look at and go, ‘I wonder what that was all about.’ ”

But, in the first two months of Harris’s candidacy, her favorability rating soared. The most promising poll, by NBC, showed a gain of sixteen points —the biggest jump for any politician that the network had recorded since the country rallied around President George W. Bush after the attacks of September 11, 2001. The awkward tendencies that her opponents had mocked turned out to be a significant part of her appeal. “She seems like a politician I could sit down and have a laugh with,” one fan known for impersonating her on TikTok declared. Things that had seemed like political

handicaps became evidence of authenticity: her fondness for dull statistics and Venn diagrams, her disregard for what she called “lovely speeches,” her disdain for introspective questions about her “moment.”

At fifty-nine, Harris is only four years younger than Barack Obama, but she has arrived at a time when voters, especially young ones, are less patient with the sheen of politics, with figures who seem just out of reach. Instead, they want a performance of approachability—what the sociologist Julia Sonnevend, in her recent book, “Charm,” calls “personal magnetism that rests on proximity.” It’s a method exemplified by Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand’s young Prime Minister, whose Facebook page, Sonnevend writes, “presented vulnerability and mistakes as features rather than as bugs.” As Harris reintroduced herself to the public, fans collected indicators of normalcy: clips of her hamming it up with kids in a marching band, cooking videos of her cracking eggs (“one-handed!”), stories about her supplying jasmine-scented candles as parting gifts to guests at the Vice-President’s residence.



For months during Biden’s campaign, focus groups and polls had suggested that voters liked the Party’s ideas but not its candidate. A former White House official told me, “Groups would do this testing—on the ‘freedom agenda,’ on shrinkflation—and voters would say, ‘That’s what Democrats

should be saying!' And it was, like, 'Oh, God, that *is* what he's saying.' But they didn't want to hear it from him, because they thought he was too old."

Where Biden failed to garner support for his "freedom agenda"—"the freedom of choice, the freedom to have a fair shot"—Harris made it personal, anchored in her impassioned defense of abortion rights, in ways that Biden, the conflicted Catholic, never could. And she was able to take on other issues that bedevilled Biden, even if the details had scarcely changed; she hewed closely to his language on Israel and the Middle East, but some members of the pro-Palestinian left were more inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt. (The activist Abbas Alawieh told Politico that Harris "conveyed more sympathy for the plight of civilians in Gaza than President Biden did at any point.") The former White House official told me, "She feels culturally more relevant, so it clicks. Look, that's politics."

On July 30th, Harris visited Atlanta for the first major rally of her campaign. Four years earlier, Georgia had given Biden a narrow win, but recently it seemed to be swinging back toward Trump; Biden's campaign had already started to turn its attention to the Midwest. Still, some ten thousand supporters crowded into the basketball arena at Georgia State University. Harris belongs, barely, to the first generation to grow up with hip-hop on the radio, and the influence showed; a d.j. played Fast Life Yungstaz' "Swag Surfin'" and Kendrick Lamar's "Not Like Us." When the rapper Megan Thee Stallion and her backup dancers took the stage, a banner unfurled in the crowd with the words "Hotties for Harris." An m.c. told the attendees to pick five people from their contacts, take a selfie, and "show them where you are!" I noticed a woman hobbling on a plastic boot. Her name was Kim Amis, and she had a broken ankle. She'd waited for eight hours, in line and on the arena floor, to hear Harris speak. But, she said, as a Black woman who never thought she'd see the day, "even with the boot, I had to be here."

Harris stepped onstage, relaxed and beaming. She stands just over five-four but looks a bit taller, thanks to heels and a habitual mode of self-presentation that she calls "chin up, shoulders back." The particulars of her speech were less memorable than the mood in the arena. (She has little patience for rhetorical flourishes, which she dismisses as better saved for a "beautiful sonnet.") For the first time in months, Democrats were not just campaigning against Trump; they were campaigning *for* someone. As important, voters

seemed pleased to have the focus turned back on them. Harris made her case in the first-person plural, with little in the way of “I” and “me.” She told the crowd, “When we fight, we win,” and they chanted, “We’re not going back!”

In the past eight years, Democrats have spent much of their time consumed by what the late political theorist Judith Shklar called “the liberalism of fear.” As a child, Shklar fled Hitler and Stalin, and she became convinced that liberals’ crucial task was to restrain the worst manifestations of cruelty. But constant fear is exhausting, and Harris thrilled the crowd in Atlanta by taunting Trump for threatening to back out of a debate with her. She cocked an eyebrow and deployed a line that her speechwriters had surely imagined spreading online: “If you’ve got something to say, say it to my face!”

Biden had occasionally indulged in schoolyard gibes at Trump, but mostly his campaign insisted on the high seriousness of the moment; his ads hinged on a husky-voiced elderly man warning of the death of democracy. Trump, meanwhile, treated the prospect of autocracy as a big joke, and his supporters laughed along. Harris’s campaign has tried to reclaim the punch lines. Before one of Trump’s press conferences, at his golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, it released a statement titled “Donald Trump to Ramble Incoherently and Spread Dangerous Lies in Public, but at Different Home.” In Atlanta, as Harris reduced Trump from a figure of historic menace to the butt of wisecracks, it called to mind a line from George Orwell: “Every joke is a tiny revolution.”

As a candidate, Harris often asks to be seen as a “joyful warrior.” Longtime colleagues and observers will tell you that her rise owes more to the warrior side. At a recent rally, as she and Oprah Winfrey sat facing each other in talk-show-style armchairs, Winfrey noted with surprise that Harris had described herself as a gun owner. “If somebody breaks into my house, they’re getting shot,” Harris replied. Laughing, she added, “I probably should not have said that, but my staff will deal with that later.”

Kamala Devi Harris was reared mostly by her mother, Shyamala Gopalan, who came alone to America when she was nineteen years old. Born in Chennai, Gopalan had applied to the University of California, Berkeley, without telling her parents. She arrived in 1958, long before the recent wave

of Indian immigration, and racism was routine. As Harris wrote later, her mother was “treated as though she were dumb because of her accent” and “followed around a department store with suspicion.” But Gopalan had an unshakable sense of self-worth. “We are Brahmins, that is the top caste,” she told *SF Weekly* in 2003. “My family, named Gopalan, goes back more than 1,000 years.” Meenakshi Ahamed, the author of a forthcoming book on Indian Americans, notes that many prominent figures—Indra Nooyi, the former C.E.O. of PepsiCo; Vivek Ramaswamy, the conservative gadfly—have Brahman heritage. It “inoculated them from the negativity,” she told me. “They held their heads high. If kids encountered discrimination, parents would tell them, ‘Just get ahead.’ ”



Gopalan had grown up during India’s fight for independence, and in Berkeley she was drawn to the Black community and the freedom struggle. “It was the foundation of her new American life,” Harris wrote in her 2019 memoir, “*The Truths We Hold*.” Gopalan joined the Afro-American Association, an influential study group that met to discuss apartheid, liberation movements, and the history of racism in America. Its members went on to introduce the holiday of Kwanzaa and to advocate for the creation of Black-studies departments; two young participants, Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, founded the Black Panther Party.

During a meeting in 1962, Gopalan was impressed by a charismatic speaker: a tall, dapper Jamaican doctoral student named Donald Harris. According to an essay that he wrote about his heritage, Harris was descended from enslaved people and from an Irish slaveholder, Hamilton Brown; like Gopalan, he had grown up under British colonial rule. He was an early exponent of the study of inequality, and eventually became the first Black economics professor to get tenure at Stanford. “He was a very rigorous teacher,” Ajay Chhibber, a former student, told me. “A very imposing figure in the classroom.” The *Stanford Daily* once wrote that he was known as “a pied piper leading students astray from neo-classical economics.” Gopalan, for her part, completed a Ph.D. in nutrition and endocrinology and specialized in the study of breast cancer.

Donald and Shyamala married in 1963, and Kamala was born the year after that; her sister, Maya, followed in 1967. As a kid, Harris was brought to protests in a stroller—she has dim memories of a “sea of legs moving about”—and she developed an image of herself as a protector. Stacey Johnson-Batiste, a kindergarten friend, remembered a day when a little boy broke her art project, a piece of pottery. Harris “jumped in between him and me, and said some words that made him so mad that he picked up a rock or piece of that hardened clay and hit her,” she told me. Harris got a cut above her eye, which left a scar that’s still visible.



Discovery of the Crazy Straw

By the time Harris was five, her parents had “stopped being kind to one another,” she later wrote. Shyamala filed for divorce in 1972, and won custody of the girls. Donald, outraged, wrote that the State of California had taken away his children on the assumption that “fathers cannot handle parenting (especially in the case of this father, ‘a neegroe from da eyelans’).” The girls saw him during summers and weekends, but Harris rarely speaks of him now. “My father is a good guy, but we are not close,” she once told *SF Weekly*. Donald has been even more reticent, making only a few public comments as his daughter gained prominence. In 2019, a radio host asked Harris if she had smoked pot, and she said she had, joking, “Half my family’s from Jamaica.” Her father responded, in an online statement that was later deleted, that his ancestors were “turning in their grave” to see the “family’s name, reputation and proud Jamaican identity” connected with a “fraudulent stereotype of a pot-smoking joy seeker.”

After the divorce, Harris’s mother focussed on raising “confident, proud Black women,” as Harris put it, with a strong strain of social justice. Harris entered a voluntary busing program that sent her to a predominantly white school, but the family stayed close to members of the Afro-American Association and sometimes attended a Baptist church. At age thirteen, after moving to Montreal for her mother’s research, Harris protested with her sister in front of their apartment building because it had banned children from playing on the lawn. (The policy was changed.)

When Harris talks of the origins of her interest in government, she lingers on a moment from her time in Montreal: a friend from Westmount High, Wanda Kagan, was being physically and sexually abused at home, and Harris’s mother took her in. “A big part of the reason I wanted to be a prosecutor was to protect people like her,” Harris has said. In subtler ways, she was coming to see government as an arena where the powerful encounter the weak, bringing either aid or harm. She observed her mother—a small, watchful immigrant—grow nervous around people in uniform. Passing through customs, she’d snap at her daughters, “Stand up straight. Don’t laugh.”

After five years in Canada, Harris enrolled at Howard, where she studied political science and economics. Though she protested apartheid, she maintained some distance from the most extreme activists. She carried a briefcase on campus, interned at the Senate and the Federal Trade

Commission, and joined Alpha Kappa Alpha, America's oldest Black sorority, which prides itself on grooming leaders.

She graduated in 1986, then returned to California, to attend Hastings College of the Law. When she told relatives that she planned to be a prosecutor, they were dubious. The family story centered on "demanding justice from the outside," she wrote in her memoir. But she had come to see herself as something else—a figure with dual loyalties, an ally embedded in the establishment. She wrote, "When activists came marching and banging on the doors, I wanted to be on the other side to let them in."

San Francisco politicians—the ones who actually get elected—tend to be more practical than the hippieish caricature of the place suggests. To win, they must manage progressive activists, old-money centrists with real-estate fortunes dating back to the gold rush, and new-money libertarians in Silicon Valley. When Biden was campaigning for the White House in 2020, Pelosi, one of the city's most powerful figures, cautioned him about moving too far left. She said, "Let us win, O.K.?"

As Harris rose through the political establishment, she developed a politically inclusive maxim, "No false choices," which she cites so frequently that aides once got it printed on stress balls to keep around the office. Louise Renne, who served as San Francisco's city attorney for fifteen years, told me that successful leaders there had to figure out, "between the left and the right and in between, what's going to *work*?" In 2000, she interviewed Harris for a job overseeing civil cases involving children. "When you're talking about child abuse or neglect, you have to be tough," Renne said. "But, on the other hand, I needed somebody who was kind and compassionate."

After two years working for Renne, Harris decided to run for district attorney, and she asked a Democratic operative named Rebecca Prozan to manage her campaign. Prozan recalled an early meeting in which she asked Harris about her name recognition: "I said, 'Have you done any polls?' And she said, 'Yeah, I'm at eight per cent.' " Prozan thought, What am I supposed to do with that? But Harris believed that she could split the ideological difference between her two opponents. "She was running up the middle, where it's always hard to define oneself," Prozan said. "But she was

taking the angle that the office needed a professional prosecutor—meaning no more politics.”

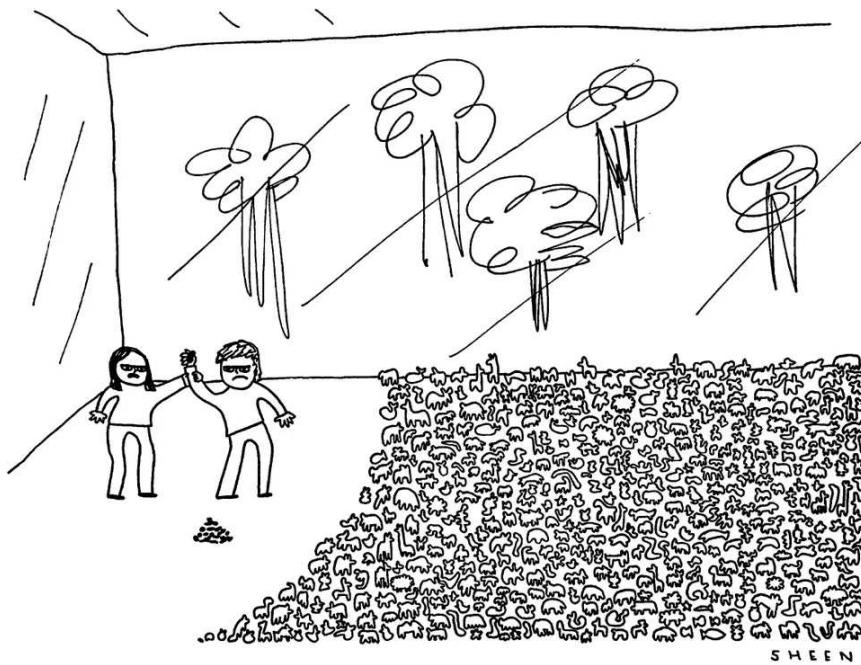


Harris opened her campaign headquarters in Bayview-Hunters Point, a neglected former shipyard, but cultivated donors and volunteers in wealthy Pacific Heights—a world that she had navigated since the mid-nineties, when she dated Willie Brown, the speaker of the California Assembly. Her relationship with Brown, who was thirty years her senior and separated from his wife, has been a blessing and an “albatross,” as she put it. He introduced her to San Francisco’s political élite, but her opponents have tried to discredit her by saying that Brown launched her career. (Brown, who is now ninety, has pointed out that he aided most of San Francisco’s major politicians during their ascent, including Pelosi, Dianne Feinstein, and Gavin Newsom.)

Harris won the race, partly by avoiding being tagged as either too stringent or too lenient. (She later produced a book-length case for her ideas titled “Smart on Crime.”) But at times her approach left her politically isolated. Barely three months after she took office, a police officer was killed on patrol, and she announced that she would not seek the death penalty, citing a principled objection to capital punishment. Police took to shunning her, turning their backs when she passed. At the officer’s funeral, where Harris

sat in the front row, Feinstein gave a speech that criticized her position. Thousands of policemen stood to applaud.

Eventually, though, Harris won support from law-enforcement groups for her commitment to locking up violent offenders; she described public safety for marginalized neighborhoods as a “civil right.” She staffed the D.A.’s office with people from the neighborhoods that were most familiar with the impact of both crime and punishment. One of her recruits, Lateefah Simon, a young community organizer, initially balked at working for a prosecutor. Simon recalled, “She’s, like, ‘If you want to spend the rest of your life holding a bullhorn, begging me to do the right thing, fine—I’ll listen to you. But you can also be on the other side of the table.’” When Simon showed up on her first day dressed in a Puma sweatshirt, Harris ushered her to a wall of photos of previous district attorneys—all white, all male. “She tapped her finger on her own photo, and she said, ‘Lateefah, you see what’s going on here? Folks in our community are going to want me overnight to shift this system to one that is fair. This is why you’re here. We’re going to chip away at what’s rotten.’ And then she says, ‘And don’t you ever come to this office dressed in sweatpants. I want you to be respected.’” When Simon came back the next day, Harris handed her a shopping bag containing a new business suit.



When Harris became state attorney general, in 2011—in an election so close that the San Francisco *Chronicle* mistakenly called it for her opponent—she showed a canny sense of political theatre. She downplayed her ties to liberal Berkeley by calling herself a “daughter of Oakland.” (She was born in an Oakland hospital and moved to the city in her twenties.) In 2013, when the Supreme Court ruled to recognize same-sex marriage and the first ceremonies were performed at San Francisco City Hall, Harris made a point of arriving on foot, to echo a famous picture of Thurgood Marshall beside an Alabama courthouse during a segregation case.

As attorney general, she made perhaps her deepest mark in 2012, during a national reckoning with foreclosure practices during the financial crisis. Five big banks proposed state-by-state settlements, but Harris rejected the offer for California. Valerie Jarrett, a friend and a former Obama adviser who was briefed on the negotiations, recalled, “She just kept saying, in a very calm and deliberate voice, ‘We can do better. They should be held accountable.’” Though Harris’s position irritated some officials in the Treasury Department, which was eager to resolve the issue, she resisted—and was joined by Beau Biden, her counterpart in Delaware, who introduced her to his father. The banks acquiesced; instead of four billion dollars, California got twenty billion.

In 2016, she won a seat in the U.S. Senate. That same night, Trump’s surprise victory scrambled political futures across the country. Harris was no longer heading to Washington to work alongside the first woman President and start building a national reputation. Instead, she arrived in a place that was fiercely divided by Donald Trump.

In a political battleground, Harris’s scrappiness was an advantage. She was lauded for prying accidental truths from Senate witnesses. During confirmation hearings for William Barr, Trump’s Attorney General, she asked if the President or his aides had ever “suggested that you open an investigation of anyone.” Barr looked forlorn, like a basset hound with a hurt paw, and sought refuge in quibbling over what she meant by “suggested.”

At a time when identity had become central to the Democrats’ political project, Harris was the second Black woman to serve in the Senate and the first South Asian person to do so. On the Judiciary Committee, she sat next

to Cory Booker, of New Jersey, and Mazie Hirono, of Hawaii; Harris nicknamed their trio the P.O.C.s. Hirono told me that a constituent contacted her office to ask if they had been forced to sit together: “We said, ‘No, that’s because we are the most recent additions to that committee.’ But that gives you an idea of how long it took for P.O.C.s to be on that committee.”

Harris had barely settled in when the next Presidential race began. She launched her campaign in January, 2019, before a crowd of more than twenty thousand. But, almost immediately, she struggled to specify her positions on polarizing issues—health care, immigration, defense, the environment. She tried using her old slogan, “No false choices,” but it came off as vague and calculating. As Democrats called to reduce prison populations and to address racial disparities in criminal justice, she described herself as a “progressive prosecutor,” but her record didn’t really match the mood. “You got the sense that she ran because she could, but that her advisers told her, ‘Just take a left turn everywhere and you’ll get to where you want to be,’ ” David Axelrod said. “She did not sound connected to the words she was speaking, and that is deadly in a race for President.” Bakari Sellers, a co-chair of the 2020 campaign, told me that the mistake was trying to shape the candidate to suit the discourse. “We bubble-wrapped her and didn’t give the world a chance to see who she is,” he said. “It was a campaign that listened to social media, really. I think the misdiagnosis was ‘Twitter is real life.’ ” Harris dropped out before the Iowa caucuses.



Biden had promised to choose a woman as Vice-President, but there were other strong contenders: Senator Elizabeth Warren, Governor Whitmer, and Susan Rice, the former national-security adviser. Only seven of the forty-odd members of the California Democratic delegation had endorsed Harris; some of her fellow-officials considered her a ruthless operator. A number of Biden's confidants were bothered that she had attacked him during the debates, for opposing busing programs decades earlier. Ron Klain saw that

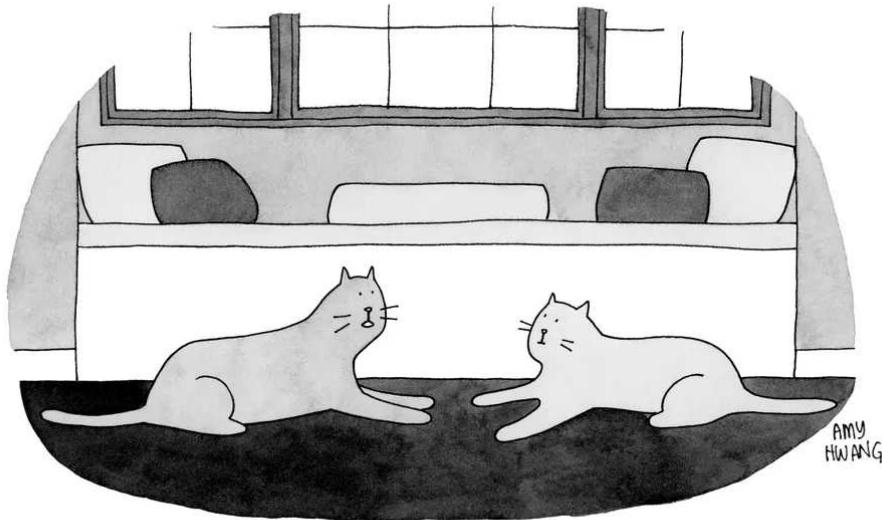
as an asset, though. “My view was, That’s what debates are for, and it shows her skill as a candidate,” he said.

Prospective running mates are expected not to lobby too avidly, but Harris “worked her phone incessantly, speed-dialing officials and donors close to Biden,” according to the book “Lucky,” by Jonathan Allen and Amie Parnes, on the 2020 campaign. She had notable advantages: three statewide election victories, experience managing a department of justice with forty million people under its remit. Also, the congressman James Clyburn, of South Carolina—who had given Biden the endorsement that rescued his campaign—had taken to saying that picking a Black woman would be a “plus.” (Activists were blunter: they circulated a video in which Black women, recalling that Biden had promoted harsh anti-crime bills, told him, “You owe us.”) Privately, Biden had a pollster test the top names. Harris came out best. A prominent Democrat told me, “Biden chose her for specific political reasons at the moment. He was a nearly eighty-year-old white moderate who was trying to win over a party in the post-Floyd frenzy.”

Biden had sometimes felt slighted during his own years as Vice-President, and in the White House he took pains to involve Harris. “Even when he might’ve been frustrated from time to time with a direction she wanted to go, he was always very attuned to making it understood in the building that he viewed her as a partner,” the former official said. Biden gave her a portfolio much like the one that he’d had, which included working to expand voting rights and to address the root causes of immigration from Central America.

But both issues had become far more intractable than when Biden had first approached them. During the Trump era, Republicans had ramped up efforts to restrict voting, and worsening conditions in Central America had steadily driven more migrants toward the United States. Also, Harris had to cast tiebreaking votes in the Senate, limiting her ability to travel. When she pointed out these complications, though, she sometimes sounded defensive or evasive. In June, 2021, the NBC anchor Lester Holt asked why she hadn’t visited the border. Harris threw up her hands and said, “At some point, you know, I—we are going to the border. We’ve been to the border.” Holt noted that she had not, and she replied, “And I haven’t been to Europe!” The performance was widely criticized, and her relationship with the press has

never fully recovered. During the campaign, she often swats away even obvious questions as petty or confusing.



Franklin Foer writes in the 2023 book “The Last Politician,” on the first years of Biden’s Administration, that Harris “didn’t want to work on women’s issues or anything to do with race. She wanted her office to be majority female—and to have a Black woman as chief of staff.” The office, stocked with a number of aides who were new to her, acquired a reputation for dysfunction. In the first eighteen months, Harris parted ways with her chief of staff, her communications director, her domestic-policy adviser, and her national-security adviser.

Former staffers recalled that, while she could be a warm, familial presence, she could also be withering. Admirers describe her stringency as an expression of high standards. Lateefah Simon, her employee in the D.A.’s office, told me, “You don’t ask anybody in the armed services if their boss is sweet and nice. Their boss has a charge to create excellence.” The former White House official told me, “It always read to me as her insecurity. ‘I haven’t prepared as much as I feel like I should have on this, and if I just come out swinging you’ll think I’m tough and smart.’ Men generally get away with that way more. Biden does it, too.”

Under pressure, Harris had the habits of a streaky point guard: good performances led to good performances, bad ones to bad. As headline writers asked whether the Democrats had a “Kamala problem,” she second-guessed herself and worried that she would make mistakes. Yet Harris also showed an aptitude for building alliances within the Party. She didn’t deflect critiques onto Biden or distance herself from him as his approval ratings sank. She seemed aware, as Valerie Jarrett put it, that “the Vice-President is there to be an adviser, to be a surrogate, not to take credit for anything.”

Behind the scenes, Harris pressed the Administration to talk to people who were usually overlooked. In April, 2021, a jury was preparing to deliver a verdict on Derek Chauvin, the police officer who knelt on the neck of George Floyd, and the White House braced for civil unrest if he was found not guilty. In meetings, Harris poked holes in the plans for a response: “Have you thought about this? Have you talked to this person?” One attendee recalled, “She was very thoughtful about who was going to need to feel like they had been part of how we arrived at these decisions.” In ways that became clear later, Harris affected some of Biden’s most consequential choices: persuading him to aid voting-rights legislation by backing an exception to the Senate filibuster rule; lobbying to nominate Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court. Harris also sought out the counsel and friendship of Michelle Obama, one of the Party’s singular stars—“quite wisely, in my opinion,” Jarrett said, adding, “They clicked.” Michelle, who largely disdains politics, would provide an unusual degree of public support.

By the summer of 2022, Harris’s office had stabilized under a new chief of staff, Lorraine Voles, a former aide to Al Gore and Hillary Clinton. Harris had adopted a pragmatic openness to issues around race or gender: her identity, rather than confining her, could give her credibility to fight for the Administration’s agenda in public. In May, the leak of a decision in Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization had shown that the Supreme Court intended to end the constitutional right to an abortion. The next night, in a blistering speech, Harris said of Republicans, “How dare they?”

Her aides saw an opportunity. Klain told her, “I think you’re uniquely qualified to travel the country and be a spokesperson on this issue.” He recalled, “It wasn’t a hard sell. She was there already.” In the year after the Dobbs decision, she held abortion-related events in sixteen states. In St.

Paul, Minnesota, she became the first Vice-President to visit an abortion clinic. (It was during this visit that she got to know Governor Tim Walz, who later became her running mate.) She arranged the first White House meeting of abortion providers. She also started pulling together politicians, union heads, and activists from a wide range of liberal causes, sometimes at her residence, urging them to pool assets and techniques. She often used a visual aid—one of her favored Venn diagrams—to show that states seeking to narrow the right to abortion were also narrowing access to voting rights and same-sex marriage.

In April, 2023, Harris made a last-minute trip to Tennessee to meet with young Black lawmakers who had been expelled from the Republican-controlled General Assembly, for protesting in favor of gun control after a school shooting. In an impassioned speech, she linked gun violence to broader threats against freedom, saying that a democracy must insure that “children should be able to live and be safe.” Representative Clyburn, watching the talk, sensed a change in Harris’s standing. “In the middle of that speech,” he later told an audience, “I said, ‘She has arrived.’ ”

Republicans responded to Harris’s sudden candidacy with a panicky barrage of insults. In September, Trump told a rally in Las Vegas, “She’s a Marxist, communist, fascist person.” Senator Lindsey Graham called her policy ideas “batshit crazy.” Tucker Carlson compared her to the Cambodian dictator Pol Pot.

But the invective obscured a salient truth: many people were still unclear about where Harris stood on some of the central issues. As President, she would have to grapple immediately with hard problems—the economy, the border, China, Russia, the Middle East. Would her positions owe more to Biden or to Berkeley? A former Obama Administration official, now in finance, told me that his firm spends tens of thousands of dollars a month on lobbyists and consultants, and yet with “all these fancy-pants people, former members of Congress, nobody can tell me conclusively what she believes about anything.”

As the Harris campaign got under way, she renounced progressive goals that she had endorsed in 2019: Medicare for All, a ban on fracking, decriminalizing illegal border crossings. She now called herself a pragmatic

prosecutor, rather than a progressive one. Four years after talking of “reducing the defense budget and redirecting funding to communities in need,” she vowed to maintain the “most lethal fighting force in the world.” Her allies frame her redrawn positions as evidence of an education in political realism. “She has learned that you can explore the ideals, and you can talk about them and their merits, but at the end of the day you have to be where people are,” Sellers told me. “For me, that’s not a flip-flop. That’s fucking leadership.” Another way of putting this is that she is trying to win an election.

When pressed, Harris said that her “values have not changed,” but hinted that her constituency had. She said on CNN that after “travelling the country extensively” she had come to believe that “it is important to build consensus.” Harris had been a centrist in California, and now she was trying to be a centrist in national politics. To address immigration, she wanted to revive a bipartisan border bill that Trump had killed; on trade, she was inclined to keep existing tariffs on China, which had been initiated by Trump and continued by Biden, but she rejected Trump’s new call for blanket tariffs on foreign imports.



When I asked Janet Yellen, Biden’s Treasury Secretary, about Trump’s effort to portray Harris as a radical, she said, “There’s nothing fringe or out there

or Marxist about her view of the economy.” Yellen has worked with Harris to promote business development among poor and minority populations, and she recalled that Harris cited her mother’s experience as a single parent in arguing to make child care less expensive. “The entire child-care system just doesn’t work,” Yellen said. “There are chronic costs that have weighed on families and made it almost impossible to lead a middle-class life.”

Much of Harris’s policy agenda sounded like something you might have heard from Biden, whom a White House colleague once described to me as a “weathervane for what the center of the left is.” Unlike Biden, though, Harris has made overtures to the business world. In California, she often took positions favorable to big constituents—Apple, Meta, Alphabet—on issues around innovation and labor practices. When her plan for a federal ban on price gouging was rejected by economists as unworkable, her advisers downplayed the idea. And she said that she would pare back Biden’s plan to tax capital gains at higher rates. That move infuriated Morris Pearl, the founder of Patriotic Millionaires, which advocates for higher taxes on the rich. In a statement, he faulted Harris for “capitulating to the petulant whining of the billionaire class.”

It’s easy to imagine that Harris welcomed the criticism; eight weeks before the election, a poll found that nearly half of voters considered her “too liberal.” Harris has declined to comment on some of the most divisive business issues, such as antitrust policy, leaving her full vision just vague enough to maintain her coalition. Mark Cuban, the investor and television personality, told his social-media followers that Harris was “more supportive of entrepreneurs than any candidate in a long time.” Goldman Sachs calculated that her plans would be better than Trump’s for growth, inflation, and the budget deficit. Within six weeks of announcing her candidacy, she had matched Trump on the crucial polling question of whom voters trust more to handle the economy.

In August, Harris was greeted with the biggest rally crowd of the campaign: fifteen thousand people, jammed into an airport hangar in Detroit. She was midway through her routine—reminding the crowd that, as a prosecutor, she knows “Donald Trump’s type”—when hecklers started shouting, “Kamala, Kamala, you can’t hide, we won’t vote for genocide!” Michigan is home to one of America’s largest Muslim communities, and in the primaries Biden’s

support for Israel's war in Gaza had led to the worst performance there for an incumbent Democrat since Jimmy Carter.

Harris gave the protesters a moment—"I'm here because we believe in democracy," she said—but when the outcry continued she grew impatient. She narrowed her eyes and said, "You know what? If you want Donald Trump to win, then say *that!* Otherwise, I'm speaking." When the clip spread, Harris was broadly criticized from the left for the first time since her campaign began. (The writer Peter Beinart called her comment "stupid and heartless," adding, "Why not acknowledge that what's happening in Gaza is horrifying, and say you want to beat Donald Trump so you can stop it.") Harris quickly made adjustments. Two days later, when protesters interrupted her in Arizona, she said calmly, "We're here to fight for our democracy, which includes respecting the voices that I think we're hearing from." Then she went for a balance: "Now is the time to get a ceasefire deal and get the hostage deal done." The uproar passed.

Harris had to decide if such demonstrators were vocal outliers or representatives of a voting bloc that could swing the election. She was relying especially on overwhelming support from young people, to counteract Trump's lead with older Americans. Not long after the protest in Michigan, researchers at the University of Chicago released a national poll. Although forty-eight per cent of respondents under twenty-seven disapproved of Biden's handling of the war in Gaza, only eleven per cent said that it made them less likely to vote for Harris. Over all, respondents were far more concerned about inflation, housing costs, abortion, immigration, and inequality.

On the Middle East, as in other areas of foreign policy, Harris hopes to be seen as a skeptical heir to Biden and Obama—ideologically similar but hardened by their mistakes. Phil Gordon, Harris's national-security adviser, opposes attempts at regime change but has argued for the finite use of force; he faulted Obama for not bombing Syria after Bashar al-Assad crossed Obama's "red line" by using chemical weapons. Compared with Biden, who has known Benjamin Netanyahu for nearly half a century, Harris has treated the Israeli Prime Minister coolly. (Asked on "60 Minutes" if he was a "close ally," Harris suggested that the more important alliance was "between the American people and the Israeli people.") And, unlike Biden, she does not

typically see the great global challenge as democracy versus dictatorship; democracy is too wounded in Israel, Turkey, and other U.S. allies to sustain the distinction. Instead, with a lawyer’s eye, she tends to criticize violations of the law, such as China’s seizure of territory in the South China Sea. She also talks of forming closer ties among traditional allies in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where China and Russia have increased their influence.

Harris came to Washington with scant foreign-policy experience. One expert who briefed her while she was in the Senate described her as a “complete blank page.” Since then, she has spent nearly four years seated alongside Biden in the Situation Room. She has met scores of foreign leaders and developed a diplomatic style that observers describe as focussed and direct—devoid of the small talk that Biden savors. A European official who met with her was surprised at how “inquisitive” she seemed. “She didn’t put herself forward as ‘I am the Vice-President of the most powerful country in the world.’ She showed herself in a very humble and very open way,” he said.

Harris the messenger sometimes makes a deeper impression than her message. In 2021, when she visited Guatemala and bluntly discouraged potential migrants by telling them, “Do not come,” American immigration-rights groups were furious. But Jorge Guajardo, a former Mexican diplomat, told me that the comment caused her no real damage. “It’s not any different from what we’ve been hearing from Americans throughout the decades,” he said. On the contrary, he went on, Harris has become popular among people in Latin America. “The political leaders of the region mostly would support a President Trump because they can deal with him—they know they will never be challenged by him on democracy, on corruption, on nepotism, on anything. But I think society would largely prefer President Kamala. She represents everything that the region aspires to.”

Naming a new Presidential candidate barely a hundred days before the election sent waves of disorientation throughout the Democratic Party. At the Convention, in Chicago, the official printed platform still contained numerous mentions of a “President Biden second term.” Lobbyists, milling around over drinks, complained that they didn’t know which of Harris’s aides to schmooze.

But the Convention also showed signs of Harris's imprint on the Party's culture. Emhoff, the Second Gentleman, delivered what amounted to a wedding toast about a midlife marriage. His son, Cole, said, "We might not look like other families in the White House, but we're ready to represent all families in America." Dana Nessel, Michigan's attorney general, spoke about same-sex marriage, but, instead of offering another grave warning about conservative attacks, she said, "You can pry this wedding band from my cold, dead, gay hand. And I'm retaining a lot of water, so good luck with that." Democrats were gambling that they could motivate more voters with patriotism than with fear. Delegates waved "U.S.A." signs, and speakers talked about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the American Revolution. At an after-party, Wyclef Jean, the Haitian American musician, played "The Star-Spangled Banner" and said, "You know what makes America great? We're a bunch of immigrants."

On the sidelines, where people pored over arcane PowerPoints of voter data, the mood was grimmer. One of the greatest worries was that Harris might ultimately fall short with workers in Midwestern factory towns, the kinds of places that Klain described as the fulcrum of the race—Flint, Manitowoc, Altoona. In a dreary hotel meeting room, a small group of Convention attendees got a briefing on the Democrats' chances in the region. Celinda Lake, a prominent pollster, asked, "How do we bring these voters back?" She added, "If we don't figure out that strategy, we're not going to be winning these states anymore."

There were some encouraging signs. Lake's polls and focus groups in factory towns found that people could go left or right. They resent corporate greed and price gouging; they rely on Social Security and Medicare; they like Biden's reduction in the price of prescription drugs and his efforts to revive manufacturing. Harris was hoping to reach working-class voters by focussing on the cost of living. She talked of expanding tax credits—including six thousand dollars for parents of newborns and twenty-five thousand for first-time home buyers—and of extending capped drug prices to people without Medicare. (The Harvard economist Jason Furman, who served in the Obama Administration, called her program "populism lite.") But the residents of factory towns still see Democrats as "obsessed with L.G.B.T. transgender issues," Lake said. "People believe that we are constantly bringing it up, that we care about it more than the economy." I

asked what those voters said about Harris. Mike Lux, a Democratic strategist, answered, “They knew who Joe Biden was, that he was a working-class kid, that he cared about them, even if they didn’t necessarily agree with him or blamed him for inflation. They don’t feel like they know Kamala Harris at all.”



A day after Harris’s rally in Michigan, she and Walz were due to speak at a union hall in Wayne, not far from Detroit. The United Auto Workers Local 900 sits across from a Ford plant and has a large sign in the parking lot that reads *“NO FOREIGN VEHICLES ALLOWED ON THIS PROPERTY.”* I’d arrived early (in a domestic car) and saw a hundred or so union members, many of whom work on Broncos or Rangers or electric batteries. The U.A.W. had endorsed Harris for President. David Green, who worked at a plant in Ohio before becoming a union leader, told me that Trump’s allure had faded when he failed to keep a promise to save imperilled G.M. plants. “Trump was telling people, ‘Don’t sell your houses. All these jobs, they’re all coming back.’ Two years later, the plant closed. People lost their fucking jobs. The hospital I was born in, Northside Hospital, closed. The barber shop I used to go to shut down.” He added, “I wrote him letters. I got nothing.” But Mark Gibson, a union leader at a diesel plant, still saw Trump’s effect on people. “We got guys coming to our plant in their twenties, and they have

their opinions,” he said. “They’re getting on a bandwagon with something. They’re reciting those sound bites.”

Before Biden ran for President, every Democratic ticket for three decades had included a graduate of Harvard or Yale. Harris and Walz extended the turn away from the Ivy League. When they arrived at Local 900, Shawn Fain, the president of the U.A.W., introduced them by saying, “They have working-class roots. They know struggle.” Walz, who often speaks with the amplitude of a man dismissing a pep rally in an orderly fashion, gave Fain a bro hug and greeted the audience as “sisters and brothers.” As a teacher, he belonged to a union for decades. His candidacy defied the Washington wisdom; many analysts had argued that Harris should choose Josh Shapiro, the governor of Pennsylvania, the swing state with the most electoral votes. But Walz provided, at least within the ambit of centrist Democratic policies, a way to avoid “false choices.” He is a military veteran and a hunter who wants more gun control, and a progressive who makes videos about the best way to clean a gutter or a carburetor—ordinary activities that become striking when you try to picture Bill Clinton doing them. Walz implored the autoworkers to spread the word about what Democrats have done for working people. “This is a bit of preaching to the choir,” he said, “but the choir needs to sing right now.”

Harris looked less comfortable; her working-class roots are mostly among the low-paid but high-status workers of academia. She started by saying, “Can we hear it again for Tim Walz? Isn’t he spectacular?” But, once she settled in, I heard her reach, for the first time in weeks, for a transcendent note in a speech. “There’s some perversion that’s happened in our country in the last several years, where there’s a suggestion that somehow strength is about making people feel small, making people feel alone,” she said. “But isn’t that the very opposite of what we know—unions know—to be strength? It’s about the collective. It’s about understanding that no one should ever be made to fight alone.”

She was trying to make the case that her politics of inclusion went beyond “L.G.B.T. transgender issues,” as Lake had put it. White factory workers in Wayne were part of the coalition, too. Toward the end of her speech, she said, “I understand the concept, the noble concept, behind collective

bargaining. And here it is—fairness.” She went on, “Isn’t that what we’re talking about in this election? We’re saying, ‘We just want fairness.’ ”

Harris and Walz were arguing against cynicism, against Trump’s nihilism, against his poisonous projection that optimism is weakness, that cruelty is intelligent. Nearly a decade ago, when Trump entered politics, liberals took to circulating a passage by the late philosopher Richard Rorty. In 1998, Rorty reasoned that members of “labor unions, and unorganized and unskilled workers, will sooner or later realize that their government is not even trying to prevent wages from sinking or to prevent jobs from being exported.” He predicted that they would find “a strongman to vote for—someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and postmodernist professors will no longer be calling the shots.” But it is only now that the Democrats are starting to heed the key prescription that came with Rorty’s diagnosis: the left must reclaim patriotism from the right. He wrote, “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals, a necessary condition for self-improvement.”

Trump has had little use for national pride in the final months of the campaign. Fear has always been his primary instrument, and he has deployed it to summon ever more lurid fictions about immigrants. Recently, he told a crowd in Michigan, “They grab young girls and slice them up right in front of their parents.” In Wisconsin, he warned of outsiders who come to “rape, pillage, thieve, plunder, and kill.” Moreover, he threatened to imprison his opponents, including Democratic donors, lawmakers, and Harris herself.

When Trump won, in 2016, Obama wondered to aides, “What if we were wrong?” Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national-security adviser, recently explained, “He was basically saying, ‘What if we were wrong about the inexorable progress toward multiracial democracy?’ ” But if Harris wins, Rhodes said, “it may end up that Trump, not Obama, is the weird parenthesis in history.”

On the other hand, if Trump returns to the White House—and especially if he does so after losing the popular vote again—the voters who thrilled to Harris’s sudden ascent will be profoundly demoralized. Already, according

to the University of Chicago poll, fifty-eight per cent of young people say that American democracy isn't working. Rhodes told me, "I think the Democratic Party would have an internal reckoning of a kind that we haven't had in my memory."

If that pressure weighs on Harris, she has seemed determined to make use of it, allowing herself to convey more gravity than joy. On the first Friday in October, she was back in Michigan, speaking to a gathering at a firehouse. "We have thirty-two days," she reminded the crowd. "And we are the underdog."

By late afternoon, she was in Flint, in a minor-league hockey arena. Backstage, in a makeshift photo studio with an American flag and a blue curtain, she stood in stilettos on a stained concrete floor. Locals lined up for pictures with her. Every politician has a characteristic style for such moments. Biden tends to chat so long that event organizers have to rerun the soundtrack. Harris is welcoming but efficient: a smile, a word, a subtle straightening of the spine that cues the photographer to wrap it up by saying, "Look right this way!"

One after another, people came with their rehearsed lines, searching her face for a connection. A woman from Pakistan, gesturing to her earrings, said, "For you, I wore my *jhumkas*," and Harris leaned in to demonstrate appreciation. Another woman, in a white hijab, spoke rapidly and quietly about the Middle East, while Harris nodded. Then, perhaps a beat earlier than the guests would have liked, the photographer called, "Look right this way!"

There is no hyperbole in the observation that any handful of those voters, or the millions like them, has the power to tip the country's fortunes. The Midwest is so evenly divided that in 2020 Biden and Harris won Wisconsin by an average of just three votes in each of the state's roughly seven thousand wards—a difference small enough to hinge on a flat tire or a flu on Election Day.

I thought back to Gordon-Reed's mention of politics as contingency. Just as a confluence of circumstances had lifted Harris to the doorstep of history, any mishap seemed capable of turning her away. Hurricanes ravaged the

Gulf Coast and Appalachia; Israel and Iran careered toward war. Trump used each event to insist that the country was falling into chaos. But other facts were on Harris's side: a deal that ended a dockworkers' strike, a jobs report that proved the strength of the economy. Her campaign strategy barely budged. It rested on the proposition that Harris—still unfamiliar to many voters—was more appealing than the man who has occupied so much of the national psyche for the past eight years.

After the photos, it was time for Harris's speech. She walked through a cinder-block hallway and took her position just offstage, shadowed by Secret Service agents and a man in a headset. For a moment, she stood behind heavy curtains that separated her from the crowd. By her shoulder, a monitor depicted the people on the other side—a roomful of weary, wary voters hoping that they had found a candidate who would carry the country forward. ♦

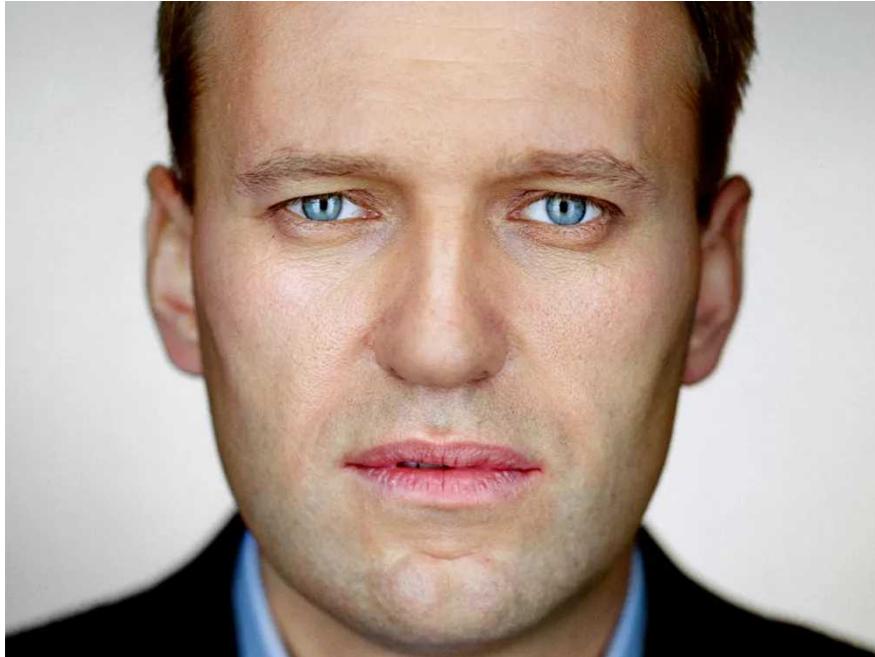
Personal History

Alexei Navalny's Prison Diaries

The Russian opposition leader's account of his last years and his admonition to his country and the world.

By Alexei Navalny

October 11, 2024



On August 20, 2020, during a flight from the Siberian city of Tomsk to Moscow, the Russian opposition leader and anticorruption campaigner Alexei Navalny thought he was dying—he was disoriented, and felt his body shutting down. The plane made an emergency landing in Omsk, and Navalny was hospitalized. Two days later, thanks to the persistence of his wife, Yulia Navalnaya, and international pressure, the Russian authorities allowed a German plane to take him to Berlin for treatment.

Navalny emerged from a coma on September 7th. A week later, he announced his intention to return soon to Russia, despite the obvious danger. Doctors concluded that Navalny had been poisoned with a deadly nerve agent called Novichok. While recovering in the German countryside, he began writing his memoir, “Patriot,” and investigating the attempt on his

life. He had no doubt that it had been the decision of Vladimir Putin and the work of the F.S.B., the Russian security services, but he was determined to uncover the details. During an unforgettable telephone call, which was filmed for a documentary about his life, Navalny duped an F.S.B. agent into describing how agents had broken into his hotel room in Tomsk and dosed his clothing with the poison.

On January 17, 2021, Alexei and Yulia flew back to Moscow. Navalny was arrested at the airport. Despite international protests on his behalf, Navalny immediately entered a netherworld of trumped-up criminal charges (embezzlement, fraud, “extremism,” etc.), prison cells, and solitary confinement. By the end of 2023, he landed in the “special regime” colony known as Polar Wolf, north of the Arctic Circle. In captivity, he managed to keep a diary and even had his team post some entries on social media. In one Facebook post, he explained why he refused to live out his life in the safety of exile: “I have my country and my convictions. I don’t want to give up my country or betray it. If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary.”

2022

January 17th

Exactly one year ago today I came home, to Russia.

I didn’t manage to take a single step on the soil of my country as a free man: I was arrested even before border control.

The hero of one of my favorite books, “Resurrection,” by Leo Tolstoy, says, “Yes, the only suitable place for an honest man in Russia at the present time is prison.”

It sounds fine, but it was wrong then, and it’s even more wrong now.

There are a lot of honest people in Russia—tens of millions. There are far more than is commonly believed.

The authorities, however, who were repugnant then and are even more so now, are afraid not of honest people but of those who are not afraid of them. Or let me be more precise: those who may be afraid but overcome their fear.

There are a lot of them, too. We meet them all the time, in all sorts of places, from rallies to the media, people who remain independent. Indeed, even here, on Instagram. I recently read that the Ministry of the Interior was firing staff who had “liked” my posts. So in Russia, in 2022, even a “like” can take courage.

In every period, the essence of politics has been that a tin-pot tsar who wants to arrogate to himself the right to personal, unaccountable power needs to intimidate the honest people who are not afraid of him. And they, in turn, need to convince everyone around them that they should not be afraid, that there are, by an order of magnitude, more honest people than the mean little tsar’s security guards. Why live your whole life in fear, even being robbed in the process, if everything can be arranged differently and more justly?

The pendulum swings endlessly. Or the tug-of-war. Today you are brave. Tomorrow they seem to have scared you a bit. And the day after tomorrow they have scared you so much that you despair and become brave again.

I have no idea when my journey into space will end, if ever, but on Friday I was informed that another criminal case is being brought against me and going to court. And there is yet another coming up, in which I am supposedly an extremist and a terrorist. So I’m one of those cosmonauts who don’t count the days until the end of their term. What is there to count? People have been kept in prison for as long as twenty-seven years.

But I find myself in this company of cosmonauts precisely because I tried my utmost to tug my end of the rope. I pulled over to this side those among the honest people who would not be or could no longer bear to be afraid.

That is what I did. I don’t for a second regret it. And I will continue to do it.

Having spent my first year in prison, I want to tell everyone exactly the same thing I shouted to those who gathered outside the court when the

guards were taking me off to the police truck: Don't be afraid of anything. This is our country and it's the only one we have.

The only thing we should fear is that we will surrender our homeland to be plundered by a gang of liars, thieves, and hypocrites. That we will surrender without a fight, voluntarily, our own future and the future of our children.

Huge thanks to all of you for your support. I can feel it.

I'd just like to add: This year has gone by incredibly quickly. It seems only yesterday I was boarding the plane to Moscow, and now I've already completed a year in prison. It's true what they say in science books: time on earth and in space passes at different speeds.

I love you all. Hugs to everyone.

March 22nd

Nine years of strict regime. Today, on March 22nd, a new sentence was announced. Before that, I ran a sweepstakes with my lawyers. The losers would have to buy whoever won a drink. Olga reckoned eleven to fifteen years. Vadim surprised everyone with his prediction of precisely twelve years and six months. I guessed seven to eight years and was the winner.

I decided to record my feelings right away, because all year I had been training for situations like today, developing what I call my "prison Zen."

Whatever way you look at it, nine years, especially in "strict" conditions, is an extremely long sentence. In Russia, the average punishment for murder is seven years.

A prisoner sentenced to an extra term of nine years is going to be upset, to say the least. When I got back to the prison, everyone—who of course already knew about the sentence—furtively gave me a particular kind of look. How was I taking it? What was the expression on my face? It is, after all, intriguing to see someone's reaction when they have just been told they will be serving the longest sentence of anyone in the entire prison complex. And that they are going to be sent somewhere especially grim and usually reserved for murderers. Nobody is going to come over and ask how I feel,

but everyone is curious to see how this plays out. It's an occasion when a person might hang themselves or slash their wrists.

But I am completely fine. Even "my" jailer said in the course of a really annoying full strip search, "You don't look to me to be all that upset." I am really O.K. I am writing this not because I am willing myself to keep up a pretense of being carefree and blasé but because my prison Zen has kicked in.

I knew from the outset that I would be imprisoned for life—either for the rest of my life or until the end of the life of this regime.

Regimes like this one are resilient, and the most foolish thing I could do is pay attention to people who say, "Lyosha, sure, the regime is going to last at least another year, but the year after that, two at most, it will fall apart and you will be a free man." And everything along those lines. People write that to me frequently.

The U.S.S.R. lasted seventy years. The repressive regimes in North Korea and Cuba survive to this day. China, with a whole bunch of political prisoners, has lasted so long that those prisoners grow old and die in prison. The Chinese regime does not relent. It releases no one, despite all the international pressure. The truth of the matter is that we underestimate just how resilient autocracies are in the modern world. With very, very rare exceptions, they are protected from external invasion by the U.N., by international law, by the rights of sovereignty. Russia, which right now is waging a classic war of aggression against Ukraine (which has increased tenfold the predictions of the regime's imminent collapse), is additionally protected by its membership in the U.N. Security Council and its nuclear weapons.

Economic collapse and impoverishment await us most likely. But it is far from obvious that the regime will come crashing down in such a way that its falling debris breaks open the doors of its prisons.

My approach to the situation is certainly not one of contemplative passivity. I am trying to do everything I can from here to put an end to authoritarianism (or, more modestly, to contribute to ending it). Every single

day, I ponder how to act more effectively, what constructive advice to give my colleagues who are still at liberty, where the regime's greatest vulnerabilities lie. As I said, giving in to wishful thinking (about when the regime will collapse and I will be released) would be the worst thing I could do. What if I'm not free in a year? Or three years? Would I lapse into depression? Blame everyone else for not trying hard enough to get me released? Curse world leaders and public opinion for having forgotten me?

Relying on being released anytime soon, waiting for it to happen, is only a way of tormenting myself.

I decided from the beginning that if I was going to be released as a result of pressure or a political scenario it would happen within six months of my arrest, "while the iron was hot." And, if it didn't, I was up the creek for the foreseeable future. I needed to adjust my thinking so that when they did extend my sentence I would feel even more sure I was doing the right thing when I boarded that plane back to Moscow.



Here are the techniques I worked out. Perhaps others may find them helpful in the future (but let's hope they are not needed).

The first is frequently to be found in self-help books: Imagine the worst thing that can happen, and accept it. This works, even if it's a masochistic

exercise. I can imagine that it's not suitable for people suffering from clinical depression. They might do it so successfully that they end up hanging themselves.

It's a fairly easy exercise, because it involves a skill everyone developed in childhood. You may remember crying your eyes out in your bed and exultantly imagining you are going to die right then and there just to spite everyone. Imagine the look on the faces of your parents! How they will cry when it finally dawns on them who they have lost! Choked with tears, they'll beg you, as you lie quiet and still in your little coffin, to get up and come and watch TV, not just until ten o'clock but until eleven, if only you would be alive. But it is too late, you are dead, which means you are unrelenting and deaf to their pleas.

Well, mine is much the same idea.

Get into your prison bunk and wait to hear "Lights out." The lights are switched off. You invite yourself to imagine, as realistically as possible, the worst thing that could happen. And then, as I said, accept it (skipping the stages of denial, anger, and bargaining).

I will spend the rest of my life in prison and die here. There will not be anybody to say goodbye to. Or, while I am still in prison, people I know outside will die and I won't be able to say goodbye to them. I will miss graduations from school and college. Tasselled mortarboards will be tossed in the air in my absence. All anniversaries will be celebrated without me. I'll never see my grandchildren. I won't be the subject of any family stories. I'll be missing from all the photos.

You need to think about this seriously, and your cruel imagination will whisk you through your fears so swiftly that you will arrive at your "eyes filled with tears" destination in next to no time. The important thing is not to torment yourself with anger, hatred, fantasies of revenge, but to move instantly to acceptance. That can be hard.

I remember having to stop one of my first sessions at the idea that I will die here, forgotten by everybody, and be buried in an unmarked grave. My family will be informed that "in accordance with the law the burial site

cannot be disclosed.” I had difficulty resisting an urge to start furiously smashing everything around me, overturning bunks and bedside tables and yelling, You bastards! You have no right to bury me in an unmarked grave. It’s against the law! It isn’t fair! I actually wanted to shout that out.

Instead of yelling, you need to think about the situation calmly. So what if that comes to pass? Worse things happen.

I’m forty-five. I have a family and children. I’ve had a life to live, worked on some interesting things, done some things that were useful. But there’s a war on right now. Suppose a nineteen-year-old is riding in an armored vehicle, he gets a piece of shrapnel in his head, and that’s it. He has had no family, no children, no life. Right now, dead civilians are lying in the streets in Mariupol, their bodies gnawed at by dogs, and many of them will be lucky if they end up in even a mass grave—through no fault of their own. I made my choices, but these people were just living their lives. They had jobs. They were family breadwinners. Then, one fine evening, a vengeful runt on television, the President of a neighboring country, announces that you are all “Nazis” and have to die because Ukraine was invented by Lenin. The next day, a shell comes flying in your window and you no longer have a wife, a husband, or children—and maybe you yourself are also no longer alive.

And how many guiltless prisoners there are here! While you are sitting with your bagful of letters, other prisoners have never had a letter or package from anyone. Some of them will get sick and die in the prison hospital. Alone.

The Soviet dissidents? Anatoly Marchenko died from a hunger strike in 1986, and a couple of years later the satanic Soviet Union fell to pieces. So even the worst possible scenario is not actually all that bad. I resigned myself and accept it.

Yulia has been such a help in this. I didn’t want her to be tormented by all that “perhaps they’ll let him out after a month” stuff. Most important, I wanted her to know I was not suffering here. On her first extended visit, we walked down a corridor and spoke at a spot as far removed as possible from the cameras wired for sound that are tucked in all over the place. I whispered

in her ear, “Listen, I don’t want to sound dramatic, but I think there’s a high probability I’ll never get out of here. Even if everything starts falling apart, they will bump me off at the first sign the regime is collapsing. They will poison me.”

“I know,” she said with a nod, in a voice that was calm and firm. “I was thinking that myself.”

At that moment I wanted to seize her in my arms and hug her joyfully, as hard as I could. That was so great! No tears! It was one of those moments when you realize you found the right person. Or perhaps she found you.

“Let’s just decide for ourselves that this is most likely what’s going to happen. Let’s accept it as the base scenario and arrange our lives on that basis. If things turn out better, that will be marvellous, but we won’t count on it or have ill-founded hopes.”

“Yep. Let’s do it.”

As usual, her voice sounded as if it belonged to a character in a cartoon, but she was dead serious. She looked up at me and batted her eyes with those big eyelashes, at which point I swept her up in my arms, hugging her in delight. Where else could I ever have found someone who could discuss the most difficult matters with me without a lot of drama and hand-wringing? She entirely got it and, like me, would hope for the best, but expect and prepare for the worst.

Yulia laughed and broke free. I kissed her on the nose and felt much better.

There is, of course, a hint of trickery and self-deception in all this. You have accepted the worst-case scenario, but there is an inner voice you can’t stifle: Come off it, the worst is never going to happen. Even as you tell yourself your direst fate is unavoidable, you’re hoping against hope that someone will change your mind for you.

The process going on in your head is by no means straightforward, but if you find yourself in a bad situation, you should try this. It works, as long as you think everything through seriously.

The second technique is so old you may roll your eyes heavenward when you hear it. It is religion. It is doable only for believers but does not demand zealous, fervent prayer by the prison barracks window three times a day (a very common phenomenon in prisons).

I have always thought, and said openly, that being a believer makes it easier to live your life and, to an even greater extent, engage in opposition politics. Faith makes life simpler.

The initial position for this exercise is the same as for the previous one. You lie in your bunk looking up at the one above and ask yourself whether you are a Christian in your heart of hearts. It is not essential for you to believe some old guys in the desert once lived to be eight hundred years old, or that the sea was literally parted in front of someone. But are you a disciple of the religion whose founder sacrificed himself for others, paying the price for their sins? Do you believe in the immortality of the soul and the rest of that cool stuff? If you can honestly answer yes, what is there left for you to worry about? Why, under your breath, would you mumble a hundred times something you read from a hefty tome you keep in your bedside table? Don't worry about the morrow, because the morrow is perfectly capable of taking care of itself.

My job is to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and leave it to good old Jesus and the rest of his family to deal with everything else. They won't let me down and will sort out all my headaches. As they say in prison here: they will take my punches for me.

March 26th

The ghastliest days in prison are the birthdays of close family, especially children.

What sort of pathetic greeting is it to send a letter to your son on his fourteenth birthday? What kind of memory will that be of being close to his father?

"For my birthday my dad took me on a hike."

“Well, on my birthday, my dad taught me how to drive a car.”

“For my birthday my dad sent me a letter from prison on a piece of notepaper. He promised that when he gets out he’ll teach me how to boil water in a plastic bag.”

Let’s face it, you don’t get to choose your parents. Some kids get stuck with jailbirds.

But it is on my children’s birthdays that I am particularly aware of why I’m in jail. We need to build the Beautiful Russia of the Future for them to live in.

Zakhar, happy birthday!

I really miss you and love you very much!

April 3rd

It’s a real Russian spring day. That is, the snowdrifts are up to my waist, and it’s been snowing all weekend. Snow is something prisoners hate, because what do they do when it snows and after it snows? That’s right, they clear the snow away. Arguing that it is, after all, April, and in at most ten days it will all just melt anyway, not only doesn’t work but draws heartfelt indignation from the prison administration. If anything is lying anywhere in violation of the regulations and the normal routine of doing things, it must be shovelled up, scraped off, and removed. That said, clearing snow actually is one of the most meaningful activities in prison life, because most of the others are an inane response to the need to generate work at all costs. The prisoners have a saying: “It doesn’t matter where what gets chucked, as long as the con feels completely fucked.”

This describes my feeling every weekend, because, although you can find at least an inkling of sense in shovelling snow in April, the work is genuinely exhausting. Because I am classified as a nontrusted prisoner, they don’t allow me to shovel the snow like everyone else and to break the ice on the “main line,” the camp’s principal street, along which the commandant walks. In my local area and with my own squad, though, I have to shovel.

We all have that classic labor-camp look that belongs in a movie about the Gulag. The heavy jackets, fur hats, and mittens, the enormous wooden shovels, each of which is so heavy you would think it was made of cast iron, especially after it gets saturated with water, which freezes. They are the selfsame shovels used by the soldiers who cleared the streets of my military home town when I was a child. You might have thought that in the thirty years that have passed since then shovel technology would have progressed toward production of lighter shovels, but in Russia, as with so many other things, we didn't hack it. We were brought a couple of lightweight shovels that immediately broke. The response was the usual "Oh, well, what the hell, let them use the wooden shovels. We've used them for shovelling snow all our lives. They are reliable." As if to say, Our grandfathers invented these shovels and far be it from us to doubt their wisdom by trying to improve something that is already ideal.

So there I was, scowling, wearing a heavy winter jacket, and wielding a wooden shovel with snow frozen to it. The only thing that amused me, and at least partly enabled me to accept this reality, is that on these occasions I feel like the hero of my all-time favorite joke. It is a Soviet joke, but has a certain relevance today.

A boy goes out for a stroll in the courtyard of his apartment block. Boys playing soccer there invite him to join in. The boy is a bit of a stay-at-home, but he's interested and runs over to play with them. He eventually manages to kick the ball, very hard, but unfortunately it crashes through the window of the basement room where the janitor lives. Unsurprisingly, the janitor emerges. He is unshaven, wearing a fur hat and quilted jacket, and clearly the worse for a hangover. Infuriated, the janitor stares at the boy before rushing at him.

The boy runs away as fast as he can and thinks, What do I need this for? After all, I'm a quiet, stay-at-home sort of boy. I like reading. Why play soccer with the other boys? Why am I running away right now from this scary janitor when I could be lying at home on the couch reading a book by my favorite American writer, Hemingway?

Meanwhile, Hemingway is reclining on a chaise longue in Cuba, with a glass of rum in his hand, and thinking, God, I'm so tired of this rum and

Cuba. All this dancing, and shouting, and the sea. Damn it, I'm a clever guy. Why am I here instead of being in Paris discussing existentialism with my colleague Jean-Paul Sartre over a glass of Calvados?

Meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre, sipping Calvados, is looking at the scene in front of him and thinking, How I hate Paris. I can't stand the sight of these boulevards. I'm sick and tired of all these rapturous students and their revolutions. Why do I have to be here, when I long to be in Moscow, engaging in fascinating dialogue with my friend Andrei Platonov, the great Russian writer?

Meanwhile, in Moscow, Platonov is running across a snow-covered courtyard and thinking, If I catch that little bastard, I'll fucking kill him.

Although, of course, I am no Andrei Platonov, I have the quilted jacket and the fur hat, and I, too, am writing a book. Next, I'll finish the chapter about how I met Yulia.

July 1st

I live like Putin and Medvedev.

At least I think so when I look at the fence around my barracks. Everyone has the usual fence, and inside there are rods to dry the laundry on. But I have a six-metre-high fence, the kind I have only seen in our investigations of Putin's and Medvedev's palaces.

Putin both lives and works in such a place—in Novo-Ogaryovo or Sochi. And I live in a similar place. Putin lets ministers sit in the waiting room for six hours, and my lawyers have to wait five or six hours to see me. I have a loudspeaker in my barracks that plays songs like "Glory to the F.S.B.," and I think Putin has one, too.

That's where the similarities end, though.

Putin, as you know, sleeps until 10 *a.m.*, then swims in the pool and eats cottage cheese with honey.

But, for me, 10 *a.m.* is lunchtime, because work starts at 6:40 *a.m.*

6:00—Wake up. Ten minutes to make my bed, wash, shave, and so on.

6:10—Exercise.

6:20—Escorted to breakfast.

6:40—Searched and escorted to work.

At work, you sit for seven hours at the sewing machine on a stool below knee height.

10:20—Fifteen-minute lunch break.

After work, you continue to sit for a few hours on a wooden bench under a portrait of Putin. This is called “disciplinary activity.”

On Saturday, you work for five hours and sit on the bench under the portrait again.

Sunday, in theory, is a day off. But in the Putin administration, or wherever my unique routine was set up, they are experts at relaxation. On Sunday, we sit in a room on a wooden bench for ten hours.

I don’t know who can be “disciplined” by such activities, except a cripple with a bad back. But maybe that’s their goal. But you know me, I’m an optimist and look for the bright side even in my dark existence. I have as much fun as I can.

While sewing, I’ve memorized Hamlet’s soliloquy in English.

However, the inmates on my shift say that when I close my eyes and mutter something in Shakespearean English, like “in thy orisons be all my sins remembered,” it looks as if I were summoning a demon.

But I have no such thoughts: summoning a demon would be a violation of the prison regulations.

2023

January 12th

In my two years behind bars, my only truly original story is the one about the psycho. Everything else has been told and described numerous times. If you open any book by a Soviet dissident, there will be endless stories of punishment cells, hunger strikes, violence, provocations, lack of medical care. Nothing new. But my story about the psycho is fresh; at least, I've never seen or heard anything like it.



So, let me give you an idea about the *SHIZO*, the place where I sit all the time. It is a narrow corridor with cells on either side. The metal doors offer little to no soundproofing, plus there are ventilation holes above the doors, so two people sitting in opposite cells can have a conversation without even raising their voices. This is the main reason there has never been anyone in the cell opposite mine, or in my entire eight-cell section. I am the only one there, and I have never seen any other punished convicts the whole time.

And then, about a month ago, they put a psycho in the cell across from mine. At first, I thought he was faking it. He was very active. If you tell a kid to act like a madman, that's what he'll come up with. Screaming, growling, hitting, barking, arguing with himself in three different voices. But, in the case of my psycho, seventy per cent of the words are obscene. There are a

lot of videos online of people who think that they've been possessed by demons. This is very similar—the growling wail (my favorite of his three personas) comes on periodically and doesn't cease for hours. That's why I stopped thinking he was a faker; no normal person can yell for fourteen hours every day and three hours at night for a month. And, when I say "yell," I mean the kind of yelling that makes your neck veins swell up.

For the past month, I've been going nuts and starting every checkup by demanding this lunatic be transferred elsewhere. It's impossible to sleep at night or read during the day. They don't transfer him, and they go out of their way to emphasize that he is a convict just like me.

And then I find out a wonderful detail: this nutcase was incarcerated (he got twenty-four years for killing someone) in another place, and a month ago they moved him here, and now they keep him in a punishment cell so that he can, so to speak, keep me entertained.

I have to admit that this plan is working: I never get bored, nor do I ever get a good night's sleep. Being ill here is something else: during the day you suffer in a cell with a fever and long for it to be night, when they lower your bunk bed and give you a mattress, but at night you listen to the cheerful barking of your neighbor. As you know, sleep deprivation is one of the most effective tortures, but formally I can't complain: he's an inmate like me, he was also put in a punishment cell, and it's up to the administration to decide who gets put into which cell.

But as usual in such situations I am amazed at something else.

This was all planned. Someone thought of this and implemented it at the regional or federal level. You can't transfer a convict for no reason at all; there's a rule about serving your whole term in one camp. So there was an order from above: Put pressure on him. And the generals and colonels at lower levels held a meeting: So, how shall we put pressure on him? And someone wanting to distinguish himself said, We have a madman in such-and-such prison; he screams day and night. Let's take him to Navalny.

What a great idea, fellow-officers. Comrade Colonel, proceed and report on it.

I wouldn't be surprised if it turns out that they took a raving madman from a prison hospital and declared him sane, just to keep him in a cell across from mine.

The moral of this story is simple: The Russian prison system, the Federal Penitentiary Service, is run by a collection of perverts. Everything in their system has a sick twist: the infamous mop rapes, sticking things up people's anuses, and so on. It wouldn't occur to a bad-but-sane person to do such a thing. Everything you read about the horrors and fascist crimes of our prison system is true. There's just one correction needed: the reality is even worse.

January 17th

It has been exactly two years since I returned to Russia. I have spent these two years in prison. When you write a post like this, you have to ask yourself: How many more such anniversary posts will you have to write?

Life and the events around us prompt the answer: However many it may take. Our miserable, exhausted motherland needs to be saved. It has been pillaged, wounded, dragged into an aggressive war, and turned into a prison run by the most unscrupulous and deceitful scoundrels. Any opposition to this gang—even if only symbolic in my current limited capacity—is important.

I said it two years ago, and I will say it again: Russia is my country. I was born and raised here, my parents are here, and I made a family here; I found someone I loved and had kids with her. I am a full-fledged citizen, and I have the right to unite with like-minded people and be politically active. There are plenty of us, certainly more than corrupt judges, lying propagandists, and Kremlin crooks.

I'm not going to surrender my country to them, and I believe that the darkness will eventually yield. But as long as it persists I will do all I can, try to do what is right, and urge everyone not to abandon hope.

Russia will be happy!

June 4th

It's my birthday today. When I woke up, I joked to myself that I can now add the *SHIZO* to the list of places where I've celebrated it over the years. And then, like many other people who reach a certain age (I turned forty-seven today, wow), I thought about my accomplishments over the past year and my plans for the next.

I haven't accomplished much, and this was best summed up the other day by the psychologist at our penal colony. The procedure requires that before you are sent to the *SHIZO* you must be examined by a medical officer (to check whether you will be able to withstand it) and a psychologist (to make sure you don't hang yourself). Well, after our meeting, the psychologist said, "This is the sixteenth time we've put you in the *SHIZO*, but you keep cracking jokes, and your mood is much better than that of the commission members." That's true, but on the morning of your birthday you have to be honest with yourself, so I ask myself the question, Am I really in a good mood, or do I force myself to feel that way?

My answer is, I really am. Let's face it, of course I wish I didn't have to wake up in this hellhole and could, instead, have breakfast with my family, receive kisses on the cheek from my children, unwrap presents, and say, "Wow, this is exactly what I dreamed of!" But life works in such a way that social progress and a better future can be achieved only if a certain number of people are willing to pay the price for their right to have their own beliefs. The more of them there are, the less everyone has to pay. And the day will come when speaking the truth and advocating for justice will be commonplace and not dangerous in Russia.

But, until that day comes, I see my situation not as a heavy burden or a yoke but as a job that needs to be done. Every job has its unpleasant aspects, right? So I'm going through the unpleasant part of my favorite job right now.

My plan for the previous year was not to become brutalized and bitter and lose my laid-back demeanor; that would mean the beginning of my defeat. And all my success in this was possible only because of your support.

As always, on my birthday, I want to thank all the people I've met in my life. The good ones for having helped and still helping me. The bad ones for

the fact that my experience with them has taught me something. Thanks to my family for always being there for me!

But the biggest thank-you and biggest salute I want to give today goes to all political prisoners in Russia, Belarus, and other countries. Most of them have it much harder than me. I think about them all the time. Their resilience inspires me every day.

June 19th

Some people collect stamps. Some collect coins. And I have a growing collection of amazing court trials. I was tried in the Khimki police station, where I was sitting under the portrait of Genrikh Yagoda. I was tried in a standard regime penal colony, and they called it an “open trial.”

And now they’re trying me in a closed trial in a maximum-security penal colony.

In a sense, this is the new sincerity. They now say openly, We are afraid of you. We are afraid of what you will say. We are afraid of the truth.

This is an important confession. And it makes practical sense for all of us. We must do what they fear—tell the truth, spread the truth. This is the most powerful weapon against this regime of liars, thieves, and hypocrites. Everyone has this weapon. So make use of it.

August 4th

Nineteen years in a maximum-security penal colony. The number of years does not matter. I understand perfectly well that, like many political prisoners, I am serving a life sentence. Where “life” is defined by either the length of my life or the length of the life of this regime.

The sentencing figure is not for me. It is for you. You, not I, are being frightened and deprived of the will to resist. You are being forced to surrender your country without a fight to the gang of traitors, thieves, and scoundrels who have seized power. Putin must not achieve his goal. Do not lose the will to resist.

November 13th

When you are looking for a wife, be sure to check the potential spouse to see whether she has been registered as a juvenile delinquent. I didn't do that and here I am.

On a daily basis, the administration informs me that they are unable to deliver another letter from Navalnaya Y. B. The correspondence was seized by the censor because it contained evidence of preparation for a crime. It applies to all recent correspondence.

I wrote to her, saying, "Yulia, stop preparing crimes! Instead, cook some borscht for the kids."

However, she can't stop. She carries on inventing new crimes and keeps writing to me about them in her letters.

Once upon a time, about a hundred years ago, she told me that in her school days, she, along with her friends, conspired to steal a briefcase from a classmate and study the trajectory of an object flying out of a second-floor window. Just to clarify, the flying object was the briefcase, not the classmate. Although, actually, I'm not so sure now.

Even back then, her criminal inclinations were evident. Not a spouse, but more like some kind of outlaw.

December 1st

I have no idea which word to use to describe my latest news. Is it sad, funny, or absurd?

I am brought letters and the conversation begins:

"Any letters from my wife?"

"Censored."

"Any papers from my lawyer?"

“Censored.”

“So what do you have?”

“There’s one from the investigator.”

I open the letter from the State Investigative Committee: “We inform you that a criminal case has been opened against you for a crime under Part 2 of Article 214 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. Two episodes.”

They initiate a new criminal case against me every three months. Rarely has an inmate in solitary confinement for more than a year had such a vibrant social and political life.

I have no idea what Article 214 is, and there’s nowhere to look. You’ll know about it before I do.

Nevertheless, this seems to be a case of positive feedback, as the scientists might say. If this Kremlin gang of corrupters, traitors, and occupiers does not like what I (we) are doing, we must be on the right path.

December 26th

I am your new Santa Claus.

Well, I now have a sheepskin coat and an ushanka fur hat, and soon I will get felt boots. I have grown a beard during the twenty days of my travels under escort. Unfortunately, there are no reindeer, but there are huge, fluffy, and very beautiful German shepherds.

And the most important thing: I now live above the Arctic Circle in the village of Kharpy, on the Yamal Peninsula. The nearest town has the delightful name of Labytnangi.

I don’t say, “Ho ho ho,” but I do say, “Oh oh oh,” when I look out the window, where I can see night, then evening, and then night again.

The twenty days of my trip were pretty exhausting, but I’m in a good mood, as befits a Santa Claus.

They brought me here on Saturday night. I was transported with such precautions and by such a strange route (Vladimir—Moscow—Chelyabinsk—Yekaterinburg—Kirov—Vorkuta—Kharp) that I didn't expect anyone to find me here before mid-January.

So I was very surprised when the cell door was opened yesterday with the words “A lawyer is here to see you.” The lawyer told me that you had lost track of me, and some of you were quite worried. Thanks very much for your support!

I can't regale you with stories about polar exotica yet, because I can only see the fence, which is very close.

I also went for a walk. The “exercise” yard is a neighboring cell, a bit bigger, with snow on the ground. And I saw guards, not like in central Russia, but like in the movies, with machine guns, warm mittens, and felt boots. And with the same beautiful fluffy German shepherds.

Anyway, don't worry about me. I'm fine. I'm totally relieved that I've finally made it here.

Thanks again to everyone for your support. And happy holidays!

Since I'm Santa Claus, you're probably wondering about the presents. But I am a special-regime Santa Claus, so only those who have behaved really badly get presents.

December 31st

This is the third New Year's Eve. I have taken the traditional family New Year's Eve photo using Photoshop. I am trying to keep up with the times, and on this occasion I asked to be drawn by artificial intelligence. I hope it turned out fantastic; I won't see the picture myself until the letter reaches Yamal.

“I miss you terribly” is kind of incorrect from the point of view of Russian syntax. It's better to say, “I miss you a lot,” or “I miss you so much.”

But, from my point of view, it is more accurate and correct. I miss my family terribly. Yulia, my children, my parents, my brother. I miss my friends, my colleagues, our offices, and my work. I miss you all terribly.



I have no feelings of loneliness, abandonment, or isolation. My mood is great and quite Christmassy. But there is no substitute for normal human communication in all its forms: from jokes at the New Year's feast to correspondence on Telegram and comments on Instagram and Twitter.

I miss being able to argue with people who send stupid, identical greetings and pictures via their WhatsApp list on New Year's Eve. It used to annoy me, but now I just think it's cute. Imagine someone sitting down and sending everyone a couple of kittens with hats under a Christmas tree.

Happy New Year to everyone.

Don't miss anyone. Not terribly, not much, or very much. Don't miss your loved ones, and don't let your loved ones miss you. Continue to be a good, honest person, and try to be a little better and more honest in the coming year. That's pretty much what I wish for myself. Don't get sick, and take care of yourself.

Arctic hugs and polar greetings. Love you all.

2024

January 9th

This idea I had, that Putin would now be satisfied with the simple fact of having me in a cell in the far north rather than just keeping me in the *SHIZO*, was not only overoptimistic but also naïve.

I had just come out of quarantine when it was reported that “the convict Navalny refused to present himself according to the regulations, did not respond to the educative work, and did not draw appropriate conclusions for himself.” I got seven days in a *SHIZO*.

A wonderful detail: in a punishment cell, the daily routine is slightly different. In a normal cell, your “exercise” takes place in the afternoon. Even though it is a polar night, it is still a few degrees warmer in the afternoon. In the *SHIZO*, however, “exercise” starts at six-thirty in the morning. But I have already promised myself that I will try to go for a walk no matter what the weather is.

My “exercise” yard is eleven steps from one wall and three to the other; not much of a walk, but at least there’s something, so I go outside.

It hasn’t gotten colder than -32°C [-25.6°F]. Even at that temperature you can walk for more than half an hour, but only if you are sure you can grow a new nose, ears, and fingers.

Few things are as refreshing as a walk in Yamal at six-thirty in the morning. And what a wonderful breeze blows into the courtyard despite the concrete fence, it’s just wow!

Today I went for a walk, got frozen, and thought of Leonardo DiCaprio and his character’s dead-horse trick in “The Revenant.” I don’t think it would work here. A dead horse would freeze in about fifteen minutes.

Here you need an elephant. A hot or even a roasted elephant. If you cut open the belly of a freshly roasted elephant and crawl inside, you can keep warm

for a while. But where am I going to get a hot, roasted elephant in Yamal, especially at six-thirty in the morning? So I will continue to freeze.

January 17th

Exactly three years ago, I came back to Russia after treatment following my poisoning. I was arrested at the airport. And for three years I've been in prison.

And for three years I've been answering the same question.

Prisoners ask it simply and directly.

Prison officials inquire about it cautiously, with the recording devices turned off.

“Why did you come back?”

Responding to this question, I feel frustrated in two ways. First, there's a dissatisfaction with myself for failing to find the right words to make everyone understand and put an end to this incessant questioning. Second, there's frustration at the political landscape of recent decades in Russia. This landscape has implanted cynicism and conspiracy theories so deeply in society that people inherently distrust straightforward motives. They seem to believe, If you came back, there must have been some deal you made. It just didn't work out. Or hasn't yet. There's a hidden plan involving the Kremlin towers. There must be a secret lurking beneath the surface. Because, in politics, nothing is as straightforward as it appears.

But there are no secrets or twisted meanings. Everything really is that simple.

I have my country and my convictions. I don't want to give up my country or betray it. If your convictions mean something, you must be prepared to stand up for them and make sacrifices if necessary.

And, if you're not prepared to do that, you have no convictions. You just think you do. But those are not convictions and principles; they're only thoughts in your head.

Of course, this doesn't mean that everyone who's not currently in prison lacks convictions. Everyone pays their price. For many people, the price is high even without being imprisoned.

I took part in elections and vied for leadership positions. The call for me is different. I travelled the length and breadth of the country, declaring everywhere from the stage, "I promise that I won't let you down, I won't deceive you, and I won't abandon you." By coming back to Russia, I fulfilled my promise to the voters. There need to be some people in Russia who don't lie to them.

It turned out that, in Russia, to defend the right to have and not to hide your beliefs, you have to pay by sitting in a solitary cell. Of course, I don't like being there. But I will not give up either my ideas or my homeland.

My convictions are not exotic, sectarian, or radical. On the contrary, everything I believe in is based on science and historical experience.

Those in power should change. The best way to elect leaders is through honest and free elections. Everyone needs a fair legal system. Corruption destroys the state. There should be no censorship.

The future lies in these principles.

But, for the present, sectarians and marginals are in power. They have absolutely no ideas. Their only goal is to cling to power. Total hypocrisy allows them to wrap themselves in any cover. So polygamists have become conservatives. Members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union have become Orthodox. Owners of "golden passports" and offshore accounts are aggressive patriots.

Lies, and nothing but lies.

It will crumble and collapse. The Putinist state is not sustainable.

One day, we will look at it, and it won't be there. Victory is inevitable.

But for now, we must not give up, and we must stand by our beliefs.

Alexei Navalny died on February 16, 2024. ♦

This is drawn from [Patriot: A Memoir](#).

Shouts & Murmurs

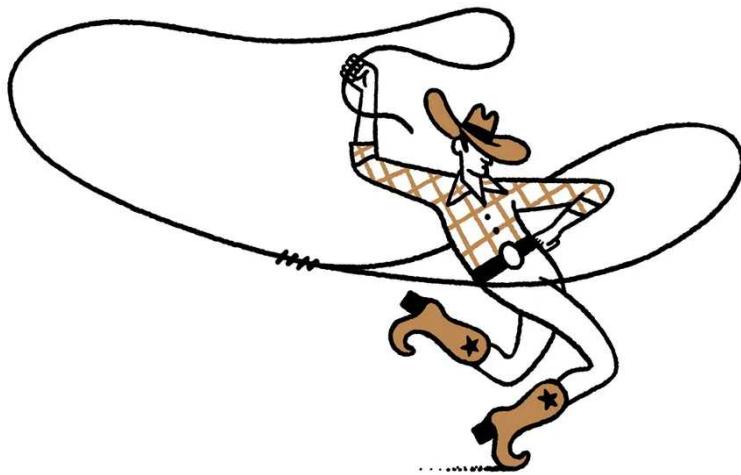
- [Cowboy-Dance Future World](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Cowboy-Dance Future World

By Jack Handey

October 14, 2024



It is the year 2248. We live in what some would call a perfect world. There are no diseases, or hangovers. There is no fighting, except between women, for entertainment purposes. If you hear about a party, they have to let you in. It's the law. And they can't kick you out, no matter what you do.

But there is a dark side to our world. There is no funny cowboy dancing. It is forbidden by the High Council. No one wearing a cowboy hat or cowboy boots may get up in front of others and do a dance that could be considered "outlandish" or "unserious." This includes funny spinning, funny stomping, and funny sashaying. You don't even have to be wearing the cowboy boots on your feet; moving them with your hands is also a crime.

It's no longer safe to wear a cowboy hat at all. Especially a cowboy hat that is comically large or small. A friend of mine was arrested for walking down the street with a tiny Mexican sombrero on his head. He was never seen again.

The secret police are always looking for the slightest sign of people doing a funny cowboy dance. If you fall down on a slippery floor, then get back up, then fall down, then get up, over and over, you will probably be beaten with billy clubs. Spin around once, you might be O.K. Spin around twice and they set the dogs on you.

Even the language has been changed. Officially, the word “yee-haw” no longer exists. Nor does the phrase “Watch me go!”

Those found guilty of habitual funny cowboy dancing are either executed or banished to the Desolate Zone, where they are forced to get jobs and raise families. Some have to undergo state-sponsored “dance therapy.” When you come out, they say, the only kind of cowboy dancing you’re interested in is cowboy ballet, which nobody likes.

Despite the perils, there are those of us who have vowed to keep funny cowboy dancing alive. We have learned to recognize one another. When I meet someone, I might cross the room with an exaggerated swing to my arms. If he says, “Why are you walking that way?,” I know he’s not one of us. But if he approaches me with a little prance, holding up his hand as though he’s twirling a lasso, I know he’s O.K.

No single one of us knows the entire funny cowboy dance. It would be too dangerous. One person might know the bowlegged forward scoot. Another might know the fake off-balance running-in-place. Yet another could be an expert at the agitated-leg-while-the-other-leg-is-straight. Under torture, you might be forced to reveal the cowboy peekaboo, but that’s it. That’s all you’d know.

How did our society, so enlightened when it comes to things like free telescopes if you live near a girls’ college, or mandatory drunk leave, come to this? The terror can be traced to Don, the so-called chairman of the High Council. Many years ago, he was giving his annual Big Speech at a mass rally. The speech was not going well. It was long and boring. Don sensed this, and suddenly announced, “Hey, everybody, want to see me do a funny dance?” Without waiting for an answer, he launched into a desperate, flailing flurry. It went on and on, becoming more and more pathetic. When it finally ended, with Don panting and sweating, what is now known as the Great

Silence occurred. For nearly an hour, there were no sounds—no laughs, no cricket chirps, no ticking of a clock. No one even coughed, lest it be mistaken for a laugh. Finally, someone yelled, “The funny cowboy dance is a lot funnier!”

Don vowed, then and there, to crush funny cowboy dancing. He even sent a killer robot back in time to kill Leonardo da Vinci, the genius who first conceived of the funny cowboy dance. Leonardo showed the robot his sketches of various moves for the dance, and even performed it himself. The robot was laughing so hard he could not kill him.

Upon returning to the present, the killer robot was executed. He was placed, standing up, under a huge hydraulic press. It is said that as the press squeezed down upon him he began doing the funny cowboy dance. He continued dancing until he was only two feet tall. Then his lights went out.

Perhaps one day a man will once again be able to get up and do his funny cowboy dance. Or any kind of dance he wants (within reason). He'll be able to throw his cowboy hat on the floor, stomp on it with both feet, then put it back on his head and get a goofy look on his face. He'll be able to pretend to strike a match on his buttock, light an imaginary cigarette, then notice with alarm that his rear end is on fire. All while galloping and tiptoeing and high-kicking to his heart's content.

I don't blame Don. He was my friend once. But he got corrupted by being such a moron. And, to be honest, not everything he's done has been bad. After all, he did wipe out Shakespeare. ♦

Fiction

- [My Camp](#)

Fiction

My Camp

By Joshua Cohen

October 13, 2024



Human nature, yes. Nature nature, no. I know nothing about it. A rose is a rose is my tradition, but then feelings lead us outside tradition, they lure us beyond it, and I feel nature deeply. I feel its lack of interest in me, its lack of humanity jibing with my inner emptiness; I like how its trees come together to make a forest that shows me how to breathe, and how its boulders show me how to concentrate. I'm content with having these immature, idealizing poetic-romantic emotions about the great outdoors and don't want to know anything more, chiefly because I've always regarded the outdoors as a refuge from knowledge—a haven of ignorance to flee to whenever the city news runs me down.

In the summer of 2023, this was certainly the case. Though in retrospect that season now seems a golden age, at least a silver age—the last sane season—in the literal heat and humidity of the moment I was depressed. All my friends were out of the city and I had no invitations. It seemed that every one of my acquaintances lucky enough to have a house upstate or in the

Hamptons had just given birth and childless singles like me were no longer welcome: *Happy summer, we'll catch up in the fall . . .*

I was going stir-crazy in the tarry swelter, and though I couldn't quite get it together to purchase a new, non-leaking air-conditioner or book a hotel or motel or really come up with anywhere climatized to retreat to even for a weekend's vacation, I found myself beginning to contemplate homeownership. That should be proof I was losing my grip: that I didn't dismiss the idea immediately, that I let it grow on me like a prickly rash as the sweat slicked down my back. A place of my own was the fantasy. A little place out in the hinter. As I pigged around my hotbox, crosstown traffic fuming and blaring outside, I kept imagining a wattle fence, a thatched roof, a clutch of loosely mortared walls out in some leafy glade where I could sit cool and quiet and get back to writing.

I suppose it was a compulsion. An addiction. Some smoke, some drink, and some, like me, do both while also spending vast unreclaimable hours scoping real estate online, checking out maps and floor plans, scrolling through rooms, and then, against all sounder judgment and despite an inability to afford anything even halfway decent, even halfway standing, clicking the button that contacts the agent who listed the property to set up an in-person viewing.

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

This is where the obsession turns dangerous, when you let the monster that's taken over your life take over someone else's—an agent's, a fellow-human who lives on commission.

And so this became my habit: waking up early and taking the ferry to Jersey, where it was cheaper to park my car, and then driving out in all directions—cow country, horse country, queer antiquesville abutting the Trumpty burbs, Westchester, Eastchester, every chester, beyond the amboys and brunswicks into the boros and fords, but particularly down to the Pine Barrens, that wild, welchy green swath I'd pinpointed as especially suitable, a huddled, hushed sanctuary too far and too hickish for the city to care about it, stranded past the last stretch of Goodwill strip malls and parking lots, a patchwork of alternately swampy and sandy-soiled flatland studded with stands of its

prevailing namesake tree, the only type of tree, incidentally, that I could ever identify, whose leaves—though I’m not clear on whether pine needles are technically leaves—are not shed and never change color.

The agents were locals, though down in the Pines local could mean they’d driven forty or so miles out of their way to meet me. They were a motley lot. There was an older man, retired as a welder, who struggled out of his truck using two billiard cues as canes and hobbled around and, when I told him he didn’t have to go up a flight of stairs with me, got indignant: “Don’t do me like a crip and try to help me while I’m working.” There was a younger man, weedy and Visine-eyed, whose childhood was passed on a nearby farm that according to him “didn’t grow shit,” and who, after volubly denigrating the Pines, calling the area “dead-end” and “pussy-free,” asked me, straight up, why I wanted to move there. And I answered him just as directly: “To write.”

“Like, you write scripts and all?”

“Books.”

He took that in, bobbleheading. “That checks out. Fits in with your taste.”

He meant my penchant for the older properties he was showing me, the Dutch-gabled disasters, the scarified heaps of chipped Quaker brick, and the musty Federal manses held upright as much by the tarps taped across slapdash plywood as by their columns, with pitted mirrors reflecting creeping mold, and spiderwebbed mantels whose wood was already filigreed to imitate spiderwebs.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Joshua Cohen read “My Camp.”](#)

I could imagine myself in each, but all were too expensive. Even the cheapest—even the split-level sided in blighted vinyl—would’ve required me to give up my city apartment, and I wasn’t going to relocate full time to the Pine Barrens, at least not yet.

Still, interest to a real-estate agent is like trash to a bear: irresistible. Inquire about even one property and every property in the world beats a path to your door. Agents I'd dealt with, agents I hadn't dealt with, were sending me sneak peeks and early looks, calling me even at the latest hours, doing all they could to prevent me from surrendering this dream and driving me to consider financial schemes I knew were hopeless: finding some obscure fintech stock that would 2x, 3x, 4x, putting my cache of autographed samizdat out on the market.

As summer dwindled, so did the supply: I was receiving the same listings again and again. I'd already visited nearly every dwelling, but that didn't stop me from clicking the links and scrolling past the recurring ranchers and clapboards that were promising onscreen but travesties in the real. Comparing these pristined images with the grimy reality of my tours suggested to me that I wasn't actually serious about acquiring anything other than impressions and that all this searching was just a hobby; it was fantasy real estate, a dabbled time suck. I didn't want a house; I just wanted to look for a house—or, rather, to look for a way to justify getting out of the city on weekends.

By then, it was September—in fact, it was the night before I had to teach my first class of the fall semester, and this was how I spent it, browsing. In a few hours, I'd have to get up in front of a few dozen dewy new students of the Survey of Soviet Literature course I should never have taken on, but instead of preparing by rereading Mayakovsky or Blok, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Pasternak, or Mandelstam, instead of preparing by taking a sleeping pill, I was skimming the listings, constantly expanding my search criteria and clicking every pop-up that emerged like a panicked groundhog from the pixelated green—Fixer Upper . . . Victorian D.I.Y. Charm . . . Lake Adjacent Renovation Opportunity . . . Former Summer Camp Ready to Be Reinvented—alerting the agents, “I am interested in this property,” and on the drop-down menu where I could indicate my availability noting that I was free every day except Wednesdays, when I had to be at the university delivering my lectures.

And when I was out—after taking attendance, distributing the syllabus, and dragging the students through the young, heady poetics of the Glorious Revolution—I found I had a message: a reply from an agent named Barbara,

telling me that she could show the property today, and I immediately agreed to meet her, without even confirming which property she meant. It almost didn't matter, because the weather was so beautiful, the sky clear to its heights, and before I knew it I was out of the Soviet Union and plunged into Jersey, making time on the midday lanes free of traffic save a stalled span approaching a gruesome tractor-trailer accident that had strewed melons all over the road outside Voorhees. The malls spread out and went vacant and their asphalt broke down and chunked into fields and I was miles deep into farmland—grapes, I think, or berries—when I turned off into a gas station. This was where Barbara wanted to meet, as the property's address apparently didn't correspond to its location—"if you go by phone," she'd texted me, "you'll wind up somewhere else." The gas station, though findable, was out of business. Across the mini-mart's chained and padlocked door was spray-painted "*CERRADO-CLOSED-CERRADO*." Barbara's car, which she'd described as a "purple Toyota beater," was the only car in the lot. I appreciated the accuracy of that description.

She didn't get out of the car but honked and downed her window, showing herself to be a sweet bouffy-haired woman around my mother's age, lipstick crusting at the corners of her smile, giant fake nails beckoning me to follow. She drove out to the crossroads and turned, then sped up past manure-scented cropland and turned again, about a mile on, onto a one-lane road that brought us into the forest. The going was slow as Barbara kept stopping and sticking her head out the window to check for the next turn, and it was hard to tell what dirt was a road and what dirt was just a bareness in the tree cover. The turn she picked was a road for a stretch and then narrowed and trenched into little more than a trail, and as we rollicked along in caravan, stones whipping against my muffler, stones snapping up to scrape my doors, I was jounced into feeling ridiculous, wondering why I had taken this fixation so far and why I didn't have a truck.

A dead end, a mucky hollow. Barbara stepped out of her Toyota, her pumps poking drastic holes in the dirt as she strode over and launched into her spiel: how you—how I—just had to keep an open mind, this property's got business potential out the wazoo, mixed-use commercial-residential, the township and county would be happy to permit anything I wanted, she knew everyone on the zoning committee and they'd be overjoyed, she'd just been in California visiting her daughter, who'd taken her to this outdoor Old

West-themed restaurant with picnic tables corralled around a circled-wagon open kitchen and it would be amazing, just amazing, were I to do something like that here, it might attract other folks from the city . . .

Nattering, she led me toward the clearing's edge, where massive trees were posted with warnings against trespassing. Down a smoke wisp of pine-needle-covered sandy soil was a tree with a rough-hewn wooden sign that read "*CAMP*" in crudely carved letters and whatever name had come before was illegible: hacked away, blacked out as if by fire.

"What was it called?" I asked, pointing to the sign as we approached it, and Barbara's face cracked in puzzlement, as if her ability to make the sale hinged on her ability to answer this question; her siren-red lower lip jutted, a vein shivered on her forehead. "You know," she said, "originally it was some name from the Lenape, I think. That's what a lot of the Indian, the Native American, stuff is around here, so I'm just assuming that's what it was, but who knows if it really was Lenape or was just trying to be Lenape, you never much can tell." She took a careful step over a rotted log. "Though I'm sure it was all done with the best intentions."

I decided to agree with her, feeling sort of amused and sort of touched that she was being so cautious with me, trying not to say anything too risky for the city guy.

"Whatever the name," I said, "I'm sure it was meant as a tribute."

"That's it," she wheezed, "a tribute." She was getting winded on our walk, and her prattle was broken up by heavy breaths. "Back in the dinosaur days when I was a kid, it was a religious camp, like for religious scouts, and then one of the farmers, a guy who died last year, which is why this property's on the market, he got ahold of it and was using it as housing for—is it polite to say migrants? I'm sorry, I want to say Mexicans, but I don't know for a stone fact that they were Mexicans, just that they were from somewhere down there and this was where they stayed during picking season," and as we passed the sign she turned to size me up and said, "and then out of season, I'll be straight with you, because I'm always straight with my clients, I've been in this business a million years and I've never once lied to a client, though of course I encourage everyone to do their own diligence

and have independent inspections, but out of season, when no one's picking, this all became like a hangout place for what my ex-husband likes to call punks, my ex who's on the force and our son, who's also police, used to have to come out here a fair bit to calm things down, but I guess the kids prefer to stay indoors these days. It's the Internet they have now—the Internet and all those shooting games they're playing. . . . ”

We rounded a mossy rock, the trees stunted and sparse, and her voice got carried away on a breeze—for a moment, I forgot her. Ahead was a scruffy dun clearing lined with dainty log cabins and a more substantial log cabin at the farthest rim; a fire pit was at the center, ringed by benches made from stumps, and like a fool I fell in love. It happened that quickly. It'd never happened that quickly with a woman. I'm told it happens that quickly with a child. As soon as it's in the world, you love it.

This was paradise, at least a paradise I could feel myself earning, thinking my library could go in that cabin, I could turn that other cabin into a garage, and I'd write in the big one and sleep in another, or I'd sleep in the big one and write in another. . . . And though I understood on some level how deranged this all was, though I saw in a single glimpse how much work had to be done, the skewed beams and splintered panes and the energy drinks littering the fire pit and the fast-food wrappers trapped in the bushes, I also saw the thick-skinned trees unswayed at the perimeter and behind the large cabin the wildflowers along the stream and I felt around me the pulse of acres and empty acres and I knew that despite everything I had to have it.

Should you have any reservations about the confession you've just read, I'm going to ask you to table them. It really doesn't matter if you're wondering why I'm choosing to write about myself in such a shameful, out-of-touch way, or why you should give a fox's fart about any of it—why you should care at all about some privileged middle-aged white guy's travails trying to purchase a summer home in the country. Put those questions—put those objections—to the side, if only because the subject I'm about to get into is pretty much the opposite. I'm speaking, if you haven't guessed it already, of what happened that October, when scores of Palestinians from Hamas and Islamic Jihad and other terror organizations bent on eradicating the State of Israel poured across the border from Gaza, massacred well over a thousand people, and took a few hundred hostages back to Gaza with them. It was a

slaughter, pure and simple, a total wholesale slaughter of civilians, and even while it was still under way an editor from the newspaper of record got in touch to ask me what I thought. The massacre began on Saturday morning Israel time and this was barely Sunday evening New York time and there were still terrorists in Israeli territory; bodies were bleeding out in the sun warm and uncollected and this editor wanted to know whether I wanted to write something. Write what? An op-ed? I couldn't believe it. There was no "How are you?" or "How's the fam?" from an editor who was far from being a stranger, just the request, the cold solicitation. What kind of psychopath would I have to be to write an op-ed under such conditions—what kind of sociopath, I think is the more correct term, would I have to be to broadcast my opinions, even to have opinions, with the butchery so fresh? Friends had been killed, some friends were still missing, and this Long Island Episcopalian soccer dad wanted to know my take, my predictions, my forecasts, my thinking? A major magazine was in touch next, wanting to know if I had anything to say.



No was the answer: I'd just seen images of mangled corpses mounded by a roadside, of women in the fields shot point-blank in the vagina, of a family tied together and burned alive at a kibbutz, of a guy getting his head lopped off with a shovel, of an unconscious or possibly already dead woman stripped half naked and spread-eagled on the back of a truck being driven

through the streets of Gaza City getting heckled and spit on by kids, so I had nothing to say (scream, shout), and certainly nothing to write (it's impossible to write screaming and shouting). I was sure, I was positive, that they could find another writer who'd provide them with the outrage they desired, I told subsequent editors who also tried to commission something from me, and that was precisely what they did; they ran articles decrying the slaughter alongside an increasing supply of articles that highlighted the increasingly popular sentiment that this rampage against civilians was something the Israelis had brought upon themselves, the justified reaction to a half century of Israeli oppression, undertaken in the name of Palestinian liberation. This thesis—let's call it a thesis—was everywhere online: the idea that “by any means necessary” was a valid strategy that licensed all manner of violent tactics and that in the pursuit of “decolonization” it was somehow not just politically expedient but laudable to align oneself with groups that made a habit of murdering babies and raping women.

Enter Cousin Oded—a cousin on both sides, actually, because his father is my father's brother and his mother is my mother's sister, a fact that perhaps testifies to my family's closeness or to its lack of creativity. Oded was the physical embodiment of those tight bonds: strong, compact. He was a bullet-bald tech guy, unsuccessful but undeterred. A chaser who wouldn't give up. He was often in the city pursuing new opportunities, though he didn't always let me or my family know. I remember once I happened to bump smack into him in the middle of the day in Times Square. Oded! I didn't know you were in New York! Why didn't you tell me? Should I send up a flare to my parents and sibs, get everyone together? No—he barely had time for a beer; he had wall-to-wall meetings and then the return flight to Tel Aviv. A mobile guy, not upwardly, not even downwardly, just sort of back and forth. Nothing he got involved with ever worked out, but he didn't let that temper his enthusiasm or embitter his sincerity in the rush to whatever was next.

One Passover, he came to my parents' home and told us that he was making some apps, and then a year or so later when he dropped in on us again and I asked him about the apps, it was as if they'd never existed and I'd conjured them up and all his new talk was about cybersecurity, biometrics, behaviometrics, semiconductor lasers. Multitasking startups and self-reinventions, he was ceaselessly babbling about “this A.I. project I shouldn't

be talking about . . . ” (and then talking about it), “this genetics thing I’m doing and though we’re not quite at the stage of taking investors . . . ” (he would’ve taken my money, had I had any).

The Wednesday after the massacre, he got in touch, texting me *shalom yehoshua u free tonight at 6*. That was it. Absolutely no acknowledgment of what’d happened. The moment I saw the notification on my phone, I regretted not having checked in on him or his brother Ido or their parents—I’d assumed my own parents had done that on my behalf.

You’re in NY? I replied like an idiot. *How are you?*

I tell you. Tonight at 6.

You’ve been in NY for a while or you got on the first plane out? Even stupider.

Soho.

You feeling bad you’re here and missing out on all the fun?

This wasn’t just flippancy: there’s a deep Israeli imperative to not sit out a war, and I wondered if he was feeling guilty.

Don’t say nothing to your family. Green Cafe Soho at 6.

He was sitting at a sidewalk table in the stale dusking heat, and as we man-thumped our greetings I felt as if I were congratulating both of us: Will you get a load of us cousins, hanging out in New York! The beardy ancestors would be so proud! I asked him how his parents were faring and he shrugged. “Going to funerals.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t—” I started to apologize, but the waitress interrupted and I ordered a pilsner.

“Nothing for me,” Oded said, which was something I’d seen him do before—sit somewhere and not order. His parents were like that, too: Why should I have to order something just because I’m here? I didn’t ask them to put a café here—I just happened to take a seat and it should cost me?

The waitress considered enforcing a policy, decided it wasn't worth it, left.

"You know how obsessed Israelis are with American news," I said, acting the American, trying to lighten the mood. "Like whenever there's a storm close to New York—even if it's still in Florida, some hurricane downgraded to a storm and getting weaker up the coast—your parents get in touch with mine. I know I should've checked in, I'm saying. Feel free to break my balls."

But Oded wasn't listening. He was hunched over his phone.

"I can take my balls out to make breaking them easier." But he kept scrolling and I lit a cigarette. "You going to say something?"

He picked up his head and mentioned a name. It was a name most people would know, most people in New York. A tabloid name I'm not going to mention, but suffice to say: cosmetics, fragrances, hair care, a few billion.

"A friend of yours?" I said.

"I thought of yours?"

"Why?"

"You met him. I know you met him. I saw it online," and he held up his phone, showing me myself and the man he meant. "He gave you a prize."

"What's this about?"

"He remembers you? You didn't do anything since you met him to piss him off?"

The idea that Oded was after some investment, that business never stops, not even for pogroms, struck me as cheap. "I admire your capacity for compartmentalization."

"My what? Speak Hebrew."

“You’re really exploiting the moment, seizing the day. You think he’s going to want to invest in something Israeli out of pity?”

Oded threw up a hand of pinched-together gnawed-nail fingers, that Levantine gesture for just-stop. “You’re fucked up. You’re fucked up in the head. I asked you if you know the guy. I already know the answer. You know the guy.”

“So if you know the answer, why ask? Let me tell you how it works. You write a book, and if it’s not a best-seller then at least you’ve got a chance at being nominated for prizes. Your book goes to a panel of judges and what happens is some of them want this one person to win and some of them want this other person to win, so what they do is they compromise and settle on you. The guy no one wanted. The book no one wanted. Now you have to put on a suit and go to a bad catering hall by Grand Central that you’ve only been to before for bar mitzvot, an event with shitty food, shitty wine, and endless speeches about the hope-bringing, change-bringing capacities of art, where the rich guy who’s endowed the prize in memory of his father, who loved to read, and also because he’s getting a tax break, steps up to the mike and intones a few phrases about humanism or liberalism or the enduring power of liberal humanism and then shoves a trophy like a little plastic idol into one of your hands and then shakes your other hand for the cameras. That’s the first and last time you’ll ever meet him. Though maybe, just maybe, there’s a check.”

“How much of a check?”

“Not enough. But that’s not the point. The point is that’s how I know him.”

Oded nodded. “He’ll be there tonight.”

“He’ll be where?”

“And what about,” and he glanced down at his phone again and read names I’m going to fictionalize as the Glazers, Larry Stern, the Tadels, and Martin Zucker, whose real-life versions were almost as prominent as my prize sponsor.

“I’ve heard of them. I think I met Stern’s son. I’m friends with a guy who went to school with one of the Tadel daughters, I think it’s the same Tadel, they dated for a while—why?”

The waitress brought my pilsner and Oded did the pinched fingers again as if to prevent me from talking while she was present. “Ready to order?” she said.

He shook his head. “Still nothing for me, but he’ll take the bill,” and when the waitress huffed off he continued his list-reading: a name close enough to Dankfein, a name close enough to Shiller . . .

“Stop for a sec. You want to explain why you’re throwing wealthy Jewish names at me?”

“Guess.”

“I already said investors and you told me ‘Fuck off,’ so I don’t know—you’re planning a massacre of your own?”

He scowled. “You shouldn’t joke about these things.”

“So that’s where we are now—that’s what the Arabs have done to the great nation of the Jews, the world’s funniest nation? Suddenly there are things we shouldn’t joke about?”

“Helmets,” he said, and then he took up my stein and downed my beer. “Go pay these antisemites and I’ll explain on the way.”

“On the way to what?”

“We’re going to this party for helmets.”

There was other gear, too, vests and body armor and such, he explained, as he led the way downtown, past the boutiques whose displays were filled with suddenly ominous amputated and decapitated dummies. “But the most urgent need is helmets,” he said, and clapped his hairy hand down on my scalp. “We’re having a—fund-raiser, a charity event. We’re going to recruit the money to get some helmets.”

He said this as if it were the most logical thing—of course that's what we're doing! The Israel Defense Forces don't have enough helmets to go to war in, so Cousin Oded and I are heading downtown to raise the money to get them!

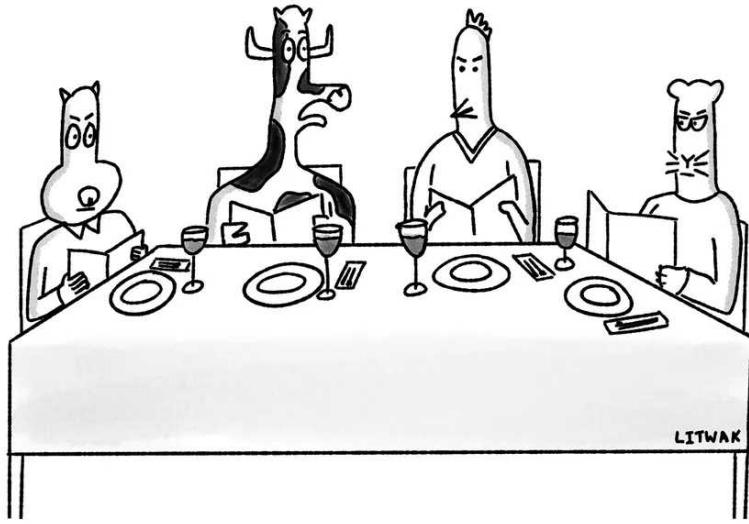
"But why don't they have enough helmets?" I asked, as we neared Canal.
"With all the money Israel has—with all the money Israel gets from America—you're telling me it can't organize helmets?"

Oded sighed, as if I should just shut up and accept what he said, as if it were costing him too much effort to explain it to someone so innocent. "Who said they didn't have enough?" he said. "They have enough. But you know how many soldiers are being called up? All the soldiers. Standing Army plus reservists. Everyone eligible. It's a war. And whoever goes out to fight the war, you know what helmet they have? They have the helmet from the year they were in the Army. So the standing Army, the active-duty soldiers, they have the new shit, they're taken care of. They've got the helmets with ballistic protection, fragmentation protection, padding against brain trauma. They're so lightweight, you wear them and you don't even feel them, but they'll stop a bullet at close range." He poked a blunt thumb at my forehead.

I swatted at his thumb. "And the old helmets?"

He started crossing Canal against the light. "The old shit? You're better off wearing a coconut. And a coconut would be more comfortable."

"So how many of these up-to-date helmets do they need?"



“We need at least enough for my old unit and my brother’s.”

Implied in that statement was the fact that while his brother Ido was being conscripted, Oded himself wasn’t. He couldn’t be; he’d been injured. He’d been spared reserve duty owing to a back injury incurred during his service, or maybe during training, or maybe surfing. No one was supposed to mention it; I read his face as daring me to mention it, so instead I mumbled, “Let’s say you get the money—what then? How do you get the helmets? You buy them on Amazon and they ship direct?”

He smirked. “Not the new shit. You know how many factories in the U.S. make the new shit? One. In this plenty-of-everything country of yours, just one. In Iowa. And who do they make for first in Iowa? They make for the U.S. military. Obviously they do. But if we put in a big enough order with a little extra on top, then we can jump the line and have the first batch of helmets flown out to Israel next week. It won’t be enough, but it might save lives. You don’t want soldiers going out into battle with old equipment, do you? You wouldn’t send your own cousin, my brother Ido, out to fight with just fucking slingshots or what are those called?”

“You’ve been practicing this pitch.”

“From the Middle Ages. From the cartoons. They’re like large slingshots. For large rocks. They throw the rocks into the castle.”

“Catapults.”

“Exactly. You wouldn’t go out to meet the enemy with catapults.”

“O.K.,” I said, just to say something as he stopped on Franklin and checked his phone for directions, “but I’m still not clear what this has to do with me.”

“Look,” he said, as if he were about to point out a window-lurking sniper. “Listen,” he said, as if he wanted me to block out the traffic noise and notice the faint shriek wafting up through a sewer grate from some captive underground, “this is your city, your country. These people we’re going to meet, they don’t know me from an Arab, they don’t even know my partner—they just know the guy whose loft it is, who’s one of our investors in this startup I’m with. Did I tell you about it? It’s like a digital concierge?”

“Maybe you did. It can be hard to keep up.”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters. Not after what they did to us.” Oded sputtered, calling the terrorists sons of whores and wishing their whore families wiped from the earth like—he was suggesting—diarrhea or Satan’s cum. I tried to refocus him:

“And so your investor’s invited some friends?”

He composed himself. “Friends, acquaintances, business partners—Jews. He invited who he invited and they’re not going to know me, but they’re going to know you.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

“Or they’ll know of you—who you are.”

“Who am I?”

“You’re my famous cousin, the guy who wrote the book. Their little Jewish writer guy—they’ll trust you—so when we ask them for what we need

they'll come through for us."

"For us?"

"Exactly."

The party was in an ex-warehouse off an alley between Hudson and Greenwich. The elevator opened directly into the loft. It was a floor-through with, on one side, a bar where a lab-coated bartender was stirring and shaking and, on the other, a kitchen where a toqued chef hacked away with a vicious knife. Between those stations was a gleaming expanse of bowling-alley parquet partitioned by a half wall on which a live stream of the Israeli news was being projected, and, as the guests passed the wall, some drab jeep or the curt face of a newscaster would be stretched across their pasty flesh and wool-silk suiting.

Positioned just under the ceiling-mounted projector was the main seating area, a few dark leather couches surrounding a low chrome glass-topped table where, amid trays of pita and flutes of prosecco, a pile of books that included my own had been arranged to form a plinth for a helmet—a helmet like a witch's black cauldron overturned, its webbed-mesh adjustable straps spilling onto the table and picking up flecks from the dipping bowls of hummus, tahini, and labneh.

A man Oded identified to me as his startup partner, Itay, was standing by the table speaking to guests. He was Christ-haired and wearing clinging cycling clothes that he seemed to think required no explanation or perhaps he thought they matched the helmet—though it was decidedly not a cycling helmet—he was picking up and passing around, giving to guests to try on, and, as a man I knew to be an active board member of the New York Public Library set the helmet atop his gray-stubbled pate, Itay turned and said, "And here's my partner, Oded," and Oded said, "And here's my cousin, the writer."

The active board member of the New York Public Library removed the helmet, blushing. "Excellent to meet you," he said, "though I'm sure we've met before."

“Probably,” I said, wondering which of us was more embarrassed.

An older man offered a name I recognized from some buildings he’d donated: the cancer center he’d almost certainly die in. The hand he gave me was pillow-y, boneless. “My wife loved your book.”

“Which one?”

“Which wife or which book? It’s always best to talk about the latest one, don’t you think?”

“If that’s your policy.”

“She read it aloud to me. In bed. How does that feel—that my wife brings you into bed with us?” He said this while tentacle-slipping his arm around the woman next to him, who said, “Ignore him. It’s wonderful to meet you. Even under the circumstances. So how are you related to Itay?”

“Oded,” I said, and tried to explain the connection: my father, the son of German Jewish refugees who’d fled to British Mandatory Palestine before leaving Tel Aviv for the States sometime after the Yom Kippur War; his brother remaining and marrying a woman from a Turkish Jewish family whose older sister wound up in fashion school in New York and was introduced to my father and became my mother soon after—a tangled and confusing-even-to-me saga that I found myself repeating in ever tougher-to-follow versions for each new guest who approached our seating cluster.

I was trying to recall where exactly my grandparents were from—in response to one guy who’d said that his family had been in Germany for generations, too, and to another guy who’d said that he and his girlfriend, or perhaps he’d said boyfriend, had just been in Turkey for a vacation and it’d been lovely—when the host, the putative investor in my cousin’s startup, a hefty frazzled man wearing both a Star of David charm on a chain and a Star of David hat, started pacing around yelling, “Dim . . . dim . . . diiimmmer . . . diiimmmer . . . ,” until the lighting system complied and it was dark enough.

Itay ensconced himself at the edge of a couch, laptop on his lap, trying to connect wirelessly to the projector, which eventually broadcast onto the wall an overdesigned desert-camo-colored Web site full of gear: helmets like the model featured here in person as well as weird black and brown-and-green body-armor slabs that resembled the sleek-crunchy exoskeletal plates of a gigantic post-nuclear cockroach. Oded stood by Itay's side, just beyond the blast radius of the projection, and after thanking the host and everyone for coming gave a presentation that despite its wonky technical details about compression-resistance and shell-flammability factors somehow still managed to be moving, though I admit that perhaps what moved me about it and what moved others was slightly different.

Oded was a guy who'd spent most of his adult life pitching schemes that never broke through—an app that linked parking garages in a competitive-pricing system based on the number of open spaces and time of day; an oils-of-the-Levant subscription service that sent new batches of oils (olive, sesame, and so on) to home or office—and here he was standing up in front of the most élite room of his life, flicking through the deck of something realer and more selfless and it was all somehow valiant and pathetic at once, his ultimate revenge and his ultimate abasement.

As for the guests, the audience crowding the wall, I kept wondering what they saw, as Oded wrapped up his portion and turned it over to Itay to discuss logistics: how the pallets would be shipped to Ben Gurion and, the moment they cleared customs, transported to regional distribution points . . . reserve commanders and other officers who'd submitted requisitions would be contacted directly to retrieve them . . .

History, that's what I think they were seeing: they were seeing history in their own time—history being made, history being offered to them in the making—and the question my cousin and his partner were asking was whether their American brethren were up to the task. Jews were in peril, Jews were yet again in peril, and the moment of proving had come. I'm not suggesting this idly. After the presentation concluded and the lights glided partially up and the skewers were served—it was smart to wait until after the presentation to serve the skewers—the man who'd given me the prize approached cradling a plate of shimmering meats. “I was told you were here,” he said. “Congratulations.” I didn't understand what he was

congratulating me on. Congrats that I was related to Oded? Congrats on having become who I was despite my plainly limited family origins? “I read that article you wrote just after the attacks and it was great.” But I hadn’t written anything. “I had my assistant send it around.” I didn’t want to correct him. “Let’s sit for a minute.”

He led me over to the window to lean against the sill, he with his plate of stabbed-through proteins, me with my glass of vodka-flavored melting ice. His face was flushed, and as he went on praising this article that wasn’t mine I could feel a momentousness radiating off him, the sense that this meeting was a crucial occasion. This was something big, finally, bigger than his usual: endowing an Oriental wing at a museum or a school for the handicapped in Africa. “This is existential,” he kept saying, between bites at his lamb, between his predictions about the war’s expansion and an inevitable direct confrontation with Iran, “just like you said in your article.”

He grimaced, removed a sliver of gristle from his teeth, and then launched into a wistful reminiscence of his father, who’d crawled out of the concentration camps all the way to Jersey, where he got into scrapping copper and tin and junking cars and eventually his salvage lot out by the intersection of the Turnpike and the Parkway became a weapons depot; they’d bundle the guns and ammunition there and send them out of Newark on ships and even fly them out of airfields on Long Island, straight into the hands of the Irgun . . .

News from the Middle East is an inverted affair: New York’s day is the conflict’s night and vice versa. From this flipped perspective—and I’d go as far as to say from the perspective of most people in the world who weren’t flying the jets that dropped the bombs or cowering on the ground having the bombs dropped on them—Israel’s counterattack was a horror of wait and see: wait for the light to make the damage visible. The darkness was total—electricity in Gaza was sporadic, then cut—and the sky so black that it eradicated the horizon, and the only indication that a certain portion of what I was watching was sky and another portion was land was a twinkling high up, followed, a held breath later, by a pillar of fire spumed from below. Under the rising sun—around midnight in Manhattan—the destruction was revealed: sloppy gray craters pounded into the earth like graves, scorched

nurseries, splintered cribs, clothes flapping like the flags of stillborn nations, and people half dead or fully dead, pallored in dust.

As I spectated this carnage, how did I feel? I could recognize in myself every extreme of feeling, but my primary emotion—I promised myself I'd be honest here—was one of resentment toward the reactions of those around me. My family who wanted to bomb the Palestinian Nazis into silly oblivion, and my friends who daily, hourly, sent me open letters to sign and petitions to circulate: ceasefire now, end military aid, stop Nazi Israel, and so on. Ignoring these entreaties, I holed up drinking, smoking, crumbling crescents of anti-anxiety pharmaceuticals, and reloading the latest footage of the toppled mosques and pocked market squares, along with the repeated declarations of Israeli officialdom that Gaza had to be levelled before troops could be sent in on the ground, or belowground, into the deep-sunk twisting tunnels where the hostages were being held—a claim that became increasingly difficult to countenance as the entire territory was being turned into an underground affair, its cities buried within themselves, cemeteries under cemeteries . . .

I knew why I was avoiding my parents; that avoidance wasn't anything new, and I had grievances against them that went far beyond their current coarsening. But I was curious as to why, despite my abhorrence of the killing, I couldn't engage with those petitions (*WRITERS AGAINST THE WAR*); I couldn't put my name to them and forward them on (*STOP THE ZIONIST LIES*). I suppose some of my unwillingness was from the obvious source—primitive cultic guilt about coming out publicly against my own people—but I think a fairer share came from my native temperament; whenever someone tries to pressure me into doing something, I can't find it in me to agree, and the closer the pressure gets to outright bullying verging on blackmail, the harder I dig in, as if to demonstrate for those leaning on me the true meaning of resistance. It was the prose—the words that were being offered to appear over my name—that was most bothersome. I couldn't deal with the clichés. I became a writer so I could choose my own words and speak for myself—why else would anyone get into this racket? And now all sorts of people who called themselves my “colleagues”—as if writers had colleagues—were after me to endorse their distortions and tag along to their rallies, where they, who'd never wear dashikis or sombreros,

donned kaffiyehs and waved signs calling Zionism “apartheid” and seeking to “Globalize the Intifada.”

I hated those protests, which “welcomed Jews,” or so I was told, and yet had scant room for Jewish contradiction. I don’t mean to bang the drum for nuance or subtlety, let alone the divided self—a cause that doesn’t quite lend itself to drum-banging—but I do think it’s often healthy to dwell within your crisis and let yourself be tortured by your conflicting mind and heart. It was that torture I found lacking. Suddenly so many people around me were certain, suddenly so many people around me were convinced—my family as much as the protesters—and whatever agony they were experiencing was caused less by inward inconsistency than by the fact that not everyone agreed with them. Faced with that opposition, they reinforced their positions and declaimed their excruciation, calling all the like-minded to get in line: come block a bridge, block a highway, click Like and follow, Like and subscribe.

Returning from winter break, I found the university the center of this madness. Students filled the quad and unfurled their banners, slathered the campus with Palestinian flags. They stuck up maps of the region erasing Israel or labelling Israel Palestine and gathered rowdily in the halls to opine.

I walked head down through their sermons, refusing to get dragged in, only to enter a classroom filled with white, Black, and brown kids, few of them Arab, who refused to discuss the reading I’d assigned because, in the words of one female student from Connecticut, “it’s just hard to focus with all this ethnic cleansing.” Another student, a Colorado rock-climber type, held up his phone, recording me, asking me whether I “unequivocally condemn the genocide currently being perpetrated by the Zionist entity.” I answered by giving my lecture on Babel—Isaac Babel—and fully half the class walked out. The next week, hardly anyone showed up.

I followed my students’ lead and left, heading past the encampment and its rainbow of weatherproof tents, and though so many of the protesters’ faces were concealed by hijabs, I thought I could recognize some pale eyes from my lectures staring at me, staring through me, eyes as impaling-sharp as the university’s tall gates.

I didn't go down into the subway but stomped past the stop and then past the next stop, too. The tunnels, I'd taken to calling them: don't go down into the tunnels.

A guy dragged his shopping cart across Broadway—just a few blocks away from where the liberation of Palestine was being declared. He came off the traffic island foaming, his trench smeared and ragged. Another guy mumbled to himself, squatting on cardboard in front of a bank. There were men swaying shirtless, pants down, peering into groceries and delis. Men with no movements behind them, unhoused on filthy streets. I gave the guy in the trench some cash and—peace unto him—turned off Broadway toward the river that flowed to the sea and wondered what the original names were, what the Hudson and the Atlantic had been called before they were colonized, before they were indigenized, what the whales used to call them . . .

My phone was ringing. “Hello?”

It was an unknown number, a Bronx voice cloaked in self-regard and auditioning for a thriller: “This the guy who’s been handling things?”

“Handling what things?”

It wasn’t clear whether the snort he gave expressed humor or nasal clearance. “I get it. We shouldn’t be doing this on the phone.”

“What are we doing?”

“We can meet up in person, if you want—if you want to swing by my office.”

“In order to do that, you’d have to tell me where your office is. And who you are.”



He chuckled out his name and I recognized the latter part, which signified commercial real estate. He said a friend of his—the man who'd given me the prize, whose father had supplied the Irgun—had told him that “you’re the guy I’ve got to talk to if I want to,” and there was a catch in his voice, some oleaginous and horny yearning, “you know, if I want to support the troops.”

“I’m the guy?”

“It’s important work. A nice sideline for a writer. You just picking up material or going in for a change of career?”

“I don’t know,” because I didn’t.

“So you think this thing’s going to spread all to hell and Hezbollah’ll get into it for real now?”

“They haven’t told me.”

“Or Iran?”

“That would be terrifying.”

“How many of these shithole Sharia regimes does Israel have to fight so the rest of the world doesn’t have to? And will the rest of the world ever thank us for it? All we get are U.N. resolutions. Fuck the U.N. Bunch of midtown Eurotrash and sheikhs who rip up their parking tickets. But the protesters are worse—and the worst ones are the Jewish ones.”

“You don’t think Jews protesting the only Jewish state is somehow—how do I put this—extremely on-brand Jewish?”

“I don’t. If these protesters love the Islamists so much, they can have them—the Muslims are the biggest imperialists there ever were. They went around conquering and forcibly converting for centuries and you know when their religion was invented? The year 600! That’s six hundred years after Jesus fucking Christ! China was already moving away from coins into paper money! The Jews had already lost Jerusalem—twice! I mean, seriously—come back when your religion is at least two millenniums old.”

“I’ll let them know you said so.”

“Can you imagine if Black people had only one little tiny state in the whole entire world and all these trust-fund whitey protesters were out in the streets saying how it had to be deconstructed?”

“Let’s not talk about Black people.”

“After all we’ve done for them. Or the gays. Or the trans—the transes? If they only had one country. But Jews can’t be like other peoples. We’re expected to be more ethical, more moral—suck my cock. Are they protesting what Russia’s doing in Ukraine? And what about all those Muslim wiggers they’re keeping out in those Chinese camps? You know how many women and children have been slaughtered in Sudan? In just one of the Sudans, and they got a few of them? No. It’s always the fucking Jews. Or, I’m sorry, the Zionists . . .”

“I’m guessing you don’t find the attention flattering.”

“I’ve had enough. And I want to do what I can to put a stop to it. I like cutting through the bullshit. No middlemen, no go-between red tape. No gala

benefit—you get me?”

“I think so.”

“I’m told you have a direct line to the troops—you want to tell me how I can help?”

I looked out at the sunset, the polluted beauty fading behind the speeding scrims of bicyclists and joggers. “Let me get back to you.”

“Of course. This is the number. *Am Yisroel chai.*”

The nation of Israel lives: *Am Yisroel chai*. I kept repeating that famous line as the sun sank the evening into purple. It was cold, and behind the wind picking up, behind the water and the towers basking in the last of the sun, was Jersey.

It’s almost scandalously simple to set up a company and open a bank account online. This might not be news to most people, but it was to me. Most of the company names that initially came to mind were way too obvious: *IDFGEAR*, *ISRAEQUIP*, and so on. I wanted something that sounded convincing but wasn’t begging for an audit, so I eventually settled on PB Logistics and made myself ready to explain the source: PB stood for Partisan Brigade or Protection Battalion or maybe something in Hebrew (perhaps *Peilot Benleumiyot*, “international actions,” or *Peilot Benleumiyot*, “international activities”), when really it was an acronym for the Pine Barrens. It was surprising—it was disconcerting—how little I had to do: I sent the account information to the guy who’d called. I didn’t indicate any sum. I didn’t make any overt solicitation. Just the account information, which I didn’t even label as such. Account number and routing information. They were just some lines of digits. I figured it wasn’t illegal to send the guy some digits. The transfer came that same day, and by the time it’d cleared the guy had sent a few other people in my direction, some of whom messaged me things like “got another contribution coming your way” with a fist emoji and “Solidarity” with a Torah-scroll emoji, while others—a guy from Riverdale who owned parking lots, a guy from Vegas into hospitality—just wired cash to my new account, bumping the balance without comment. It was amazing how receptive they were. How forthcoming. Men—they

were mostly men—who ran billion-dollar empires shouldn’t be so easy to dupe, and yet I’m not ready to admit that duping was what I was doing. It was more like I was giving them space—the ones I spoke with—I was letting them fill in the blanks of my pauses with their own projections and placeholder anxieties.

If ever we came to a point in the conversation at which more information was required of me, I could say, if we were talking on the phone, We really should be talking in person, and if we were talking in person I could say, I’m not really at liberty to discuss this and anyway I don’t know nearly enough—you have to understand I’m just the local face of a pretty far-reaching, intricate, and decentralized operation. When donors inquired if it was only gear they were being asked to fund, I did my best to judge the worry behind the query. If I thought they were worried that what they were doing was illegal and wanted to insure that their money would be used only to purchase “protective” or “defensive” military gear and not actual ammunition or weapons, I’d put them at ease by saying, Of course, what do you think, we’re not arms traffickers here, that stuff is a whole other level, to deal with it you have to be background-checked and approved by multiple governments, all we’re talking about here is armor, not arms, the basic wearable almost-like-a-uniform equipment necessary to keep the soldiers safe down in the tunnels when they go to free the hostages.

But if I thought that whatever donor I had on the line was worried that such equipment wasn’t enough or not required anymore or if they were in any way dubious of me in the same way I’d been dubious of my cousin and asked, Don’t the soldiers already have everything they need, aren’t there enough billionaires in Israel, and isn’t Congress getting its act together to pass some type of aid package?, I’d say, Look (in the style of Oded), I’d say, Listen (even doing an imitation of Oded’s accent), you’re correct, by now most soldiers have all the gear they need—what we’re talking about here is something else, I thought you knew. . . . I can’t really talk about it too much, but let’s just say that what we’re putting together isn’t for the soldiers, at least not for the official soldiers, but has to do with Judea and Samaria, the West Bank if you will and the settlers there . . . the Army can’t just freely hand out its surplus, if I have to get explicit about it . . . so other means have to be found by which the Israeli government can maintain deniability . . .

and, well, if you didn't have the settlements acting as the buffer, you know how many more attacks there'd be in Tel Aviv?

Contributions bundled in from Wall Street, from a bi/poly art gallerist, from a diabetic record producer who lamented that one of his children was an antisemite and the other had married a goy—if I put all their names down here, I'd be making trouble for them and getting some fairly major businesses boycotted and it was that fear they had of being outed that reassured me. Guilty of providing material assistance to the Zionist regime—it was almost a war crime. I had the feeling that not a few of them wanted it to be a war crime. To everyone who contributed I sent a pic I'd got from Oded of his brother Ido in full battle kit in Gaza—complete with the same model helmet I'd last encountered being toasted with prosecco—and then, when I became worried that my donors were talking to one another and comparing notes, I was in touch with Ido directly during one of his leaves and asked him to record a video of thanks to our American friends who'd financed that helmet and Ido came through, sending me a clip of himself in front of a tank, saying in his Herzliya-surfer English, “Thank you to all that is giving the money to keep us safe, *Am Yisroel chai . . .*” I'd send that clip to the donors with a message, “Kfir Brigade thanks you,” or “Battalion 5036 Division 10 Egoz thanks you,” and the donors would gush, click thumbs-up, click hearts. As the account's balance kept increasing—I'd taken to checking every hour, despite receiving notifications of every new deposit as it came in—so, too, did my excitement.

I'm not sure which was simpler, getting the money—six figures and counting—or justifying it to myself. At the end of the day, I thought, these people were coming to me—what could these amounts actually mean to them? Couldn't it be argued that I wasn't fleecing my supporters so much as letting them fleece themselves, letting them spend their way to the feelings they wanted: the connection, the identification, the sense of mission, godly purpose? What I was doing, kosher or not, was still preferable to forwarding the funding along and putting it toward flattening more streets, pummelling more dwellings, separating more limbs from bodies, and leaving more parents childless and children parentless, creating from the concussed survivors—from the bloodied child wandering alongside an ass like a budding prophet of chaos out of some parable—the Jew-haters and massacrists of the future.

After I closed on the camp in the Pine Barrens, negotiating the price way down by paying cash, I set about disbursing the remains of my windfall to various Gaza-affiliated charities, though it was difficult to know which were real and which weren't—I didn't want to meet the Palestinian or "Palestinian" version of myself and get scammed—and, among those many confusing nonprofits that struck me as not unlikely, I had no concept of which might be effective. I gave to Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee, because I recognized their names, and I gave to a Swiss org that dealt in clean drinking water, and then I off-loaded a chunk more on this Christian-presenting concern in Egypt that provided medical care and legal resources to Gazans who'd fled, and I doled out, too, to individual Gazans whose American relatives had set up funding sites with plausible accounts of hideous traumas—donating toward the costs of a juvenile-size prosthesis, a teen's facial reconstruction—and by spring semester's end I was down cozy in Jersey among the conifers and crumbling logs, wondering how much I should've held on to in order to deal with renovations.

The cabins, the main cabin in particular, had to be rechinked and redaubed. A few roofs had to be done over, and the old septic tank that'd rotted through had to be dug up and replaced. If ever the home improvements threatened to overwhelm me, I could always sit out on the wicker rocker that Barbara, my real-estate agent, had got me as a housewarming token, or stroll out to the stream and along its wildflowered bank and breathe in the bright fresh air and delight in reminding myself that I hadn't hooked up the camp yet and so had no way of going online, and that until I got back to the city the news to me would have to be the breeze rustling the trees and the water trickling blood-thick over the pebbles.

That's it—that's all. It was time to light a fire and get to work—get to writing—but before I could bring myself to once again attempt some popular fiction, I felt I should write this very real record of how I came to possess these cabins, mine, and all the land around them. A record I'll stash away in some locked drawer that—should my actions ever be exposed—will serve as a document memorializing my intentions: this, readers, was not deceit but dissent. This camp has been my protest. ♦

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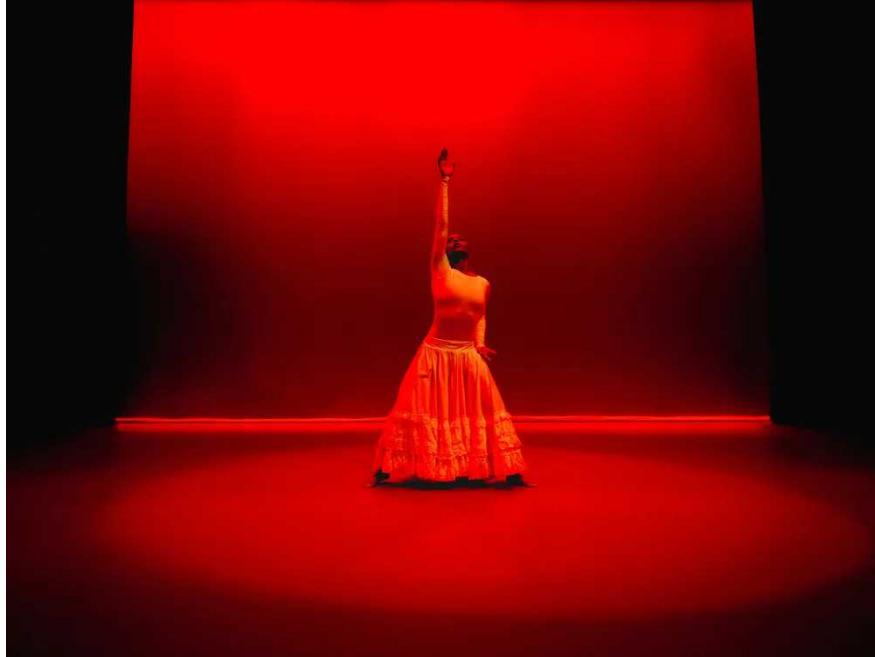
A Critic at Large

The House That Alvin Ailey Built

In “Revelations” and other works, the choreographer created a home for Black dancers.

By Hilton Als

October 14, 2024



In 1960, the twenty-nine-year-old Alvin Ailey premiered his landmark work, “Revelations,” with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, the company he’d founded to showcase Black culture through dance. This marked the end of his apprenticeship as a young choreographer who’d grown up revering Katherine Dunham, Lester Horton, Martha Graham, and Jack Cole—American masters with an international perspective. It also launched him into critical purgatory.

From the start, the thirty-six-minute piece, which depicts Black resilience and Christian faith, and is set to various spirituals, was a hit with audiences, both because of Ailey’s preternatural talent for constructing graphic stage pictures and because it took us to church without our having to go to church. You do not need to have been raised in the South, as Ailey was, or to have

attended Baptist services, as he did with his mother, in order to understand what he is doing here, particularly in the final section of the piece, set to the triumphant “Wade in the Water.” The dancers, clad in light colors, step high, their backs straight and heads held high, as they walk across baptismal waters toward their own glory. (Stretches of fluttering fabric simulate the water, an effect that Ailey, a magpie by nature, no doubt borrowed from Jerome Robbins, who did something similar to create a river in “The King and I,” in 1951.) But what you are watching is not just a parade of “vertical saints,” as James Baldwin described his churchgoing brethren, but the work of a choreographer who aims to show us how the metaphysical moves.

In “Revelations,” Ailey turns away from Martha Graham’s anxious world of men and women and myth, from George Balanchine’s plotless ballets, and from Merce Cunningham’s brilliant abstract explorations of the body. Here and in his subsequent work, Ailey tells a different story, one in which the music, the Black dancers’ inner lives, and the choreographer’s memories are the narrative. This shift was especially potent—vital—at a time when the Civil Rights Act was still four years away and activists and protesters were being beaten and burned to death. Without pandering to white tastes or shutting white people out, “Revelations” is resolute in its insistence on portraying Black life and community. The only stage performance from that time that is remotely analogous to “Revelations” is Lorraine Hansberry’s play “A Raisin in the Sun” (1959)—the story of a Black family that doesn’t give up, a story for all families.

After “Revelations,” Ailey continued working for almost three decades—until his death, in 1989—choreographing more than seventy dances. You can see some of them live or in archival footage or photographs, and in dialogue with art that Adrienne Edwards, the protean senior curator and director of curatorial programs at the Whitney Museum of American Art, has gathered, in “Edges of Ailey,” the largest and most comprehensive examination of Ailey’s life, work, influences, and inspirations ever assembled. On the museum’s eighteen-thousand-square-foot fifth floor are works by eighty-two artists, including Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Lorna Simpson, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Romare Bearden, and Alma Thomas, which illustrate and intersect with Ailey’s themes. There are videos of historic performances, and live stagings by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and Ailey II in the

third-floor theatre. It took Edwards six and a half years to put the show together, but, as she told me this summer, it was a lifetime in the making.

Every curator is a storyteller. And the story that Edwards aims to tell in “Edges of Ailey” is that of Ailey’s many permutations and trajectories—his desire to keep moving forward as a dancer, a choreographer, a teacher, a writer. In the process, she reveals him to have been more culturally important than he is generally given credit for being. Edwards relied greatly on Ailey’s voluminous notebooks and diaries to chart his story, which could not be recounted in a linear way. “What I could do,” she told me, “was relate to things that I found to be illuminating about him, trying to get into a headspace of what it would be like to be a gay man in the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties, especially during this moment in his life where you’re founding this thing and coming of age.” Edwards sees Ailey’s literary, theatrical, and intellectual loves as a form of company. In his notebooks, we see him planning and imagining possible projects: a ballet inspired by the life and work of Hart Crane, say, or an exploration of the genius of Federico García Lorca, or of Tennessee Williams—all queer artists who don’t directly appear in Ailey’s dances but who formed a kind of brotherhood in his mind. A lifelong autodidact, he had a deep admiration for writers who were able to speak of their queerness, at least through metaphor. The ultimate metaphor for Ailey was the body, and his work was the language with which to articulate it.

In Ailey’s career, “Revelations” was both a blessing and a curse: a blessing because it kept audiences coming back, and a curse because his subsequent attempts to push against the perimeters of dance—or, more specifically, Black dance—were often measured against that masterpiece and found wanting. Arlene Croce, in her review, in this magazine, of Ailey’s winter 1974 season at City Center—which included “Revelations” and “Masekela Langage” (1969), a work set to the music of the South African composer Hugh Masekela which addresses apartheid—expresses her frustration with Ailey, with his tendency, as she writes, to be “remarkably consistent in trying to capitalize on ‘Revelations’ as if it were a *formula* success.” She goes on:

The Ailey company is . . . loading up on religious and secular song suites, feeding its audience with a particular kind of material when all

that matters is how that material—or *any* material—is assembled. With musicals slipping badly in recent years, the Ailey has been drawing a lot of people who think of it as a higher substitute for Broadway. They find what they are looking for in only one piece. It doesn’t take them long to discover that “Revelations” is the higher substitute for the Ailey.

Joan Acocella, also writing here, nearly forty years later, observed:

The dancers of Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre are thrilling, and the dances they do are mostly sentimental and conventional. There are exceptions, notably the company’s signature work, “Revelations.” . . . This piece is relentlessly programmed by the Ailey troupe. During the present season . . . it closes nearly two-thirds of the performances. The spectators wouldn’t have it any other way. They clap along; they vocalize. At the end, they jump to their feet and shout, and demand an encore (which they get).

In both reviews, it’s the “they” that concerns me; there’s a whole lot of othering going on, like when white people ask why Black people talk to the screen so much during a movie. There’s also the assumption that a work this popular must be easy. Judith Jamison, Ailey’s great star, made this mistake, too. When she first saw the company rehearsing “Revelations,” in 1963, she said, “Oh, I can do that!” Later, as she writes in her autobiography, “Dancing Spirit,” she changed her tune: “Guess what? *You* try it sometime. The dancers made the movement look easy. It’s not. It takes unbelievable coordination. It takes passion, commitment, dedication, and love to know that every step you do should be infused with 100 percent of yourself.”

The dance world has always been a segregated place, divided as much by class as by European cultural history. Ailey was an uneven choreographer, for sure, but what he wanted to promote with his company was the idea that Black audiences—general Black audiences, like the folks Acocella probably saw applauding “Revelations”—should connect not only with their “ ‘buked’ and “scorned” selves onstage but with the feeling that performance can be a kind of balm, an embrace.

“Revelations” grew in part out of memories—of the people who made up Ailey’s community, and thus of Ailey himself. He was born in 1931. His birthplace: a little Texas town called Rogers, between Austin and Waco. This is the territory you’ll find in a Katherine Anne Porter story—“He” (1927), say, or “Noon Wine” (1937)—a world that consists of hard earth and mean poverty, a world where Jim Crow is a defining factor. And so is Jesus. Ailey’s parents, Alvin, Sr., and the beautiful and theatrical Lula, met in church and married when Lula was fourteen. Four years later, their only child was born, but the marriage wasn’t working. When Alvin was three months old, his father took off. Then he returned. He was feckless. “He just didn’t have the education to take care of a family,” Lula says in Jennifer Dunning’s rich biography “Alvin Ailey: A Life in Dance” (1996). When Lula expressed her discontent to her father, he told her to stay married; nevertheless, Lula used her sharecropper’s wages to buy train tickets that got her and her son about a hundred and fifty miles away, to Wharton, where Lula picked cotton for a time, accompanied, on occasion, by Alvin. These were years of closeness, of Lula sharing stories from books that she bought on the cheap, and Alvin showing her a house that he dreamed of living in. There was also violence. As Ailey recounts in his autobiography, “Revelations,” which was published posthumously, in 1995:

When I was about five years old, my mother was raped by four white men. She never admitted to me that it happened. She only recently found out that I knew about it. One night she didn’t come home until ten *p.m.* She usually came home at three or four in the afternoon. She probably had been working in some white people’s kitchen. That was the other kind of work, along with picking cotton, available to black people. It was very clear to me that my mother was crying. She had bruises all over her body. I don’t think she ever told anyone about it except maybe her sisters or friends from church.

Violence can beget violence. The rage that was burned into Lula’s skin—the rage of poverty and abuse—was sometimes turned on Alvin. He recalls in his book that when Lula drank she’d beat him. Alvin’s tears when that happened were evidence not only of physical hurt but of longing: a longing to express how it feels to be wounded, to be loveless. Lula did love him, though, and it showed in all the menial jobs and the small and big humiliations that she endured to support him.

In 1936, she saw a newspaper ad for a job preparing meals for a highway crew eighty miles away, in Navasota. While the five-year-old Alvin stayed with a relative in Wharton, she secured the job, and also found romance with Amos Alexander, a churchgoing Black businessman who was well respected by both Black and white townspeople. Eventually, Lula and Alvin went to live in Alexander's house.

When Ailey writes, in his autobiography, about his gratitude for the stability of that home and his love for Alexander, who became like a father to him, he seems to rest in a kind of languid joy—the same emotion that one sees and feels at times when watching “Revelations,” which is presented partly from a child’s perspective, particularly in the last section, set on the Sabbath. A big Texas sun shines down on a congregation. Church ladies, sitting on stools in their Sunday best, wave their fans and nod in acknowledgment. These “correct” ladies are joined by their Christian brothers, gentlemen in smart vests, who are a willing, proud audience to the women as they get the spirit and cast off the trials and tribulations of the week. In “Revelations,” Ailey glorifies not only the female body, which most choreographers do, but also the male body, and, more specifically, the Black male dancer, who moves differently onstage than, say, a dancer like Baryshnikov (an Ailey admirer, who appeared in his 1976 piece “Pas de Duke” with Judith Jamison). You can feel that the spotlight is often on the men in Ailey’s work, and his early queer experiences clearly play a part in his artistic story.



In his book, Ailey talks about a twelve-year-old named Chauncey, his best friend when he was eight, and how, one summer afternoon, he and Chauncey were playing by a water tank behind Alexander's house. It "must have been twenty feet deep," Ailey writes, "and very slick at the edges."

On one of those hot days I fell into the tank and almost drowned. Chauncey saved my life. I went under the water three times, thrashing my arms and gasping for air, before Chauncey pulled me out. . . . Chauncey managed to push all the water out of me. As he pushed the water, he also lay on top of me. He thought it was fun to lie on me and make what amounted to sexual movements. I guess I became a kind of sexual object for Chauncey. I didn't mind, but he introduced me to passivity, to being a kind of sexual object for an older guy.

Part of what's touching about Ailey's book is the questioning way in which he tries to define himself through language. One wonders if he wrote it in order to tell Lula who he was—the way Tennessee Williams used "The Glass Menagerie" to describe aspects of his own family and his place in it.

Family—the stability that Alexander offered—wasn't enough for Lula; her ambition kept her on the move. In late 1941, she heard about more lucrative work in California; she soon got herself to Los Angeles, while Alvin stayed

behind to finish out the school year. When he arrived at Union Station, in L.A., his mother noticed that he was carrying a stained paper bag and asked what it was. It was the lunch he'd been given for the trip, he said. He'd saved some of it for her, in case she was hungry.

At first, dancing was something that Ailey did by himself, for himself, inspired by performers he loved watching onscreen: Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly. Although he and Lula were now living in the city where those movies were made, he didn't think of dancing as something that he could do professionally. "You were a sissy (*sissy* was a big word back then) if you danced," he writes. He *was* a sissy. One Halloween, when he was fifteen, he dressed up in drag; he also hung out with a group of boys who traded sex with an older man for beer and money. But he didn't get caught up in that. Culture offered more freedom. As a matter of fact, writing poetry was an escape from the raw sexuality that he overheard at home, the sounds of Lula and her second husband, Fred W. Cooper—a "navy man"—making love in their small apartment in segregated South Central Los Angeles. Another form of escape was seeing shows on Central Avenue, the street he took to and from the primarily Black Thomas Jefferson High School.

Back in the forties and fifties, on Central Avenue, which was known as Little Harlem, you could catch great performances by Pigmeat Markham, Lena Horne, and Katherine Dunham's dance troupe. Dunham, who was trained as an anthropologist, had studied and lived in Haiti and elsewhere in the Caribbean; realizing that you could go out into the world and bring back alternate vocabularies about the Black experience had an enormous effect on Ailey. Dunham became, in time, a kind of spiritual mother to him—a forerunner in his fight to establish a school where Black dance idioms could be studied.

Carmen de Lavallade, one of Ailey's gymnastics classmates in high school, had always danced; her cousin Janet Collins, whom she revered, had danced for Dunham and was the first Black prima ballerina with the Metropolitan Opera. Forward-thinking, even prescient, de Lavallade knew talent—knew possibility—when she saw it, and in Ailey she saw a dancer who needed making. One afternoon, she took him to the Lester Horton Dance Theatre, in Hollywood, where she studied. For Horton, the company was a kind of family. His dancers didn't just dance; they worked on costumes, lighting,

and sets together, building the atmospheres for their dances. There was little money, and the company, which was racially mixed, had to deal with segregation when touring, but the dancers knew that what Horton was offering—a total-theatre approach—would round them out as performers. Ailey studied many genres of dance with Horton, but he still had some ambivalence about being a “sissy” dancer. After high school, he attended U.C.L.A. and later San Francisco State College, studying Romance languages and intermittently dancing with Horton. In 1953, at the age of twenty-two, he returned to Horton full time.

Horton encouraged Ailey to start making his own dances, and after Horton died, from a heart attack, later that year, Ailey became the company’s choreographer. At first, his work felt derivative, to him and to de Lavallade, who was now a lead dancer. “When I started doing choreography, I was Lester all over again—Lester reincarnated,” Ailey writes in “Revelations.” Who were Ailey and de Lavallade without their mentor’s vision? But others saw their worth, these two young performers at the height of their beauty, fluent in styles ranging from ballet to Caribbean-influenced modernism, performers who oozed sensuality and grace whenever they crossed the stage.

One of the producers of Truman Capote and Harold Arlen’s musical, “House of Flowers,” a story of young love set amid rival bordellos in Haiti, saw the pair perform at Jacob’s Pillow in 1954, and asked them to move to New York and join the cast. Soon after Ailey and de Lavallade arrived in New York, the show’s choreographer, Herbert Ross, added a dance for them, and it brought the house down. Their work was not singled out in a *Times* review by Brooks Atkinson, who praised the dancers in the language of the time. “Every Negro show includes wonderful dancing,” he wrote. “Tall and short Negroes . . . torrid maidens in flashy costumes and bare-chested bucks break out into a number of wild, grotesque, animalistic dances.” But the photographer and writer Carl Van Vechten was more specific in his praise, pointing out the pair’s “desperate energy” before focussing on Ailey, whom he described as “young, beautiful, strong, with a perfect body and with the technique well welded into his system.” He added, “He knows how to approach practically all the dance problems, except perhaps of classical ballet.”

Dancers, more than any other performing artists, live in a constant state of humiliation. They are criticized in the most demeaning way: You're too heavy. Your legs are too short or too long. You don't have enough technique. You're too sexy—or not sexy enough. Throughout his life, Ailey, who had a large frame, lamented his weight, his limited ballet training, and so on, but what really upset him, I think, was the feeling that, as a queer Black kid, he lacked a certain inner grace. That grace belonged to those others, over there, and not to him. You can see in “Revelations,” which he made only five years or so after appearing in “House of Flowers,” a wish: to be as elegant as those Sunday ladies, as strong and self-assured as those proud gentlemen in their vests.

After “House of Flowers” closed, in 1955, Ailey’s next significant gig was a long time coming. In 1957, he choreographed a duet for himself and his new dance partner Christine Lawson to use as an audition piece for the musical “Jamaica,” starring Lena Horne. “Alvin looked to me like a young football player,” Horne wrote. “He was so huge and beautifully built and full of energy. All of the dancers were as talented as he was, probably, and maybe a few even more so, but no one loved work more or worked harder to learn than he did.” Moved by Ailey and the other dancers’ commitment to their craft—how they went to class day after day, despite being low on funds and on anything like the kind of acclaim that Horne herself had received—she made sure that they could use the stage to develop their own work when the theatre was dark. “Jamaica” was a hit with audiences, if not with the critics, and by the time the show closed, in 1959, Ailey was on his way, anxious to share what he was learning.

Ailey’s apprenticeship as a choreographer wasn’t long—he made only ten pieces before premiering “Revelations,” in New York. Filled with memories of Ailey’s Texas past, “Revelations” also reflects other influences—his interest in Henry Moore’s sculptures, for one, all that graphic force and reach. But, in a way, “Revelations” is bigger than itself. It’s framed by Ailey’s certainty that Black Americans had a story to tell—and part of that story was the Southern Black experience, an experience in which faith was a freeing agent, not a repressive one, an experience that was segregated and stained with blood, and still is, decades after Ailey’s death.

On tour with Horton, Ailey had suffered the indignities of racism not only in the South but up North, too—though New York was a haven for artists who believed in integration, and in the city he had friendships that ranged farther than he would have imagined possible elsewhere. Still, as a “sissy,” he had lived in the world more or less on his own. That kind of isolation can foster self-hatred in the soul. Throughout his life, Ailey struggled with what would now be called bipolar disorder. He fought to save the cross-addicted men with whom he had relationships. He died of complications from *AIDS* at the age of fifty-eight. (Lula outlived him by some five years.) He had not found a home for himself, but he had wanted to build one for others like him. This was a tremendous dream in 1960, and the success of “Revelations” helped him call attention to it. In 1969, in the culturally segregated world of dance, he founded the Ailey School, a training ground where dancers of color could be taught and appreciated.

The sheer amount of energy that Ailey expended in order to make a self—and, by extension, a company—that reflected his curious, closeted, fearful, sometimes thrillingly reckless nature, which is to say, all his “edges,” is most stunningly represented in “Edges of Ailey” by an art work that Edwards and the filmmakers Josh Begley and Kya Lou have created. Wrapped around the perimeter of the museum’s fifth floor is a video installation incorporating years of footage from the Ailey archives. You see Jamison, gorgeous and moving like no other person on earth, as she makes her way through a solo dance that Ailey choreographed for her, “Cry,” from 1971. Then, seamlessly, you view the same piece performed by a more recent Ailey dancer, before continuing on to footage of Ailey’s tributes to Duke Ellington, intercut with scenes from Studio 54, the energy and synthetic high of those years. Watching the film, you are sometimes startled to see the leonine head of Ailey himself. You hear him talking about the work he wants to make, or see him teaching a class, and then you witness dancers from the early years of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre pushing toward the front of a stage, their backs arched or straight, hands clenched or open, legs thrown up high or crouching, as they declare their various selves. It’s a moving-image world—a visual stream that flows through Ailey’s history and reflects his restlessness, his desire to stay in motion, to keep going beyond “Revelations.”

Ultimately, Ailey himself wearied of his most famous piece. In his autobiography, he writes:

About fifteen or twenty years ago, when we were setting out on a European tour, I said, “I want to stop taking this piece to Europe.” I made up my mind to leave “Revelations” home. But after two performances the dancers and audiences were asking, “Where’s ‘Revelations’?” and of course we had to relent. It was so popular a piece that it was dangerous to lead off a performance with it. Once we did it first on a program, everybody went home after it was over. Even after all these years, we still feel that our season at New York City Center, where we play for four weeks, hasn’t really begun until we do “Revelations.” If we open on a Wednesday and “Revelations” isn’t presented until Sunday, the stage somehow hasn’t yet been blessed.

As for me, though, I’m more interested in what’s next. ♦

Books

Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Temptations of Narrative

In “The Message,” Coates counsels against myth but proves susceptible to his own.

By Parul Sehgal

October 14, 2024



It is a truth only fitfully acknowledged that whom the gods wish to destroy, they first give an opinion column. “A live coffin,” a former newspaper colleague of mine once called hers. (She quit.) Such a space seems an impossible remit, created to coax out vague, vatic pronouncements as the writer, mind wrung dry of ideas, sets about a weary pantomime of thinking and feeling, outrage and offense.

Few writers have seemed as aware of the hazards of professional opinion-mongering as Ta-Nehisi Coates. “Columns are where great journalists go to die,” he once wrote. “Unmoored from the rigors of actually making calls and expending shoe leather, the reporter-turned-columnist often begins churning

out musings originated over morning coffee and best left there.” And yet few writers have been pressed so needily into service as pundit, as prophet. Coates was a staff writer for *The Atlantic* and the author of a memoir of his childhood, “The Beautiful Struggle” (2008), when he exploded into the public consciousness with “The Case for Reparations,” a 2014 article for that magazine, which documented the long history and devastating reach of racist housing policies, and argued for restitution to the descendants of enslaved Black Americans.

Where “The Case for Reparations” advanced Coates’s claim with shores of evidence and stately, prosecutorial logic, his next book, “Between the World and Me” (2015), addressed to his fifteen-year-old son, followed the arc of feeling. “All our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth,” he wrote. “You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body.” Toni Morrison anointed him heir to James Baldwin. *Vanity Fair* declared him “our most vital public intellectual.” There was some hyperbole, but also genuine awe of Coates’s range, his ambidexterity: the skill with which he synthesized acres of scholarship with deep reporting, the music and organization of his prose, the delight in ideas along with clear argumentation and unabashed, open emotion.

A collection of his *Atlantic* articles, “We Were Eight Years in Power” (2017), followed, then a novel, “The Water Dancer” (2019), set on a Virginia slave plantation. The main character, Hiram, seemed like a Coates stand-in, a man who has a preternatural capacity to remember and becomes the keeper of his people’s stories. Like Hiram, Coates was called to perform. At readings, teachers asked him to give their students hope. White columnists wrote him open letters, processing their own feelings about race, alternating between flattery and belligerence. Coates resisted. “The best part of writing is really to educate yourself. I don’t want to be anybody’s expert. I came in to learn,” he said in an interview with the *Times*. His writing depended on error, he insisted; it required space and privacy for the awkwardness and thrill of working out new ideas. He sought out projects that permitted him to be a student again, to learn new forms. He revitalized the Black Panther

comics for Marvel and through the hero T’Challa brooded on the nature of power and public persona—is it skill that sets T’Challa apart or his mystique, his reputation? Coates co-founded a film-production company; he scripted a Superman movie. In 2021, he took a faculty position at Howard University to teach writing.

His new book, “The Message,” is addressed to his students. It is shaped like an extended craft talk on the uses and abuses of narrative, stretched over trips to Senegal, South Carolina, and Palestine—but, at its heart, it is a mea culpa. In “The Case for Reparations,” Coates invoked German reparations to Israel after the Holocaust as a model, disregarding what those reparations enabled. He now acknowledges that they allowed Zionists to displace some seven hundred thousand Palestinians, forbidding them to return to their land and property.

More than twice that number of people have been forced to leave their homes during the past year, in the war following Hamas’s attack of October 7th, in which twelve hundred were killed and two hundred and fifty-one taken hostage. In the subsequent Israeli onslaught, more than forty-one thousand Palestinians have been killed, and about a hundred thousand more have been maimed and mutilated. Countless others are missing. Israel has obliterated whole families; targeted hospitals, schools, and aid workers; and stopped passage of food, water, and medicine. For a year, Palestinians have live-streamed their own annihilation: parents mourning children, children mourning parents, amputations and C-sections performed without anesthesia, a *NICU* filled with the dead bodies of Palestinian infants. How, the reader wonders, will Coates use his talents now, his moral clarity, his reporting; how will he use his celebrity, and whatever platform or protection it implies? Is there something that only he can see, something that only he can say?

George Orwell’s essay “Why I Write” provides an epigraph for “The Message”: “In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer.” It is an unsettling omen, this sentiment so uncharacteristic of Coates, who has always insisted that he is an artist, not an activist. He will no longer resist the role he has been assigned. He will be conscripted by the great

emergencies of his age, a superhero reluctantly donning his mask, stepping into his destiny.

And there he is, doing the press rounds, sharing statements of support for Palestinian rights and Palestinian liberation that are forceful, clear, compelling, and still relatively rare in mainstream media. But the book he is promoting feels strangely out of step, slipshod and assembled in haste. “The Message” is stitched together with haphazard reporting, and it suppurates with such self-regard that it feels composed by the very enemy of a writer who has so strenuously scorned carelessness and vague pronouncement. It is a public offering seemingly designed for private ends, an artifact of deep shame and surprising vanity which reads as if it had been conjured to settle its author’s soul. The precepts on craft and narrative gather underfoot, tangled and unheeded.

When Coates was a child, his mother, a schoolteacher, would make him write essays whenever he got into trouble, explaining how and why he had erred. Revision and self-critique can be seen as a native form, a beat. “We Were Eight Years in Power” follows this model. Each essay in the collection is framed by an introduction in which Coates revisits the making of the piece, often to analyze its flaws. He examines, for example, his big break: a 2008 profile of Bill Cosby. For years, Coates had been hearing rumors of Cosby drugging and raping women. Why had he failed to follow up on these reports, why had he minimized the charges that had already come to light? It was his first assignment at *The Atlantic*, he notes with chagrin; he wanted to write the story *his way*.

As I reread this essay in a library copy of “We Were Eight Years in Power,” I noticed that a previous borrower had lightly circled certain words in pencil. On page 10: “unsullied” and “sublime.” On page 71: “stratagem,” “sable.” On page 73: “ennobling.” Someone once used this book to learn English, or to perfect it. These little labors felt moving, and apt, in the context of Coates’s own lifelong project of passionate autodidacticism, of learning in public. The blog he once kept for *The Atlantic* felt like his writer’s notebook cracked open for all to see, showing his thinking; his commentators tested his ideas, suggested additional reading. He has always been fuelled by a sensitivity to language and a greed for narrative, which he traces back to childhood. In “The Message,” he describes the enchantment and escape he

found in *Sports Illustrated* articles, the rapper Rakim's lyrics, and "Macbeth."

A story can explain the world as well as distort and occlude it; Coates impresses on his students narrative's risks and temptations. In his section on Senegal, he considers the origin myths of colonialism: "For such a grand system, a grand theory had to be crafted and an array of warrants produced, all of them rooted in a simple assertion of fact: The African was barely human at all." In his section on South Carolina, where his books, among others by Black writers, have been pulled from school curricula for making students "ashamed to be Caucasian," he considers how American history itself is being rewritten, scrubbed and sanitized. "I am trying to urge you toward something new," he writes to his students, "not simply against their myths of conquest, but against the urge to craft your own." He is familiar with this longing; he knows how it can be stoked by the theft and erasure of one's own history. He recalls it in the Black-nationalist literature that his father loved: "I'd seen it all my life in the invocations of great kingdoms and ancient empires—a search for provenance and noble roots." The discipline of his craft, of journalism, can be a check, as he imparts to his students the lesson "to walk the land, as opposed to intuit and hypothesize from the edge."

Why doesn't Coates follow his own excellent advice? He walks the land, but lost in reverie, in communion with his own questions and not with the world around him. His Senegal is populated only by the ghosts of his ancestors; he scarcely speaks to the living. He walks the rocky beach: "I felt the whole of the land speak to me, and it said, *What took you so long?* What indeed." That beach has stories of its own—that coastline, for example, is vanishing, being eaten by rising ocean water—which he ignores. Senegal exists as a relic, as a painted backdrop for his own meditations. So, too, does South Carolina, where Coates travels to meet Mary Wood, an English teacher fighting to assign "Between the World and Me." His gloss on censorship, its past and present, is dizzyingly brisk, and limited to the fate of his own book. An unwelcome impression begins to gather, that these places, these people, are being relegated to bit players in the larger, more exigent story of Coates's intellectual evolution, his contemplation of his career and legacy.

The reluctant superhero counsels against myth but proves susceptible to his own. He breaks from battle to monologue about what made him, what drives him: “Who would I be, left to the devices of those who seek to shrink education, to make it orderly and pliable? I don’t know. But I know what I would not be: a writer.” And, like the superhero, he is thronged by a grateful public. In Senegal, he notes a young woman stepping forward to meet him, “a look of amazement on her face.” In South Carolina, he meets another fan: “I shook her hand and her eyes grew big and she smiled.” He confesses his envy of the teacher who tried to assign “Between the World and Me,” of the rapture and the mission his words have given her: “What I wanted was to be Mary for a moment, to understand how she came to believe that it was worth risking her job over a book.” In Palestine, he reports warmly that one of his books is quoted at a panel. In Chicago, he meets Deanna, a Palestinian teacher, about whom we learn precious little, save that “she said she loved teaching ‘The Case for Reparations.’”

In the third act, Coates recounts a ten-day trip to Israel and Palestine, in the summer of 2023. It is here that he tries to make all his lessons come to bear: the human craving for a story and a place of origin (what he experienced in Senegal) and the dangerous drives to sanitize and to rewrite history that can accompany it (what he saw in South Carolina). Upon arriving in the West Bank, he feels a disorienting form of recognition, seeing the strict segregation of society, the unrelenting harassment and privation endured by Palestinians. It is a more sophisticated form of Jim Crow, he writes. He offers a desultory tour of Palestine’s past, with largely familiar facts. He doesn’t reckon with Palestinian political history. He doesn’t reckon with the attacks and aftermath of October 7th. His interventions feel directed at declawing certain linguistic battles—say, the objections to characterizing Israel as a “colonial” state, when, as he points out, the revisionist Zionist Ze’ev Jabotinsky celebrated it on those very terms. The frame is kept squarely on what he saw during his trip, a constraint that has the unhappy function of again subordinating the stories he tells, of slotting them into the grand narrative of the education of Ta-Nehisi Coates.

The description of Coates’s time in Palestine contains nothing that feels new to those sympathetic to his perspective, and nothing that would meaningfully challenge those who disagree, in part because he does not entertain any objections. To do so would be obscene, the journalist “playing god,” in his

words, deciding what perspectives should be considered. “This power is an extension of the power of other curators of the culture—network execs, producers, publishers—whose core job is deciding which stories get told and which do not,” he writes. Rather than engage existing narratives, he wants to “expand the frame of humanity, to shift the brackets of images and ideas.” But falsehood, corruption, and delusions do not go so gently; they must be unravelled, picked apart. One recalls the doggedness of “The Case for Reparations,” whose every aspect—tone, pacing, evidence—was designed to obviate disagreement or reflexive scorn in order to take a topic long regarded as pure fantasy and break down, almost axiomatically, its moral necessity. “I am a writer and a bearer of a tradition, a writer and a steward,” Coates asserts. But stewardship must be demonstrated, not simply announced, and to demonstrate care for a story requires a rigor, a labor of learning and craft, missing in “The Message.”

Coates is, as ever, self-critical. “I had gone to Palestine, like I’d gone to Senegal, in pursuit of my own questions, and thus had not fully seen the people on their own terms,” he writes. He enumerates the limitations of his project with a complacency that shades into self-exculpation: “Even my words here, this bid for reparation is a stranger’s story—one told by a man still dazzled by knafeh and Arabic coffee, still at the start of a journey that others have walked since birth. Palestine is not my home. . . . If Palestinians are to be truly seen it will be through stories woven by their own hands—not by their plunderers, not even by their comrades.”

One could argue that Coates could have given far more space to such native stories and voices, as he has done in the past. But if this failure to represent other perspectives signals a break with his usual methods, it signals another rupture, with journalism itself. In previous books, he used journalism to shatter myths—of the American Dream, of the arc of justice. Early in “The Message,” he prescribes journalism as an antidote to the myths of nationalism. But it is journalism and its power to shape reality itself that he must finally contend with—his own sword and calling, his own institution.

Coates was once a proud company man. “I got some of the best motherfuckers—excuse my language—in the business,” he said on the “Longform” podcast in 2015, praising his copy editors at *The Atlantic*, and calling out the masthead by name. “I’ve told them, as long as they’re going

to be there, I'm going to be there." Three years later, he left. "I became the public face of the magazine in many ways and I don't really want to be that. I want to be a writer," he told the *Times*. When he returned home from Palestine, he reached out to the Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi to learn more. "I think he felt that he had been conned," Khalidi told *New York* magazine in a recent profile of Coates. His ignorance was nurtured by his profession, Coates believes—by mainstream journalism, and specifically by white editors and colleagues, many of them friends. "There were no Palestinian writers or editors around me," he writes. "But there were many writers, editors, and publishers who believed in the nobility of Zionism and had little regard for, or simply could not see, its victims."

Coates makes the case that his white colleagues and bosses stood in the way of his seeing a more complete picture. But his critics on the left, many of them of color, have long pointed out these very blind spots in his work—the parochialism of his politics and his reticence where Muslim, and particularly Palestinian, death and suffering were concerned. Such writers as Pankaj Mishra and Cornel West have remarked on the "missing interrogations" (Mishra's words) in Coates's writing about President Obama. As West points out, "Coates praises Obama as a 'deeply moral human being' while remaining silent" on drone attacks, the nearly thirty thousand bombs that rained down on seven Muslim-majority nations in one year alone, and Israel's killings of five hundred and fifty Palestinian children in fifty days during the 2014 Gaza war. It can be difficult to hear one's critics, but consider, too, how many of Coates's intellectual heroes were fluent and consistent in their criticisms of Israel, from Malcolm X to Toni Morrison. The historian Tony Judt, whose work has been crucial to Coates, gave an extensive interview about Israel in 2011—in *The Atlantic*, Coates's own magazine, no less. To look back over Coates's blog is to encounter a writer who knew that a reckoning was coming; in one post, he listed the subjects and books that were on his mind, all that was left to read. "My whole project suffers from a kind of bias," he wrote in 2015. "I haven't yet grappled with Israel."

The story Coates wants to tell in "The Message," however, is one of sudden epiphany. "The light was blinding," he writes. "But when it cleared I had new eyes, and I could see my own words in new ways—and the words from which they were derived." That epiphany is a mainstay of Western writing

about Palestine—“apparent blindness followed by staggering realization”—as the British Palestinian novelist Isabella Hammad points out in her new book, “Recognizing the Stranger: On Palestine and Narrative,” noting that “the pressure is again on Palestinians to tell the human story that will educate and enlighten others and so allow for the conversion of the repentant Westerner, who might then descend onto the stage if not as a hero then perhaps as some kind of *deus ex machina*.¹”

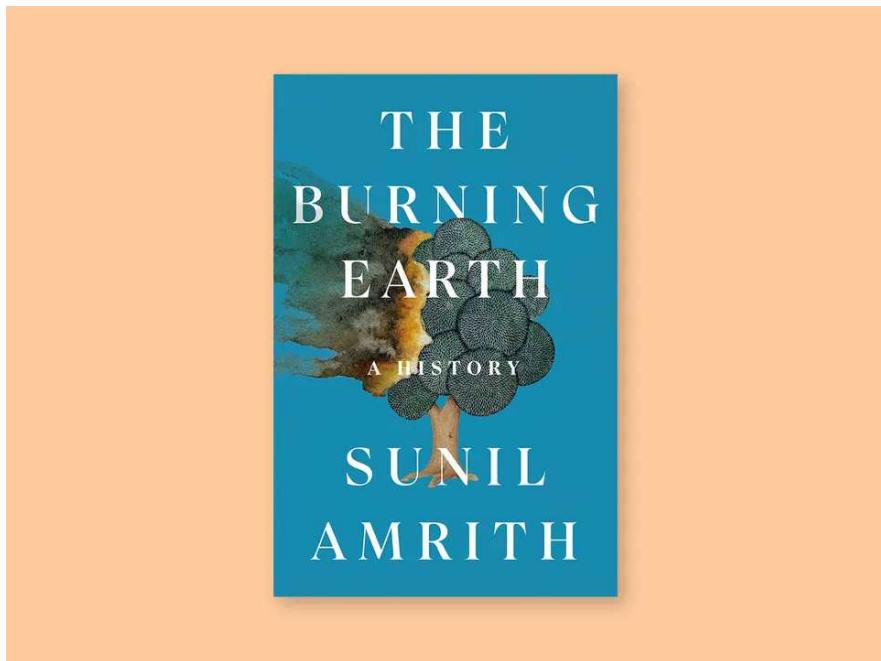
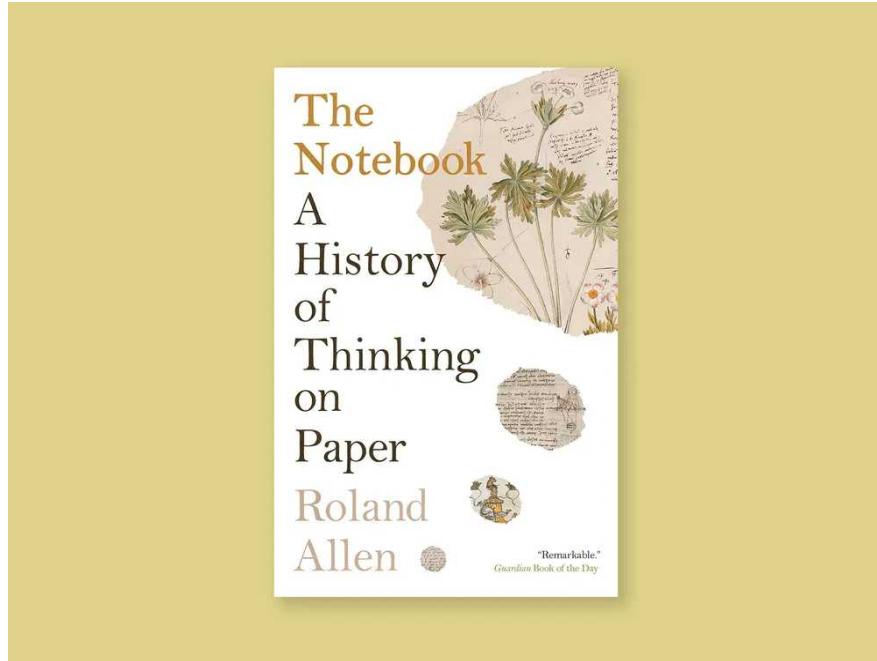
The blinding light that Coates saw revealed his own words to him. In the shadows remain the very people his story attempted to aid. Magazine profiles promoting the new book feature photographs of Coates in Palestine, diligently writing in his notebook with the city of Lydda, the site of a brutal massacre, in the background. On the morning talk shows, he looks resolved, if uneasy, as his face fills the screen. ♦

Books

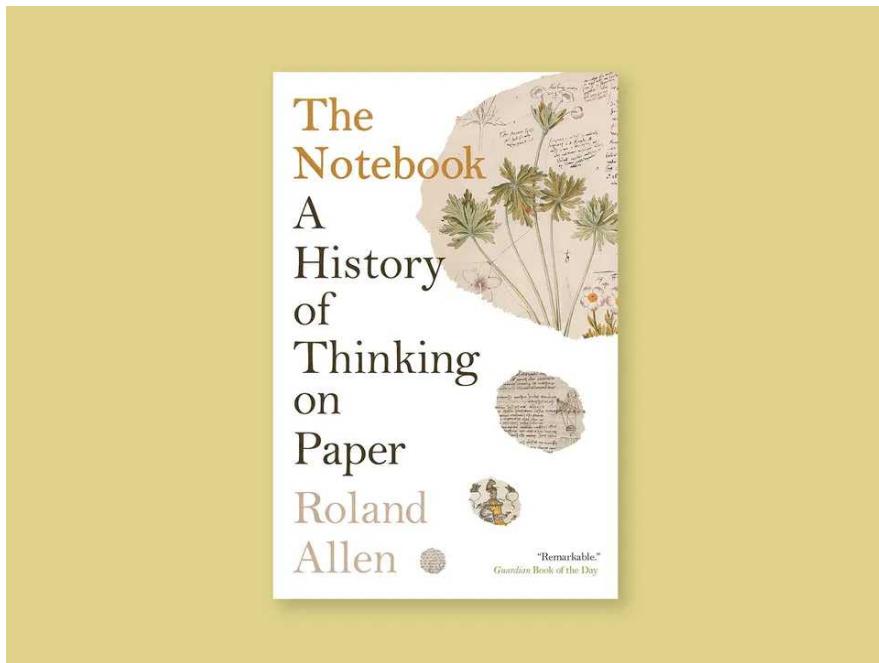
Briefly Noted

“The Burning Earth,” “The Notebook,” “Enlightenment,” and “The Sequel.”

October 14, 2024

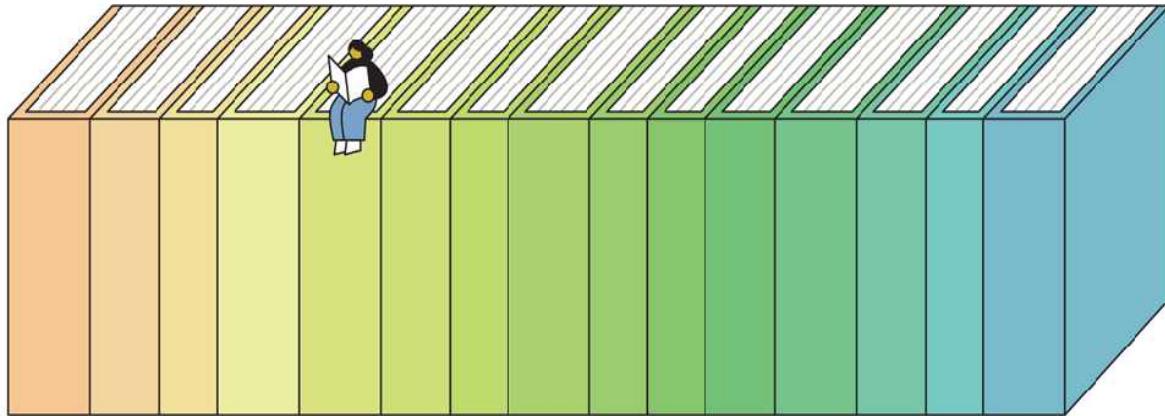


The Burning Earth, by Sunil Amrith (Norton). In this expansive book, a historian places the earth's ecological plight in the context of human exploitation. Amrith's inventory of crucial events begins with the Charter of the Forest of 1217, which granted common people rights to England's forests. Surveying gold-mining operations in South Africa and oil extraction in Baku, among other enterprises, Amrith recognizes the inseparability of environmental distress and political, economic, and social factors. As he recounts attempts by human beings to squeeze value out of natural resources, he also examines changing attitudes about our relationship to the natural world, which we have long regarded—erroneously, he argues—as separate from, rather than symbiotic with, our species.

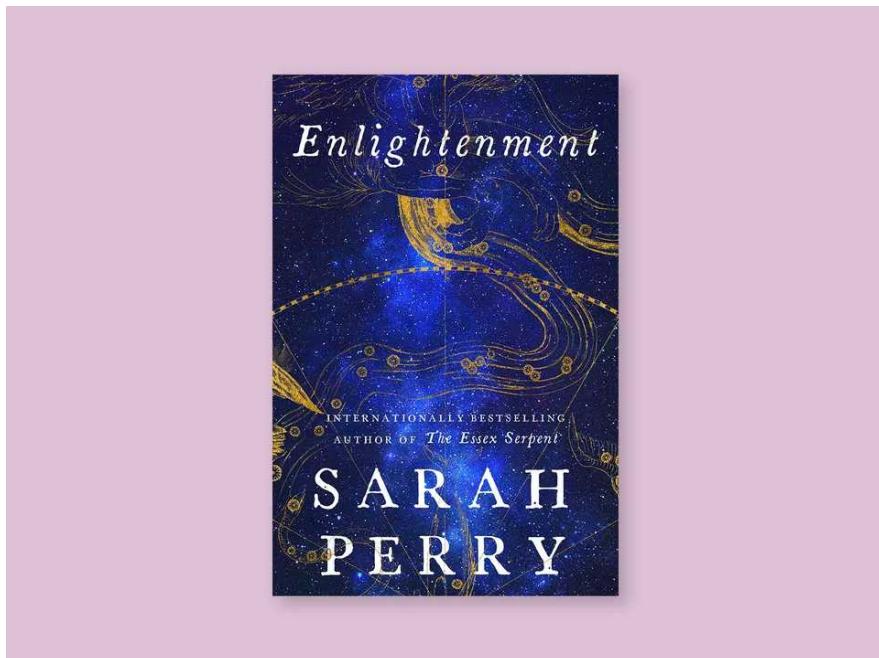


The Notebook, by Roland Allen (Biblioasis). The profound cultural and intellectual impact of the notebook is the subject of this wide-ranging history, which traces the unassuming object's development from ancient wax tablets to modern-day Moleskines. Through the centuries, notebooks and allied forms such as sketchbooks have been indispensable tools for merchants, writers, artists, scientists, and everyday people. Allen's narrative moves fluidly as he recounts the evolution of the notebook's use—touching on medieval trading routes and contemporary artist studios—and explores its role in both mundane tasks and world-changing innovations.

What We're Reading

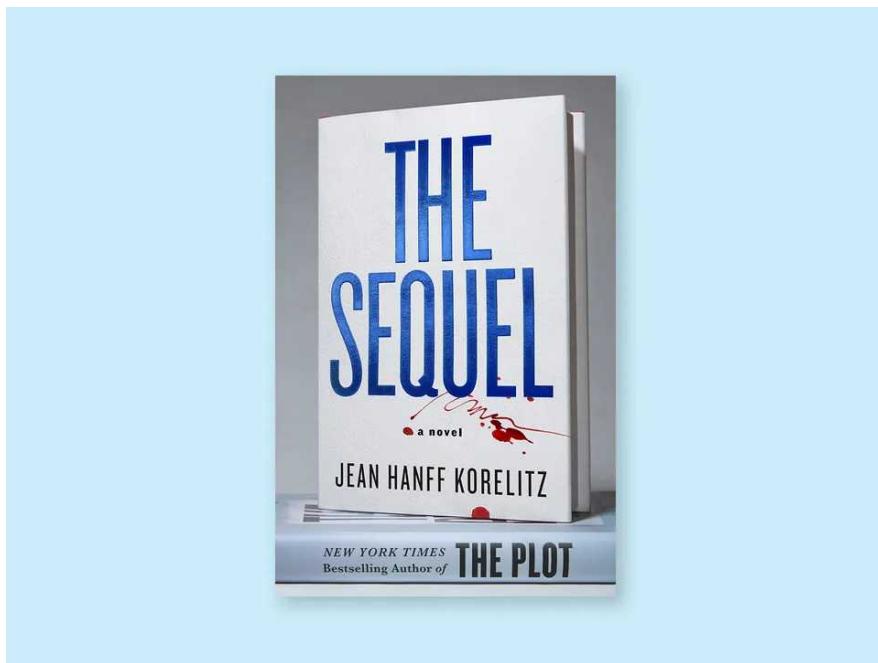


Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Enlightenment, by Sarah Perry (*Mariner*). This tale of faith and obsession, which was long-listed for the Booker Prize, follows a pair of friends from an

insular Baptist community in Essex, England. As one of them searches for a ghost that has haunted him since childhood, he becomes a rapturous student of physics and astronomy. “Occasionally it struck him that his love for the stars was no less a matter of faith than his remaining love for God,” Perry writes. Though the friends’ love stories form the novel’s heart, the book also navigates their attempts to find enlightenment beyond the boundaries of their community, as they question the binaries of goodness and sin, faith and doubt.



The Sequel, by Jean Hanff Korelitz (*Celadon*). In “The Plot,” the best-selling forerunner to this propulsive thriller, the novelist Jacob Finch Bonner dies by his wife’s hand, after becoming a literary star for having written a novel that—unbeknownst to him—is based on her grisly life story. That wife, Anna Williams-Bonner, is the quicksilver protagonist of this book, which follows her after she writes a novel of her own: ostensibly a roman à clef retelling of the events surrounding her husband’s suicide, it is in fact a cover for murder. The novel makes Anna a star, but her success is soon punctured by anonymous messages indicating that somebody knows the truth about Jacob’s source material. Korelitz spins Anna’s pursuit of her accuser into a satisfying hunt, threading it with her antihero’s hilariously jaundiced opinions of literary life.

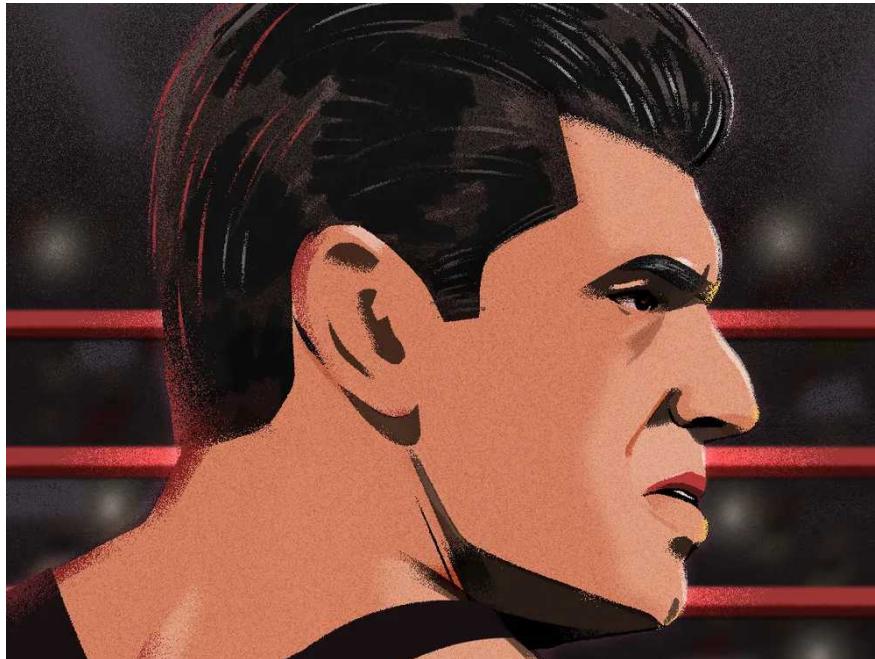
On Television

The Rise and Fall of Vince McMahon

The Netflix docuseries “Mr. McMahon” explores the sordid history of the W.W.E. and the man who made it what it is.

By Vinson Cunningham

October 11, 2024



Something's bugging me about the way political happenings unfold these days. How do we—all of us who, during the past decade or so, have been baptized in the waters of public unreality—come to process passages of history which feel like heedless locomotion through plot points that make no sense? Take the last several months: An aging President loses control of his cognition on television, prompting questions about a coverup, and a national referendum on whether he should continue his pursuit of a second term. He surrenders the nomination, and a fresh surrogate steps in with choreographed speed. A different candidate, a former President (almost as old as the deposed one), chooses a running mate with the rhetoric of a cartoon Nazi: something about unwanted visitors abducting and ingesting pets. Somewhere in there, somebody tries to kill the former President and almost succeeds. And then somebody tries again.

We should be alarmed—beyond alarmed. But most of my friends grimace and then, after a rueful joke, move on to other topics. I wondered, watching “Mr. McMahon”—the new Netflix documentary miniseries about Vince McMahon, the crude, bombastic, devilishly clever impresario of World Wrestling Entertainment—whether the surreal story logic of professional wrestling had engulfed, for good, our feeling for plot, and, on a deep level, our understanding of how real life on the national stage should feel.

The series advertises itself as a close look at a big figure—McMahon, in all his muscular strangeness. And, indeed, in a potted way, we learn some biographical facts. McMahon’s father, Vince, Sr., was also a honcho in the world of pro wrestling, before this particularly American form of lowbrow “sports entertainment” went national. His World Wrestling Federation promotion was confined to the Northeast, part of a loose patchwork of territories kept within boundaries by a noninterventionist code of honor. If you lived in Louisiana and wanted to see a metal chair smashed over the head of a dizzy athlete, you’d do it at a local event, organized by a company headquartered close to home. In his early years, the younger McMahon didn’t know his father. He lived with his mother and stepfather, in poverty, and suffered abuse at their hands, both physical and sexual, apparently; he mentions being beaten up and alludes to incest. His way of coping was to just be grateful when the violence was over. He’d survived.

When he finally met his withholding father, he jumped eagerly into the business of wrestling, eventually buying his father out, then hastening to encroach on the other territories, stealing their wrestlers and staging events in their towns. “If you can’t compete with me—it’s America!” McMahon says, reminiscing grandly. “Tough!” The rude new businessman—acting a lot like the characters who strutted around the ring, garnering the rabid love of the crowd—upset a genteel arrangement and won big.

Beyond these moments, though, “Mr. McMahon” zooms out and presents a miniature history of professional wrestling—one that doubles as a harrowing history of storytelling in America. In the eighties, coming off the heels of the Iran hostage crisis, wrestling audiences thrilled to the clash between Hulk Hogan—an extreme American hero with the sheen and obvious power of a motorcycle engine, played, for almost a lifetime, by Terry Bollea—and a wrestler called the Iron Sheik. The Iron Sheik, whose real name was Hossein

Khosrow Ali Vaziri, was an Iranian American who portrayed his character with colorful xenophobic glee, sometimes speaking in a made-up gibberish meant to sound vaguely Middle Eastern. McMahon and his employees had a salt-of-the-earth understanding of their fans—these people just wanted to “let out their aggression while also watching a morality play,” the wrestler Bret Hart says. “Our business is no different than a play, a movie, books,” McMahon says.

But McMahon also used a sophisticated, if frequently racist, strategy of mirroring current events, doubling them in a form demotic enough to capture the attention of the beer-drinking crowd. It was good for business—“business” being McMahon’s favorite word, which he talks about the way some people talk about God—until it wasn’t. When the audiences got too bloodthirsty, McMahon dialled back the enmity between Hulk and the Iron Sheik. Missteps notwithstanding, McMahon turned wrestling into a true American pastime. Aretha Franklin once sang at “WrestleMania,” the W.W.E.’s answer to the Super Bowl. Andy Warhol shows up onscreen. “Oh, I’m speechless,” he says. “It’s just so exciting, I don’t know what to say.”

I thought about Donald Trump far more than I would have liked while watching “Mr. McMahon.” The association is obvious: Trump, like McMahon, is obsessed with generating attention-grabbing “heat,” has a habit of dismissively denying lawsuits—especially the sort that allege sexual assault—and continues to erect money and its pursuit as a kind of gilded god. As the series reminds us, Trump has also appeared on W.W.E. broadcasts, playing an even more brightly caricatured version of himself, a rich-asshole foil to the ultimate rich asshole, Mr. McMahon—Vince McMahon’s long-running character, perhaps the most well-developed “heel” (wrestling-speak for “villain”) in history.

I kept thinking back to July 13th, when Trump was shot at a Pennsylvania rally. By now, the episode is a montage: Trump crumples to the floor and is dragged away by Secret Service officers, who have arrived too late to stop the shooting but soon enough to cover the former President’s body. Blood leaks all over Trump’s head. For all anyone knows, there’s a shooter on the loose, but Trump exposes his face to the crowd, pumps a fist, imploring his followers to fight. Fight whom? At the moment, it didn’t matter. The “good guy” had been attacked.

If that surreal passage had taken place in a wrestling ring, we would have dismissed it as a “work”—the insider term for a fake job. In saner times, we’d still be talking about the attempted assassination; it would be the sole interpretive angle on the election under way, for good or ill. But these are not sane times. The rapid procession of domestic political absurdities—over which Trump continues to officiate like a McMahon-style circus master—and mind-shredding global catastrophes has made us punch-drunk, concussed like a wrestler whose head has bounced on the mat after taking flight off the top rope. Everything looks like a “work” when you’re this dizzy.

Another part of McMahon’s strategy is manic activity—fast movement from one crisis to another. Earlier this year, he resigned from the company he so gaudily built. A former staffer alleged that he’d sexually trafficked and assaulted her, forcing her into sexual scenarios with himself and some of his employees; he has denied this. Others, all along, have made similar claims, which he has also denied. McMahon’s a nasty guy and barely tries to hide it. He deceives his way through corporate battle. “You just have to throw things out there,” he says, evidently satisfied with his slimy tactics. (He stopped coöperating with the filmmakers after the sex-trafficking allegations against him were made public.)

The most popular period of W.W.E.’s history came in the late nineties and early two-thousands, during what’s called the Attitude Era. The matches were no longer between good guys and bad guys but between bad guys and worse guys. The first big hero of the moment was the beer-swilling, leather-wearing, foulmouthed Stone Cold Steve Austin, who appropriated a famous Bible verse for his own purposes. Here’s John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” Here’s Austin 3:16, intoned by middle schoolers of my generation with devotional glee: “I just whipped your ass.” Maybe we’re living in America’s Attitude Era. Somebody, please, God, change the channel. ♦

The Current Cinema

“Anora” Is a Strip-Club Cinderella Story—and a Farce to Be Reckoned With

Sean Baker’s thrilling film, starring Mikey Madison as a New York sex worker, pushes comic misadventure to the brink of chaos.

By Justin Chang

October 11, 2024



Earlier this year, the Cannes Film Festival observed a heroic first: the director who won the Palme d’Or, the event’s highest honor, dedicated the prize to “all [sex workers](#), past, present, and future.” No one familiar with the director, [Sean Baker](#), could have been too surprised. Baker has spent his career—up to and including his Palme-laurelled latest, “Anora,” a comedy about a Brooklyn stripper—chasing American hustlers of every stripe. He became an indie darling with “Starlet” (2012), a drama set in the industrial pornucopia of the San Fernando Valley, and “Tangerine” (2015), a Los Angeles-based buddy comedy about transgender sex workers. From there,

Baker ventured east for “The Florida Project” (2017), set at an Orlando day-rate motel where a woman sells sex to support herself and her daughter. Then he veered west again, to Texas City, with “Red Rocket” (2021), about a flailing ex-porn star—a prodigal gigolo—in search of fresh, frisky mischief.

All this cross-country zigzagging, which might have once felt arbitrary and rootless, has come to seem ever more purposeful and even political with time. In focussing on a broad swath of sex workers and their hardscrabble realities—odd hours, gruelling conditions, treacherous pimps, hostile johns, nonexistent benefits, dressing-room squabbles, porn-set performance anxieties—Baker has made the case, in movie after movie, that there is no tougher, more resourceful, and more cruelly stigmatized labor force under the sun. “Anora,” set over several wintry New York days and nights, splendidly renews this argument, even if the sun itself, such a glaring fixture of Baker’s earlier work, is on hiatus. The cinematographer Drew Daniels finds a forlorn beauty in the gray skies over Coney Island, where visitors shiver along the boardwalk, and in the heavy snow that, in a late, lovely scene, blankets a nearby neighborhood. Fortunately, the movie has its own built-in heat supply.

Anora—who goes by Ani, and is played, brilliantly, by Mikey Madison—is a twentysomething exotic dancer at HQ, a Manhattan strip club. The movie begins with Ani and her colleagues at work, each one straddling a customer in a chair. Take That’s “Greatest Day” fills the air, striking a tone of lush, night-of-our-lives romanticism. The men lap it up, but their lust is mocked as well as indulged; the camera, gliding matter-of-factly past a row of swaying hips and bouncing buttocks, could easily be a manager taking inventory.

Ani is one of HQ’s best girls, and Madison plays her with a bawdy effrontery and a disarming grin that seems to widen by a mile under neon lights. Watch and listen as Ani slyly coaxes a patron out of his shell; hearing that he has no bills to tuck into her thong, she playfully offers to escort him to an A.T.M. She’s so good at her job that the movie has to remind us that it is, in fact, a job, and an exhausting one: cut to the next morning, as Ani, wearing shades and a heavy jacket, trudges in steely silence back to her

Brooklyn apartment, crawls under the covers, and recharges for another long night ahead.

No wonder the rest of “Anora” plays like a wild dream—first joyous, then catastrophic, and always fiercely unpredictable. Back at HQ, Ani is assigned to Ivan Zakharov (Mark Eydelshteyn), a heedless young pleasure seeker from Russia. Ani is Uzbek American, and though her Russian is serviceable at best, her body language is more than fluent enough for them both. Ivan, for his part, knows just enough English to murmur “God bless America” as Ani slides onto his crotch. He is also rich enough to take their relationship private. Before long, Ani is visiting him at his parents’ mansion in Brighton Beach, which has stunning waterfront views and daily maid service. Who exactly is this privileged little mophead? And who—and where—are mom and dad?

The answers, as with most things involving the Russian oligarchical class, bode well for no one. Eydelshteyn, a supremely nimble clown, makes Ivan the very picture of fuckboy fecklessness. When he first pays Ani for sex—he finishes so fast he doesn’t bother removing his socks—you want her to take the money and run. But the relationship progresses, even if it never deepens. Ani isn’t dumb, and Madison, whose sad eyes often tell a story her smile doesn’t, betrays a silent awareness that something here is too good to be true. Still, Ani is also young and, if not quite in love, then eager to believe in love. She can’t resist Ivan’s horndog enthusiasm, his party-hearty vibes, his obscene fortune. Within days, the two jet off to Vegas by private plane, get hitched, then return to New York to start their new life. It’s over almost before it has begun.

Baker conceived the role of Ani with Mikey Madison in mind, inspired mainly by her work in “[Once Upon a Time . . . in Hollywood](#)” (2019) and “Scream” (2022). In each of those pictures, you might recall with alarm, Madison’s character dies horrifically, doused in blood, set ablaze, and howling in agony. Mercifully, Ani avoids such a fate, though she is bound, gagged, and made to scream bloody murder. Her antagonists are a bumbling trio of toughs, drawn with a sharp eye for the immigrant demographics of Brighton Beach: two Armenian Americans, Toros (Karren Karagulian) and Garnick (Vache Tovmasyan), and a Russian, Igor (Yura Borisov). The men work for Ivan’s parents, and they spring into action once they catch word

that the lad has tied the knot with “a prostitute.” The marriage must be annulled, Ivan kept on a leash, and Ani sent packing.

Easier said than done. The centerpiece of “Anora” is an acridly electrifying sequence—a nearly half-hour whirlwind of nose-breaking, furniture-smashing chaos—in which you can feel not just the narrative stakes but the very genre foundations shifting beneath the characters’ feet. Funny games are afoot; the pratfall vibes are part Three Stooges, part “After Hours.” It was surely this sequence that led Greta Gerwig, the Cannes jury president, to invoke Howard Hawks and Ernst Lubitsch. I suppose “Anora” could well be Baker’s “Trouble in Paradise,” if you can imagine Miriam Hopkins kicking Herbert Marshall in the face. But would it be more or less sacrilegious to invoke [Preston Sturges](#), the most class-conscious and marriage-minded of screwball auteurs? Like Sturges, Baker grasps how the clashing priorities of love, sex, money, and status can send an impulsive romance spiralling into matrimonial anarchy.

A contemporary return to screwball tradition is a welcome but challenging proposition, and Baker’s play with the form is hardly seamless. If you manage to see “Anora” in a packed house, listen closely to the audience laughter spilling forth when all hell finally breaks loose: Is it boisterous or nervous? Does it arise in response to, or in spite of, the brutal shenanigans on display? There’s no wrong answer. In setting his characters on a furious collision course, Baker seems bent on pushing realism, humanism, comedy, and action well past the point of formal compatibility. Through it all, I think, he is also trying to negotiate an honest path for his flinty yet vulnerable heroine. He doesn’t want to soft-pedal the danger that someone like Ani could find herself in, but at the same time he wants to make her more agent than victim of chaos. That’s why her bodily control, evident from the first strip-club scene, satisfyingly extends to the art of self-defense. There’s an uglier subgenre of crime movie that “Anora” acknowledges by rejection: the kind where a female sex worker winds up on a slab.

When Ivan takes cowardly flight, the picture becomes ever more ambitious and unwieldy, morphing into a vehicular chase thriller, with three men in desperate pursuit and a sullen, semi-chastened Ani in tow. The manhunt has its monotonous moments, but it’s also where the action comes into moral focus. The movie, having built up a righteous steam of fury, now unleashes

it against the Ivans of the world and salutes those toiling thanklessly in their employ. That's why Baker lingers thoughtfully on the women who arrive at the house every morning to clean up Ivan's messes—and on the belligerent tow-truck driver who turns up to obstruct the plot but emerges, within seconds, as a harried kindred spirit. In the most comical aside, even Toros is shown to be putting in overtime: by day, he's a priest.

Such multitasking is a constant in this director's cinematic universe, which, given its devotion to seeking out various armpits of America, we might as well call Bakersfield. And so it is that "Anora," by turns a teeming slice of life and a virtuoso farce, reveals itself in the final stretch as a cracked fairy tale. Ani is a strip-club Cinderella, saddled with the froggiest of princes, but she is also granted, in Igor, the unlikeliest of white knights. What passes between Ani and Igor—whom Borisov plays with a gaze calm enough to soothe even this movie's nightmarish tumult—is a moment of rare and complicated grace, a connection that goes beyond mere transaction. You want it to last forever; you know that it won't. For both Ani and Igor, it's back to the grind. ♦

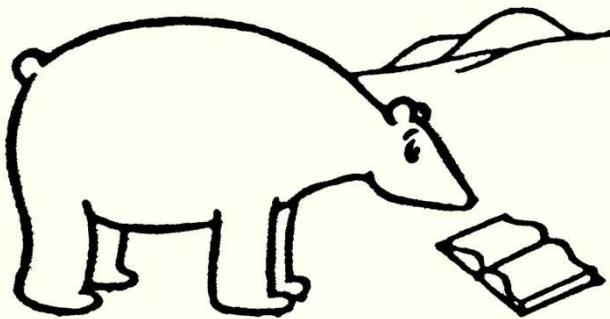
Poems

- [Mother](#)
- [Blue Muse of the Unborn Mind](#)

Mother

By Dorothea Lasky

October 14, 2024



Mother I went in the rose garden
In the middle of the night
To find the things I lost there
Mother I searched for you
For seven nights
And could not find you
They left your perfume everywhere
A kind of toying aspect
And scratched your picture
With their talons
I replaced it
Despite their anger
And still got up in the morning
To feed the babies
Their first meal

Mother I wore a lilac dress
And stepped through the thistle
The alligators had already overtaken
The endless landscape
Your body was somewhere there
And it was my job to bury it
In my head your voice rang out
With the strangest aroma
The gods had left you in the rose garden
Mother I went in before dawn to find you
I didn't know they left
So many noxious animals
There to hurt me
Terrible fear upon fear
Mother I was motherless
So I became myself finally
I wandered in the endless garden
To find something I had lost
When I finally gave up
Mother the roses they overtook me
I filled with vines and lead
I waited two hundred years
Mother I waited there forever
Searching and searching
Mother until they let you in again

Blue Muse of the Unborn Mind

By T. R. Hummer

October 14, 2024



In the darkest hour, stars are falling over water
And nothing sentient feels it
Except the mirror of the lake. Even the deer
Are still sleeping in the hollows

They press with their bodies in tall grass.
One doe in labor stirs but doesn't see her fate
Etched before her on the black surface.
The distance from birth to the other shore

Is meniscus-thin. She kicks as the membrane
Breaks. The herd sleeps. All around her
The future is scattered, written in scat,
And the limp fawn waits for its arrival, breathless.

*

The old wake early, so I'm awake
When the sky fractures at the horizon.
I walk on the path the deer make
From their safe-house copse to the water

And find the dead fawn abandoned in Johnsongrass.
Our clear sky is perfect. Of course it is.
When I reach the lake, its water scummed
With oil from a party barge sunk offshore,

I imagine the unborn, the stillborn, the lowborn.
So far, I've been two of those. The deer drank just here,
Incising their hoofmarks in the sludge, muzzles deep
In algae and acetones. But the unborn mind is clean, horizon

To horizon, its dome over the planet unfathomable blue.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Monday, October 14, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, October 14, 2024

A challenging puzzle.

By Natan Last

October 14, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Anna Wiener's profile of the bicycle designer Grant Petersen, Margaret Talbot's piece about Pamela Harriman, and Jackson Arn's piece about Claude Monet.

October 14, 2024

City Bikes

As a longtime rider of Rivendell bikes (fourteen years and counting), I was overjoyed to read Anna Wiener's profile of the Rivendell Bicycle Works founder, Grant Petersen ("[Joy Ride](#)," September 23rd). These bikes are cult objects for a reason—they marry form and function, and encourage a playful approach in an increasingly competitive marketplace. But what about those of us who don't live a stone's throw from nature, or who don't have the means to put our bikes in a car and drive to a winding trail?

I am one of many Riv riders who use bikes as urban transport: commuting to and from work and school, schlepping groceries and Craigslist purchases, or zipping around town to movies and ballgames. In most of the U.S., cycling is a hobby or a workout regimen, but where I live, in New York City, it's an integral part of daily life. Yes, Rivendell's over-all vibe hews toward the crunchy and outdoorsy, but there are just as many of us cultists locking our beloved steel frames to parking signs and sidewalk bike racks.

*Caroline Golum
Brooklyn, N.Y.*

Seat at the Table

Margaret Talbot's article about the Democratic power broker Pamela Harriman describes the custom, at Harriman's dinners, of the ladies retreating from the table following the meal so that the men could talk seriously about important subjects ([Books](#), September 23rd). While I was an

Under-Secretary of State, in 1980, I attended such a dinner at the Harriman home, in Washington, at which a powerful congresswoman, Lindy Boggs of Louisiana, was the most prominent guest. When Harriman announced that the ladies would be heading upstairs to chat, the congresswoman dutifully followed her. The men at the table were furious: for us, the main purpose of the dinner was to have a serious conversation with Boggs about some pending legislation.

The practice of having the ladies leave the table to engage in ladies' talk, thus permitting the men to hold important discussions over coffee and port, did not last long once a substantial number of women achieved high-level professional roles.

*Matthew Nimetz
New York City*

Eye of the Beholder

In Jackson Arn's enjoyable review of Jackie Wullschlager's biography "Monet: The Restless Vision," he describes how the artist's eyesight deteriorated late in life, owing to cataracts, and notes that mydriatic eyedrops provided temporary relief ([Books](#), September 23rd). He could have also mentioned that Monet had the lens of his right eye removed in the first of three cataract procedures in 1923.

Monet had put off the procedure until he was eighty-two; he knew that unsuccessful cataract operations had ended the painting careers of Honoré Daumier and Mary Cassatt before him. (Perhaps his trepidation was partly due to the fact that, since 1747, when the first such surgery was performed, in France, the only real advancement was that surgeons now knew to wash their hands before operating.) Although Monet was an argumentative, noncompliant patient—the stories of him refusing to remain still and tearing at his bandages are harrowing—the operation (and newly developed Zeiss optical lenses) enabled him to paint until shortly before his death, in 1926.

*Craig Hankin
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Baltimore, Md.*

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