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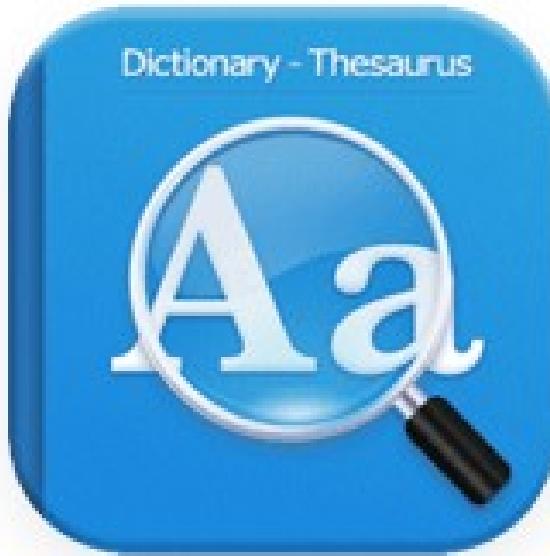
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Goings On

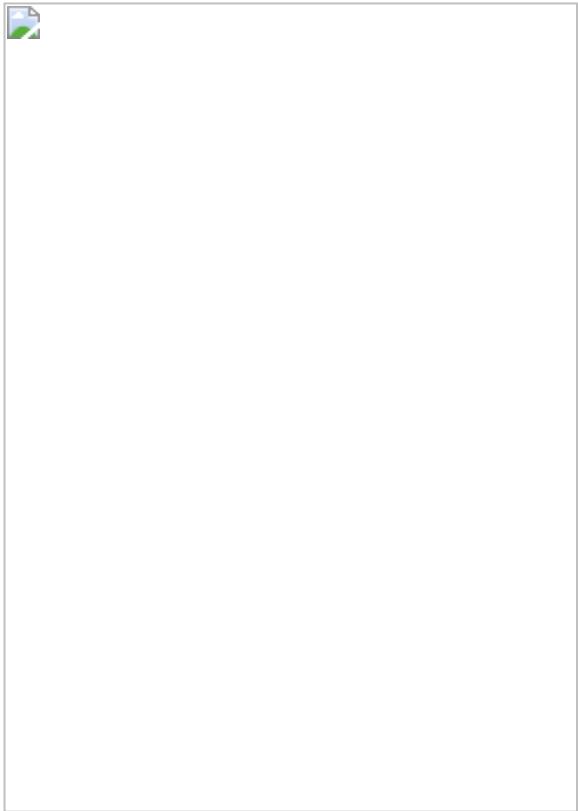
- [Bill T. Jones's Controversial "Still/Here," Thirty Years Later](#)
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Goings On

Bill T. Jones's Controversial “Still/Here,” Thirty Years Later

Also: the glamorous camp of “Drag: The Musical,” the Afropop of Angélique Kidjo, the Vatican thriller “Conclave,” and more.

October 25, 2024

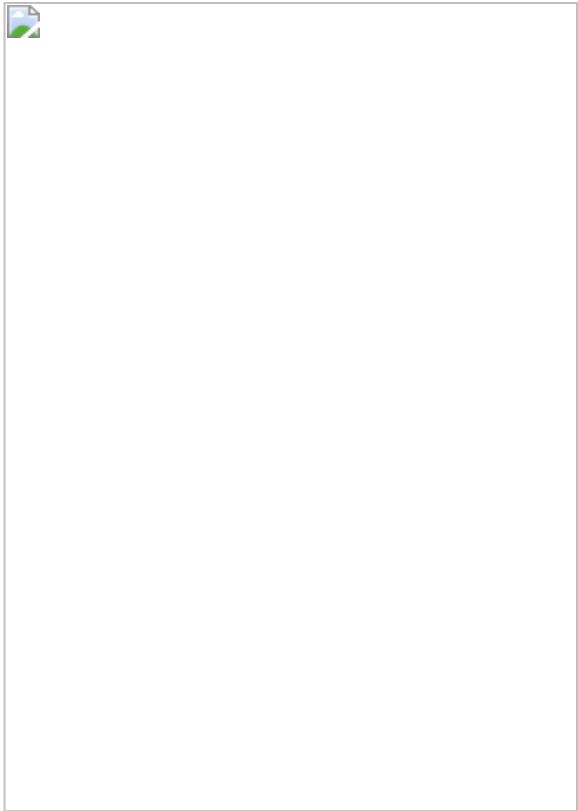


Brian Seibert

Seibert has covered dance for Goings On since 2002.

Few, if any, dance performances of the nineties provoked more controversy than “**Still/Here**,” a multimedia work from 1994 by the choreographer Bill T. Jones, which is now getting a thirtieth-anniversary revival, from the **Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company**, Oct. 30-Nov. 2, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Most of that controversy began in *The New Yorker*.

“*Still/Here*” originated in a series of so-called survivor workshops that Jones, who was publicly H.I.V.-positive, led across the country with volunteers who had faced, or were facing, life-threatening illnesses. From these sessions—during which participants, in verbal and movement exercises, were asked to recall the moments they learned of their diagnoses and to imagine their deaths—Jones took movement material and video testimonials and built them into a work performed by the dance company that he had founded with his romantic and creative partner Arnie Zane (who had died of *AIDS* in 1988).

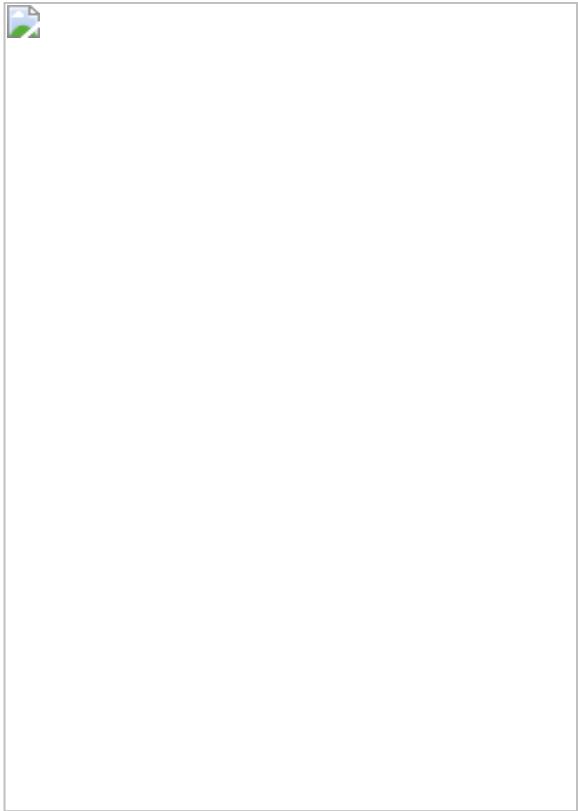


Arlene Croce, *The New Yorker*'s dance critic at the time of "Still/Here" 's première, wrote about the piece in the magazine, even though she refused to see it. In an essay titled "[Discussing the Undiscussable](#)," she argued that by including dying people in his work Jones had put himself "beyond the reach of criticism." She called Jones—a MacArthur-winning provocateur who had just been [profiled](#) in the magazine by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.—"the John the Baptist of victim art," the most coercive avatar of a "pathology" that she blamed on the "permissive thinking of the sixties" and a utilitarian bias within the arts bureaucracy. "Parading their wounds," she wrote, such artists made critics seem expendable. She responded to the piece as to an attack.

(Oddly, she later said that she had initially conceived of the essay as a Shouts & Murmurs piece.)

The essay kicked up a storm of commentary that spilled over from the readers'-letters section of the magazine into other publications, with the likes of Tony Kushner, Joyce Carol Oates, Susan Sontag, and Camille Paglia cheering and denouncing its claims and insinuations. Croce's piece and "Still/Here"—though neither was what fans of Croce or Jones would likely choose as their best work—became infamous together, a conjoined exhibit in the culture wars, bound on syllabi and in cultural memory.

The revival of "Still/Here," original video intact, offers a chance to revisit that moment, but also to consider the work at a distance from the uproar, in a very different context. How do its juxtapositions of text, movement, and image, of illness and vitality, of death and beauty look today, performed by a new cast of dancers, half of whom weren't yet born when it was made? Jones is still here; what does "Still/Here" still have to say?



About Town

Art

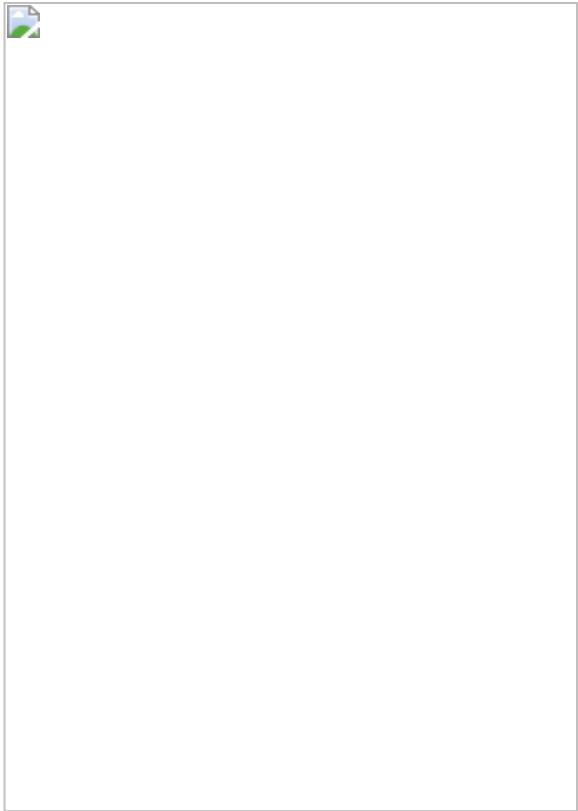
For some time now, Dietmar Busse has been painting his photographs until the original image nearly disappears, but when he first arrived in New York, in the early nineties, after a childhood in a farming village in Germany, he made mostly small, black-and-white Polaroids. More than a hundred of these, plus some knockout blowups, are included in the sprawling,

sensational show “**Dietmar Busse Fairy Tales 1991-1999.**” Mostly, but never merely, snapshots, Busse’s pictures were taken on bike trips around the city, and the curiosity on both sides of the camera makes them vibrate. There are a number of editorial assignments, including subjects such as Pedro Almodóvar and Ultra Naté, but they can’t really compete with a trio of homely queens at Wigstock or people lounging on Harlem stoops.—*Vince Aletti* (*Amant*; through Feb. 16.)

Afropop

For more than four decades, the Beninese French singer-songwriter **Angélique Kidjo** has been a titanic figure working to dispel the Western myth of “world music.” From the 1991 album “Logozo” to three Grammy-winning LPs—“Eve” (2014), “Sings” (2015), and “Mother Nature” (2021)—Kidjo has fiercely advocated for African music, from Afrobeat to Afropop, jazz, and classical. She is joined on the first U.S. stop of a tour celebrating her forty-year career by the Colour of Noize Orchestra, directed by Derrick Hodge, and the funk ambassador Nile Rodgers, the Chic front man who worked on hits for Diana Ross, David Bowie, Madonna, Beyoncé, and Daft Punk, the last of which earned him the 2014 Grammy for Album of the Year.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Carnegie Hall*; Nov. 2.)

Off Broadway



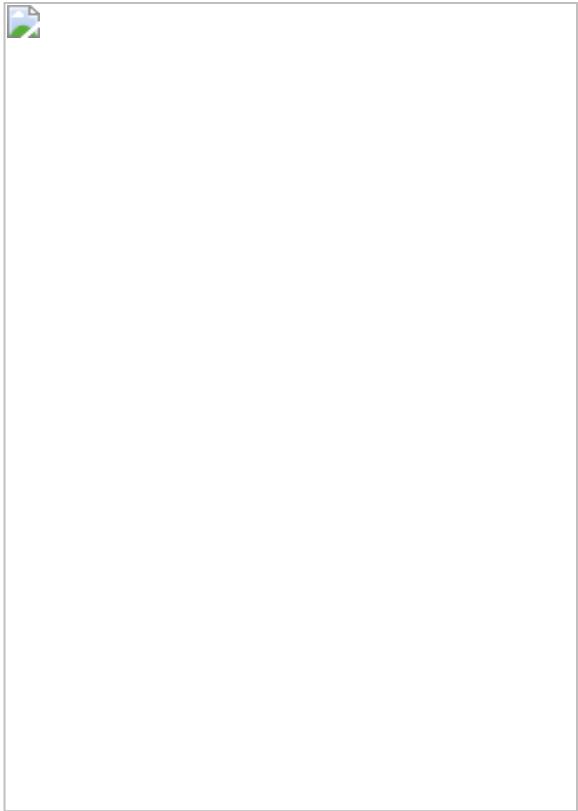
Drag, at its best, is a union of glamour and camp, spectacle and heart. “**Drag: The Musical**”—a tale of two night clubs, written by Tomas Costanza, Justin Andrew Honard, and Ashley Gordon, and directed with pizzazz by Spencer Liff—delivers the goods, with some rock and roll to boot. One club is owned by Kitty Galloway (the “RuPaul’s Drag Race” sensation Alaska Thunderfuck); the other, across the street, belongs to her ex, Alexis Gillmore (a distractingly muscular Nick Adams). But Alexis’s establishment may soon fold because of financial mismanagement, prompting an appeal to her straight accountant brother (Joey McIntyre, bringing his own thunder). He arrives with his young son (Remi Tuckman/Yair Keydar), who discovers—to his father’s consternation and

Alexis's delight—a love of drag. With Jujubee, Jan Sport, and a shit ton of rhinestones.—[Dan Stahl](#) (*New World Stages; open run.*)

Dance

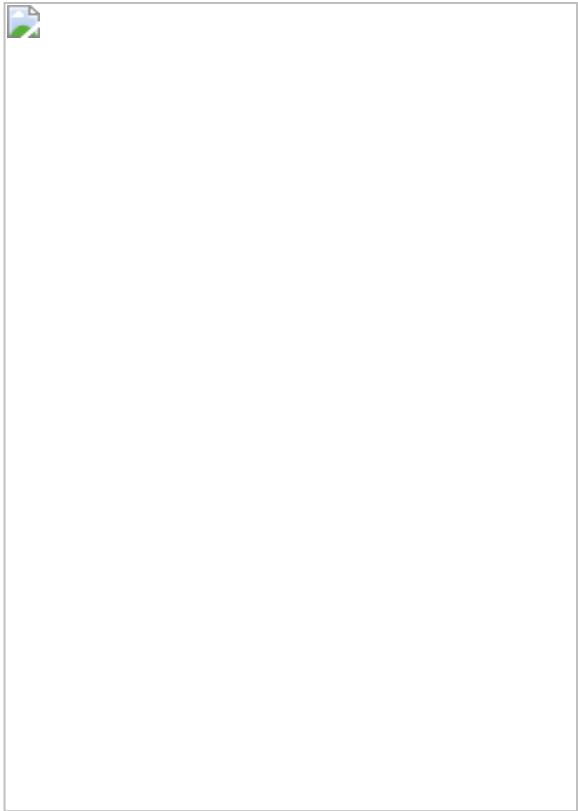
Since being named the resident choreographer at **Paul Taylor Dance Company**, Lauren Lovette has proved adept at channelling the dancers' exuberantly warm style and grounded technique. She has provided two new works for the fall, "Chaconne in Winter" and "Recess." There are other premières as well: Robert Battle, until recently the director of Alvin Ailey, has made a tribute to Carolyn Adams, a beloved former member of the troupe. And there are, of course, the Taylor dances, from the familiar—"Aureole," "Arden Court," and "Esplanade," which turns fifty next year—to the rarely performed, such as "Images," a dance inspired by the friezes of antiquity, set to Debussy.—[Marina Harss](#) (*David H. Koch Theatre; Nov. 5-24.*)

Art



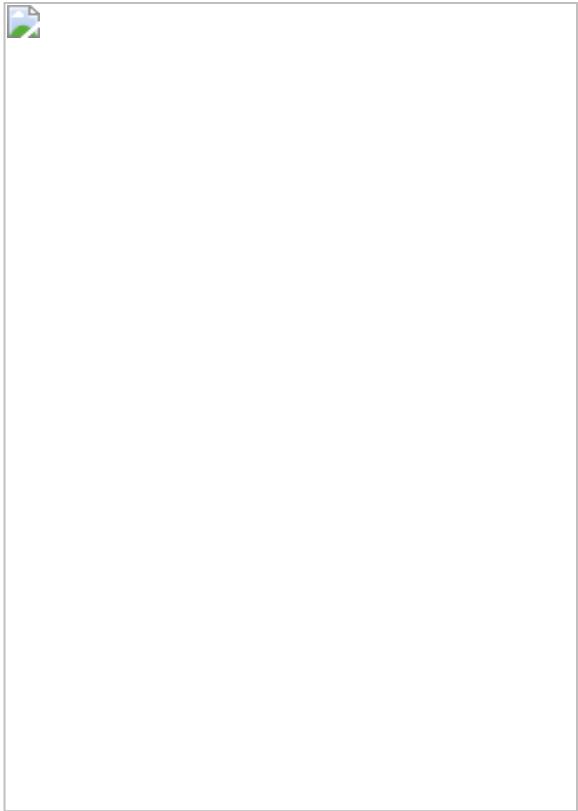
You can see the thirty-four-year-old painter Samuel Hindolo pushing himself in the two-part exhibition “**Eurostar**”—made up of photo collages, drawings, and paintings inspired by train-station architecture—not to be identified by one genre. So doing, he avoids a common pitfall: the artist’s commodification and getting stuck in a signature style. Passing intimacies are keenly felt in small paintings such as “Vitrine III” (2024), where the figures are rendered with a kind of awkward grace, a hallmark of Hindolo’s draftsmanship. His faint and subtle renderings of domestic scenes remind one at times of the beginning of Wim Wenders’s “Wings of Desire”—and of the distance and the privilege inherent in privacy being observed, and recorded.—*Hilton Als* (*15 Orient and Galerie Buchholz; through Nov. 9.*)

Edward Berger's plush thriller "**Conclave**," based on a novel by Robert Harris, details a fictional meeting of cardinals at the Vatican, after the death of a Pope, to choose his successor. Ralph Fiennes stars as Cardinal Thomas Lawrence, who is working behind the scenes to prevent the victory of a reactionary (Sergio Castellitto). But an outspoken liberal (Stanley Tucci) has trouble winning votes, and the resulting action involves deft coalition-building and the papal equivalent of October surprises. The drama is clever but stodgy, spotlighting picturesque settings and arcane rituals, and relying on a formidable cast, which also includes John Lithgow and Isabella Rossellini, to invest stock characters with a semblance of life.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In wide release.*)



Pick Three

[Sarah Larson](#) on standout podcasts.



1. “The Wonder of Stevie,” bursting with music and hosted with extreme exuberance by Wesley Morris, tells Stevie Wonder’s life story from, roughly, “Fingertips” to “That Girl,” with an emphasis on his five extraordinary albums released from 1972 to 1976. Wonder himself appears in the final episode; peers such as Smokey Robinson tell stories, and musicians and fans including Questlove, Janelle Monáe, and Barack and Michelle Obama (whose Wonder-inspired company, Higher Ground, helped produce) articulate the nature of Wonder’s genius. Also: Barack sings!

2. In “Empire City,” Chenjerai Kumanyika, of the excellent podcasts “Uncivil” and “Seeing White,” provides a bracing history of the N.Y.P.D.,

the country's largest police force, beginning with its early connections to slavery and including its history of brutality and overreach. Kumanyika, a warm and shrewd presence, personalizes the narrative with stories about his civil-rights-activist father, who was detained by the N.Y.P.D., and his young daughter, who still believes that police "keep people safe."

3. Leon Neyfakh and Arielle Pardes's "**Backfired: Attention Deficit**," which follows their previous strong series, "Backfired: The Vaping Wars," illuminates the complex history of attention-deficit disorder and of stimulant use in the U.S., which began decades ago and skyrocketed during the pandemic, leading to an infamous drug shortage. It's empathetic and quietly funny; reflecting on Adderall and college, Neyfakh says, "Never in my life have I thought my ideas were better and more original than when I was in the library, high as a kite, tapping out mediocre essays about things I barely understood."

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Andrew Garfield reads a Chris Huntington essay](#)
- [Tina Brown's first "Fresh Hell" post](#)
- [Pedro Pascal as a mushroom](#)

The Food Scene

The Vivid Second Life of a Mexican Supper Club

In a colorful space in Hamilton Heights, Cocina Consuelo does serious renditions of beef birria, mole negro, and cinnamon-scented *café de olla*.

By Helen Rosner

October 20, 2024



Cocina Consuelo, a restaurant in Hamilton Heights that opened in August, comprises four hundred square feet jam-packed with color and life. A blue-painted wooden banquette, like a church pew or a bench in a train station, runs against a wall that is summer-corn yellow; the tiles around the bar are a deep pond green. In the back of the room is a bar, which is also the kitchen; at the front, just inside a great casement window that fills the front wall, is a spinet piano made of blond wood and confettied with stickers. You could fit another table or two in that space instead—in such a tiny restaurant, a few more seats would be a meaningful increase—but then, well, there wouldn’t be a piano, or the books and plants that sit along its top, or the sheaf of menus resting above the keys on the music stand. On a recent evening, the

window was open to the fall breeze, and music and conversation spilled out onto the street. At one point, the chef, Karina Garcia, rushed up to a table to sweep a baby into her arms, dancing with him to trance-y German electronica as his parents cheered them on. No one actually sat down and played the piano on either of my visits, but there was a feeling in the air that, at any moment, someone might.



The restaurant is the joint project of Garcia and her husband, Lalo Rodriguez. The two met while working at a now-closed Italian restaurant on the Upper East Side; Garcia went on to work in the front of the house at Eleven Madison Park, while Rodriguez put in time at [Cosme](#). Like many restaurant people put out of work during the pandemic, the couple turned to their own creativity to get by, selling tacos out of their then apartment in Harlem. That venture evolved into a supper club, also called Cocina Consuelo, serving food rooted in Rodriguez's childhood in Puebla, Mexico. It's been wonderful, during the past few years, to see scrappy projects from that uncertain era—among them Wizard Hat Pizza, the taquería Border Town, and the bakery L'Appartement 4F—live on and form a thriving new generation of New York City food culture.



Cocina Consuelo serves a daytime meal (through 2 P.M.) and then reopens for dinner. By day, there's excellent coffee—a cinnamon-scented *café de olla*; a revelatory combo of espresso and pineapple juice over ice—and a menu that's both brief and serious. Two small half-moon quesadillas are showcases for a smoky, stewy *tinga* made not with shredded chicken or pork but with braised hibiscus flowers, which have a tender, meaty texture and a gentle astringency. *Picaditas*—the soft, savory corn cakes sometimes known as *sopes*—are piled up with green chorizo, homemade and herbaceous, under a mountain of tangy purple onion and fresh white cheese. A dish understatedly called “grilled cheese” has undeniable star power: made on, of all things, a croissant, it features tangy orange cheddar and is squashed on a griddle until the cheese and pastry are crisp. It’s liberally spread with a similarly sharp-textured salsa macha, a Veracuzan condiment akin to chile crunch, made with toasted hot peppers, garlic, and toasted pepitas and sesame seeds.

Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

In the evening, the lights go down, and that communal coffee-shop energy transmutes into something a little sexier. A tart, jalapeño-spiked Caesar

dressing coats long, pale leaves of bitter endive that beg to be picked up with the fingertips and eaten, lustily, out of hand. A pair of bright-red peppers, stuffed with tangy tuna confit and draped in tender rings of soft-cooked onion, are plated leaning against one another, almost romantically. A large marrow bone, halved lengthwise and roasted, is topped with tender beef birria, which Garcia slow-cooks for more than fifteen hours, and a creamy salsa roja. The marrow, like all marrow, is obscene in its richness; the birria, like the best birria, has a dark, curvaceous intensity. Eaten together, on a warm masa tortilla , the marrow and the birria nearly overwhelm each other, but both are kept just in balance by the snap of pickled onion and the sharp bite of cilantro. Less Instagrammable, but perhaps even more wonderful, is a night-dark puddle of *mole negro*. The sauce, ladled over a confited leg of duck and swashed with crema, is enrapturing as quicksand, luxuriously smooth and complex, with a welcome edge of bitterness. With their elegant plating and sophisticated flavors, these dishes wouldn't feel out of place at a ritzy downtown dining room, but they fit in just as seamlessly here, in Cocina Consuelo's multicolored space, surrounded by personal touches in a room full of music. ♦

The Talk of the Town

- [Trump's Health, and Ours](#)
- [Conjuring the Worst Case](#)
- [Making the Big Hair Big Enough in "The Apprentice"](#)
- [Madonna's Twelve-Year-Old Daughter in the Mix](#)
- [The Door Knockers Knocking for Anyone But Trump](#)

Comment

Trump's Health, and Ours

Studies increasingly suggest that a healthy nation depends on a healthy democracy.

By Dhruv Khullar

October 27, 2024



A couple of weeks ago, Donald Trump turned in one of his strangest performances in a campaign with no shortage of them—part of a series of oddities that may or may not constitute an October surprise but has certainly made for a surprising October. “Who the hell wants to hear questions?” he hollered at a town hall in Pennsylvania, after two attendees had suffered medical emergencies. Then he wandered the stage for nearly forty minutes, swaying to music from his playlist—“Ave Maria,” “Y.M.C.A.,” “Hallelujah.”

Trump has always given off Twenty-fifth Amendment vibes. But, even by that standard, his behavior has grown unnervingly bizarre, prompting new questions about his mental fitness and his emotional stability. In recent weeks, he has said that Haitian migrants should be deported “back to

Venezuela,” rebranded the January 6th insurrection a “day of love,” mused about the size of Arnold Palmer’s genitals, and criticized Abraham Lincoln for not having “settled” the Civil War (though he did allow that Lincoln was “probably” a great President). Trump has also increasingly cancelled interviews, reportedly owing to exhaustion; he has held less than a quarter as many rallies in 2024 as he did in 2016.

Over time, Trump’s language has become angrier, simpler, less focussed, more violent, and more profane. According to the *Times*, his rally speeches are, on average, about twice as long as they were in 2016, and he swears nearly seventy per cent more often, a trait that can be associated with age-related disinhibition. The health-news site STAT has reported that since Trump left office his use of extreme and binary linguistic constructions such as “always” and “never”—which can also be a sign of cognitive decline or depression—has increased some sixty per cent, and that his speech now contains much more negative and backward-looking language. Trump himself has felt obliged to address his digressive rambling. “I do the weave,” he said recently. “I’ll talk about, like, nine different things, and they all come back brilliantly together.” He added, “English professors, they say, ‘It’s the most brilliant thing I’ve ever seen.’ ”

Joe Biden’s deficiencies became apparent in part because he has always behaved like a normal politician. But Trump’s conduct has been so aberrant for so long that separating genuine deterioration from routine volatility is no easy task—on what basis does one judge oscillations in something without precedent in public life? In the first half of this year, major U.S. newspapers ran dozens more articles about Biden’s mental acuity than they have about Trump’s in the past nine months, and, in the end, the Democratic leadership prevailed upon Biden to step aside for coalition and country. Republican leaders, confronted with the unravelling of their own nominee, have only reaffirmed their fealty.

Yet growing numbers of Americans seem to harbor misgivings about Trump’s age and cognitive abilities. In Wisconsin, according to polling from Marquette Law School, more than six in ten voters say that Trump is too old to be President; a recent Reuters/Ipsos poll found that, nationally, around half of Independents say that he doesn’t have the mental acuity for the job. The question is whether, after all that Trump has said and done—maligning

the military, fawning over dictators, bragging about sexual assault, refusing to accept election results—the spectre of a man now even less in control of his faculties could be what moves voters.

The 2024 campaign has been unusual both in its intense focus on the health of the candidates and in its relative inattention to the health of the people. Whether owing to pandemic fatigue or to overworn slogans about Obamacare repeal and Medicare for All, health care has been less central to this election than to any in a generation. Bill Clinton fought for universal health care, and George W. Bush secured prescription-drug coverage for seniors. Barack Obama oversaw the passage of the Affordable Care Act, and Trump nearly orchestrated its demise. This year, a health-care transformation doesn't seem to be in the offing—Trump's “concepts of a plan” notwithstanding—but something more fundamental is on the ballot: a system of government that makes good health possible.

Not long after the American Revolution, Benjamin Rush, a physician and a signatory to the Declaration of Independence, proposed a link between healthy politics and healthy people. Rush argued that there is an “indissoluble union between moral, political, and physical happiness,” and that “elective and representative governments are most favourable” to both individual and societal well-being. His contention seems to have been borne out: research increasingly supports a salubrious effect of democratic governance.

A recent study in *The Lancet*, led by Thomas Bollyky, the chair of global health at the Council on Foreign Relations, suggests that, for many health outcomes, the strength of a country’s democracy may matter more than the size of its economy. On average, nations that transitioned from autocracy to democracy saw near-immediate improvements—within a decade, life expectancy increased by more than two years—and those which slid from democracy to autocracy experienced the opposite. Bollyky estimates that, in the decades between the fall of the Soviet Union and Trump’s glide down the golden escalator, democracy helped prevent some sixteen million deaths from cardiovascular disease alone.

Democratic governments are accountable to people, and people like to be healthy. Health care is what economists call a superior good, meaning that as

societies get richer they want more of it. Democracies, accordingly, spend more on health than autocracies do, and are likely to preserve access to care even when the economy tanks. Meanwhile, a free press keeps people informed; the rule of law fuels innovation, by curbing corruption and protecting intellectual property; and independent agencies check power and implement regulations to promote clean water, breathable air, and safe food.

The real danger of a second Trump term is not that Trump is a man in decline. It is that, this time around, he would be surrounded by a cast of characters who aim to reify, not restrain, his worst impulses. John Kelly, Trump's longest-serving chief of staff, has argued that Trump is "certainly an authoritarian"; Mark Milley, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has warned that Trump is "fascist to the core." Healthy democracy, like good health, requires adherence to a particular set of norms and behaviors, and the price of neglect is not just sick polities but sick people. With both, it's better to push for prevention than to hope for a resuscitation. ♦

Gut Check

Conjuring the Worst Case

As the election nears, along with the potential mess to ensue, an apprehensive citizen retraces the steps of a man who chronicled New York's Draft Riots.

By Nick Paumgarten

October 28, 2024



A week and change until Election Day. How you feeling, N.Y.C.? Is it fair to say that people seem anxious, afraid, weary, angry, and confused, and yet also (or otherwise), in some corners, oddly complacent, blinkered, fatalistic, or detached? How to gauge the mood in a town of eight million moods, especially when the moods, like the polls, keep swinging?

It's hard to believe much of anything, with the slanted data and wishful thinking swirling around. The only certainty seems to be that, whatever comes to pass, we're in for a mess: a month—O.K., maybe a lifetime—of ugly partisan warfare, bloodless or not. This, then, is the week we put tape on the windowpanes. Will we tear ourselves to pieces, or go on living,

imperfectly, as we have done so many times before? The mind shuffles through decades of horror and farce, conjuring worst cases.

For an example of one such case, a friend suggests a dive into the diaries of George Templeton Strong, a wealthy nineteenth-century New York City lawyer, and his eyewitness account, from 1863, of the Draft Riots, in Manhattan. This was the insurrection, the week after the Battle of Gettysburg, of mostly poor, mostly Irish New Yorkers against Lincoln's new policy of conscription into the Union Army. A class riot (the wealthy could buy exemptions) became a race riot (Black residents bore the brunt). Buildings were looted and burned to the ground; more than a hundred people were killed, including eleven lynchings. It was, arguably (Tulsa would like a word), the bloodiest riot in American history, and, as Kevin Baker, the author of "Paradise Alley," a novel set during the riots, put it the other day, "the worst thing New Yorkers ever did to other New Yorkers." The mind scrolls through old baseball rivalries and pineapple pizza toppings and concedes that this must be so.

Last week, an apprehensive citizen set out in Strong's footsteps. On First Avenue, near Nineteenth Street—in 1863, the rioters dominated the terrain east of there—Strong described how some of his fellow-Unionists were "fired upon from houses, and had to leave sixteen wounded men and a Lieutenant Colonel Jardine in the hands of these brutes and devils. This is very bad indeed." Of the events, the shopkeepers at the edge of what is now Stuyvesant Town were entirely unaware. Those houses are long gone. Neither Marcos Lopez, a Trump supporter from Washington Heights, working the wine racks at the Rouge & Blanc liquor store, nor Beverly Wilpon, a Harris partisan and one of the owners of Ess-a-Bagel, a couple of doors down, had heard of the Draft Riots, and so perhaps were disinclined to imagine such scenarios. During the George Floyd protests of 2020, both shops had declined to heed the advice to board up their windows. The liquor store's was smashed. Wilpon said, "We were spared. Apparently, they weren't looking for bagels."

On the first days of the riots, Strong worked his way uptown, toward the epicenter of the violence. "Reached the seat of war at last, Forty-sixth Street and Third Avenue," he wrote. "Three houses on the Avenue and two or three on the street were burned down." A few blocks away, a mob burned down a

building that housed a draft-lottery barrel (operated by a blindfolded man, to insure fairness) and then, when the police superintendent arrived, beat him nearly to death.

Last week, at the former seat of war, two men working a street-food cart hadn't heard about any of this, but they did know about the murder of Big Paul Castellano, in 1985, outside Sparks Steak House, a few dozen yards east, and they pointed the way.

Inside, a Sparks manager, Jeffrey Streem, was sitting at the bar, relaxing after the end of the lunch rush. He was wearing a tuxedo. He knew all about the Draft Riots. "They were taking people from the poor, shit places to fight the war," he said. "That's what's happening now in Russia."

There were three large gentlemen at the other end of the bar. Newsmax, the conservative news channel, often hosts a talk show, "Wise Guys with John Tabacco," in a private room downstairs. Devin Nunes, Rudy Giuliani, Kari Lake. Streem, seventy-one, grew up in Los Angeles, and allowed that his politics did not jibe with theirs. "It's pretty fucked up," he said. And the preëlection vibes? "Fucked up." He went on, "I don't sleep well at night. Trump, you look at it, he has created so much tsuris. You know what I do, if people talk shit about Trump to me?" On his phone, he pulled up a document he'd made chronicling Trump's transgressions. He began to read it aloud and then stopped.

"It's just another part of American history. Come on. Nothing's the end of the world." The phone rang, and he picked it up: "Good afternoon, Sparks Steak House. Jeffrey speaking. How can I help you?" ♦

The Pictures

Making the Big Hair Big Enough in “The Apprentice”

The hairstylist Michelle Côté built the towering mid-eighties dos worn by Ivana and Mary Anne Trump, and for the title character she whipped up a tonsorial turducken.

By Bruce Handy

October 28, 2024



If the movie hairstylist Michelle Côté is going to work on a period picture, she prefers the restrained elegance of the nineteen-fifties. But neither restraint nor elegance was on hand with a recent job, for which she was tasked with re-creating the pouffy locks of the nineteen-eighties. The movie was “The Apprentice,” which dramatizes Donald Trump’s rise from outer-borough hustler to the pinnacle of, if not status or wealth, at least Trump Tower.

“I tried to stay away from the subject,” Côté said on a recent afternoon. She added, “When one of the producers approached me about the project, I was,

like”—here she vocalized something halfway between a groan and retching, from the privacy of her office in Montreal, where she lives. (The film was shot in Canada, with Toronto mostly filling in somehow for grimy, gritty Koch-era New York.) But Côté liked the movie’s creative team, including the director, Ali Abbasi, and she liked the cast, including Sebastian Stan as Donald and Maria Bakalova as Ivana, the first Mrs. Trump.

Another appeal of “The Apprentice”: Côté began her career at around the same time as the movie opens, in the nineteen-seventies, when she had her first job behind a chair at a Quebec City salon. This was the era of the wedge cut, when women were enthralled by the Olympic figure-skating champion Dorothy Hamill; hair was worn short, napes exposed. Côté’s introduction to big hair came with a move to Montreal, in 1985: “I was working downtown in a big salon with women coming in at lunchtime. That was the time of teasing, and we were also doing perms and frosty highlights.”

Thus, though Côté rarely takes time to style her own hair, she was intimately familiar with the various cloud formations and conchlike structures that swaddled Ivana Trump’s head through much of the nineteen-eighties. Bakalova’s actual hair sufficed for the film’s early scenes, when the pre-Trump Ivana Zelníčková wore her hair simply, if fetchingly; a pair of wigs alternated to re-create the more imperial styles Ivana adopted once she took on the dual roles of wife and brand extension. Côté guessed that the real Ivana didn’t have to spend as much time in the chair as Bakalova did: “An hour, maybe two, at her salon, three times a week. It wasn’t like the mom.” That would be Donald’s mother, Mary Anne MacLeod Trump, also featured in the film, who was given to monstrous bouffants resembling giant redwood burls. “She was getting roller-set, going under the dryer for hours,” Côté continued. A colleague of Côté’s was responsible for styling the movie Mary Anne. When the actress playing her, Catherine McNally, was brought to the set, Côté recalled, “Sometimes, we were, like, ‘That’s *a lot*. But then you look at the photos. . . .’”

The greater challenge was styling female extras. “Women wear their hair longer now,” she explained. “It’s hard to create that volume when the top is longer, because in the eighties the hair was very short on the top and you could tease and crimp it.” For the uninitiated, that might seem like a paradox: big hair requiring short hair. By way of historical perspective, Côté

said that Jennifer Aniston's "Rachel" cut, a nineteen-nineties standby, long on top and parted in the middle, remains popular with many, many women—which is neither here nor there unless you're trying to make a movie set in the nineteen-eighties and you don't have the budget for dozens of wigs. Fortunately, Côté and her team came up with work-arounds for the longer-haired extras. "We're not doing a documentary," she pointed out.

But what about styling Donald? There was no question of using Stan's real hair, Côté said. "He has very, very thick hair—beautiful hair. No way we could have done this with his own hair." Côté had three wigs at her disposal: one for young Donald, one for pre-scalp-reduction-surgery Donald, and one for post-scalp-reduction-surgery Donald. "The second one was thinner," Côté explained. "The effects-makeup people put a bald plate underneath it, so we could see his scalp." In other words, Stan's real hair was covered in part by a fake scalp, which was covered in turn by a wig—a tonsorial turducken.

"*The Apprentice*" ends in the nineteen-eighties, so Côté was spared having to plumb the engineering mysteries of Trump's latter-day hair, but she did offer one two-word theory she'd picked up on: "Little extensions." ♦

Who's That Girl?

Madonna's Twelve-Year-Old Daughter in the Mix

Estere Ciccone, who goes by the d.j. name Queen Estere, didn't wear pink, but she kept the Barbie-loving dance floor packed.

By Bob Morris

October 28, 2024



Twelve-year-old Estere Ciccone fiddled with a small control board in a big room at the Museum of Arts and Design, preparing for the museum's annual gala and the opening of an exhibit called "Barbie: A Cultural Icon." Her navy polo, gaucho shorts, and makeup-free face evoked an innocent schoolgirl. But her glittery, earmuff-size headphones were, in the parlance, giving global glamour.

"Right now, she's checking out her mixes and deciding on her cue points and transitions," Mary Mac, Ciccone's d.j. mentor (real name: Maryse Pierre-Antoine), said, watching her charge. "She's my best student and already showing me stuff." Ciccone is one of Madonna's six children, and under her

d.j. name, Queen Estere, she has just released, on SoundCloud, a raunchy dance track called “I’ll Tech House U Mix.” “A d.j. has to keep up with the latest music and dance moves,” Pierre-Antoine said, “and at twelve she already knows it all.”

Pierre-Antoine, who is fifty-two, has been Madonna’s personal d.j. for more than a decade, since the pop star heard her at an Adidas store. She warms up audiences before concerts and gets crowds dancing at after-parties. In New York, she has a residency at Henrietta Hudson, a lesbian bar in the West Village. She grew up in the area as the basketball-playing daughter of Haitian immigrants. “My mother still asks if I’m making money, and is the work steady,” she said. Queen Estere’s mother, on the other hand, actively promotes her daughter’s avocation with posts on Instagram. She also featured Queen Estere in the recent “Celebration” tour, in which the girl vogued in a black-and-yellow catsuit and thigh-high stiletto boots. Then she d.j.’d onstage, in front of her mother’s fans.

“I definitely felt something up there,” Ciccone said in a soft voice, as she finished cuing up for the gala. “But when you do a lot of shows you get used to it.” She likes being a d.j., she said, “because you really don’t need anyone else. You just need to keep doing it.”

Ciccone was adopted from Malawi and, last month, was bat mitzvahed along with her twin sister, Stella. At the museum, a phalanx of protective handlers (including a nanny and a family entourage) hovered to make sure she didn’t say too much, citing privacy concerns. But she did get a chance to say that it was nice to work at the museum, even though Barbie isn’t her thing. “The movie was O.K. for younger kids, not me,” she said. She had to go change for the pink-themed party. “But I’m not wearing pink,” she said. “I’m wearing black.” Last question: Was she a fan of Taylor Swift? “I like Billie Eilish and Charli XCX,” she said.

Downstairs, in the exhibition hall, word had got out about Queen Estere’s presence. It was unclear whether her mother would show up, although the security staff was ready to manage a back-entrance arrival.

“This opening is a very good gig for a twelve-year-old d.j.,” Robert Best, a Mattel executive and the evening’s honoree, said. He wore a pink velvet

Paul Smith tuxedo. “I admire any kid with the presence of mind to know herself so young.”

“When I was twelve, I wanted to be thirteen,” Beau McCall, an artist known for his use of upcycled buttons, said. “I wanted to be a teen-ager, but when I became one nothing happened.”

Later, when Queen Estere did her set, her mother wasn’t in the house, but Pierre-Antoine played the stage-mother role. “She’s twelve years old, and I’m gonna take my credit!” she yelled to the crowd. “Give it up for Queen Estere! She wants you to show her some love tonight!” The pinked-out intergenerational mob cheered while Ciccone, with the concentration of a child doing some very engaging schoolwork, focussed on her console, occasionally leaning over to ask Pierre-Antoine a question.

“Everyone is dancing, so just go for it,” she told the girl. Peggy Gou, Crystal Waters, and Diplo tracks kept the guests bumping and grinding.

“I guess she comes to this music naturally,” Marilyn Eiges, an octogenarian museum docent, said from the dance floor. She tried to remember what being so young felt like. “All I know is that, when I was twelve, I wanted Fred Astaire to swirl into my living room to dance with me,” she said. Moments later, at around ten o’clock, Queen Estere was being hustled out by her posse. Mary Mac would keep the dancing going with Madonna’s “Into the Groove,” among others on her playlist.

“Love you, Mary Mac! See you Friday,” Ciccone said, waving.

It was a school week, with d.j. lessons, piano lessons, and homework in the mix. ♦

Shoe Leather Dept.

The Door Knockers Knocking for Anyone But Trump

Three long-time political volunteers in Monroe County, Georgia, canvass for the Democrats, after a rah-rah speech by Tim Walz.

By Charles Bethea

October 28, 2024



On a Tuesday morning in September, as Bernice Smith lay asleep in Forsyth, Georgia, her phone rang. It was Yvonne Stuart, a fellow-member of the Monroe County Democratic Party, calling from a phone-banking event. “I got someone here for you,” Stuart told Smith, who was rubbing her eyes. “Tim Walz wants to speak to you.”

Walz had just given the phone bankers a rah-rah speech, in person. Now he was surprising their callees. “I sat up straight in bed,” Smith recalled. “He said, ‘Bernice, this is Tim Walz.’ I couldn’t hardly talk. He said, ‘What are y’all doing in Forsyth?’ I finally said we’re doing all we can until Election Day.” Then Smith called everyone she knew. Smith knows a lot of people in

Forsyth, where she's lived for eight decades. As a child, she picked cotton. Later, she worked in day-care centers and special-needs classrooms. For more than fifty years, she's knocked on doors for Democratic candidates, "starting with a peanut farmer from Plains, when I was nineteen," she said. Door knocking is how she met Stuart, a retired librarian. These days, the two are often joined by Juanita Pitts, a retired nursing-home assistant, who's been knocking just as long.

"My son and my mother have become Republicans," Stuart said at a Hardee's, where the three women had met up before making their rounds.

"It's gonna be all right, darling," Pitts said. "That's what I tell her."

Smith and Pitts wore blue T-shirts that read "Rise Up and Vote." Stuart had on a lavender flannel shirt and a beaded bracelet, which spelled out "*VOTE*": a gift from a teen-ager who'd gone knocking with them.

"She said she didn't know how she was gonna take a Harris sign home," Pitts said. "Her family is for Trump."

Talk turned to their favorite Presidents. "Clinton was just cool," Smith said. "And he balanced the budget."

"I fell out with Clinton about ol' Monica Lewinsky," Stuart said. "I loved President Obama."

"Kennedy," Pitts said. "He was a righteous person. He could have done so much more." She offered her take on Trump: "Can't dance. Tells lies."

Sufficiently hydrated and hyped up, they piled into Stuart's Honda and headed over to an apartment complex that was decorated for Halloween. Consulting her clipboard, Smith approached Apartment A3, and a young couple emerged from a neighboring unit. "You know me," she said to the man. "We'd appreciate it if you'd consider Kamala Harris." He nodded politely.

"We're with the Democratic Party," Smith added.

"I know you!" Pitts told them. "Both of y'all are registered to vote? You know we're doing early voting."

"When is it?" the woman said.

"It started Tuesday," Smith said. "Go tomorrow, please. We need every vote we can get."

"I'm trying to still look into it," the woman said, carefully. "I'm trying to see."

"See what, baby?" Pitts said. "What you need to see?"



"Kamala," Smith said. "Kamala."

"She's gonna do right by us, honey," Stuart added.

"Yes, Ma'am," the woman replied.

"They're gonna do it," Smith said firmly, after the couple left.

The next door was open when they arrived. A man came out wearing a yellow do-rag and a black Reebok sweatshirt. "We're voting on Monday," he

said.

“Y’all supporting Kamala Harris, I hope?” Smith asked.

He paused. “Yeah.”

“She gonna do right by you,” Stuart said.

“Hope so,” said the man, who introduced himself as Orlando King and said that he worked in a cabinet factory. “I’m tired of working all these hours and not seeing enough of my check,” he said. “Black, white, whatever, I don’t look at race.” He went on, “Trump said he’d cut taxes on overtime. If you believe him.” King said that he wasn’t inclined to.

Four more for Harris, none for Trump; next, on to James Street. The ladies knew that an unpredictable dog often ran loose, so they peered around before getting out. They spotted an older woman named Linda on a porch drinking a beer and scrolling on her phone. A bottle of wasp spray sat at her feet.

“Linda, we come to kidnap you and take you to vote,” Pitts said. Linda smiled and pointed to a woman in a nearby car: her ride to the voting precinct.

They kept walking. Three men sat in front of a brown house. One wore full camo.

“How you doing, sweetie?” the man in camo asked Pitts.

“I’ll be even better if you vote Democrat,” she said.

Who did he plan to vote for? “Camilla,” he said. “I don’t even know about her, but Trump talking crazy right now.”

Crazy talk was everywhere. A few weeks earlier, a lady had opened her door and told the women that Trump sent “a trillion of his personal money to the hurricane victims.” Stuart shook her head. “What can you tell people like that?” ♦

Reporting & Essays

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Onward and Upward with the Arts

Mati Diop and the Cinema of Impossible Returns

The French Senegalese director passed on big-budget Hollywood projects before making her latest film—a fantastical documentary about art restitution.

By Julian Lucas

October 24, 2024



The Musée du Quai Branly is a long ark of a building perched over a garden, whose foliage screens the museum from its busy namesake thoroughfare on the banks of the Seine. Literally overshadowed by the Eiffel Tower, it houses more than three hundred thousand pieces of art from Africa, Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, most of them legacies of France’s colonial empire. Its opening, in 2006, was billed as an enlightened departure from the practice of exhibiting non-European works as anthropological specimens; the building’s architect, [Jean Nouvel](#), described it as a place of spiritual regeneration, where the Western curatorial apparatus would “vanish before the sacred objects so we may enter into communion with them.” But the vibes within

are less enchanting than uncanny. The cavernous main gallery is a maze of shadows and imitation mud walls, where masks look out from between oversized photographs of tropical vegetation. “I’ll never be familiar with this space,” Mati Diop said when we visited last month. “It’s like ‘The Matrix.’”

Diop, a French Senegalese filmmaker who won international renown for her débüt feature, “Atlantics,” seemed viscerally disturbed by the museum, describing its “mise en scène” as depressing, manipulative, and, switching to English, which she speaks fluently, “fucked up.” Everything was wrong, she insisted, from the folkloric condescension of the walls’ earthy colors to the crowded shelves of musical instruments in visible storage, which reminded her of bodies in a morgue. Most troubling were the grim-faced security guards, nearly all of them elderly Black men. “Psychologically, what does it do to a person to spend an entire day in a space whose violent context”—colonialism—“has been completely effaced?” Diop whispered. “And yet it’s everywhere.” She indicated a man in a dark suit beside a colorful beaded crown from the kingdom of Dahomey, now southern Benin. “The presence of these men and of this patrimony in the museum are part of the same story,” she continued. “It’s dizzying.”

Her new film, a fantastical documentary titled “Dahomey,” chronicles the return of the so-called Dahomey treasures, comprising twenty-six of the many art works that French troops seized in the eighteen-nineties while subjugating the kingdom. (A newspaper of the time crowed that the vanquished natives, whose “painted gods” had failed to defend them, “wouldn’t miss the wood.”) Dahomean sculptures were placed in anthropology museums, where they were admired by Picasso and Apollinaire. But in 2018 decades of diplomacy and activism culminated in Emmanuel Macron’s historic decision to repatriate the art works to Benin. Diop’s film follows them from the Quai Branly to a hero’s welcome in Cotonou, the country’s largest city, where they are discussed by students at a local university after an exhibition at the Presidential palace. “I cried for fifteen minutes,” one student says after seeing the show. Another declares, “What was looted more than a century ago is our soul.”

Vexing questions shadow the jubilant homecoming. What does it mean for art works to “go back” to a country that didn’t exist when they were taken? Can they have any meaning for a population alienated from their history? Or

do they risk becoming mere tools of state propaganda? And what about the countless stolen objects that Western museums *haven't* returned? In Diop's otherworldly conceit, these anxieties are voiced by "26"—a defiantly posed statue of the Dahomean king Ghezo, who speaks for the treasures in a fathomless, reverberant growl. (It's one of a trio of royal *bocio*, or power figures, depicting Dahomean sovereigns, and is attributed to the artists Sossa Dede and Bokossa Donvide.) "I'm torn between the fear of not being recognized by anyone and not recognizing anything," 26 frets in Fon, the kingdom's language, wondering, with something like survivor's guilt, why he's been chosen to "return to the surface of time."

We asked a security guard where the treasures had been exhibited before their removal from the museum. Diop had filmed there, but couldn't find where she'd set up her cameras; between the announcement of the works' deinstallation and their flight to Benin, she'd had only two weeks to prepare. "It was like commando operations," she recalled. The Quai Branly did not grant her request for access until Beninese officials, who wanted to record the handover for posterity, interceded on her behalf. Now, back at the scene of her cinematic heist, she gasped at the sight of a mask familiar from Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's "Statues Also Die," a film-essay on plundered art which France banned after its release, in 1953. "It's her," she said, retrieving her phone from a blue Telfar handbag to take a picture. "She's so beautiful. She's so beautiful."

Diop, forty-two, is a slight, poised woman with delicate features and a coolly vigilant bearing. Often seen, much to her chagrin, as "cute," she has wavy, center-parted hair and a beauty mark in one corner of her feathery eyebrows, with doe eyes that leaped, as we wandered the galleries, from vitrine to vitrine. She can be almost aggressively reserved; at one point, when another museumgoer blundered into her personal space, she reacted with mute pique. Yet, when she speaks about her work, it's with a zeal that propels her outward. At times, she gesticulated so emphatically that she touched my shoulders without seeming to notice. "I need to have a sensual and physical relationship to ideas," Diop said. "It's hard for me to create without the idea of transmitting at the same time."

"Dahomey" arrives in American theatres buoyed by its critical success in Europe. (Later, it will be available on the streaming platform *mubi*.) This

February, it won the Golden Bear at the Berlinale, on the heels of Germany’s decision to transfer ownership of its Benin Bronzes to Nigeria. Its première in France, last month, reignited a moribund national debate around the issue, transforming Diop into a fixture on radio and television and landing 26 on the cover of the leftist daily *Libération*. “She’s already had an effect,” Felwine Sarr, a Senegalese intellectual and the co-author of the 2018 Sarr-Savoy report, which guided France’s restitution of cultural heritage to African countries, told me. “This question was framed in terms of the Western debate. ‘Do you have museums? Are you able to take care of the objects? Are you emptying Western museums?’ Now, with the film, we are hearing the voices of the people who are supposed to be mainly concerned.”

“Originally, I’d planned to write a fictional epic, the whole journey of an art work from the moment of its pillage to the moment of its restitution, which I imagined to be in the future,” Diop says of “Dahomey,” explaining that it became a documentary only after she read that the treasures were about to be returned. Before its release in France, the film premiered in Benin and Senegal, where Diop recently established a production company, punningly named Fanta Sy. (Fanta and Sy are common Senegalese names.) Restitution has become her synecdoche for creatively empowering African youth. As she put it to me, “I wanted to make a film that would restore our desire for ourselves.”

The filmmaker’s fervor is inspiring, if occasionally self-serious. Who else would speak, as she did at a recent press event, of restitution as an “irresistible march” that promises to shake the very “order of the imaginary”? Yet Diop’s work justifies such auteurial pronouncements. Hers is a yearning, nocturnal cinema of ambiguous adventures and impossible returns, shuttling between intimate loneliness—a statue’s, a has-been actor’s—and vast issues like decolonization and the migrant crisis. She made “Dahomey” after passing on multimillion-dollar projects in Hollywood. It was hard to doubt her when she said that she became a filmmaker because it was her “only possible path to liberation.”

Applause broke out on Lyon’s Rue du Premier-Film as Diop, with an obliging flourish, pulled a red cloth from the “Wall of Filmmakers” to reveal a plaque inscribed with her name. A small crowd took pictures. Thierry Frémaux, who runs the Cannes Film Festival and the Lumière Institute—

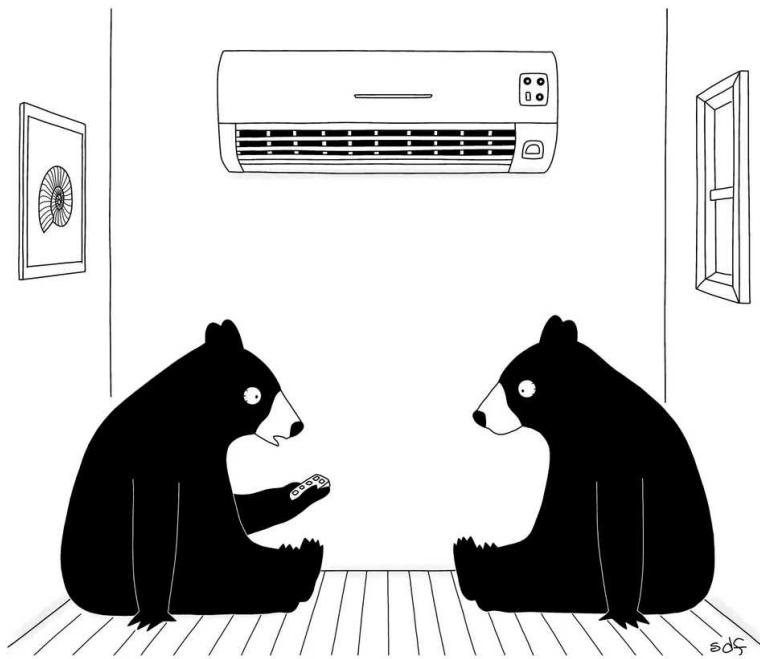
where this impromptu ceremony unfolded last month—clasped her in an avuncular embrace. Soon, dozens of students, many of them Black or brown, had gathered around Diop under the street lights. A young woman with oversized glasses invited her to visit her film school. Another, in a kaffiyeh and fingerless gloves, asked the filmmaker to sign her DVD of “*Atlantics*. ”

Diop’s *début* is a gothic romance, a political fable about labor and [migration](#), and an homage to Dakar, Senegal. A group of young men helping to build a luxury tower fall victim to wage theft and resolve to seek a better life in Spain. Like thousands of others, they perish at sea. But then, impossibly, they return, possessing the bodies of the young women they left behind. Inexplicable fires and fevers strike the city; Dakar, at continental Africa’s westernmost point, is depicted as a sprawl of dust-choked motorways and ghostly beaches edging into the Atlantic’s dark expanse. In one of the final scenes, the boys force their boss to dig graves for them at a seaside cemetery. “Every time you look at the top of the tower, you’ll think of our unburied bodies at the bottom of the ocean,” one says.

Diop cast nonprofessional actors from across Dakar. Amadou Mbow crossed her path at two in the morning in the chic Almadies neighborhood, where he’d been out clubbing. “Me, I believe in destiny,” he told me; though he had never considered acting, and feared religious backlash for the sex scenes, he ended up starring as a young police detective—and occasionally interpreting for his co-star, Mama Sané, who spoke no French. The film was shot in Wolof, Senegal’s lingua franca, which Diop herself labored to understand. But her determination was a language all its own. “If she had to do the scene fifty times, we did the scene fifty times,” Mbow said, recalling an instruction to be “exhausted within an inch of your life” during an interrogation scene. The shoot went on all day: “With Mati, there is no ‘timing,’ only searching until you find.”

“*Atlantics*” débuted at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival, where Diop was the first Black woman ever to compete as a director. Her invitation came as a shock. The film was not only a *début* but a genre fantasy in which nonprofessional actors delivered their lines in an African language. Yet it took home the Grand Prix. (It was subsequently picked up by Netflix, breaking the diaspora language barrier to join a Black film renaissance in the United States.) For Diop, who until then was largely known for starring in

[Claire Denis](#)'s intimate father-daughter drama "35 Shots of Rum" (2008), its victory was an "LSD experience." The vertigo was evident in her acceptance speech. Four minutes in, and not yet through with her solemn expressions of gratitude, Diop was escorted offstage by Sylvester Stallone to the tinkling strains of Camille Saint-Saëns's "Aquarium."



"I was impressed by this woman—so young, looking so cute and fragile—but so strong and so precise in conversation," Frémaux recalled over drinks. We were at the institute's café, just across from the hangar where some of the world's first films were created. The menu specializes in wines made by filmmakers; we had Francis Ford Coppolas. "Atlantics" had a "Senegalese essence" that transcended Diop's mixed origins, Frémaux went on, characterizing the filmmaker as "a pure artist, a pure poetess, and a great politician, too." In 2022, she directed and narrated a campaign ad for La France Insoumise, a left-wing party. It zooms in on the faces in a movie theatre, celebrating the diversity of a country where the Lumière brothers invented cinema as we know it. "In every genre and color, we laugh, we ponder, we cry," Diop intones.

The filmmaker joined us midway through drinks, having just left a screening of "Dahomey" in one of the institute's theatres. "The sound was perfect," she told Frémaux. (In Marseille, where she'd just held another *avant-*

première, it had been far too low.) She's exacting about audio, especially 26's voice, which is meant to resound like a tremor from below. "The presence needs to be disturbing and provocative," she said. "The film isn't a ballad—it's a journey." She conceives of "Dahomey" as an opera with two choruses: the students, representing Africa's future, and the treasures, trailing history's ghosts. "It should be fundamentally strange to experience such traces of coloniality, which are here in France, as over there."

Lyon, a tidy provincial capital, feels worlds away from West Africa. Yet not far from the institute was the Catholic Society of African Missions, which owns, and is expected to return, Dahomean works. Nearby was the university where [Frantz Fanon](#) wrote "Black Skin, White Masks." The hidden afterlives of empire are a through line in Diop's films. "Dahomey" opens, in Paris, with a nocturnal scene of flashing Eiffel Tower tchotchkies, sold by an undocumented African street vender just offscreen. It's a characteristically oblique touch; as Judith Lou Lévy, who co-produced the film, told me, "Mati has a special relationship to the invisible."

Sensory precision is crucial to her films, because they leave so much to the imagination. "Atlantics" evokes the spectral presence of its drowned migrants with little more than tinted contact lenses—to change the eye color of the possessed—and a soundtrack of austere electronica, by the Kuwaiti composer [Fatima Al Qadiri](#). (The director wanted a score that conveyed the feeling of being possessed by a djinn.) "Dahomey" owes much of its atmosphere of elemental futurism to the synths of the pioneering French Beninese keyboardist Wally Badarou. "Some directors are musicians who make films, and I feel like one of them," Diop explained. "Before it does anything else, a film ought to emit a frequency."

Her evocative minimalism is partially motivated by a desire to accord her subjects a degree of autonomy. Inaudible conversations recur in her films. In "Atlantics," the young migrants resolve to leave Senegal in a scene without dialogue. Their deaths occur offscreen; we learn of their last moments only when Sané's character, Ada, briefly reunites with the anguished ghost of her lover, Souleiman. "It puts the spectator in an active position, because it's she who has to imagine the shipwreck, make the journey," Diop says. "It's not something that you consume."

A different approach reigns in most Western films about Africa. Last year, Matteo Garrone ventured into territory not dissimilar to that of “*Atlantics*,” with [“Io Capitano,”](#) loosely inspired by the true story of a West African boy who attempted to reach Italy. Garrone’s Senegalese protagonist endures torture in a Libyan prison, crises at sea, and a harrowing Sahara crossing that features C.G.I. mirages and sumptuous aerial photography. Diop avoided the film until it was offered as an in-flight movie. In her view, Garrone’s Dakar is too sanitized, his narrative too sentimental, and his migrants so touchingly naïve as to defy credibility. “If it can help white racists to have a bit of empathy, maybe it’s good,” she said. But it’s “the antithesis of my approach.”

Diop feels that her own work is often misunderstood in Europe. “France is too much,” she complains. “They don’t get it. ‘She’s a filmmaker, but she looks like an actress. She’s French, but her films are so strange, hybrid and talking Wolof. There’s zombies.’” She observed that she hadn’t appeared on a single magazine cover in the country since winning the Grand Prix. The audience that Diop really wants to reach is in Africa, but she sometimes wonders if that’s a realistic aspiration. She was gratified by the response to “*Dahomey*” in Benin, but the entire country has just one movie theatre—which, in a further irony, belongs to a chain controlled by a right-wing French billionaire known as the “King of Africa,” Vincent Bolloré. “I’m addressing this film to these youth, who don’t go to the theatres,” Diop said. “Sometimes I question the pertinence of the medium I chose.” But she had little time to explore those doubts before she was whisked off to a Q. & A. A glass of red wine remained full on the table. Diop had left her Coppola untouched.

The next morning, Diop and I rode the high-speed train from Lyon to Paris. We took two seats in the café car, where she neatly quartered a croque monsieur as fog-shrouded countryside raced by. Her mother, Christine Brossart, was born in Paris, and worked as a photographer—and once as a Sahara guide—before pursuing a career as an art director in advertising. Mati’s father, Wasis Diop, is a guitarist and composer, who emigrated from Dakar to Paris; his jazz-rock fusion band, West African Cosmos, helped to establish the city’s world-music scene. (Father and daughter recently collaborated on a video.) The marriage of sight and sound would have been

obvious enough without the addition of Diop's uncle, the legendary Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty.

Mambéty, who made only two feature-length films, earned a permanent place in the pantheon of world cinema with "["Touki Bouki"](#)" (1973), a picaresque adventure set in and around Dakar just after independence. The city is saturated with color and dizzy with life. A young couple gallivants around on a motorcycle with the skull of a zebu between its handlebars, managing to scrape up enough cash for passage to Europe. Then, when the time comes to embark, the two are separated—the man balks and the woman boards. Mambéty's camera never leaves Senegal, but the film is pervaded with a fantasy of elsewhere, conveyed through the hypnotic repetition of [Josephine Baker](#)'s "Paris, Paris, Paris."

His niece's longing ran in the opposite direction. Mati Clementine Diop was born in 1982 and reared in Paris's Twelfth Arrondissement, a quiet residential area whose Hausmannian architecture and lack of diversity felt stultifying. Christine and Wasis, who separated when she was eight, nurtured her creativity but neglected the peculiar challenges of her identity. "My parents were very out of it," she recalled. "They seemed to romanticize the idea of me being mixed, as if it meant the end of racism." Diop has been described as "African film royalty," a phrase that conjures up a Sofia Coppola of the Sahel, but neither cinema nor the continent was an inevitable discovery. At first, she wanted to become a singer-songwriter, training her voice on Aaliyah songs and learning bass in emulation of Meshell Ndegeocello.

By eighteen, she wanted to direct. One culprit was a scene of Gena Rowlands dancing in John Cassavetes's "A Woman Under the Influence," which showed her how camerawork could expand a performer's range of self-expression. "I was moved by the space that was made for that woman to be," Diop recalled. She became similarly infatuated with the work of American filmmakers like Larry Clark and with the photography of [Nan Goldin](#). Diop briefly enrolled in a self-directed film course at Le Fresnoy, an art school and institute, in 2007. But staying behind the camera proved a struggle. "I felt myself to be prey very early," she told me, recalling the overtures of male filmmakers who wanted to cast her in their projects. Directing was a preëmptive rejection of being objectified onscreen. Diop

said of her thinking, “I’m going to control my narrative. I’m not going to become the ‘cute’ mixed actress of white cinema, only directed by old white men.”

Ironically, it was her role in “35 Shots of Rum” that set her course. After a few months at Le Fresnoy, she was alerted by a friend, the actor Grégoire Colin, about an open role in a new film by Claire Denis. She was thrilled. “I wanted to be in a film like ‘Trouble Every Day,’ ” she told me—Denis’s erotic thriller, starring Vincent Gallo, about a man obsessed with a female serial killer. “This was my fantasy, to do something *rock*.” She’d long idolized a “white trash” aesthetic associated with directors like Harmony Korine. But Denis’s new film was about an aging Black train conductor living on the outskirts of Paris, who gently pressures his too dutiful daughter to leave their apartment and live her own life.

“When I read the script, I was so disappointed,” Diop recalled, burying her face in her hands. “‘This is so uncool!’ ” She admired Denis but had no desire to appear in a “social Black French film.” Then she learned that another biracial woman considered for the part had been unwilling to stop straightening her hair. Diop, who then wore her hair similarly, was jolted.

“I had read Fanon, I knew that it was fucked up,” she explained, but she hadn’t truly confronted her own self-avoidance. At their first meeting, she told Denis that she wanted to be a director, not an actress. But when Denis saw her opposite Alex Descas, who played the father, and Colin, who played her character’s paramour, it was clear that they had chemistry. “When I finished,” Denis told me, “the link with Mati was very strong.”

Denis had no idea that her young lead was the niece of Mambéty, whom she’d once met, and whose “Touki Bouki” was one of her favorite films. Nor could she have known that, for Diop, appearing in “35 Shots” would mean coming to grips with her African roots. “She told me that she never saw herself as Black before my film,” Denis recalled. “I thought she was joking.” Diop told me that playing a Black man’s daughter was a “huge coming out,” and said it confirmed her belief in cinema’s power to emancipate. “I went through the mirror, and not just as a director-actress,” she said. “Something had actually changed.”

After “35 Shots of Rum,” Diop visited Dakar for the first time since her late teens. It was the tenth anniversary of Mambéty’s death, and she travelled with her father, who had scored one of his brother’s films. Djibril and Wasis had shared a house on the tiny island of Ngor, where nearly everyone knew them. (The family is Lebu, an ethnic group believed to be Dakar’s original inhabitants.) Diop recalled being struck by seeing her father back in his birthplace. “I felt the weight of the exile’s vertigo—of the choice to leave or stay—condensed in ‘Touki Bouki’ but also in their lives and mine.” She began to feel that it was time to take her place as an artist in the family, and to establish a dialogue with an earlier wave of African film.

The result was the short “A Thousand Suns” (2013), in which the male lead of “Touki Bouki,” Magaye Niang, plays a version of himself. “That’s me,” he tells a group of kids at a Dakar screening of the 1973 film; they mock him in response. His acting dreams have gone nowhere, and it begins to seem that his entire post-independence generation—scorned by the young and abandoned by émigrés—has missed its rendezvous with destiny. When he calls his co-star in “Touki Bouki,” who is working on an oil rig in Alaska, she seems equally unfulfilled. “You don’t have a home until you leave,” he tells the woman in one dreamlike sequence, which envisions him pursuing her naked spectre across the tundra. “And, once you’ve gone, you can’t come back.”

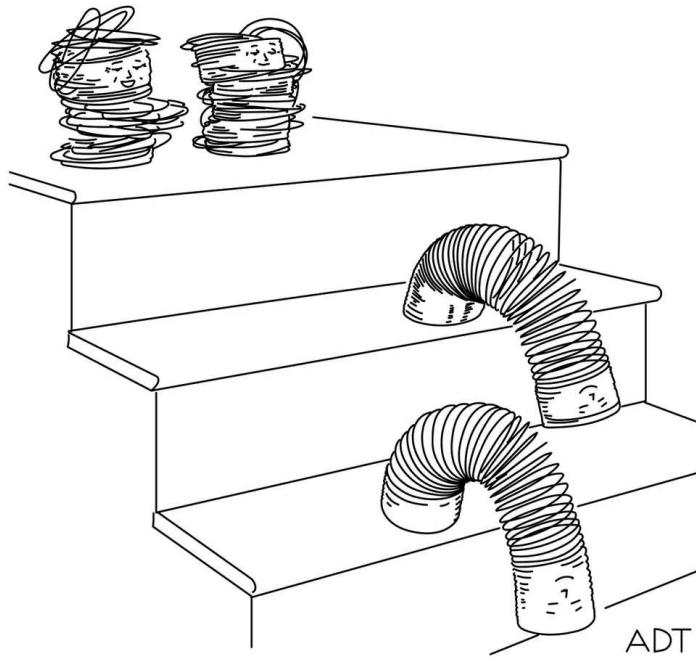
While beginning to shoot the film, in 2009, Diop saw Dakar anew on rides with a beloved cousin, Cheikh Mbaye. “We spent our time exploring the city on his scooter, making images day and night,” Diop said. “It’s all you need for cinema.” Mbaye, who now lives in Texas, told me about Diop’s passion for seeing the city from a lighthouse, and catching it unawares at dawn. “There were times when we missed the sunrise because I’d been hanging out late with my friends,” he recalled, laughing. “She would be *super, super* upset about it.”

As Diop embraced her Senegalese heritage, Mbaye’s friends dreamed of migrating to Europe. But theirs was no longer the fanciful aspiration of her uncle’s time. It was born of a period of economic contraction and of a despair that she managed to film one night during a fireside conversation between her cousin and two of his friends on the beach. One, a poor tailor, recounts his deportation from Europe, and swears that he’ll try to make it

there again: “May I die en route if I lie—I would get on board. There’s nothing but dust in my pockets.”

“Dakar started to feel like a city of the living dead, with youth throwing themselves into the ocean,” Diop told me. She felt an almost supernatural calling to tell the story of this “ghost generation,” and made a short called “Atlantics” with her footage of the conversation on the beach. But her feature of the same name took ten years to realize. Back in Paris, she began a fruitful collaboration with Judith Lou Lévy. The two met at a night club, and bonded over a shared interest in genre films. Before long, Lévy had established a small company that went on to co-produce “Atlantics” and “Dahomey.”

“Mati loves to put her camera on feminine figures, on their desiring bodies, on their relationship with what’s missing,” Lévy told me, characterizing her films as obsessed with the links between death and sensuality. The two co-wrote a homoerotic short called “Snow Canon,” about a teen-ager who develops feelings for her American babysitter in the French Alps. The short’s exploration of abandonment, nature, and the bonds between women ultimately found its way into “Atlantics.”



Nowadays, Diop is at work on a feature, set between France and Africa. But she also fantasizes about moving to New York and buying a dog. (A few weeks ago, she visited for the New York Film Festival, where “Dahomey” was screened before a packed house at Lincoln Center.) “I feel so respected as a young filmmaker,” she said of working in the United States—where, she believes, it’s easier to cross boundaries like French and African, actor and director, genre fantasy and *cinéma d’auteur*. “I would definitely make a great American film.” But she’s still waiting for a Hollywood pitch tempting enough to draw her away from her own fixations: “I’m an artist, I’m a creator, so I need to invent.”

Diop was approached about directing “The Woman King,” a big-budget action movie about Dahomey’s legendary “Amazon” warriors, set in the eighteen-twenties. (The movie, which was released in 2022, drew criticism for minimizing the kingdom’s involvement in the slave trade.) She says she would have loved to work with Viola Davis, who starred in the film, but couldn’t bring herself to shoot an epic about the Fon kingdom with English-speaking actors.

“I don’t think it’s wrong for *them* to do it,” she explained, but the project was in “absolute contradiction” with her own mission. “My name is Mati Diop,” she went on. “I’m African. If you come to me to propose a film that deals with Africa, you’ve gotta speak the language.”

“I won’t budge!” Claire Denis exclaimed, lifting her knees to let a group of newcomers make their way to their seats. We were in the Max Linder Panorama, a historic Paris cinema. The place was full of artists and activists, including Assa Traoré, a leader in France’s racial-justice movement. A prominent rap journalist introduced Diop—whose success had even reached his mother, in Benin—as “*une nana de ouf*,” or an amazing chick. Diop thanked her audience for coming out “in force,” alluding to France’s rightward tilt as she stressed the political importance of Black imagination. “Macron doesn’t have the power to restitute,” she declared as the lights went down. “*We* have the power to restitute.”

Creative works about art restitution have tended to look backward. Films like “Statues Also Die”—and, more recently, Isaac Julien’s video installation [“Once Again . . . \(Statues Never Die\)”](#)—are melancholy reckonings,

dwelling on looted art works as witnesses of colonial devastation. A more mischievous conceit is the artifact as avenger: Killmonger seizing a vibranium axe from a British museum in “Black Panther,” or Yinka Shonibare’s recent sculpture “Monument to the Restitution of the Mind and Soul,” a ziggurat packed with replica Benin Bronzes and a bust of a British officer imprisoned in a vitrine: Who’s the artifact now? By contrast, Diop’s film leaves behind history and wish fulfillment, preferring to explore what restitution means in the messy present and uncertain future.

Onscreen, we were back at the Quai Branly, watching a curator bandage 26’s damaged leg. “I was already in physical relation with the statue,” Denis later told me. The scene left her “moved like a child.” Denis spent part of her youth in Cameroon, where her father, a colonial administrator, disapproved of colleagues who decorated their homes with ritual masks. “Dahomey” dramatizes the rebirth of such curios as living entities. The journey from Paris to Cotonou unfolds in the womb-like darkness of the airplane’s hold—which we experience from 26’s perspective through a camera that Diop had sealed in the sculpture’s crate.

The art historian Bénédicte Savoy, who co-wrote the restitution report, travelled in parallel with the treasures, on a plane with Beninese officials. “Mati’s film is a U.F.O.,” she told me. Jackie Chan had made action movies about the theft of Chinese art works, and there were documentaries (and a Nollywood melodrama) about the British sacking of Benin City. But “Dahomey” confronted the epistemological question at the heart of restitution, Savoy said: “How can Western museums tell us that such objects are just objects—with a weight, an age, a material, et cetera—when so much agency swirls around them?”

Savoy has argued that restitution should involve not just the return of plundered works but their reintegration into sacred and communal contexts. But you don’t have to believe that art works are alive to see them as actors in history. The heart of Diop’s film is a spirited discussion among students at the University of Abomey-Calavi, just outside Cotonou, which moves fluidly between the art works themselves and the broader questions they’ve engendered. The students touch on class, religion, language, geopolitics, and even Benin’s government, a staunch ally of France with an increasingly authoritarian leader.

“We all know that an ancestor of our President, Patrice Talon, was one of the interpreters who facilitated the plunder,” a student claims. Others see the return of so few works as political pandering or even a “savage insult,” and wonder what economic or military concessions their own government has offered in exchange. Still more complicated are the students’ feelings about the treasures. One says that if the objects were reconnected to Benin’s vodun rituals they would inspire fear; another worries that at museums they’ll be inaccessible to ordinary Beninese.

“I grew up with Disney, I grew up watching ‘Avatar,’ ” a student says, but never an animated movie about Dahomey’s last sovereign, Béhanzin. (France exiled Béhanzin to the Caribbean; Diop hired a Haitian writer, Makenzy Orcel, to compose the voice of 26, playing on the parallels between the scattering of African art and life in the diaspora.) “All I want to say, I can’t say it,” a young woman laments, arguing for the use of Fon and other national languages in schools. “I’m speaking French, but I’m not French. I’m from Abomey.”

After the screening at the Max Linder Panorama, Diop, her friends, and several students from the film gathered at L’Embuscade, an African-Caribbean restaurant in the Ninth. Beyoncé played as a disco ball revolved. Diop flashed a toothy smile I’d seldom seen. Her films tend to reach their climax in moments of unexpected celebration; in “Atlantics,” the bereaved young lover awakens from her ghostly farewell smiling, as morning light fills a bar on the beach. “It’s not so much the impossibility of return as the possibility of transcending it,” Diop says of her films. “I want to create a space where lost lives can find second breath.”

For “Dahomey,” she wrote a sci-fi epilogue set in the twenty-seventies, and another sequence that envisioned the spirits of the treasures possessing a Beninese youth. But they didn’t fit within the budget. Instead, like “Atlantics,” the film concludes with a closeup of a young woman at a night club. The camera zooms in on her slumbering face as revellers dance in slow motion amid green lights and empty beers. On a second viewing, it occurred to me that she might be the source of the statue’s voice, the whole century-long saga tumbling out of a Black girl’s dream.

Watching “Dahomey,” I was often reminded of a story from “A Thousand and One Nights.” A djinn entombed in a jar on the seabed gets caught in a fisherman’s net and lifted to the surface, where he tastes freedom for the first time in centuries. He offers the fisherman a reward—not three wishes, but a choice as to the manner of his death. Deliverance has been so long in coming that its arrival inspires only resentment. They take from us thousands of pieces, a debater in the film thunders, and they restitute only twenty-six: “In a hundred years, they’ll restitute two. We won’t be there then!”

Is 26 too late? Earlier this year, legislation on the restitution of cultural property was indefinitely postponed in France’s National Assembly, where the rise of the far right, in parallel with a generational turn against Paris in African countries, has left little appetite for further transfers. Last year, Nigeria’s government alarmed Western art professionals by giving the traditional ruler of the Benin kingdom—not to be confused with the nation of Benin—authority over the returned Benin Bronzes, leaving him free to decide whether and how to exhibit them. Today, Dahomey’s twenty-six treasures are back in boxes, because the construction of the new museums meant to house them is behind schedule.

“Dahomey” is full of sly acknowledgments that repatriation isn’t quite liberation. Diop zooms in on a white supervisor barking orders at Beninese workers. She cuts from a Dahomey throne decorated with shackled slaves to laborers at work on the Presidential palace in Cotonou. During an eerie night scene at the fortified capital complex, where sprinklers mist the air in time with the patrolling soldiers, 26 says that contemporary Benin is “far removed from the country I saw in my dreams.” One wonders how the Dahomean kings might have reacted to a future in which French is the official language, the currency is controlled from Paris, and billboards—as one shot reveals—advertise skin-lightening creams. But the subtlest insight of Diop’s film might be that restitution doesn’t have to undo the past in order to be right for a necessarily imperfect future.

Just before the pomp and circumstance of the official exhibition of the works in Cotonou, we see two construction workers admire the newly returned treasures in an otherwise vacant gallery. They can’t be older than twenty, and their silent fascination is more persuasive than a thousand Sarr-Savoy

reports. The boys speak, looking up at a towering throne, in a conversation to which we aren't privy. Then, at a signal from above, they amble upstairs, recalled to the endless work of building their country. ♦

A Reporter at Large

The Aid Workers Who Risk Their Lives to Bring Relief to Gaza

As the war grinds on, logistical challenges are compounded by politics, repeated evacuations, and the fear of being killed.

By Dorothy Wickenden

October 28, 2024



In an unheated warehouse in Rafah, Ahmad Najjar ran a power cable from the battery of a banged-up company car to his laptop and sat down to work. Najjar, a thirty-eight-year-old pharmacist, is a medical-donations officer for American Near East Refugee Aid, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. It was a cold day in March, and he wore a jacket and a vest as he inventoried towers of shrink-wrapped cartons of donations. There were blood-pressure cuffs, disinfectant, and medicine, but no crutches or oxygen cylinders. Trucks headed for Gaza that contain any metal are sent back at the border.

Najjar had jerry-rigged a workstation: two stacked boxes for a chair and a larger one for a desk, where he propped his laptop to set up a distribution

plan. The supplies were urgently needed. After half a year of war, fewer than a dozen hospitals in Gaza remained functional, and then just barely. Nurses used dishcloths as bandages; surgeons operated by cell-phone light, steadying themselves against the booms of incoming shells.

The organization Najjar worked for, known as Anera, was founded in 1968, to provide aid to Palestinian refugees of the Six-Day War. Today, it has a permanent staff of twelve in Gaza and a hundred in the region, supplemented by volunteers and contractors as needed. Anera disperses about a hundred and fifty million dollars a year in humanitarian and development aid, from donors around the world, and oversees many of the programs that it supplies. Sean Carroll, Anera's president and C.E.O., describes it as a "last-mile delivery partner in Gaza."

These days, the last mile is difficult to navigate. Gaza is uniquely isolated—governed for the past seventeen years by Hamas and subject to an unremitting blockade by Israel. After thousands of Hamas soldiers and other militants surged into Israel on October 7th, killing some twelve hundred people and taking more than two hundred hostages, Israel began dropping more than seventy thousand tons of bombs, devastating an already precarious place. As aid agencies mobilized, the Israeli government prepared to obstruct them. "Humanitarian aid to Gaza?" Israel Katz, who was then the energy minister, said on social media. "No electrical switch will be turned on, no water hydrant will be opened, and no fuel truck will enter until the Israeli abductees are returned home." For two weeks, not a single aid truck entered Gaza.

During the past year, as more than forty-two thousand Palestinians have been killed, the Israel Defense Forces have restricted foreign journalists' access to Gaza to brief and highly controlled "visits." But I have been in close contact with Najjar and some of his colleagues since the spring. Throughout the war, they have made unthinkable choices with precious few resources. With most of the Gazan health system in ruins, they established field clinics—makeshift structures of white nylon and wooden struts—and recruited displaced medical personnel to staff them. In one note, Najjar said that he and his team had saved a man's leg from amputation by treating a suppurating wound, but had to turn away a mother whose child had hemophilia. "This is out of our hands because we don't have the

medication,” he wrote. Najjar was known for a buoyant sense of humor, but he could manage only a resigned equanimity: “We have success days and fail days.”

Before the war, Anera’s work in Gaza was focussed less on saving lives than on improving them. It funded early-childhood education programs, trained adults in software engineering, and supported entrepreneurial ventures by women. Electricity, always erratic in Gaza, was a primary concern. Without power, pumps don’t work, and sanitation fails. In heavy rains, septic tanks overflow, flooding the streets and spreading disease. Anera installed new wastewater facilities, along with wells for drinking water and solar panels to run them. Its employees on the ground, all Palestinian, scouted communities’ needs and suggested new projects to Anera’s office in Washington. When Najjar wasn’t distributing medical goods, he was developing proposals for diabetes treatment and children’s dental care.

The bombardments last October upended priorities. The I.D.F. ordered more than a million Palestinians to evacuate the north, and refugees began pouring into Khan Younis, Najjar’s home town. At first, he recalled, he couldn’t imagine that he would be displaced: “I didn’t expect for a moment that I will experience it myself.” He had a comfortable home, shared with his wife, their five children, and his extended family.

But the bombing was getting closer. Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza and a principal planner of the October 7th assault, grew up in a refugee camp in Khan Younis, and Israel believed that he and his lieutenants were hiding in a labyrinthine tunnel network beneath the city. The campaign to dislodge them would clearly be devastating. The Israelis used two-thousand-pound bombs, many of them U.S.-made, which smash every structure and living creature within six hundred feet. Determined not to flee, Najjar moved his relatives from the third floor of their house to the first, then reconsidered and moved back up. He’d decided to “be killed with my family quickly, instead of dying under rubble and suffering.”

In November, Israeli jets began dropping leaflets, warning the residents of Khan Younis to evacuate. Some contained a verse from the Quran, referring to both the Biblical deluge and the attacks of October 7th, which Hamas called Operation Al-Aqsa Flood: “Then the Flood overtook them, while they

persisted in wrongdoing.” Najjar remained at home for another six weeks, but, as battles escalated nearby between the I.D.F. and Hamas’s Khan Younis Brigade, he and his family finally left.

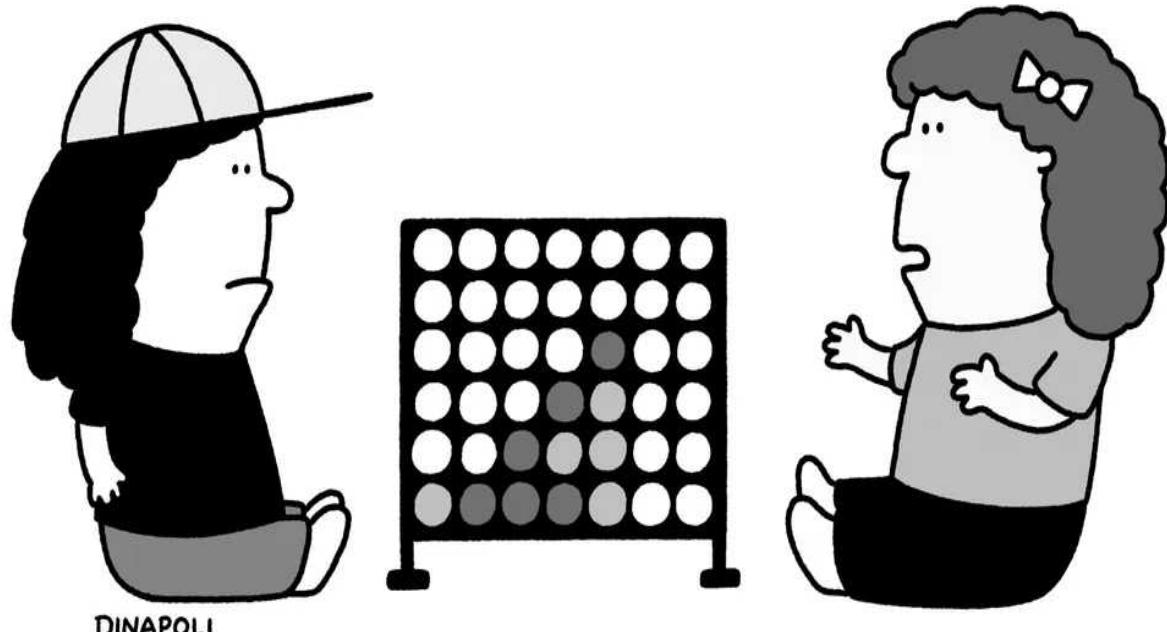
The I.D.F. was sending Khan Younis residents to Rafah, in the far south, and to al-Mawasi, a newly designated safe zone to the west. Najjar and his family were ordered to al-Mawasi. A scrap of sandy Mediterranean coast with virtually no electricity, water, fuel, or food, it had become a congested encampment for hundreds of thousands of refugees. Though no bombs fell there in the early months of the war, there was little protection from the elements, and the sanitary conditions were abysmal. “When you see your children get ill several times because of unclean water, and you know the cause but you don’t have the solution,” Najjar wrote, “to see them shiver from the cold and you have nothing to do, to see the water leaking inside the tent when it rains—this made me die inside a million times.” He described the winter at al-Mawasi as “the black months in my life,” saying, “They killed our humanity.”

In al-Mawasi, as in the rest of Gaza, life revolved around securing the necessities for survival. Even after Israel began allowing some aid to enter, the trucks had to wait for days at the border; witnesses at the Rafah crossing observed lines backed up for miles. Once inside, convoys were sometimes beset by desperate crowds and armed gangs. The transit of aid is overseen by an Israeli agency called *COGAT*, for Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories. Amid the shortages, *COGAT* became a target of outrage among Palestinians and aid workers, likened by one security expert to a prison gatekeeper.

One of Najjar’s colleagues, a program manager named Suad Lubbad, served as an unofficial shelter coördinator for Anera workers in al-Mawasi. Lubbad, fifty-five, is an even-keeled woman with a Ph.D. in human development and a warm, brisk manner. Since June, she has been running a series of mother-and-child clinics, which Anera established with support from *Unicef*. Between shifts, she arranges cleaning details and organizes women to bake bread.

Before the war, Lubbad led an Anera program that worked with farmers and women’s coöperatives to provide breakfast—fruit, milk, cheese, and spinach

pies—to schoolchildren. Learning materials were scarce, so she showed students how to use Styrofoam food containers to grow seeds, and how to recycle the foil wrapping inside for drawing paper.



As the first bombs fell, Lubbad—a single mother since her husband died, eight years ago—fled Gaza City with her three grown children. Until I asked, she didn't mention that she'd left family behind; an air strike had killed fourteen of her relatives, including her sister and her sister's children. Like some ninety per cent of her fellow-Gazans, she was now an internally displaced person.

In a video tour, Lubbad walks through Anera's corner of al-Mawasi: sandy alleyways, white tents, a few plastic stools, clotheslines sagging under the day's wash. A diminutive woman in a beige head scarf, she squints at the camera and says, "The good thing here is that we are having olive trees around us." At times, she described displacement to me as an educational experience: "We have people who had no idea how to light a fire who now do this every night." But in candid moments she conceded that life in a tent camp was gruelling. "We sleep on the floor," she said in June. "I have backaches. We see many kinds of insects. It's very, very hot, and the sunshine is everywhere. We don't have gas to cook our food." The obstacles of the war made her job nearly impossible. "You want to sleep to get rid of

the whole exhausting day,” she said. “Then you wake up another day to go to work.”

Lubbad opened mobile clinics where they were needed most, setting up in tents or unoccupied buildings. Her patients seemed almost as if they were being attacked by the camp itself. They suffered from skin ailments caused by contaminated sand, or by scabies, bedbugs, and lice. Rat bites were a hazard, as were infections from bathing in seawater polluted by garbage and human waste. Hepatitis and dysentery afflicted people already stricken with grief. One fourteen-year-old boy told Lubbad, “I’m sad that my father has been martyred and I couldn’t say goodbye to him. And I’m sad because even our house that has so many memories with Dad has exploded.”

Traumas were compounded by the lack of basic commodities. It was common for women to go a week without bathing because they had no soap. Others, lacking shampoo, cut off their hair. A colleague of Lubbad’s told me, “They’ve lost what it feels like to be a woman. They feel like their identity has been taken away.” Lubbad issued “dignity kits,” containing a hairbrush, a toothbrush, undergarments, sanitary pads, and light head coverings.

The most pressing problem was hunger. When nonprofits were able to get food trucks across the border, they began a fraught process of triage, distributing such staples as beans and lentils, and occasionally meat, to wherever there were passable roads and the need was most urgent. For people without cooking facilities, Anera set up community kitchens, where cooks tended stockpots that produced meals for hundreds of families. It was not remotely enough.

Lubbad spoke about the pressures on pregnant women, hearing the battles at night “and not knowing how to reach the hospital, not having enough food for this baby.” Women were depressed, she told me: “They are facing a lot of troubles to make life easier for their families,” going out each day to search for food and firewood, and cooking whatever they secured. Their husbands apparently weren’t much help. “You know, women can do many things,” she said. “Men, I don’t know, they aren’t able to do so many things at the same time.”

As hunger deepened, the U.N. regularly reported that Israel curtailed truck deliveries into the territory, and the International Criminal Court alleged that Benjamin Netanyahu and the defense minister, Yoav Gallant, were using the “starvation of civilians as a method of warfare.” Brigadier General Elad Goren, who directs *COGAT*’s efforts in Gaza, brusquely dismissed the charges, insisting that the real problem was the U.N.’s inefficiencies. Though he acknowledged some challenges—“Food insecurity, maybe. Difficulties in access and movement, maybe”—he claimed, “There is no famine in Gaza, period. We check how many calories are entering every day per person. We are not limiting the number of trucks. We are facilitating.”

Stories in the American press have refuted that claim, and more directly implicated the Biden Administration in the crisis. In April, after U.S.A.I.D. and the State Department’s refugees bureau presented clear evidence that Israel had purposefully held back food and medicine from Gaza, President Biden chose to go ahead with weapons shipments. Lubbad evaded the debate, relating only what she saw in her clinics. This summer, she said, “moderate acute malnutrition” was more common than life-threatening “severe acute malnutrition.” For the less dire cases, at least, she had the necessary nutritional supplements—“So far, so good.” But it was worse in the north, which was virtually inaccessible to aid convoys for months. Oxfam reported that people there were subsisting on the equivalent of less than a can of beans per day, and that ninety-five per cent of the territory had no access to clean water.

After Israeli intelligence found continued Hamas activity in Gaza City, the I.D.F. resumed a concerted initiative, effectively blockading the north. Sami Matar, who leads many of Anera’s deliveries, described harrowing journeys there over the summer. On one, I.D.F. soldiers fired a machine gun at his car, damaging the tires and the gas tank. On another, a drone lowered to eye level, and a disembodied voice ordered him to get out and unpack bags of clothes and hygiene products for inspection: “Open the green bag. Open the yellow bag.” In August, he managed to deliver twelve hundred parcels of produce to Gaza City. Upon returning, he reported extreme shortages of milk, vegetables, meat, and medicine. Scarcity led to preposterous prices: tomatoes cost ninety-six dollars a pound. His boss told him that he was being reckless; he had a family to care for. He told her, “If I die, I’m going to die doing my job.”

Under international law, nations at war are obligated to protect humanitarian personnel. In Gaza, aid groups rely on *COGAT* to facilitate the practice of “deconfliction”—rules meant to reduce the risk that workers are mistaken for militants or inadvertently enter combat zones. Before missions, Anera supplies the names and nationalities of the workers involved, the cars’ makes and contents, and the convoys’ routes. *COGAT* is expected to convey the information to fighting units, but I.D.F. and intelligence officers can overrule its plans and directives.

Carroll, Anera’s C.E.O., said that the decision of whether to fully coöperate with *COGAT* was tricky: “Should you be more or less visible?” Humanitarian workers don’t carry weapons, and they worry about attracting attention from the I.D.F. and from militants, who are known to hijack trucks. Some organizations reportedly avoid trouble by paying Hamas, or by handing over a portion of the cargo. (Carroll said emphatically that Anera has no contact with Hamas or any belligerent.)

Goren maintained that the deconfliction process operated smoothly. “We are working shoulder to shoulder,” he said. “When an ambulance needs to move, when a U.N. team needs to bring medical supplies, when a pipeline needs to be fixed, it’s coördinated perfectly, with not an incident.” He conceded, though, that at times “complications arise.” Observers enumerate such complications as blocked roadways, looting, Hamas activities, and misdirected I.D.F. targeting orders.

The relationship between *COGAT* and aid groups was more strained than Goren admitted. Israel has complained for decades that *UNRWA*, the United Nations agency that provides the majority of Gaza’s health care, education, and social services, is a hostile presence. In January, the Israeli government named a hundred and ninety *UNRWA* staff members as “hardened fighters”—nineteen of whom it accused of taking part in the October 7th attack. Eighteen countries immediately suspended more than four hundred and thirty million dollars in funding. An independent investigation acknowledged that *UNRWA* facilities could have been used to store weapons, but concluded that Israel had provided no persuasive evidence that significant numbers of staffers were terrorists. The donations resumed (except for the U.S. portion, frozen until March). The U.N.’s internal inquiry cleared ten employees and fired nine others, while saying that Israel had not

sufficiently verified evidence against them—a waffling response that enabled *UNRWA* to continue its work.

Carroll objected to what he sees as a reflexive Israeli assumption: “‘All Palestinians are terrorists.’ Really? ‘Every humanitarian worker is a sympathizer?’” Although Anera has never been accused of employing militants, it has its own problems with *COGAT*. “Let me count the ways,” Carroll said. “Machinations. Arbitrary changes in rules, down to nail clippers removed at a checkpoint and the truck turned back. In May, we started preparing shipments of frozen meat for the Eid al-Adha festival in June. The first was delivered in September. Tons of meat are still stuck in Jordan and Egypt.”

On the afternoon of March 8th, Najjar was working at the distribution center in Rafah when he got a visit from Anera’s logistics coördinator, Mousa Shawwa. The two had business to transact—Shawwa was picking up supplies for mobile clinics—but there was also gossip to catch up on, and Shawwa wanted to ask Najjar about treating his mother’s hypertension. Shawwa was known as a consummate fixer. When Anera officers were told that they’d have to wait a week for a permit to enter Gaza, he secured it in a day. When his boss asked if jackets could be made with the Anera logo, a tailor he knew rushed to fill the order. Najjar, who’d worked with Shawwa for thirteen years, described him as “Anera Superman.”

After packing up his supplies, Shawwa returned to the apartment in central Gaza where he and his family were staying. As he chatted with his wife, Dua, and her brother, an Israeli missile crashed into the building. Dua later told Human Rights Watch, “I lost consciousness immediately and only woke up later in the hospital to find out that I had lost Mousa and my brother.” She was treated for a fractured hand and for a head wound. Dima, their thirteen-year-old daughter, had cuts all over and a broken foot. Karim, their six-year-old son, had a brain bleed. He died on March 19th.



When Najjar got the news, “I was not able to speak for a day,” he told me. “My children knew from my expression that something horrible had happened. They became crazy about my safety. They were sure that they might hear about my death anytime.” It was the first time in Anera’s history that an employee had been killed by the Israeli military. Carroll got a call from a *COGAT* official, who offered condolences but no explanation. “I want to believe that it was a mistake,” Carroll told me. “But, wait a minute —are we being targeted? How could anyone in their right mind not come up with the same question?”

This spring, reports from the *Times* and Human Rights Watch looked into eight bombings of sites and vehicles occupied by aid groups and found that in every instance their location had been provided to *COGAT*. In Shawwa’s case, Carroll had e-mailed in coördinates and photographs of the building where he was living, and reconfirmed the information four days before he was killed.

Goren said that the strike on Shawwa was “an incident we haven’t been able to look into.” In fact, the I.D.F. had told the *Times* months earlier that its target was a Hamas terrorist who had participated in the October 7th incursion, and that an investigation was expected. But Shawwa was not a

terrorist, and the bombing had the marks of a precision strike: it demolished only his floor, leaving the one below standing.

Najjar told me that he used to dream about his children's future, "thinking about the colleges they would attend." Now he worried about whether they could resume their studies at all. All twelve of Gaza's universities, and some eighty-five per cent of its primary and secondary schools, have been irrevocably damaged. Others are being used to house displaced families. The I.D.F. justifies such attacks by saying that militants shelter in schools, making them legitimate targets. Najjar said that the schools "will take years to rebuild; homes will need tens of years." In the meantime, he added, "the killing machine continues to kill our people."

By October, more than three hundred humanitarian workers had died. Aid groups speculate that one reason for the high death toll is the I.D.F.'s increased reliance on artificial intelligence. In April, the left-wing Israeli magazine +972 published an investigation about A.I.-powered targeting systems that operate with breathtaking speed and reach. In the first weeks of the war, one tool, called Lavender, reportedly populated a "kill list" with tens of thousands of suspected militants. Another, Where's Daddy?, tracked the suspects and signalled the Army when they were at home. (The I.D.F. has denied the existence of a kill list, and described Lavender as a database that simply collates intelligence sources.) In some cases, the information has been catastrophically wrong; three intelligence sources said they had learned after the bombing of a family home that the target wasn't there. Carroll said, "You combine the A.I. systems with the expansion of the acceptable level of damage and you get many innocents killed."

Miri Eisin, a retired I.D.F. colonel and a fellow at Israel's International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, told me it was wrong to conclude that a machine was making the decisions: "Nothing, zero, is done without a human being." In fact, Eisin suggested, human fallibility was the problem. The I.D.F. "doesn't always have the right person at the right time," she said. "Some are too fast on the trigger."

The I.D.F. boasts of being "the most moral army in the world." Yehuda Shaul, who served in the occupied territories between 2001 and 2004, has spent much of his career gathering evidence of how far the military has

deviated from this standard. After completing his service, Shaul and some Army friends founded a nonprofit, Breaking the Silence, to compile testimonies from similarly disillusioned soldiers.

Shaul said that the “incrimination process” for assassinating enemy commanders was once long and arduous. According to his sources in military intelligence, “you needed a file this thick, and then a committee of officers made the decisions.” There were added restrictions for strikes on such targets as schools and hospitals. For apartment buildings, the I.D.F. engaged in “roof-knocking,” dropping a small rocket as a warning that a missile was going to hit. Over the years, the rules loosened, and the number of deaths seen as tenable rose drastically. Today, Shaul contended, “rules of engagement don’t exist for ground troops.” Over all, “there is deliberate disproportion—‘You hit my nose, I run over you with a tank.’ ”

Colonel Grisha Yakubovich, a former head of *COGAT*’s Civil Department, rejected that argument, and emphasized that what happened on October 7th was unlike earlier rounds of escalation: “Three thousand terrorists invaded our towns, moshavim, and kibbutzim, burned families, raped our daughters, slaughtered elders.” The I.D.F. argues that Hamas invites civilian deaths by hiding among them. “If they sacrifice their people to save their own skin, that’s their historical failure,” Yakubovich said. “In a war, you stop being polite.” Still, he added, Israel was obliged to improve coördination before issuing orders to strike: “We’re judged by higher values. We don’t want to be compared to Hamas.”

Dave Harden, an expert in crisis management in the Middle East, noted that “Israel, as the occupying power, is legally responsible for the safety of the general population.” When questioned about excessive collateral damage, I.D.F. spokespeople issue slight variations on the statement “We make efforts to reduce harm to civilians to the extent feasible.” To warn residents to evacuate areas that are about to be attacked, the I.D.F., in addition to dropping leaflets, sometimes sends S.M.S. messages or makes phone calls. In many strikes on aid workers, there were no such warnings.

For years, Carroll talked with José Andrés about forming a partnership on the ground in Gaza. Andrés, a burly, charismatic Spanish American chef who owns dozens of upscale restaurants, founded World Central Kitchen in

2010 to supply aid in natural-disaster zones. His motto is “Food is a universal human right.”

Andrés—friendly with world leaders, television personalities, and the mega-rich—presents himself as a kind of humanitarian action figure, filmed at the scenes of earthquakes and floods, stirring cauldrons with paddles or wading through high water to deliver food to stranded families. An essential premise of World Central Kitchen is that disaster relief should be run like a restaurant kitchen: intense, efficient, improvisational, and attuned to local products.

World Central Kitchen arrived in Israel on October 8th, to feed families that had lost their homes in the attacks. After the counterstrikes began, Anera helped W.C.K. obtain permission to enter Gaza, and the two groups began opening community kitchens together. Carroll knew that Andrés, who has more than a million followers on Instagram, would bring attention to the cause. “José Andrés in Gaza—with his charm, visibility, and connections—that was a big deal,” he said.

On the night of April 1st, seven employees of World Central Kitchen finished unloading a hundred tons of food supplies in central Gaza, then headed south to their quarters, in Rafah. It was late, but they were travelling on an approved route, in three white cars, two of which had W.C.K.’s logo, a bubbling pot, stamped on their roofs. Around 11 P.M., a targeted drone missile hit the first vehicle; soon afterward, the second was struck, and then the third. Gruesome footage showed the burned chassis of the cars, bloodied passports, the remains of bodies in bulletproof vests.

Air strikes on aid workers, a regular occurrence since November, were suddenly the source of international outrage. Andrés accused the I.D.F. of targeting the convoy “systematically, car by car.” Christopher Lockyear—the secretary-general of Médecins Sans Frontières, which had seen five staffers killed—excoriated a “pattern of deliberate attacks on humanitarians, health workers, journalists, U.N. personnel, schools and homes.” The Israeli government’s response was perfunctory. Netanyahu, stone-faced in a video statement, called the attack “a tragic event in which our forces unintentionally harmed noncombatants,” adding, “This happens in war.” An I.D.F. statement described it as “a grave mistake.”

On April 4th, President Biden called Netanyahu to demand that he act immediately to reduce harm to civilians and aid workers. Netanyahu, a longtime practitioner of political sleight of hand, promised a thorough inquiry and said that the military would “do everything to prevent a recurrence.” The next day, the I.D.F. issued the initial results of its investigation. Two officers were fired and three reprimanded, though the report maintained that the officials who had approved the attacks “were convinced they were targeting armed Hamas operatives.”

Anera, like other organizations, suspended operations in Gaza, but it went back to work the following week, after *COGAT* assured Carroll that his workers would not be at risk. World Central Kitchen returned a month later, although Andrés wrote in a *Washington Post* opinion piece that “little has changed.” On August 7th, another W.C.K. staffer, a Palestinian warehouse worker in central Gaza, was killed in an air strike. The death received only passing mention in the press.

In April, after the I.D.F. declared its mission in Khan Younis complete, Najjar and his family went home. The city was a wasteland. They passed bulldozed mountains of exploded concrete, skeletal remains of high-rises, and people wearily loading donkey carts with filthy mattresses, clothing, toys, and broken beams for firewood. One woman, despairing over the wreckage of her home, told a reporter for NPR, “There’s no Khan Younis. God damn Sinwar.”

Najjar refused to speak about Hamas or Israel: “I don’t like to talk about politics. I believe that always civilians are the victims.” Though his home was badly damaged, his family moved back in, and he resumed work at the wound clinic. Before long, the city was showing scattered signs of renewal: vendors selling falafel, a barber cutting hair amid blown-out shop windows, tailors at sewing machines salvaged from a destroyed factory. Then, in July, the I.D.F. returned to Khan Younis, having determined that Hamas was regrouping there.

For a month, Najjar sent only a few cryptic messages, and when he resurfaced he wrote, “We spent very painful and scary weeks recently.” During one operation, an Israeli bomb struck fifty yards from his clinic, killing seventeen people and injuring twenty-six. Najjar and his team

administered first aid, laying out the wounded on tarps in the sand. Ambulances took victims in critical condition to the overflowing wards at Nasser Hospital.

The I.D.F. reported striking more than fifty infrastructure sites in its offensive: a weapons depot, tunnel shafts, buildings occupied by Hamas. As it proceeded, Najjar wrote to me, “The Israeli tanks are not far from my home, and the situation is very dangerous.” He included a photo of a suitcase and several backpacks (two small pink ones for the girls), all ready to leave. When I asked where he would go if they had to evacuate again, he replied, “I swear to God, I don’t know. I’m just thinking of rescuing my family.”

Gazans knew from experience that “safe zones” offered no real protection. The military had recently tracked two top Hamas commanders to a fenced compound in al-Mawasi. On July 13th, F-35 jets dropped eight tons of bombs there. The I.D.F. described the strike as the result of a careful vetting process that went all the way up to the Prime Minister. The Gaza Ministry of Health reported ninety civilians killed and three hundred wounded.

Suad Lubbad went out to assess the damage and started to cry. “I couldn’t see what happened to the children and to the people,” she told me. For the first time, she sounded desperate. “People sometimes get a warning just half an hour before, and leave everything behind, and just go around in the street. There are no other places left for them to go.” Her voice rising, she added, “We reached a limit. We are not able to continue in such a situation.” Two young boys her team was treating, one of them deaf, had been killed in another air strike. “We were trying to get them out of their psychological distress,” she said, “but we could not keep them alive.”

DEREGULATED BASEBALL



In July, COGAT established the Joint Coordination Board, focussed on “the safety and effectiveness of humanitarian operations.” The next month, a World Food Programme truck was shot up as it approached an Israeli security post. “The current deconfliction system is failing,” Cindy McCain, the agency’s executive director, said. Two days later, Anera was delivering supplies to a hospital in Rafah when an air strike hit the lead car, killing four men inside. The I.D.F. and Anera have offered conflicting reports about the dead men, describing them variously as “armed assailants” and as hard-up locals who had joined the convoy as escorts. Sami Matar, who’d been in the second car, was unhurt; he completed the delivery, leaving the dead behind.

On September 1st, Najjar wrote that, since he’d sent the photo of his family’s backpacks, they had evacuated back to al-Mawasi several times. They wouldn’t do it again: “We prefer that they kill us one time instead of killing us hundreds of times via their evacuation orders.” But he had some good news about work. He had recently hired a pediatric surgeon to perform circumcisions. “We’ve done the circumcision for 91 newborn boys so far,” Najjar wrote, “and tomorrow, we are going to do another 20.” He was in the process of hiring some ten additional doctors, to handle everything from respiratory infections to general surgery.

Lubbad, too, found reasons for optimism. The first confirmed case of polio in Gaza had got everyone's attention, and Israel had agreed to a series of pauses in hostilities; *COGAT* facilitated vaccine deliveries, and aid workers spread out to administer the drops. Lubbad's clinic directed patients to sites where the vaccines were being given. "Most children are reaching out for vaccination," she said. "It is present everywhere and easy to get."

The wider picture was bleak. In mid-October, with winter setting in, a State Department spokesman said that the amount of aid reaching Gazans had dropped to its lowest levels in a year. According to Save the Children, Gaza had the highest rate of child malnutrition in the world. Lubbad reported ever-dwindling supplies, adding, "Many don't have winter clothes, and people are worried about their shelters." Heavy winds and flooding had already begun, destroying dozens of families' tents.

On October 17th, the I.D.F. announced a major development: Israeli soldiers had finally killed Yahya Sinwar. Lubbad was skeptical that it would make a difference—Israel had killed many Hamas leaders in the past year, and the war hadn't stopped. Still, she clung to the idea that her family would one day resume a semblance of their former life. "Imagine—by car, I could be in Gaza City in less than an hour," she said. "We hope that we may go home soon, if we still have a home." ♦

The Improbable Rise of J. D. Vance

“Hillbilly Elegy” made him famous, and his denunciations of Donald Trump brought him liberal fans. Now, as a Vice-Presidential candidate, he’s remaking his image as the heir to the *MAGA* movement.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

October 28, 2024



On a warm, gray morning in mid-September, a small group of reporters waited under the wing of a plane at a private terminal at Ronald Reagan National Airport, anticipating the arrival of the Vice-Presidential candidate J. D. Vance. Earlier in the week, a would-be assassin had tried to ambush Donald Trump on his golf course in West Palm Beach, the second attempt on Trump’s life this summer, and the apparatus accompanying Vance had the feel of an armed brigade. The travelling party included a dozen staffers and about the same number of Secret Service officers. When Vance’s motorcade pulled up to Trump Force Two—a Boeing 737 with the names of anonymous donors (Edward M., Victoria W.) painted on the tail fin—it contained twelve cars. In the only other political campaign that Vance had run, for the United States Senate, in 2022, he had ridden to events in an aide’s old Subaru. Now

he and his wife, Usha, accompanied by their ten-month-old dog, Atlas, emerged from a long black Suburban, both trim and elegantly dressed for the campaign trail.

Vance's selection as Trump's running mate had punctuated an astounding rise. Born in the small manufacturing city of Middletown, Ohio, he was raised by a drug-addicted mother and his beloved Appalachian-born grandmother, Mamaw. He worked his way up through storied American institutions: the Marine Corps, Yale Law School, Silicon Valley. "Hillbilly Elegy," the best-selling memoir Vance published in 2016, made him famous, and his denunciations of Trump as "cultural heroin" for the white working class even more so. A few years later, he was a senator from Ohio, the Republican Party's most effective spokesman for Trumpism as an ideology, and—both improbably and inevitably—the Vice-Presidential nominee. "If you think about where he came from and where he is, at forty years old," the conservative analyst Yuval Levin, a Vance ally, said, "J.D. is the single most successful member of his generation in American politics."



At Yale Law School, where the Vances met, Usha, who had been a Yale undergraduate, operated as an interpreter of Ivy League folkways for the rougher-hewn J.D. She kept a spreadsheet of things she thought he should try, a mutual friend of theirs recalled—"I remember one of them was Greek

yogurt.” Vance talked with another friend about becoming a househusband; he had not had a father, and it was important to him to become a good one. (In an echo of Bill Clinton’s experience, Vance used the last name of a stepfather, Hamel, until after college.) But, as he began to consider a political career, it was Usha, a former clerk to two Supreme Court Justices, who moved to Ohio. When he joined Trump’s ticket, she left her job at a prestigious law firm. At this year’s Republican National Convention, Usha, the daughter of Indian immigrants, sat next to Trump as her husband said that “America is not just an idea” but a people bound by a “shared history.” The scene would have been unimaginable to many of her friends just a few months earlier. “I’m not sure what deal J.D. made with Usha,” a person close to the couple told me. “But it had to be something, because they make every decision together.”

Vance, too, had only recently made a full accommodation with Trump. A longtime political adviser to Vance told me, “The problem that J.D. had always been trying to solve is what to do about the decline of the Midwest.” Many of his prior solutions, the adviser went on, had simply not worked. “Hillbilly Elegy” had been, in part, an attempt to make liberal readers sensitive to the plight and the anger of rural whites. Vance’s subsequent efforts to establish an addiction-treatment nonprofit in Ohio and a heartland-focussed venture-capital fund were, in this view, intended to rebuild the Midwest from within. Vance’s partnership with Trump, whom he once derided, represented his shift to a more tribal politics. Remember, the adviser said, even in Vance’s Never Trump days he hadn’t really opposed Trump on policy: “His objection was that he thought Trump didn’t mean anything he said.”

But this theory is complicated by how perfectly Vance’s rightward turn has tracked the fixations of conservative activists and élites. His rise has been backed by the billionaire investor Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Donald Trump, Jr., whose complaints about woke politics and tech censorship Vance has amplified on the trail. In the view of one of his old friends, Vance, in becoming a national figure, has also become more thin-skinned, not unlike many of the tech titans who support him. Some commentary on Vance’s political transformation after the 2020 election identified the beard he had started to grow as a symbol of his newly bristling politics. But at least as noticeable is the weight he’s lost and the fitted suits he now wears. Such a

change isn't unusual for powerful people in the Ozempic era, but it also suggests the ways in which Vance, who positions himself as an enemy of the élite, is still a part of it.

On the tarmac, Vance let Usha board the plane first and then lumbered up the stairs, somewhat more in the manner of his dog than of his wife. He turned to the cameras and let his right hand vibrate in a quick tremor of a wave. He was making two stops that day, first in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a long-standing conservative bastion where Democrats had lately made inroads, and then in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. More than one of Vance's advisers told me that his selection as the Vice-Presidential candidate had depended partly on poll numbers in July, which had suggested that Joe Biden posed a bigger threat in Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin than in the Sun Belt states. Had the Democrats been stronger in Arizona, Georgia, and North Carolina, the advisers thought, the Florida senator Marco Rubio might have been the pick.

But, even if Vance was an emblem of the Midwest, he was also a drag on the ticket, significantly less popular than his Democratic counterpart, Tim Walz, the governor of Minnesota. The stances Vance had taken that endeared him to the conservative base—his support for a national abortion ban and his association with Project 2025, the think-tank initiative to weaponize the federal government for right-wing causes, which Vance had once termed “de-Baathification”—were so toxic to the general electorate that Trump had disavowed them, and then Vance had, too. The question of what kind of populism would follow Trump into office, should he win, was entangled with the question of what kind of populist his chosen political heir is: a tireless representative of the alienated Midwest, or—like Thiel and Musk, who urged Trump to pick Vance in the first place—a rich, very online man, motivated by a sweeping rejection of progressive culture? Vance disappeared through the door of Trump Force Two, and within a few minutes he was up and away, soaring high above Arlington National Cemetery. The Republican Vice-Presidential candidate was headed someplace like home.

On a Friday morning at the end of September, before the start of the school day, I drove to a slightly oversized house just outside Cincinnati to meet Vance's old physics teacher, Christopher Tape. Of all the people I

interviewed—Vance’s advisers, political allies, co-ideologues, and law-school friends among them—Tape had seemed the most eager to meet with me, perhaps because his enthusiasm for Vance runs the purest. “A phenomenal learner,” Tape said. “And always such a jovial, friendly kid.”

Not every student at Middletown High School was poor—some, especially those who lived closer to the interstate, had parents who worked in Cincinnati or Dayton—but many were, and Tape tended to be circumspect when he asked students about their future. But one day, during Vance’s senior year, Tape inquired about his star student’s post-graduation plans. “And J.D. says, ‘Oh, I’m going to the Marines,’ ” Tape told me. “I was, like, ‘Oh, R.O.T.C.?’ And he went, ‘No, I’m enlisting.’ And I was stunned. Like, dude, you can write your ticket. And he says—I’ll never forget this—‘I love this country. And I talk about it a lot. But, if I don’t do anything about it, it’s just talk.’ ”



In “Hillbilly Elegy,” Vance relays how he had emerged from a highly chaotic childhood—in one scene, a twelve-year-old Vance dashes out of a car on the shoulder of a highway after his mother threatens to kill them both in a crash—with a desire for order, which he found in the Marines. He was deployed to Anbar Province, Iraq, in 2005, where he worked in public affairs—shepherding visiting journalists and writing articles for the military press.

“He wasn’t kicking down doors,” as the former congressman Adam Kinzinger, a Republican who supports Kamala Harris, said earlier this summer, but he was working in a very dangerous place. A senior officer in his division was killed by a roadside bomb in Ramadi, while escorting journalists from *Newsweek*. Cullen Tiernan, Vance’s best friend in the Corps, with whom he trained Stateside, recalled that Vance was more politically engaged than most marines. “When Dick Cheney visited,” Tiernan told me, “J.D. was the only person who was excited.” But he was also attuned to the darker aspects of the invasion. “There’s civilian contractors that are getting paid six times as much as you, just to supervise third-party nationals. Halliburton and KBR are having a feast of war,” Tiernan said. “Those were things we discussed and were disenchanting.”

Vance earned a degree from Ohio State University, then entered Yale Law School in the fall of 2010, the same year as the former Republican Presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy. If Yale offered an established track for ambitious young conservatives, it could also make a kid from the sticks feel less assured. Ninety-five per cent of the school’s student body at the time came from upper-middle-class backgrounds, and many were obviously wealthy. “Your classmates are the coddled children of hospital administrators and faculty members and corporate lawyers,” the longtime adviser, who finished Yale the same year as Vance, told me. “They ain’t like you, and there’s just whole swaths of existence that seem foreign to them.” Vance had “heard through the grapevine” that a professor who had criticized his work thought that the law school should only accept students from élite private institutions, because students from public schools needed “remedial education.” “I have never felt out of place in my entire life,” he wrote in “Hillbilly Elegy.” “But I did at Yale.”

Such alienation seems like one seed from which Vance’s politics eventually sprouted. But people who knew him then recall a boisterous, bighearted student at the center of Yale’s social life. “He was at every party,” a female classmate said. “He was the guy who, when you were going through a hard time, would be, like, ‘Oh, yeah, let’s just drink ourselves silly,’ and talk you through it.” During his first year, Vance met Usha and developed a close relationship with Amy Chua, a law professor and the author of the book “Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother,” in whose class Vance would write the first draft of “Hillbilly Elegy.” (Chua later connected Vance with her literary

agent.) When Thiel came to Yale to speak before the Federalist Society, the conservative legal group, of which Vance was a member, Vance seized the opportunity. “At the end of his talk, Peter said anyone should feel free to write him for career advice,” a law-school friend told me. “J.D. took that literally.”

Vance’s politics weren’t doctrinaire—a friend at the time remembers him as a devoted reader of *The Dish*, the blog of the iconoclastic gay conservative Andrew Sullivan—and he had a natural facility as a writer. “J.D. really was a maverick ideologically,” Josh McLaurin, a roommate of Vance’s at Yale, who is now a Democratic state senator in Georgia, said. “I was intimidated by his sensibility. He would go off and read something and study it and come back with a viewpoint that was uniquely his.” Some friends struggled to recall whether Vance was pro-life or pro-choice, but many of them described him as instinctively partisan. The friend remembered telling Vance about a breakup with a girlfriend: “J.D. said, ‘She’s dead to me.’” This same friend thought that Vance likely planned to vote for Hillary Clinton in 2016, until Clinton said that some portion of Trump’s supporters were in a “basket of deplorables.” Vance’s sister was planning to vote for Trump. In the end, he wrote in Evan McMullin, who campaigned as a Never Trump conservative. (A spokesperson for Vance said that he never considered voting for Clinton.)

After law school, Vance and Usha moved to Washington, D.C., where Usha clerked for Brett Kavanaugh, who was then a judge on the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals, and later for Chief Justice John Roberts of the Supreme Court. Vance spent the late Obama years as an unhappy junior associate at a Washington law firm, and then as a principal at a venture-capital fund co-founded by Thiel. But the project in the background was his book. “Hillbilly Elegy” was released in June, 2016, and was widely regarded as a key to understanding the experience of the Trump voter. Rod Dreher, a socially conservative writer who was then opposed to Trump, gave it an early rave review on his blog for *The American Conservative*. The book’s success, as with many up-from-poverty narratives, also drew on the tension between the harsh circumstances of the author’s upbringing and the erudition with which he recalled them. At a book party that Chua threw for “Hillbilly Elegy” in Manhattan, Vance’s old law-school classmates remembered him being a little astonished when Tom Brokaw walked into the room.

Vance and the élite—it wasn’t a seamless fit. He sometimes recounts an interaction he had at a Business Roundtable event, where the C.E.O. of a large hotel chain complained that Trump’s tightening of the border meant that his properties had to hire native-born workers who “just need to get off their asses, come to work, and do their job.” Sofia Nelson, a law-school friend of Vance’s, who has since broken with him politically, said, “He was hanging out with these people he found very vapid, and I was, like, ‘You know, you can just stop it—you don’t have to do this.’ I think he very much wanted to rise within that world, but he also kind of hated it.”

In 2018, Vance and Chua held a public discussion at the Aspen Ideas Festival titled “Can Americans Resist the Pull of Tribalism?” A friend brought him along to a private dinner at the lakeside château of Lynda Resnick, the billionaire owner of Fiji Water and a Democratic mega-donor. During a garden cocktail reception, Resnick told Vance that because he hadn’t been formally invited he needed to leave. (Only later did Resnick learn who Vance was.) Vance took it graciously, the friend said, and walked off down the home’s long, winding driveway. McLaurin, the Democratic state senator, said, “The way I think about it, it’s like a dial. If you’re a politician, you carry around all these personal grievances and memories of all the things that were done to you, and you get to decide whether to keep that dial turned down or to turn it up. And J.D. has turned it all the way up.”

Vance spent Election Night in 2016 explaining on TV why Trump had won, a victory he hadn’t expected. A friend who spoke with him shortly afterward recalled that Vance was also vexed about his own career prospects. During the campaign, he had publicly said that he considered Trump “noxious” and “a total fraud,” which, he told the friend, had triggered “some really racist attacks from Trump supporters because of Usha’s race.” (In private, Vance had gone further, calling Trump “a moral disaster” and potentially “America’s Hitler.”) Even so, in the friend’s recollection, Vance was strategic about it. “He said, ‘The Trump people want me out.’ He thought that he wasn’t going to have a political future with Trump in charge.”



The political group with which Vance was then associated—the wonkish Reformicons—had encouraged the Republican Party’s rhetorical turn toward a working-class conservatism, advocating for entitlements like pro-family tax credits and denouncing the donor class. But Trump put forward a “nightmare version” of that vision, as one leading Reformicon, the former George W. Bush speechwriter David Frum, said in 2016, with everything “horribly twisted and distorted.” At the same time, a generation of conservative dogma had suddenly been washed away. New think tanks and magazines explored the boundaries of what an America First conservatism might be: more combative about progressive values, more isolationist in foreign policy, more nationalist on immigration, and more open to government intervention to stem free trade. Some of these views weren’t all that dissimilar from what the Reformicons had offered, but there was an important distinction: members of the New Right, as the movement came to be known, were among Trump’s strongest supporters, echoing, often gleefully, his most outré and politically incorrect ideas.

In Washington, Democrats and investigative reporters were scrutinizing Trump’s career for evidence of Vladimir Putin’s influence over the election. For Vance, the fixation on Russia to explain Clinton’s defeat was drowning out the self-reflection that he had hoped to inspire among the liberal establishment with “Hillbilly Elegy.” Vance’s longtime adviser told me, “He

was just, like, ‘This just seems like conspiracy theory.’ They lost and they were clinging to it.”

In 2018, Vance considered challenging Sherrod Brown, the incumbent Democratic senator from Ohio, “for about thirty-six hours,” the adviser said. Rebekah Mercer, who had been a prominent Trump donor, was enthusiastic about Vance’s potential, but the timing was wrong. Vance’s first child had been born less than a year earlier, and his network in Ohio was thin. (In law school, he had also told a friend that Brown, a progressive populist, was a Democrat he admired.) The following year, a whistle-blower revealed that Cambridge Analytica, a political-consulting firm in which Mercer and her father, Robert, were investors, had secretly harvested Facebook user data and then shared the analytics with the Trump campaign. Facebook eventually agreed to pay five billion dollars in fines for its role in the venture; Cambridge Analytica went bankrupt. Vance regarded the scandal as an extension of the Democrats’ Russia obsession—a way to deflect attention from the neoliberal policies that he believed had pushed working-class voters to Trump.

That fall, the Senate confirmation hearings for Brett Kavanaugh’s nomination to the Supreme Court turned on an accusation by Christine Blasey Ford, a California psychologist who said that Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her decades earlier, during a high-school party. The *Guardian* and HuffPost reported that Chua had privately told a group of law students that it was “no accident” that Kavanaugh’s female law clerks all “looked like models,” and had offered to give them advice on how to dress if they wanted to work for him. Usha, whom Chua had recommended for the clerkship with Kavanaugh, sent a stiffly worded e-mail to her law-school class distancing herself from Chua’s reported comments and asserting that she knew, from her time interviewing candidates as a Kavanaugh clerk, that appearance was not a factor in who got hired. “Kind of a dork,” Vance said of Kavanaugh in an interview with Ross Douthat, of the *Times*, this past spring. “Never believed these stories.”

After the Kavanaugh hearings, Vance began to contemplate a more thorough remaking of American institutions. An academic friend recalled that in 2019, while Vance was preparing to deliver a speech at the National Conservatism Conference, the defining New Right confab, in Washington, he wrote to ask

“if I thought élite universities were beyond redemption.” Vance was also making a personal turn to Catholicism. Dreher, who was close with Vance at the time, introduced him to a group of Dominican friars in Washington. In August, 2019, Vance converted in a ceremony attended by, among others, his biological father. (Usha, who was raised Hindu, did not convert.) In an essay published in *The Lamp*, a Catholic magazine, Vance wrote that his conversion was the result of a search for a system of “duty and virtue,” in part so that he could become a better husband and father. But his essay also suggested that he was becoming a more stringent social conservative. He quoted at length from St. Augustine’s denunciation of Roman excess, of the “plentiful supply of public prostitutes for every one who wishes to use them.” This broadside from a fifth-century bishop, Vance wrote, was “the best criticism of our modern age I’d ever read.”



Vance’s past friendships with progressives began to inform the manner in which he fought the other side. During a podcast with American Moment, a young-conservative organization affiliated with the New Right, Vance said that, for his liberal classmates at Yale, “pursuing racial or gender equity is like the value system that gives their life meaning,” and that “they all find that that value system leads to misery.” Meanwhile, he went on, the masculinity of young boys was “suppressed.” Such views, one of Vance’s friends from the Reformicon movement told me, reflected Vance’s

“reinvention as a public persona.” “Some of these currents, call them cultural currents, are very deep for him—what men need, what women need from men,” the friend said. But there was also, the friend went on, “a level of becoming the thing one needs there to be.”

Vance was building a political network of supporters and donors among anti-establishment conservatives, with whom he increasingly shared a tendency to accuse the left of operating with a might-makes-right moral authoritarianism. “The thing that I kept thinking about liberalism in 2019 and 2020 is that these guys have all read Carl Schmitt,” he told Douthat, referring to the Nazi legal theorist. “There’s no law, there’s just power. And the goal here is to get back in power.” In the wake of the COVID-19 shutdowns and the Black Lives Matter protests, Vance said on “The Federalist Radio Hour” that American conservatives “have lost every major powerful institution in the country except for maybe churches and religious institutions, which, of course, are weaker now than they’ve ever been. We’ve lost big business. We’ve lost finance. We’ve lost the culture.” No compromise was possible with the liberals in control, he added. “Unless we overthrow them in some way, we’re going to keep losing.”

Drive across Ohio, and it can be a little startling to remember that, just ten years ago, a near-empty factory parking lot with a union hall nearby was a signal that Democrats were irrefutably in charge. When Trump flipped the state, in 2016, he brought a wave of new voters into the Republican Party. The change was concentrated in the union towns of the Mahoning Valley and in the southeastern part of the state—“the pockets of Ohio,” as the former Republican state chair Jane Timken put it to me, “that were hit so hard by the opioid epidemic.” In these places, the turn was so sudden and abrupt that it could seem like a magic trick.

Mark Munroe, the former chair of the Mahoning County G.O.P., is an amiable retired television executive. He remembers a time when he would press on reporters a sheet detailing the corruption of the mobbed-up Democratic Party in Youngstown, where the Republicans were heavily outnumbered. As Trump’s campaign gathered momentum, Munroe started hearing from residents who’d never been interested in his party before, but who saw the immigration issue primarily in terms of security, rather than of the economy. “For folks around here, it really is protecting the southern

border from drugs,” Munroe said. “It’s about strength.” Munroe was sitting at the office of the election board on primary night, in March of 2016, when thousands of Mahoning residents requested, for the first time, a Republican ballot. “We doubled our registration in one night,” Munroe told me recently, still somewhat awestruck.

The bigger surprise was that the new voters stuck around. In 2020, Trump maintained an eight-point margin in the state. As an adviser to Vance who is based in Ohio described it, the new voters were among the most populist in the state—the most explicitly anti-Washington and anti-élite—so that not only did the state become more Republican but the Republicans became more aligned with Trump.

The word in conservative circles was that Vance, too, had become “thoroughly red-pilled.” Privately, he still had some reservations about Trump—as late as 2020, as messages published by the *Washington Post* this September showed, he told an acquaintance that the President had “thoroughly failed to deliver on his economic populism.” But in public Vance was an increasingly reliable Trump partisan, who dismissed concerns about the former President’s efforts to overturn the election. The following year, he joined the conservative anti-vaccine-mandate chorus. A friend asked him why he was on Twitter telling people not to get vaccinated when he himself was—people might die. In response, Vance raised some safety concerns, and then added that it didn’t help that Biden had insinuated that people like his father—who hadn’t gotten vaccinated—were “sewer rats.”

That summer, after the Ohio senator Rob Portman, a stalwart of the pre-Trump G.O.P., announced that he would retire, Vance decided to run. Someone who is close with both Vance and Donald Trump, Jr., called the former President’s son to get his opinion on Vance, who, he noted, “talked a lot of shit about your dad in 2016.” As the friend recalled, Don, Jr., said, “Honestly, dude, I fucking loved ‘Hillbilly Elegy’ back in 2016, and I fucking never understood why he wasn’t on our side.”

The 2022 Republican Senate primary attracted six well-funded contenders, all of whom promptly set about establishing their America First bona fides, in both substance and style. Candidates flew to Trump’s golf club in West Palm Beach to audition for an endorsement. Josh Mandel, Ohio’s former

state treasurer, travelled to Arizona to observe an audit of contested ballots and proclaimed 2020 a “stolen” election. A wealthy investment banker named Mike Gibbons, during an exchange with Mandel on the debate stage, appeared to call him a “pussy.” Politico described it as “the dumbest Senate primary ever.”

Vance had laid the groundwork for his run by appearing on conservative podcasts and television shows, offering often extreme accounts of cultural conflict. “American history is a constant war between Northern Yankees and Southern Bourbons, where whichever side the hillbillies are on wins,” Vance told a YouTuber in the spring of 2021. The Northern Yankees, he went on, “are now the hyper-woke, sort of coastal élites,” the Bourbons are the “same old-school Southern folks,” and the hillbillies “have really started to migrate towards the Southern Bourbons.”

That July, a few weeks after he formally announced his candidacy, he appeared on Tucker Carlson’s Fox News show to discuss an idea he had been developing: that élites in the U.S. “have played their entire lives to win a status game,” and that more power should accrue to people who had children, and thus a “direct stake” in the future. “We are effectively run in this country, via the Democrats, via our corporate oligarchs, by a bunch of childless cat ladies who are miserable at their own lives and the choices that they’ve made,” Vance said. “And so they want to make the rest of the country miserable, too.”

Such arguments did little to help his cause. By the following spring, with the primary nearing its conclusion, Vance’s public image was still largely defined by the attack ads his rivals were running, highlighting his past anti-Trump comments. He was stuck at around ten per cent in the polls. It wasn’t until a Republican-primary debate in March that he found a way to stand out. The moderator asked the candidates whether they would support a no-fly zone in Ukraine. Only Vance was strongly opposed to the idea. Polls showed that a majority of Republicans supported aid to Ukraine. But Vance, like Trump, did not. Don, Jr., called the friend he shares with Vance: “He’s, like, ‘Dude, I saw this fucking clip on Ukraine. Fuck this shit. J.D. is the guy.’ ” The next day, Don, Jr., tweeted, “JD is 100% America First.”





At that point, a Vance adviser told me, the campaign figured it had “one bullet” left. Vance was convinced that what had particularly infuriated ordinary conservatives since the Obama Administration was the suggestion that any opposition to immigration was rooted in racism. In a campaign ad that appeared in early April, Vance spoke directly to the camera. “Are you a racist?” he asked. “Do you hate Mexicans?” The media thought so, he went on, simply because Ohio conservatives wanted to build Trump’s border wall. “This issue is personal,” he said. “I nearly lost my mother to the poison coming across our border.” The following week, Trump—egged on by his son—endorsed Vance, which effectively guaranteed him the nomination. “The whole team worked on that ad,” the adviser said. “But the first line was all J.D.”

When I called the former Democratic congressman Tim Ryan, whom Vance went on to beat in the general election, to ask his opinion of Vance as a campaigner, he sounded distinctly unimpressed. “He was never on the trail,” Ryan said. Ryan would drive his son’s dog, Zoie, around the state during the campaign, a gimmick that eventually he started using as a talking point: “Zoie has been in Lima twice, and J. D. Vance never has.” But the most important question in the race was who could claim the *MAGA* mantle. Who brought a dog to Lima—that was campaigning for the twentieth century.

This past July, a week or so before the Republican National Convention, Vance delivered a speech before a V.I.P. audience at the National Conservatism Conference. It had been five years since he'd first appeared there, as a clean-shaven young man with a pointy-headed presentation on moving right-wing politics beyond libertarianism. Now he spoke with the exaggerated disdain of New Right activists—"I remember getting in some argument with some loser on Twitter a year or so ago," he said—and he delivered a status update on the movement. As a basic matter, Vance said, the old conservatism of expansive overseas involvements and élites who "flooded the zone with non-stop cheap labor" no longer had a political foothold. Trump was not a threat to democracy, he told the crowd: "The real threat to democracy is that American voters keep on voting for less immigration, and our politicians keep rewarding us with more."

More than a year earlier, before Trump had even announced his candidacy, Vance had sent a note to Susie Wiles, one of the former President's senior advisers, saying that he was prepared to endorse Trump anytime. But, according to Vance's advisers, the prospect that Trump might pick him for the ticket emerged only around the time of the New Hampshire primary, in January, when word began leaking from operatives close to Mar-a-Lago. Relatively quickly, Vance decided that he wanted the job—with Biden faltering, the Republicans stood a good chance of winning. Vance's circle also felt that some of the alternatives Trump was said to be considering, such as the South Carolina senator Tim Scott and the North Dakota governor Doug Burgum, might take the Party back toward what Vance, at the National Conservatism Conference, called the *Wall Street Journal* consensus.

The plan was for Vance to appear relentlessly on TV, often in adversarial contexts, where he hoped to capture Trump's attention by outwitting liberal pundits. Several key conservative figures lobbied Trump not to pick Vance, including the billionaire donor Ken Griffin, Rupert Murdoch, and Lindsey Graham, who made an appeal to the former President on Trump Force One on the way to the Republican National Convention, in Milwaukee. Elon Musk, Tucker Carlson, Don, Jr., and the tech investor David Sacks, a vociferous opponent of the war in Ukraine, pressed Trump on Vance's behalf. The contrast between the two groups might have clarified the choice for the former President: Was he with the establishment Republicans or with the rising nationalists he'd brought into being?

On the morning of Saturday, July 13th, Vance met secretly with Trump at Mar-a-Lago; Trump did not offer him a spot on the ticket, but he intimated that he might. Early that evening, Trump was shot in the ear at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania. Vance was among the first elected officials to politicize the event. Within hours, he tweeted, “The central premise of the Biden campaign is that President Donald Trump is an authoritarian fascist who must be stopped at all costs. That rhetoric led directly to President Trump’s attempted assassination.” (The motives of the shooter, a registered Republican who had donated to a Democratic turnout effort, remain unclear.) Vance did not speak with Trump again until the following Monday, at the start of the Convention, when the former President called to ask if he’d join the ticket. Half an hour later, Trump posted the news on Truth Social.

Two days later, Vance’s prime-time speech at the Convention elevated the experiences of the left-behind. In his telling, their endurance, rather than the fight of outside groups for rights and prosperity, was the central feature of the national story. If there was a discordant note, it was in how generically he described the working-class Republicans whose interests he was supposedly championing in a newly populist G.O.P.: “the factory worker in Wisconsin who makes things with their hands and is proud of American craftsmanship”; “the auto worker in Michigan wondering why out-of-touch politicians are destroying their jobs.” But Vance’s own story remained powerful. He invoked the family cemetery in eastern Kentucky where five generations of his forebears were buried. “People will not fight for abstractions, but they will fight for their home,” Vance said. “Our leaders have to remember that America is a nation, and its citizens deserve leaders who put its interests first.”

A press seat on the plane of a modern Presidential campaign costs about as much as a spot on a chartered jet. Embeds from the major networks, along with Michael Bender, of the *Times*, are constant presences on Trump Force Two. For most of the rest of us, the trip from D.C. to Grand Rapids and Eau Claire represented something closer to a onetime splurge. Vance often enlists the press in the theatrics of his rallies, spending the last portion taking questions from reporters. Even so, there was an observable irony in how small that day’s press pool was and how central the media has become in the conservative political imagination.

Of course, Vance, in many ways, is a product of the media. That weekend, he had appeared on three separate Sunday shows. On X, he sometimes seems to be operating as a universal reply guy. “Hi Hannah,” Vance recently wrote, at the beginning of a multi-paragraph response to an author of Bible-study and self-help books, who had taken issue with his positions on child care. While on Trump Force Two, I idly looked at my phone and noticed that Vance was on X at that very moment, somewhat angrily tweeting at David Frum, who is now a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. Frum had tweeted that the difference between the Democratic and the Republican tickets was that “the upsetting things said by Trump and Vance are not true.” Vance, surrounded by his wife, his dog, and his advisers, had fired back, “I’d say the most important difference is that people on your team tried to kill Donald Trump twice.”



Some conservatives suggested to me that one source of Vance’s combativeness is that the America First movement, though very much alive as an electoral prospect, is losing intellectual steam. Yuval Levin explained that, since 2000, he had been part of three waves of attempted conservative reforms, each of which had tried to turn the Party away from libertarianism and toward social conservatism, but that each had fizzled because “if you wake up any given Republican congressman in the middle of the night and ask him what he wants to do, he’s still going to say cut the marginal tax

rate.” David French, the conservative Never Trump columnist at the *Times*, told me he thought the Republicans were making the same error that the Democrats had made a few years earlier: “They’re following their own Twitter activists off a cliff.” Conservatives often liked to say that every Republican activist under forty belonged to the New Right, French went on, but he had been watching students at the Christian colleges where he spoke and taught and doubted that this was the case. At present, French said, he had exactly one student who identified as New Right. “Nice guy,” French said, and you could sense the grin. “But, I mean, he wears an ascot.”

It’s perhaps unsurprising that, when Vance needed to connect with conservative voters, he returned to the subject of immigration. In July, Vance tried to draw the press’s attention to a situation unfolding in Springfield, Ohio: a city whose population had previously been less than sixty thousand was struggling to handle an influx of as many as twenty thousand legal Haitian immigrants, many of whom had been drawn from other parts of the United States by the promise of factory jobs. Early in September, Vance shared a story being passed around by conservative users on social media that “people have had their pets abducted and eaten by people who shouldn’t be in this country.” The next day, Trump repeated the claim during his Presidential debate with Kamala Harris, in a memorably ham-handed way. (“In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats.”) There was no evidence that this was true—the *Wall Street Journal*, chasing down the rumor of an abducted feline, found her safe in her owner’s basement.

In the following days, a series of bomb threats closed schools in Springfield and spooked the local population. The city’s Republican mayor and the state’s Republican governor pleaded with Vance to stop repeating the claim, but he refused to do so. On September 15th, Vance told CNN’s Dana Bash, “The American media totally ignored this stuff until Donald Trump and I started talking about cat memes. If I have to create stories so that the American media actually pays attention to the suffering of the American people, then that’s what I’m going to do.”

Clips from the campaign trail have emphasized Vance’s awkwardness—there was the encounter at a doughnut shop in Valdosta, Georgia, where Vance, tall and slightly hunched, brightly greeted a clerk, who quickly said

that she did not want to appear on camera. “She doesn’t want to be on film, guys,” Vance said loudly, “so just cut her out of anything.” He turned back to the shop worker, introduced himself, and said that he was running for Vice-President. “O.K.,” she said. The silence was faintly excruciating. Which doughnuts did he want, anyway? Vance indicated the glazed, the cinnamon rolls. “Some sprinkle stuff,” he said. “Whatever makes sense.”

He was better in more structured settings. Vance is an excellent debater, against both political opponents and the press, and even in hostile environments he maintains emotional control—when he’s angry, it’s because he wants to be. At the rally in Grand Rapids, held in a refurbished barn north of the city, he brought up the attempts on Trump’s life: “I think that it’s time to say to the Democrats, to the media, to everybody that has been attacking this man and trying to censor this man for going on ten years, cut it out or you’re going to get somebody killed.”



An hour later, back under a wing of Trump Force Two, Vance came over to take a few questions from the press. Bender, from the *Times*, asked him whether denouncing Democrats for inflammatory rhetoric while falsely accusing Haitian migrants of eating cats and dogs wasn’t a very narrow needle to thread. “I don’t think it’s a needle that we’re trying to thread,” Vance replied. “There’s a massive highway down which we can draw two

very important distinctions, the first of which is Donald Trump has had two assassination attempts in the last couple of months. So, if you look at this, and you try to both-sides it, the problem is only one candidate has actually suffered very serious attempts on his life, including him being literally shot in the head.”

The Senator kept his voice polite, but he was arguing a fundamental piece of his current politics—that the rupture in American life, which for a decade had been blamed on Trump, was, in fact, the fault of the Democrats and the media. Vance sounded a little exasperated; up close, I noticed for the first time the gray hairs in his beard. The second big difference, he said, was that conservatives did not call for censorship. “What is the point of the critics?” Vance added. “When you’re criticizing somebody’s rhetoric, when you’re criticizing what somebody said, are you trying to tone down the violence or are you trying to silence him?”

The following Thursday evening, I paid a visit to Springfield, where the conservative firebrand Vivek Ramaswamy, whose hard-line populism in the Republican primaries drew Trump’s praise, had organized a town hall. Earlier that day, he had met with representatives of the Haitian community, but none had come to the town hall, and neither had the mayor or any members of the city council. Outside, conservative influencers conducted video interviews with locals on their iPhones. *MAGA* gear abounded.

The conservative activist Christopher Rufo had offered a five-thousand-dollar reward to anyone who could find proof of people in Springfield eating cats. I expected to hear more stories of migrant misdeeds at the town hall. A woman said that her daughter had been chased by an “immigrant” wielding a machete. But that was the exception. Several people said that they had good personal relations with their Haitian neighbors. Some worried about the poisoned environment: one mixed-race man who had lived in Springfield his whole life said that he had been called the “N-word” twice in the past week, and that a friend had been heckled at a grocery store while holding a six-month-old baby and told to leave the country. There were murmurs of sympathy.

But the attendees mostly focussed on the stresses that the new arrivals had put on the city. A fifty-nine-year-old resident with a disability said that he

was struggling to get appointments at the local hospital; he'd heard a since-debunked rumor that this was because so many Haitian migrants needed to be treated for H.I.V. A woman mentioned that an influx of foreign-born students had overwhelmed the schools, leaving native-born children disengaged "for eight hours." A Navy veteran who was planning to vote for Trump for a third time noted that most of the Haitians were legal immigrants and asked why Republicans were focussing on deportation rather than on the drugs and homelessness that had been problems before they arrived. Listening to these complaints, I thought that the politicization of ordinary people in Springfield had at least been built on actual suffering. But their concerns weren't about any strange cultural practices of the Haitian community. They were about policy.

Vance's claims had started with something like that, too. In his Convention speech, he had insisted that the spike in housing prices nationally was due to an influx of undocumented immigrants. But, when the pressures on the housing market and institutions in a mid-sized Ohio city failed to make a dent in the national news, he tried to create a different narrative, about how foreign and culturally threatening the Haitian migrants were. Populist panics often bubble up from the grassroots, only to be refined by politicians. In this case, Vance had amplified the crudest version, ostensibly on behalf of Springfield's residents.

Ramaswamy had offered to give me a ride back to Columbus, where I was staying. After he finished an appearance on Fox News, we set off contemplatively, in his chauffeured black S.U.V. Ramaswamy is an extreme figure himself—he built his Presidential stump speech around the argument that Trump's revolution was equivalent in scope to the events of 1776. But he also seemed to think that Trump and Vance's fabrications about the Haitians in Springfield were undermining what might have otherwise been a winning issue. "I had the feeling—just my intuition—that, if I had wanted to take the crowd in a hard anti-immigrant direction, I could have," Ramaswamy said. "It wasn't where they were going to go on their own. But that's the point: leadership. People need to be led."

At the campaign event in Eau Claire, the crowd was bigger, a little rowdier. Derrick Van Orden, a white-bearded Republican House member, gave a warmup speech that dwelled on a violent crime allegedly committed by a

Venezuelan migrant in his home town of Prairie du Chien. Only Trump, he said, could make Wisconsinites feel “comfortable walking the streets.” The response of the crowd seemed to energize Vance. Onstage, he inveighed against the Democrats. “If you’re willing to throw a person in jail because you disagree with what they say,” he said, “then you’re going to be willing to put a bullet in their head, too.” Something a little dangerous was happening—Vance was accusing his opponents of wanting to kill Trump, in the guise of telling them to chill out. He addressed the Democrats directly: “Stop trying to silence people you disagree with.”

As Vance has risen in prominence, some have speculated that much of his life, following a largely fatherless childhood, has been a search for a mentor who might fill a parental role: Mamaw, the Marines, Amy Chua, Peter Thiel, Donald Trump. One of Vance’s former professors said, “I think there might be something to that.”



But it’s also the case that Thiel and Chua are both serial mentors, and that Trump needed an heir—the scarce commodity in American conservatism isn’t fathers but sons. Along the way, Vance’s liberal friends seemed to think, he’d made elisions to his persona, pruning off the inconvenient biographical details so that what remained was as unnatural as a bonsai. This summer, shortly after Vance’s nomination for the Vice-Presidency, Charles

Johnson, a far-right conspiracy theorist, gave the Washington *Post* a trove of text messages between himself and Vance, including an exchange in which Johnson had highlighted Vance's relationship with Chua. Vance had replied dismissively. "Chua doesn't tell me anything," he wrote. "I am pretty sure I don't even know another Chinese american." It was this last beat that caught the attention of some of Vance's former law-school friends, because a number of them are Chinese American.

In Eau Claire, when Vance turned his attention to the back of the room to take questions from the press, James Kelly, a reporter from a Wisconsin public-radio network, asked about the recent closure of two rural hospitals and several clinics in the Chippewa Valley. "I'm glad you mentioned providing actual concrete answers to questions," he said. "What concrete plans would your Administration have to protect rural health-care access?"

Vance was quiet for a moment. At an earlier point in his public life, this would have been a perfect question for him. As a senator, he had said that he was open to the politics of the "Bernie bros," had praised the Biden Administration's aggressive antitrust regulator Lina Khan, and had walked a U.A.W. picket line in Ohio, where a veteran pro-labor Democratic House member had asked him, "First time here?" When it comes to rural health care, themes of fairness and economic populism naturally lie close to the surface. Instead, Vance said, "This goes back to the immigration issue." He argued that the hospitals were under pressure because they were being forced to take care of migrants, adding, "Kick these illegal aliens out, focus on American citizens, and we will do a lot to make the business of rural health care much more affordable."

The elisions were happening in real time now. At such moments, I had the sense of a mismatch between Vance's talents and the timing of his trajectory. His sudden rise to power would not have been possible without the scorched-earth Trump wars that took out a whole generation of conservatives ahead of him. Vance and his allies in the New Right had spent years working out a theory of Trumpism—economic populism, an ideological makeover of the administrative state, a hard line on social-conservative issues like abortion—and then, when it was time to campaign, Trump had simply moved on.

An adviser to Vance told me that the transformations that had defined the conservative project since the 2016 election remained under way. “We’re in the third or fourth inning,” he said. The suggestion was that ambitious young right-wingers were still shaping the *MAGA* movement. But Vance, in coming so completely into alignment with Trump in this election, has helped usher in a similar change across his party. The conservative élites, like the rest of the G.O.P., are more fully Trumpist now. Vance may be playing in a much later inning.

Vance said he had time for one more question, and he awarded it to Bender, the *Times* reporter. The crowd bridled a bit, but Bender—acting politically for a second, too—quieted them by thanking the Senator for “inviting the tough questions.” What he wanted to know of Vance, Bender said, pivoting back to Springfield, was where his red line was: “What’s something you’re willing not to say in order to make a point that’s important to you?”

Vance cut him off. “The media always does this,” he grumbled. When he told CNN that he had been trying to “create a story” about what happened in Springfield, he’d meant only that he was trying to create a narrative, a “media story,” because people there were telling him that no one was taking their concerns seriously. The crowd was with him; he grew more self-assured. “I’m not making anything up,” Vance said. “I’m just telling you what my constituents are telling me.” ♦

Bidenomics Is Starting to Transform America. Why Has No One Noticed?

The full effects of the President's economic policies won't be felt for years. That might be too late for Kamala Harris and other Democrats.

By Nicholas Lemann

October 28, 2024



Among Joe Biden's afflictions and miseries, his wormwood and gall, there are the insults (about his diminished capacities), and then there are the compliments unpaid (about his achievements). We are exposed to more of the first, but it seems that to him the second are more painful. In his first interview after he withdrew as the Democratic Presidential nominee, Biden—wounded, proud, self-pitying, defiant—said, by way of defending his record, “No one thought we could get done, including some of my own people, what we got done. One of the problems is, we knew all the things we did were going to take a little time to work their way through. So now people are realizing, ‘Oh, that highway. Oh, that . . .’” He trailed off for a moment and then recovered. “The biggest mistake we made, we didn’t put

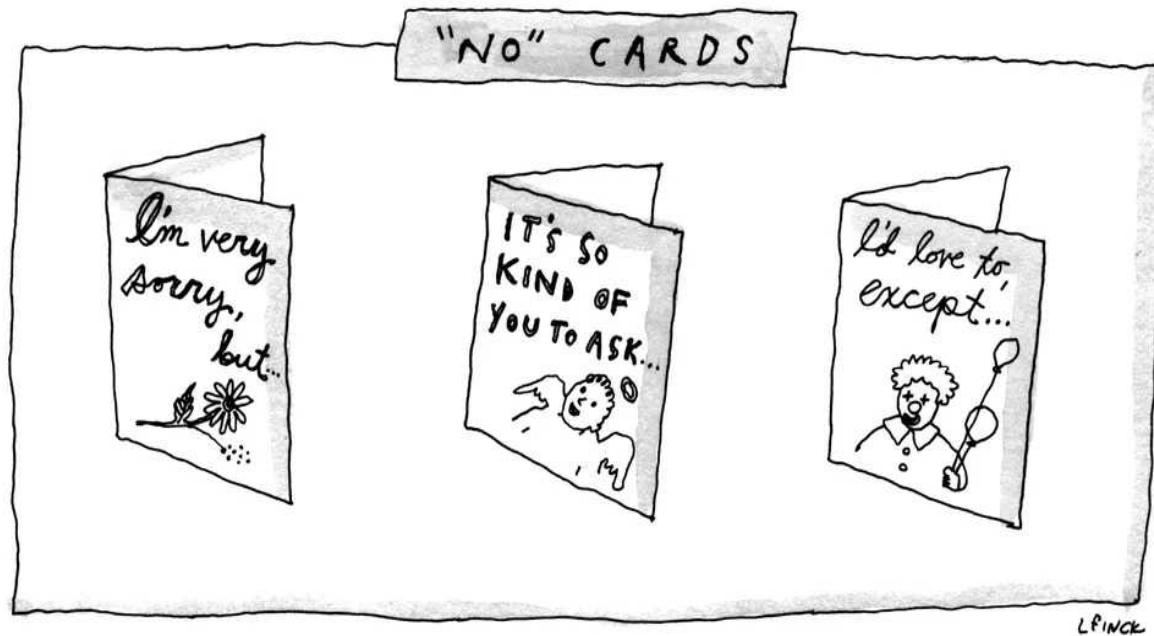
up signs saying ‘Joe Did It.’ ” He ended this with a bitter chuckle. Biden isn’t wrong. Objectively, and improbably, he has passed more new domestic programs than any Democratic President since Lyndon Johnson—maybe even since Franklin Roosevelt.

In the early weeks of 2021, very few people saw Biden as the obvious winner in the large field of potential candidates for the 2024 Democratic nomination. His victory over Donald Trump had not been overwhelming. The Democrats had lost seats in the House even while maintaining a narrow majority, and got to fifty votes in the Senate only after two runoff elections in Georgia broke their way. Then, with nothing close to a mandate, Biden passed domestic legislation that will generate government spending of at least five trillion dollars, spread across a wide range of purposes, in every corner of the country. He has also redirected many of the federal government’s regulatory agencies in ways that will profoundly affect American life. On Biden’s watch, the government has launched large programs to move the country to clean energy sources, to create from scratch or to bring onshore a number of industries, to strengthen organized labor, to build thousands of infrastructure projects, to embed racial-equity goals in many government programs, and to break up concentrations of economic power.

All of this doesn’t represent merely a hodgepodge of actions. There is as close to a unifying theory as one can find in a sweeping set of government policies. Almost all the discussion of “Bidenomics”—by focussing on short-term fluctuations of national metrics such as growth, the inflation rate, and unemployment, with the aim of determining the health of the economy—misses the point. Real Bidenomics upends a set of economic assumptions that have prevailed in both parties for most of the past half century. Biden is the first President in decades to treat government as the designer and ongoing referee of markets, rather than as the corrector of markets’ dislocations and excesses after the fact. He doesn’t speak of free trade and globalization as economic ideals. His approach to combatting climate change involves no carbon taxes or credits—another major departure, not just from his predecessors but also from the policies of many other countries. His Administration has been far more aggressive than previous ones in taking antitrust actions against big companies.

What would you call these policies? One apt label might be “post-neoliberal,” a term that does not resonate at all with the public. Another way of thinking about Biden’s approach is through terminology devised by the political scientist Jacob Hacker: it rejects redistribution as a guiding liberal principle, in favor of “predistribution,” an effort to transform the economy in a way that makes redistribution less necessary. Predistribution entails understanding the economy as something that structures the balance of power among institutions, rather than as a natural phenomenon that must be managed in order to lessen its harmful effects on individuals. So Bidenomics has overturned a number of unwritten rules that you previously had to follow if you wanted to be taken seriously as a policymaker: economic regulation is usually a bad idea; governments should balance their budgets, except during recessions and depressions; subsidizing specific industries never works; unions are a mixed blessing, because they don’t always promote economic efficiency; government should not try to help specific regions of the country or sectors of the economy.

At least in domestic affairs, nobody makes policy without thinking about politics. One grand ambition behind all the Biden economic initiatives is to usher in a political realignment that would make the Democrats competitive again in the more sparsely populated parts of the country, which have disproportionate political power. The idea is that Americans are not as motivated as you might think by notions of “opportunity” and “mobility”—that such liberal rhetoric has limited appeal among people who want to live safely and securely in the communities where they grew up, surrounded by strong institutions that are not subject to relentless economic and social disruption. (According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, ninety-two per cent of Americans say that financial stability is more important to them than upward mobility.) What people see happening around them matters far more than what the latest statistics tell us about the state of the economy. As Elizabeth Wilkins, who worked in the Biden White House, told me, “It’s national G.D.P. numbers versus how people feel about their lives, their families, their communities. It’s their job, the jobs of the people around them, what those jobs pay—not the aggregate numbers. We fully embraced that in our policy orientation.” And that meant shoring up specific places and institutions as a primary political strategy.



The irony of Bidenomics is the vast gulf between its scale—measured in money and in the number of projects that it has set in motion—and its political impact, which is essentially zero, even though a major part of its rationale is political. It has become a standard talking point of the engineers of Bidenomics that it will take at least five years, maybe ten, possibly even longer, for the public to understand its effects. “That’s the way it was with the New Deal,” Steve Ricchetti, one of Biden’s closest and longest-serving aides, said. “It wasn’t just three or four years of new programs. It was leveraged for twenty or thirty years into the future.” But the short-term politics worked out a lot better for Franklin Roosevelt; he carried all but two states in his first reelection campaign. There is little evidence that the Democrats will be similarly rewarded in 2024. Only late in the race, when she was spending much of her time in the Midwest, did Kamala Harris begin speaking regularly about Biden’s major economic initiatives. It’s unclear how committed to them she will be if she becomes President. Trump has promised to repeal many of them. Still, President Biden can rest assured that many signs are being put up. They just don’t say “Joe Did It.” They say “Investing in America.”

Over the summer, I accompanied two Biden Cabinet members, Julie Su, the acting Secretary of Labor, and Pete Buttigieg, the Secretary of Transportation, as they travelled around the country promoting the

Administration's projects. These visits took place away from the coasts, mainly in small towns. Watching the Biden officials in action made me feel like a time traveller transported back to the social-realist days of the thirties and forties. At every stop, it seemed, we'd come upon a tall chain-link fence and drive through an open gate, past a guardhouse, and then down a long, lonely road leading to a factory. All around would be forklifts, cranes, pickup trucks, huge metal sheds, silos, and lengths of pipe so wide that you could stand up inside them.

On a Friday morning in July, I went to Fort Valley, Georgia, the seat of Peach County, to watch Su promote a new factory that will build electric school buses. If the over-all goals of Bidenomics sound abstract, this project makes for a good concrete example, because it unites all the major ideas. Fort Valley is a majority-Black town in a rural swing county, in a historically Republican state that the Democrats have targeted. The biggest business in town is the Blue Bird Corporation, one of the country's largest manufacturers of school buses. During the next five years, nearly a billion dollars in grants will be awarded to dozens of school districts nationwide through the Environmental Protection Agency's Clean School Bus Program, some of which will go toward the purchase of Blue Bird's electric buses, and Blue Bird will receive eighty million dollars from the Department of Energy's Office of Manufacturing and Energy Supply Chains. In essence, the Administration is generously funding a private business. Because the money will go to electric vehicles, the plan is part of both the transition to clean energy and the Administration's project of bringing manufacturing back to the American heartland—rather than letting it happen, in particular, in China. And Blue Bird, for the first time in its ninety-seven-year history, has coöperated with its employees' effort to unionize, a development that aligns with Biden's support for unions.

For the event in Fort Valley, there was a temporary canopy to protect the audience from the summer sun, a few rows of folding chairs, a makeshift podium in front of a yellow school bus, and "Investing in America" signs posted at every possible location. The mayor, Jeffery Lundy, opened the event by saying that he was "excited and ecstatic" about the new plant. He thanked the federal government, the Blue Bird Corporation, and God, and ended by quoting a few lines of Scripture. Then came Yvonne Brooks, the president of the Georgia A.F.L.-C.I.O. Finally, Su, who has a brisk, cheerful

charm, took the podium and said that the plant would help solve the climate crisis, create jobs for the local community, and give schoolchildren a chance to breathe cleaner air.

After the ceremony, Su and I found a room where we could talk for a few minutes. She is a lawyer who started her career in civil-rights organizations and then worked in state labor agencies in California. (Her liberal past has made it difficult for her to be confirmed by the Senate, and that is why she is the “acting” Secretary.) She told me about the amount of effort that had gone into making the Fort Valley announcement possible. Phil Horlock, Blue Bird’s C.E.O., had been brought to the White House for a meeting with Biden. Then, this spring, Su had come to Fort Valley to urge Horlock to speed up his slow-moving negotiations with the United Steelworkers. Was the conclusion of the negotiations connected to the eighty-million-dollar grant to build the electric-bus factory? “I’m going to answer this way,” Su said. “The way you asked me implies conditions. Whether workers want to join a union depends on *them*. Politicians should not interfere. It is not a condition. What I said to Phil was ‘There’s no reason not to have a contract after a year of negotiations.’ They got that done. The company took it seriously. Phil said, ‘We heard the Julie Su challenge, and we accept.’ ”

How did this new era in economic policy come to pass? How did Biden, the most familiar of politicians, and previously not seen as someone with sweeping policy ambitions, become the organizer of such a big program? In retrospect, it’s possible to see what happened as the convergence of a number of forces that have been building for fifteen years. It’s a story line that seems clearer now than it did as it was unfolding.

In 2008, Barack Obama swept into office with three hundred and sixty-five electoral votes and firm control of both the Senate and the House. It seemed as if the Democrats were on their way to securing a lasting majority, as they did in the New Deal era, this time with a coalition of educated urban and suburban voters and racial and ethnic minorities. The last stage of Obama’s campaign and the beginning of his Administration took place against the backdrop of the worst financial crisis in eight decades, but Obama seemed well equipped to handle it. He and a team of experienced economic advisers got Congress to pass a large stimulus bill, aimed at preventing another Great Depression. But we wound up having a Great Recession. The unemployment

rate rose to a peak of ten per cent in October, 2009; it took until 2017 for employment to recover fully. The recession generated populist revolts on the right (the Tea Party movement) and the left (the Occupy movement), and made what had appeared to be broad public acceptance of pro-market bromides seem like an illusion. In the 2010 midterms, the Democrats lost six seats in the Senate and sixty-three seats, along with the majority, in the House.

Democrats concerned with economic inequality began identifying what they saw as the Party's original sins. There was the Clinton Administration's enthusiastic embrace of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and its lengthy negotiations to bring China into the World Trade Organization. Bill Clinton delivered a healthy economy as measured by the standard national statistics, but inside it were large pockets of woe, thanks to rising inequality and the departure of manufacturing jobs for Mexico, China, and other locations abroad. "We saw that this approach—get government out of the way, don't give business a reason to invest here—led to inequality and massive dislocation," Lael Brainard, the head of Biden's National Economic Council, who also worked in the Clinton and Obama Administrations, told me. "You saw a downward spiral of investment." Deregulation of the financial system made it less risk-proof and helped to set the stage for the 2008 crisis. Some argue that, if Obama's stimulus package—initially estimated at seven hundred and eighty-seven billion dollars—had been bigger, the Great Recession, and the resulting level of political discontent, would have been less severe.

Obama was re-elected easily, in 2012, but the Democrats' bill came due in 2016. During the primary season, Bernie Sanders, a politician whom the Democratic establishment didn't take seriously, performed unexpectedly well by running to the left of Hillary Clinton on economic issues. In the November election, Trump—another outsider, running as a right-wing populist—peeled off enough formerly Democratic voters, especially white working-class men, to win. It wasn't just that the Republicans flipped contested states such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania; formerly competitive states, among them Florida, Iowa, and Ohio, now seemed to be moving permanently out of the Democrats' reach. Hacker describes the mood around that time this way: "Trump gets elected. You can't underestimate this. People

woke up. Nothing concentrates the mind as much as the prospect of losing your democracy. We lost the heartland.”

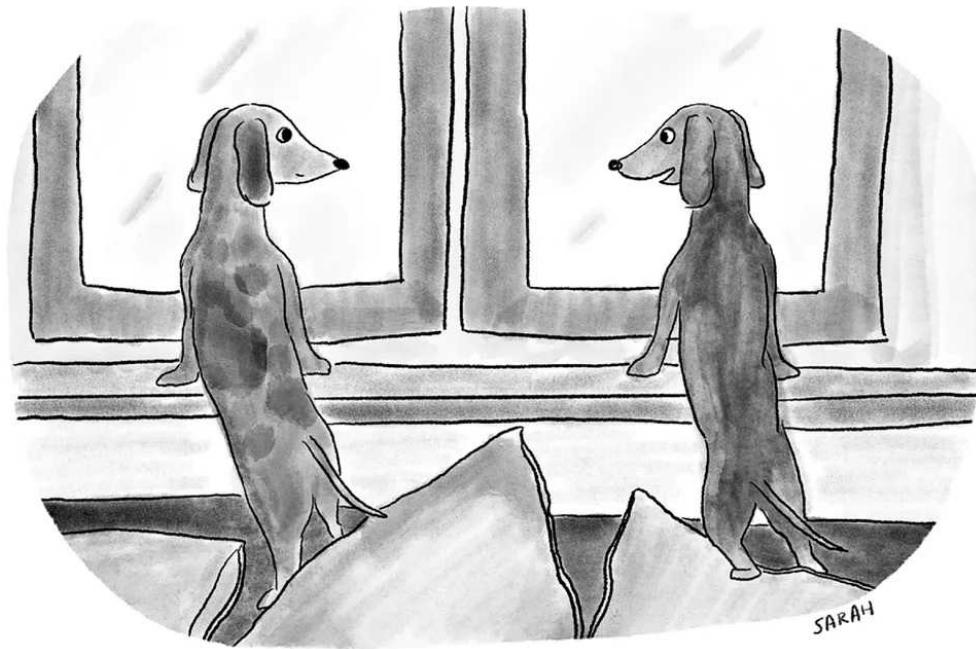
After a defeat, parties often rethink their strategies. The 2016 election was such an extreme shock to the Democrats that the rethinking had a special urgency. “Sanders and Trump tapped into something,” Elizabeth Wilkins noted. “We had to speak to economic populism as we hadn’t before.” People who had expected to be working in a Hillary Clinton Administration “spent a lot of time coming up with policy proposals because after 2016 they had nothing to do.” There was an explicit focus on finding ways to address people’s problems in their own communities—particularly in the places where the political tide had turned against Democrats. As Hacker put it, “A lot of America had been devastated by trade and by inequality. You lose civic capital in places. It’s one thing to compensate the losers. But, if you don’t, it’s a total fucking disaster.”

In high-level policy circles, a number of Democrats took up efforts to reconnect with the working class and distanced themselves from past economic policies. Jake Sullivan, now Biden’s national-security adviser, conducted a public self-examination after the 2016 election; he wrote an article in which he argued, “The American electorate as a whole is moving to embrace a more energized form of government—one that tackles the excesses of the free market and takes on big, serious challenges through big, serious legislation.” Even before 2016, John Podesta, another Clinton-Obama veteran now back in the White House, had co-founded a think tank called the Washington Center for Equitable Growth.

The argument that the Democratic Party can win by moving to the center is a staple of op-ed pages, and it seems to be shaping the Harris campaign. But inside the political world the economic left had earned significant clout by proving that it could produce new policy ideas and win votes. In 2020, Sanders ran another spirited Presidential campaign, and his reward for dropping out of the race and endorsing Biden was the creation of two Unity Task Forces, one populated with some of his supporters and the other with some of Biden’s. Senator Elizabeth Warren’s Presidential campaign had ended earlier, but the broad array of policy proposals that she put forth, generated by a network of young lawyers she had cultivated over the years, gave her a great deal of influence, too. The Unity Task Forces jointly

released a hundred-and-ten-page set of potential policies in July, 2020. Biden didn't wind up trying to enact everything in this document, but just about everything he has proposed is in there somewhere.

Also in July, 2020, Biden made a few economic-policy speeches that clearly signalled his retreat from neoliberalism—one on reviving American manufacturing, one on climate and infrastructure, one on racial economic equity, and one on the “care economy.” There was, at the time, a sense of forces within the Democratic Party and external events converging to yield a new political consensus. The *COVID* pandemic, and the high level of alarm about Trump throughout the Party, meant that the Biden Administration was coming to power during a dire national emergency. No prominent Democrats were arguing that it was a time for the government to exercise restraint. As one member of a rising generation of activists, who ended up working in the Biden White House, put it, “It’s not clear that there’s a neoliberalism to go back to.”



One feature of this post-neoliberal period is that super-ambitious, impeccably credentialled Administration officials now feel the need to demonstrate that they have not become clueless creatures of the coastal élite. Jake Sullivan's wife, Maggie Goodlander, another former White House official, is currently running for Congress to represent a district in northern

New Hampshire, and if she wins he would presumably join her there. Buttigieg has moved to Traverse City, Michigan, the home town of his husband, Chasten Glezman Buttigieg.

Over the summer, I visited Brian Deese, another high-ranking official in the Obama and Biden Administrations, in his new home town, Portland, Maine. During the Obama era, Deese, a onetime aide of Larry Summers, was seen as a neoliberal; during the Trump years, he worked for BlackRock. Biden appointed Deese, then in his early forties, as the director of the National Economic Council, a business-facing unit of the White House which Bill Clinton created. I met Deese—a slight, bearded, blue-eyed man who has the informal manner and the intensity of a Silicon Valley executive—at a new graduate school created to promote the development of tech companies in Maine. He gave me his version of the origins of Bidenomics: “Two things were going on in the spring of 2020: Biden secured the nomination, and *COVID*. He did something that’s unusual in politics. He shifted his policy vision to be more expansive. Usually, it’s the other way around.”

The result was the American Rescue Plan, a \$1.8 trillion bill—more than double the size of Obama’s stimulus legislation. It came only a year after Trump had signed a bill of equivalent size, in the early days of the pandemic, that was also meant to prevent a recession or a depression. And, indeed, the *COVID* recession was far shorter and less severe than the recession that followed the financial crisis. There were many items in the bill that signalled Biden’s priorities beyond just getting through the worst of *COVID*. Nearly ninety billion dollars went toward increasing the child tax credit, eighty billion went to shoring up union pension funds, eighty-eight billion went to infrastructure projects, and three hundred and fifty billion went to state and local governments.

The rap on the rescue bill is that it set off several years of inflation—now finally under control—which made Biden’s management of the economy widely unpopular. Jason Furman, who was Obama’s last chair of the Council of Economic Advisers and now teaches at Harvard, has been a persistent public critic of the bill, especially for its provisions authorizing more than four hundred billion dollars in checks to be sent to families with annual incomes of less than seventy-five thousand dollars. “Nobody could defend it as the right policy,” Furman told me. “The idea of sending people two-

thousand-dollar checks was invented by Trump.” (Economists prefer tax credits.) “Nancy Pelosi and Biden adopted them to troll the Republicans and to win the Senate races in Georgia. People already had money in the bank because they couldn’t buy anything,” with stores closed and supplies short, on account of the pandemic. So the price of everything rose.

By that time, it was clear that more traditional economic voices like Furman’s would not be dominant in Biden’s White House. On economic policy, most of the people who served under Clinton and Obama had been, as Furman put it, “Robert Rubin”—a former head of Goldman Sachs and the first director of the National Economic Council—“and his children and grandchildren,” figuratively speaking. (He’s one of the grandchildren.) But the ferment of the years after the financial crisis had produced a new talent pool, associated especially with Elizabeth Warren. Former aides and allies of Warren’s, and former staff members at think tanks like the Economic Policy Institute, wound up on the Council of Economic Advisers, working for Deese at the National Economic Council, or at many of the federal regulatory agencies. Jobs that customarily had gone to economists, who are predisposed to trust in markets, went instead to lawyers (like Deese), who are trained to focus on rules and institutions.

I asked Deese whether he considers himself a repentant former neoliberal. He wasn’t willing to agree to that, but he did say that some of the ideas he was charged with implementing in the Biden Administration would not have been given serious consideration under Obama. “If you had said to me in 2010 that I would be supervising industrial strategy, I would have said, ‘That’s crazy. Nobody would listen,’ ” Deese told me. “If you wanted to say ‘industrial strategy,’ you couldn’t. It was ‘picking winners.’ ”

Deese said that his perspective changed when he was in the Obama White House, working to keep General Motors and Chrysler in business during the financial crisis. “That made me see the potential for government to shape the economy,” he said. “I gained a deeper and more ground-level sense of what it meant to have economic capacity and why it’s essential. Those ideas were made super real for me by seeing an industry in free fall. We have intervened time and again in the auto industry, including in the Reagan Administration. Saying we don’t do that is a wrong description of what we’ve done as a country.”

The Biden Administration passed three more colossal bills in 2021 and 2022: the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (\$1.2 trillion), the *CHIPS* and Science Act (\$280 billion), and the Inflation Reduction Act (originally estimated at \$380 billion, now thought to have an actual cost of more than \$800 billion). Together, these laws have hundreds of provisions. But, broadly speaking, the first is intended to fund bridges, roads, harbors, and other building projects; the second brings semiconductor production back to the United States; and the third finances the transition to non-carbon-producing energy sources. In our conversation, Deese argued that the three initiatives should be thought of as one big legislative package. They share the same goal: to rebuild and redirect the industrial capacity of the United States. “We don’t just want the economy to grow,” Heather Boushey, a member of the Council of Economic Advisers, said. “Growing from the middle out means that what we make and how we make it matters.”

That idea animates many other things the Biden Administration has done (and one thing it hasn’t done: negotiate any new trade agreements). In addition to passing legislation, the White House has issued a number of significant executive orders. Probably the most important came in July, 2021—an order on competition which stands as the strongest Presidential statement on monopoly and antitrust in American history. Biden also filled the country’s regulatory agencies with appointees from the economic left of the Party. The best known of these is Lina Khan, of the Federal Trade Commission, but similar appointees are running the Justice Department’s antitrust division, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, and all the environmental agencies. The Obama Administration opened an antitrust investigation of Google and then dropped it. The Biden Administration sued Google and won. Obama, after recruiting Elizabeth Warren to design the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, rejected her request to be nominated as its initial director. Biden appointed to the position Rohit Chopra, one of Warren’s aides from those days.

Then there are parts of the government that are practically unknown to the outside world—Biden remade many of those, too. One example is the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, which Clinton established in the first year of his Presidency, to reduce the number of federal regulations. Obama’s head of the O.I.R.A. was Cass Sunstein, a law professor and the co-author, with the behavioral economist Richard Thaler, of the book “Nudge.” That

selection was a gesture in the direction of light-touch regulation. Biden reversed course by putting K. Sabeel Rahman, a Warren ally, in the job, and approving a new way for the government to calculate the cost-benefit ratio of initiatives, giving more weight to social benefits. Such considerations are embedded in the Biden legislation. The *CHIPS* Act allowed the government to mandate company-paid child care for the workers in the new factories it's financing, and for the construction workers building them, too. Forty per cent of federally backed climate investments are required to be made in disadvantaged communities. "We were trying to fuse the realities of race and other structural inequities with economics," Rahman told me. "Some people say, 'Just talk about the economics of it.' But we were trying to put these economic programs together in a way that would actually address structural inequalities."

Biden's most dramatic departure from past Democratic policy might be on climate change. For decades, incentive systems have been the dominant idea for reducing carbon emissions. Leah Stokes, a professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who's also a prominent climate activist, said, "It's wildly unpopular to make fossil fuels more expensive. You put up the cost of everything." The Obama Administration's major climate initiative was based on cap-and-trade, which allows companies to buy and sell emission allowances. The proposal never came to a vote in the Senate, and Biden wound up abandoning these ideas entirely. John Podesta, who's now responsible for climate policy in the White House, said that any Biden proposal "had to be politically viable, and to show a path forward for American workers. So we flipped the politics of it—shifted from 'What do we need to shut down?' to 'What do we need to build?'"

The way this played out was determined in the summer of 2022. The American Rescue Plan had passed quickly, though with no Republican votes, and the infrastructure bill had followed, but another four trillion dollars in Biden proposals remained. Most of it was divided into two parts, called the American Jobs Plan and the American Families Plan. The Democratic House passed a bill combining the two, called Build Back Better, but it died in the Senate. The senator with the key vote, Joe Manchin, of West Virginia, made it clear that he opposed the American Families Plan—which included child care, paid family leave, and free community college—because he considered it to be a series of handouts. But he opened

negotiations on the American Jobs Plan, which was devoted mainly to business-friendly, globalization-skeptical clean-energy provisions. It was eventually renamed (actually, misnamed) the Inflation Reduction Act and passed that August. “It came together, and we were able to get it over the finish line,” Deese said.



The Inflation Reduction Act heavily bears Manchin’s stamp. At its core are generous tax credits to businesses, mostly but not entirely in clean energy, and West Virginia will do very well. Once you get past understanding it simply as a landmark piece of climate legislation, the act is a large, unkempt thing. With the exception of a couple of relatively minor provisions, it penalizes no one for anything. Some of its provisions will benefit fossil-fuel companies. More than eighty per cent of its projects are being built in Republican districts—partly because they have more empty land and looser regulatory environments. (Conversely, around the country, feuds have broken out between environmentalists who want to push the clean-energy revolution forward and environmentalists who are opposed to, say, establishing mines to extract the minerals used in electric-vehicle batteries.) The projects have been rolling out slowly. One reason that the law will cost so much more than was estimated when it passed is that some of its subsidies come in the form of uncapped tax credits—anybody below a fairly generous income ceiling who wants a seventy-five-hundred-dollar tax credit

for buying an electric vehicle can have one, and the credits can't be applied to cheaper Chinese E.V.s, because of the Administration's ethic of "build American, buy American." European allies are upset because the Inflation Reduction Act's tax credits are so generous that they are enticing businesses in their own countries to build new factories in the United States.

The White House says that, by the end of this decade, the bill will reduce carbon emissions from 2005 levels by forty per cent, and that it has created three hundred thousand new jobs across more than three hundred projects. Deese told me that more than five per cent of all new investments in the United States are now being made in clean energy, up from about one per cent in 2018, because of how powerfully the Inflation Reduction Act's tax incentives change the economic calculus for private companies.

Back in the New Deal days, the Democrats were straightforwardly the party of labor, and the Republicans were the party of business. That simple division became much more complicated in the nineties. The Biden Administration showed its loyalties by doing a lot for at least some businesses, and for labor, and for all its other major constituencies and hoped-for constituencies. Whether that approach is sustainable, especially with Biden gone, is another question.

Kamala Harris hasn't spent a lot of time on the campaign trail visiting Biden Administration-funded infrastructure projects. That duty falls primarily to her former rival in the 2020 Presidential campaign, Pete Buttigieg. He is the public face of the infrastructure bill, which got sixty-nine votes in the 50–50 Senate, partly because it's hard for politicians to oppose noncontroversial building projects in their districts. (By contrast, no Republicans voted for the Inflation Reduction Act.) Buttigieg has held public events at infrastructure sites in all fifty states. I spent the better part of a week touring the Midwest with him, visiting Administration-funded projects.

In Menominee, Michigan, we went to a small, privately owned port on Lake Michigan that often ships large wind turbines. It got a twenty-one-million-dollar grant, its first ever from the federal government, to deepen and upgrade its shipping channel. In Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a local malt company is applying for an infrastructure grant that would help it ship products from the city's small port. In Milwaukee, the port got nine million

dollars in federal funds to help Wisconsin farmers send their crops through waterways to markets around the world. In Kokomo, Indiana, an auto manufacturer showed off facilities for its transition to producing electric vehicles, one of which has been awarded a two-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar grant from the Department of Energy. In each of these cases, the project bundled multiple Biden goals: clean energy plus working with business plus unionization plus rebuilding the Midwest's industrial base.

Buttigieg—crewcut, trim (he's a triathlete), dressed in a dark-blue suit, a white shirt, and a tie—is very good at being the Midwestern boy who left and then decided to come home. He's polite, punctual, respectful, and fully briefed, scrubbed of all traces of the attitudes that Midwesterners find suspect in people from the coasts. At each stop, he found a way to mention his local roots and his military service in Afghanistan—but not the Republican-zinging appearances that he's been making on Fox News. On the south side of Milwaukee, Buttigieg met a group of farmers at a restaurant—mainly beefy guys with beards who, while they were waiting for him, chatted about the upcoming state fair. Buttigieg walked in at 7:45 A.M. and shook hands. “Thanks for stayin’ up late to see me,” he said. (Farmers wake up well before dawn.) Then he sat down at a long table and spent an hour hearing from everybody. In the background, on a wall-mounted television with the sound turned off, an ad came on for Tammy Baldwin, Wisconsin's more-popular-than-you'd-expect Democratic senator, pointing to her role in instituting price caps for inhalers. Buttigieg and the farmers talked about five-axle versus six-axle trucks, the economic potential of processed soy meal, and Port Milwaukee's ability to handle non-containerized cargo. A couple of times, Buttigieg tried gently to steer the conversation toward the larger themes of the Biden Administration, specifically climate change and antitrust efforts. The farmers were polite, but these issues obviously didn't resonate with them at the same level as immediate, practical matters. After the breakfast, Buttigieg went to the port for a public event, where, in front of a pair of enormous corrugated-metal silos and an “Investing in America” sign, flanked by local dignitaries, he told a small audience about the eight hundred thousand manufacturing jobs that the Administration had created.

Afterward, Buttigieg and I met in an empty conference room in the port's office building, and I asked how he explains the long-running industrial decline that the Administration is working to reverse. “I think in most

accounts the familiar culprits are globalization and automation,” he said. “I would put it a little differently, though. More than anything, it was an unwillingness to invest in the kind of industrial policy and the kind of infrastructure development that made our original industrial economy possible.” Brian Deese had made a similar point: industrial strategy is a venerable American tradition, going back to the days of the Erie Canal, one that was forgotten for a few decades, with terrible effects, and is now being revived. As Buttigieg said, Biden’s economic policies recover “some of the things we were wrong to walk away from, like industrial policy, support for labor unions, support for big investments in shared things like infrastructure.”

I asked Buttigieg whether he could offer a single rubric that would encompass all the Administration’s economic policies. He said that he’d been thinking about this. “What I landed on,” he said, “was the idea that we’ll one day come to remember this as the Big Deal. There’s the New Deal. There’s the Square Deal”—Teddy Roosevelt’s name for his domestic programs. “Now we’ve got the Big Deal, because in some ways its bigness is the defining factor.” In infrastructure-building, at least, “the prior examples were more one mode at a time. The interstate highway system was massive, but that was confined to highways. The transcontinental railroad was massive, but that was about one mode: railroads. The Big Deal is more multimodal.”

That brings us back to the question of why the world hasn’t thought to call the Administration’s programs the Big Deal, or even to consider them a big deal. In Kokomo, I had another conversation with Buttigieg, in an empty classroom at a community college that trains people to work in electric-vehicle production, and I asked him about this. He gave the standard argument of Administration officials who are leading the implementation of the new economic programs: it will take a while for their political effects to arrive.

“Two things I think are going to happen in terms of political impact,” Buttigieg said. “They’re totally separate and apart from ‘Oh, you did the bridge, we’re going to support you now.’ I don’t just mean project-level political impact. The two things I would point to are more subtle, but I think very powerful. One of them is public trust. If you look—as we often do as

Americans on the left and center left—to the Nordic countries, one of the things you find there is a high level of confidence that the system is fair, partly because they use tax revenue to deliver services that people appreciate. And so you have a higher level of social and political trust, because things are delivered. There's a virtuous cycle where, if people see something for their tax dollars, they're more likely to be confident that they can and should support public things with their tax dollars.”

He went on, “The other is when you reduce inequality, and especially when you reduce inequality across social lines, like racial wealth gaps, that is conducive to a better political environment for everybody. Tony Judt, in ‘*Ill Fares the Land*,’ put forward some data showing that, even on the same average income, the society with more inequality will have worse public-health outcomes, more violence, you name it. So, for example, the data we've seen on the reduction in the racial wealth gap between 2019 and 2022 is really important. I'm not saying that a voter consciously gives the elected official who engineered that credit twenty years down the line, but I do think it just creates a better environment for all of our political processes to play out.”

If you squint, you can see the outlines of a new post-neoliberal Democratic coalition. Fast-growing clean-energy industries—wind, solar, batteries, hydrogen, electric vehicles—could join Hollywood and Silicon Valley in supporting the Democratic Party. Purple-tinted states, such as Georgia and Arizona, which are getting lots of clean-energy projects (Georgia is in the “battery belt,” Arizona in the “hydrogen belt”), could turn bluer. (The Biden Administration even has plans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars reviving the steel industry in J. D. Vance’s home town of Middletown, Ohio.) The Administration’s insistence on union labor in its building projects could begin to reverse the long decline of private-sector unionization. (The national rate is currently six per cent, down from about a third in the fifties.) A more successful push for the policies that were part of the American Families Plan could bolster not just family incomes but also the care industry and its employees’ unions. All these policies would help Black and Latino families, and so might shore up their wobbling loyalty to the Democratic Party.



Here's a specific example of the way Democrats are hoping things work out politically. On January 23, 2017, the first full workday of the Trump Administration, Sean McGarvey, the president of North America's Building Trades Unions—a muscular, heavily male zone of the labor movement which the Republican Party has been wooing intermittently for decades—stood in front of the White House, at the head of a platoon of union leaders and members in the construction industry, and made a brief, exuberant public statement: “We just had probably the most incredible meeting of our careers with the President, and the Vice-President, and the senior staff. . . . The respect that the President of the United States showed us—and when he shows it to us he shows it to three million of our members across the United States—was nothing short of incredible.” Five years later, McGarvey took the podium at a convention of the building-trades unions and offered up half an hour of ardent love for the Biden Administration. I asked McGarvey what happened. Trump, McGarvey said, “never did anything he said he was going to do. He never did infrastructure. His National Labor Relations Board was laden with anti-labor ideologues. He never did pensions. Pretty much you name it. That first meeting was all the things he was going to do. And then we had four years of a knife fight in a phone booth.” The Biden Administration, by contrast, had “delivered every possible thing we could ever possibly ask for or imagine. There have been things they did for us that we wouldn’t have had the chutzpah to ask for.” Partly because of the

Administration's projects, the building-trades unions have added fifty thousand new members in the past year—their most significant growth since the fifties.

In the view of the designers of Bidenomics, this kind of shift would be just the beginning, because, once you put into place the idea of the government remaking the economy, policy and politics will begin to operate together in a continuous self-reinforcing loop. But that's far closer to being a hope than a certainty.

Where we are now, near the conclusion of the 2024 campaign, is profoundly strange. People love to complain that politics organizes itself around perception, not reality. Here's the reality: one party, the G.O.P., ditched its establishment, embraced a form of economic nationalism and populism, and surprised everybody by winning a Presidential election. This wasn't just a freak event; versions of the same thing happened around the world. In the United States, the Trump Administration, once it was in power, mostly pursued not what it ran on but an old-fashioned Republican program of tax cuts and deregulation. Meanwhile, the Democrats began competing for the voters Trump had attracted, and, after this helped lead to a victory in 2020, they enacted an ambitious program aimed at the economic lives of working- and middle-class Americans. And still, outside a limited cadre of activists and policymakers, none of this is the dominant narrative of American politics. Another complaint that people make about politicians is that they are all talk, no action. With Biden, on these issues, it has been almost the opposite: lots of action, very little talk. As Harris's campaign wore on, she began speaking more about economic issues, especially during her visits to Midwestern states, but her language has been quite different from that of other Biden officials. If Biden's actual economic policies were the main topic of the campaign, perhaps the outcome of the election would determine their future. Their absence from the election makes their fate more of a mystery.

If Harris wins, will she stay the course that Biden has set? Biden hasn't been articulate enough lately to lay out his economic vision, and Harris's instinct is to present all her ideas, including economic proposals, in specific, tangible, personal terms. Rohini Kosoglu, a former policy director for Harris, told me, "Sometimes she tells people who work for her to imagine

going to someone's wedding and then being invited to their house and seeing the wedding album on a table. If you open it, what are you going to be looking for? A picture of yourself at the wedding. The American people want to know that we see them when we think through our policy." Harris's earliest economic proposal, a ban on price gouging in supermarkets, meets the wedding-album test—you can see yourself in the policy—but nobody thinks of it as a major economic reimagining. Her economic background and Biden's bear little resemblance. He comes from a downwardly mobile family who had to relocate to the declining blue-collar city of Scranton, Pennsylvania, and who lost everything after the Second World War. Her parents were upwardly mobile immigrants, and her home ground is the booming, innovation-celebrating Bay Area. People who work with Biden say that he has an instinctive mistrust of economists, especially those from élite universities. Harris is the daughter of successful academics; her father is an economist who worked for years at an élite university.

Harris's career has not centered on economic issues, as Sanders's and Warren's have, and she has strong ties to Silicon Valley, which is skeptical of Biden's economic policies, especially on antitrust, trade, and unions. (Her brother-in-law Tony West is a senior executive at Uber, now on leave to work on the campaign.) Economically oriented Democratic policymakers have been obsessively parsing her every move for clues about how post-neoliberal she will or won't be. Having become the nominee much later than Biden did in 2020, she hasn't had time to set a full policy agenda or to create a cadre of future officials for her Administration. Gene Sperling has left the White House and joined her campaign full time—but Karen Dunn, the lead lawyer for Google in one of the Administration's lawsuits against the company, was on the small team that prepared her for her debate with Trump. Harris frequently says that she wants to create an "opportunity economy," which isn't language that post-neoliberals would use—they'd prefer "shared prosperity." She has ratcheted down a Biden proposal on capital gains and corporate taxes, to lower the rates, and she has been notably silent on the activities of regulatory agencies, such as the S.E.C. and the F.T.C., that are intensely unpopular with business. Warren, in an interview on a Boston radio station back in January, declined to say whether she thought Biden should renominate Harris as his running mate; it seems unlikely that Harris would use Warren as an informal personnel director the way that Biden has. On the other hand, Harris is obviously enthusiastic

about care-oriented policies like the child tax credit and paid family medical leave. She gives no hint of being a limited-government person on principle.

Harris rarely talks about antitrust, or industrial policy, or trade, or the larger idea that the government should actively structure the market economy. Because these are rather technical issues, she can promise to help the middle class without being very specific. In the debate, she was vague about her economic plans, but she took pains to mention that Goldman Sachs, the Wharton School, and many prominent economists prefer her plans to Trump's. That wasn't a very Biden-esque message. In Harris's first major economic address as the Democratic nominee, in North Carolina in August, she attacked Trump for levying tariffs that would "in effect" raise taxes on the middle class. This seemed to imply that she accepts the standard view of economists that tariffs are taxes and are a bad idea. But Biden has imposed heavy tariffs on, for example, Chinese electric vehicles. (As Buttigieg put it in one of our conversations, "There is a legitimate national interest in insuring that these programs create American jobs, even if that interest is not free of charge.") Will Harris keep these tariffs? Will she retain Lina Khan, the bête noire of the Democratic donor class, at the F.T.C.? Did Harris's one anodyne line about unions in her first speech—"you should be able to join a union if you choose"—signal a loosening of Biden's intimate embrace of organized labor?

If Trump wins, will he dismantle Bidenomics? Maybe not, or not entirely. Trillions of dollars' worth of tax cuts that Trump passed during his Presidential term will expire at the end of next year. If Trump gets another term, he will likely try to extend them, and that will constrict what the government can do. But Biden's major legislation is designed to be difficult to repeal. The money is legally committed, and there are quiet efforts under way to speed up the slow pace of project launches, and to make project cancellations legally difficult, in order to Trump-proof the Biden program. Because so much of the spending is going toward the kinds of projects that elected officials love, and is in Republican-held political territory, and is aimed at the voters Trump claims to represent, it's meant to be difficult for Republicans to abandon.

Also, underneath the bluster, threats, and theatrics, Trump is running on an economic program that would have been unimaginable coming from any

previous Republican nominee, including him. He is now officially devoted to preserving Obamacare, which he spent his previous term trying to overturn. He has promised not to cut Medicare, to increase Social Security by making its benefits tax-free, and to eliminate taxes on tips and overtime pay. He wants to impose new tariffs that would be much larger than the ones he put in place when he was President. J. D. Vance has proposed more than doubling the child tax credit, to five thousand dollars, a move that would cost trillions. The most vulnerable of the major Biden bills is the Inflation Reduction Act, but Trump has stopped short of promising to repeal it. Its largest provision is a subsidy for domestically produced electric vehicles, and one of Trump's richest and most vocal supporters is the leading manufacturer of them, Elon Musk. Consistency has never been Trump's hallmark.

A great deal depends not just on who is elected President but on whom that person puts in key economic positions, and on the results of the House and Senate elections. A divided Congress and a sense that the country isn't immediately in crisis would not make for favorable weather for major changes. Still, American politics feels very different from the way it did at the turn of the millennium—we have been through the political version of climate change. In his 1996 State of the Union Address, Clinton declared, “The era of big government is over.” Inside the daily chaos of politics, there seems to be a new invisible foundation: the era of the era of big government being over is over. Both parties have accepted the premise that the government has failed voters without a college degree, especially in the middle of the country, and both are actively wooing them—partly because they determine the balance of power in American politics. (That’s why Trump and Harris chose the running mates they did.) Both accept that the wrong to these voters was done through excessive faith in unfettered markets. That faith isn’t miraculously going to reappear as the controlling principle of American politics anytime soon, but that hardly leaves matters settled. The parties have radically different ideas—different in substance, different in values, different in methods, maybe also different in sincerity—about how to achieve what they present as the same goal. The question that will dominate the years to come is whose version of the new, enlarged role of government will prevail. ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Nextdoor Reacts to the Rapture](#)

Shouts & Murmurs

Nextdoor Reacts to the Rapture

By Jay Martel

October 28, 2024



Earlier this morning, abusive and deluded homeless man dressed in white was shouting up and down our street, blowing on trumpet. Asked him politely to take it somewhere else and he got even more aggressive. Actually felt scared. WTF??? Hate to see this happen. Used to be great neighborhood.

Does anyone know what's going on in the Smithfield area? People flying around, hellfire, terrible traffic.

Inconsiderate driver partially blocked my driveway with his car, then flew up into the sky before I could get him to move it. Super annoying! What is wrong with people???

Anyone else experiencing a power outage? And hundred-pound hailstones?

These three suspicious men dropped out of sky in front of my house, on the 400 block of North Jones, hung out there for a bit, then ran toward my

driveway blowing horns and flew off, heading toward Oakwood. They were wearing white hoodies, feathery wings, halos. Doorbell camera fortunately caught the whole thing. Be on the lookout—they may be the porch pirates who've been stealing our Amazon packages.

Anyone know of a reliable house cleaner? Can't deal with flakes.

Have this ongoing dispute with my neighbor about his tree growing out of control over my fence, dropping staining seedpods all over my newly tiled patio (see photo), and he finally agreed to meet about it. But then he doesn't show up! I go over, and his wife says he "ascended to Heaven." Seriously? Some people will do anything to get out of their obligations!
#neednewneighbors

Very suspicious man with wings seen on North Elm yelling about end of the world. Hate that mental patients are just free to harass whomever and the police can't do anything about it.

Anyone notice the lake of fire blocking access to the park? You'd think the crazy property taxes we pay would be enough to keep a damn lake from burning!

Can we please do something about these winged homeless? Used to be so quiet where I live. So sick of their bugling and flitting around. Plus, their altars of fire are making air quality worse—not to mention all the litter!

I am looking for an aquarium-service person.

This big black dog appeared on our doorstep. Please message if it belongs to you. We cannot keep it as it is not a family-friendly pet because of fleas and serving the Antichrist.

Irresponsible motorists floating away have left their cars in the middle of my street, causing endless traffic jams. Tried calling city to get them towed but spent twenty minutes on hold. Typical.

See photo of winged homeless man caught in the act of littering. Asked him to pick it up and he said, "The vials of God's wrath are now empty." As if that's an excuse for not taking care of your garbage!

When I moved here, I intentionally chose an apartment near the cemetery because I work from home and value the quiet. Big mistake! Now constant stream of dead rising into the air is unbelievably distracting. Complained to my landlord, then *he* started flying away! Nobody's accountable anymore.

So today I got off work early, was really looking forward to heading to the beach, but then hit this huge traffic jam. Turns out, four a-holes are riding their horses right down the middle of the street! Seriously??? So sick of people needing to take their stupid pets everywhere. Can't wait to see all the comments from animal-lovers, but there it is.

Avoid winged homeless tending altar of fire near Third and Central Ave. One of them gave both me and my wife grievous sores. Thanks for that, liberals!

First earthquake, then hailstorm, then stars falling from sky, then ocean turning to blood: Do we need more evidence that current leadership in City Hall isn't working?

Anyone else hear that this is the beginning of seven-year period of tribulation during which Antichrist will rise from Hell and trigger Armageddon? Maybe he can do something about the litter! ♦

Fiction

- [From the Wilderness](#)

Fiction

From the Wilderness

By Yukio Mishima

October 27, 2024



One morning in the rainy season, I went to bed at 6 A.M. after working all night and was on the verge of falling asleep when I was startled by the sound of my father's voice coming through the air-conditioner next to my bed.

Ever since the device was embedded in my bedroom wall, my sleep has been frequently interrupted by the noise of construction in the neighborhood or electioneering from a passing campaign truck. No matter the season, the air-conditioner conducts sound from the outside as efficiently as if it were a speaker.

My parents live on the same property as me and my family, in a separate wing. At their advanced age, they wake up early; there are times when they get up before I've gone to bed.

My father was yelling at someone.

“You there! We’re still sleeping here. Be quiet.”

There was no response.

[Read an interview with the translator of the story.](#)

Only half awake and unaware of the time, I assumed that someone in the house had asked a tradesman, a carpenter maybe, to do some work, and that my father was worried the noise might disturb my sleep. If I was right about that, it was in fact his words of caution that had pulled me back from the brink of sleep and would have to be deemed the actual annoyance.

There was a brief interval of silence. My father’s objection must have been effective. I tried to fall asleep again.

His next words were sharper than before.

“Hey, you! I told you to knock it off!”

There was no answer to this, either, and I heard a noise like hammering on wood. I was getting angry. Some people are so inconsiderate! I thought.

“Hey! If you keep pounding on the door that way, you’ll break it!” my father yelled.

That was when I realized something abnormal was going on. Because I sleep during the day, my room has thick curtains to block the light. In order to read the clock on my bedside table I had to move my face close to the dial: it was nearly seven.

Suddenly, I heard a man’s shrill scream, and the pounding on the door became a flailing beyond the realm of anything normal. The sound was identical to the rapping at a door in the Kabuki theatre—“Open up! Open up!” I could almost see the violence in the fist, the fury as it rose and fell.

I sprang out of bed, wrapped myself in a dressing gown, grabbed my kendo sword made of solid oak, and dashed into my wife’s bedroom, next door. My wife was up.

“I saw a face,” she said, as I entered.

At that moment, I wasn’t sure what she meant. We ran downstairs. The housekeeper and the maid were terrified. It was likely that my mother had already called 110 from her wing, but my wife, thinking that she should call, ran into the kitchen and turned on the light. In the rainy morning, the house was dark. “Please don’t turn the lights on, Missus,” the maid objected. “It’s maybe safer—”

My wife dialled 110 but kept getting a busy signal. Meanwhile, the banging on the kitchen door had stopped. Eventually, the emergency operator answered: “We’re on the way—we’ll be right there.”

The pounding moved somewhere else—we couldn’t tell which door. In the stillness of the house, that violent pounding was the only noise.

I raced back to the second floor.

It was the French windows in my wife’s bedroom that were under attack. The curtains were drawn, so I couldn’t see the person outside. As though they had abruptly rebelled in the gray light of early morning, the sturdy windows in one corner of the room were creaking and groaning and the lace curtains swayed and the frames strained at their hinges.

I stared at the windows until standing there helplessly began to feel unbearable and I went back downstairs.

In the kitchen, my wife and I discussed in rapid whispers how to protect the children. We had to decide on the most appropriate rooms, first where to hide and then where to flee.

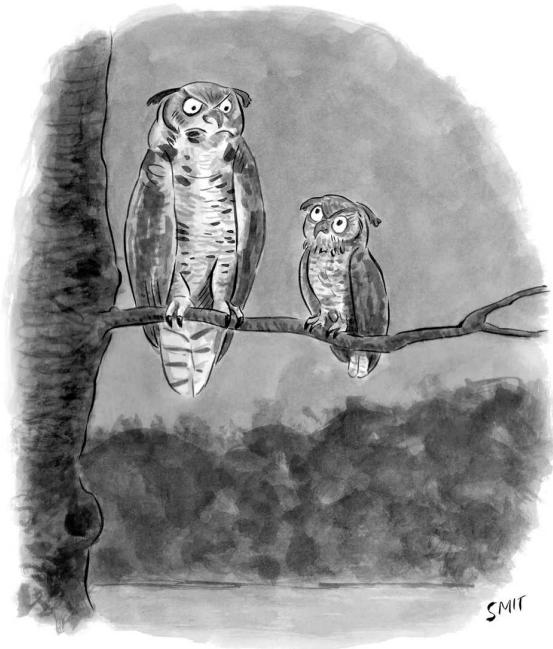
Just then, from somewhere in the house we heard the icy cascade of breaking glass.

“He’s after you,” my wife said. “It’s safer if I have a look.” Taking the wooden sword from my hand, she turned to go up the stairs.

“That will leave me empty-handed,” I said. “I’ll get another—”

Pushing past her, I climbed the stairs. I intended to get the sword in my study.

As I had finished my work for the day, the study I was picturing was deserted, a quiet place in semidarkness. All I needed to do was get my weapon before proceeding to look for the room where a window had been broken.



I started to enter the study but halted in the doorway.

In the corner behind my desk, I saw a face suspended in the dimness of the heavily curtained room.

I knew where the sword was; without taking my eyes off the face, I groped my way to it, picked it up, and brandished it, assuming a fighting stance. I felt myself calming down.

The figure standing there was a tall youth, painfully thin, in a cream-colored jacket. The face he turned toward me in the gray light was horribly pale, the most ghostly face I have ever seen. He was holding open in his hands a large green book, a volume of an encyclopedia. Clearly, he had taken it from a set on the shelf behind the desk. Curiously enough, I was instantly relieved. Is that all this is? I thought. The usual crazy with his wacko literary ideas! If

I'm right, I know this character inside and out. There's nothing to be afraid of.

"Why are you here?" I asked, the sword ready in my right hand.

The youth's ashen face was so tense it looked about to crack and fall apart. Staring at me impassively, only his eyes alive with purpose, like those of an animal sizing up a meal, he said in a trembling voice, "A book—I've come to borrow a book."

He seemed to step two paces closer, but it was only his body lurching, his chin thrusting forward.

"I want you to tell the truth!" he said more gravely.

"About what? What do you mean by the truth?"

The youth was breathing hard, gasping, yet he repeated himself mechanically.

"Please tell the truth."

I didn't know what he meant, but I was at pains to keep my response calm.

"Of course—I'll be sure to tell the truth about everything," I said, stalling for time.

Just then, someone jostled my shoulder and a policeman pushed past me and entered the room. Two other policemen followed and they surrounded the youth.

"Please tell the truth!" he shouted once more, as though delirious with fever.

"Come along now," one of the policemen said. "Let's go somewhere quiet and talk this over."

Escorted by two policemen, the youth went unprotestingly. The third police officer took the green encyclopedia from his hands and left the room with it. I noticed a small bloodstain on the spine of the book.

I had foolishly assumed that the police were intending to sit the youth down calmly and encourage him to have a conversation with me. But, as they approached the kitchen door, one of the policemen abruptly shoved him in the back and tried to force him outside. The youth put up a struggle, and in a flash all three policemen fell on him in an impressive display of coördinated action designed to drag him out. There was a practiced technique in the way they seized his arms and pressed his shoulders down. Even so, the youth continued straining to look back until it seemed he might twist his neck off. I don't remember the expression on his face at the time. But I have a feeling that it didn't bear looking at directly.

“Mishima-san, Mishima-san . . .”

It seemed to take forever for his cries to recede to a distance beyond my hearing.

The foregoing is everything I saw of the incident with my own eyes. Following is an attempt to place my account into context after hearing from my parents and my wife.

The first person to lay eyes on the intruder, having woken up in her wing a little earlier than usual because she planned to go out, was my mother. Normally, she went into her kitchen as soon as she woke up, and her rattling around summoned the maid from her bed, but this morning she happened to notice groggily a shadow flickering by the small window in the kitchen door.

She approached and squinted through the peephole. A man was tugging on the door to the shed.

Not fully awake, my mother forgot that the front and rear gates to the grounds were still locked. It didn't dawn on her that no one should have been standing there inside the gates. Assuming it was an early-morning tradesman, she called out through a gap in the door, “If you're looking for Mishima, turn right and go to the kitchen door at the back.”

The man turned, stared for an instant at where her voice had come from, then dashed out of sight toward the back of the property.

That was when my mother realized that the gates wouldn't have been open yet.

On the intercom to my wing of the house, she warned our maid that a suspicious person was heading that way and hurried to wake my father. My father jumped out of bed, opened the rain shutters, and stepped into the garden.

"Not there! In back!" my mother shouted.

Just then, the intruder's face came distinctly into focus in my mother's mind for the first time. She was sure that this was the obsessive youth who had appeared two or three times over the past year to request a meeting with me, and had been turned away each time. If it was indeed him, my mother thought with mild relief, my father could be counted on to send him packing with a scolding.

But, when my father suddenly reappeared at the kitchen entrance and shouted, "Call 110!", she grasped the gravity of the situation and rushed to the phone. Someone picked up at once and commenced a long interrogation that kept her on the line: Address? Directions? Nearby landmarks? Keys? Current situation? And so on.

Meanwhile, my father had gone around to the back from the garden, and I was awakened by his shouting from the entrance to the path that led to my kitchen door. Perceiving that the battering was about to break open the door, he shouted, "That's breaking and entering! You'll be in big trouble. You don't care about that?"

"I don't care," the man replied, his eyes glinting.

"What do you want?" my father called from the entrance to the path. "I can take a message to Mishima!"

"I've come to meet with Mishima-san about a serious problem."

"Fine. I told you I'd take him a message."

“A message won’t do. I have to speak to him in person,” he screamed over his shoulder and, turning back to the door, charged it like a bull, pushing and pulling with all his might. I imagine it was then, sensing a degree of violence that exceeded the capacity of a normal man, that my father hurried back to instruct my mother to make the call.

Before long, the man abandoned his assault on the kitchen door and circled around to the garden in front. From there he called my name.

My wife, awakened, cracked open the French windows in her bedroom and saw a man shouting in the front garden. It seems likely that the man had also caught a glimpse of her. She recognized his face, and was startled to see the youth she had chased away more than once standing in the garden so early in the morning. Stepping back, she locked the window. That was when she said to me, as I appeared in her room with my sword in hand, “I saw a face.”

While we were conferring downstairs, the man had grabbed the eaves of the roof and hoisted himself up to the outer wall on the second floor, and was banging on the French windows where my wife had appeared just a minute ago. When he couldn’t open them, he had moved along the ledge to the window of my bedroom. Breaking the window with his fist and inserting his arm, he had released the latch and then dashed from room to room until he reached my study, where he had taken down a volume of the encyclopedia behind my desk and was perusing it.

I saw later that he had chosen Volume IX, from *kun* to *kenchi*. What was he trying to look up? Or was Volume IX a random selection? Then again, having taken leave of his senses, was he even aware that the volume he had chosen was part of an encyclopedia?

Still engaged on the phone in an endless dialogue with the emergency operator, my mother heard the sound of glass breaking in my bedroom.

“Oh, my God! I heard a window breaking—he must’ve come inside!” she shouted. “Please help us right away!” At this, the operator at the other end of the line finally disconnected.

The long, frustrating phone call had tired my mother out. A patrol car might take forever to arrive, but surely the police at the local station had been notified and would be arriving any minute.

Too impatient to get dressed, my mother opened an umbrella and left the house in her nightclothes. It was drizzling. Turning right at the corner, she climbed the gentle hill to the apartment building at the top, where she encountered an old patrolman from the local police box whom she recognized. He ambled toward her, twirling his nightstick, but when my mother shouted that there was an emergency he broke into a run. My mother ran after him back to the house.

By that time, a patrol car had arrived with two policemen.

At home, my wife was about to follow me up to the second floor when she was stopped by a knock at the kitchen door. The knock was repeated more loudly, and a voice shouted, "Let me in!" Failing, in the confusion of the moment, to recognize my father's voice, my wife thought the man had gone back outside. A minute later, she realized her mistake and opened the door. The three policemen entered with my father. They took off their raincoats and politely removed their shoes.

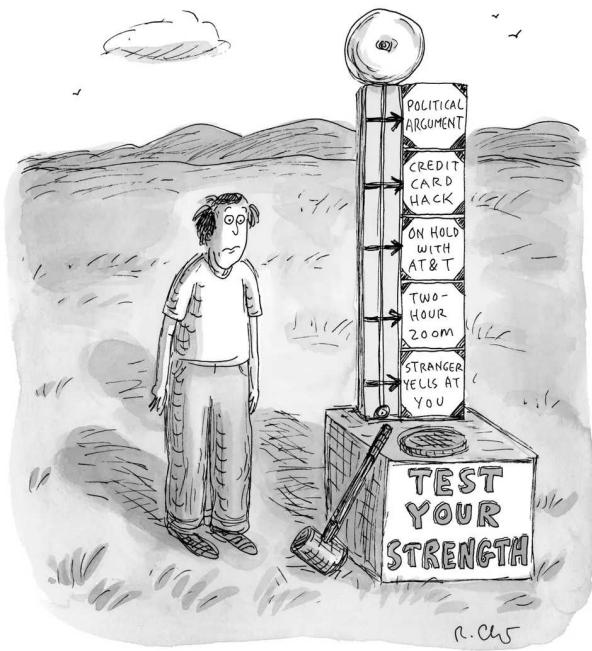
"Please don't bother with your shoes," my wife urged, but the shoes were removed and neatly arranged just inside the door. Then the three policemen climbed the stairs to the study with my father and my wife.

Judging by this, I don't believe that my confrontation with the youth could have lasted more than a minute.

My father and I went to the police station thirty, maybe forty minutes later. A patrol car came for us.

Our statements were taken in separate rooms. That took nearly two hours, long enough for the sun to rise higher in the sky: daylight oozed across the frosted glass in the door like a breaking egg yolk and brightened the interrogation room.

I was recovering my sense of myself as an aggrieved citizen; it helped that I knew one of the policemen from kendo. Identifying the perpetrator's actions as an actual crime and demonstrating that they constituted a so-called "incident" obliged the police to scale a mountain of paperwork. I was fine with that. I wasn't moved to pity; nor did I wish for the court to be lenient. Never mind me—the culprit had threatened my family's right as citizens to peace and quiet. He deserved the prescribed punishment for what he had done; and, if it was determined that he was not mentally sound enough to take responsibility, a psychiatric facility should be expected to provide treatment that would insure that he was no longer a danger to society.



We had completed our statements and were relaxing in the office when a lone detective brought the perpetrator in to be identified. He was wearing a spotless cream-colored jacket; his face was no longer pallid; and the hand he had used to break the window had been treated and was wrapped in a bandage. As he was paraded through the room, past policemen sitting or standing at their desks, he appeared entirely untroubled, even proud, and, when our eyes met, the glimmer of poignant beseeching I had seen before had disappeared: all I saw now was someone else's face.

After the youth was led out, my father asked why he was wearing a red armband.

A detective who appeared to be a black belt, his neck buried in his shoulder muscles, replied, “Times are, we get so many suspects with refined faces that we can’t tell them from honest folks. We put an armband on him so he’d stand out.”

Returning to the house, I napped for an hour or two. I had an appointment that afternoon and needed whatever sleep I could get.

I woke up to dazzling summer sunlight in the street outside; the dark, misty morning of drizzle had become a distant phantom. But that unearthly pale face floating in the dimness of my study stayed with me the whole day.

Come to think of it, since I became a novelist I’ve been troubled by strange visitors like this one more than once. One time, someone showed up intending to blackmail me for a trumped-up indiscretion. Not that a blackmailer is a madman; he has enough knowledge of the law to skirt the parameters of legal extortion while sneaking up on a person cunningly through the back door of his psyche. People like that fill me with violent hostility and even hatred. I feel that even the briefest contact with the meanness of their intentions fouls me physically. The day the blackmailer appeared, it was as though evil had permeated my skin like the smell of garlic and clung to me no matter how hard I tried to scrub it away.

But this time was different. That pallid face hadn’t smelled of evil in the least. Accordingly, it had aroused no hint of hostility or combativeness in me. Confronting in my study that odd, fragile intruder with an open encyclopedia in his trembling hands, I’d had no desire to attack with my kendo sword. Naturally, if he had come at me I would have defended myself, I might even have aimed a blow at his forearm, but although he had broken the law by forcing his way into my home and was clearly a criminal, he didn’t make me feel that I had to subdue him.

I wouldn’t like this to be interpreted as pity or some other humanistic impulse. Nor does it have to do with my self-esteem, or, beyond that, my vanity, being gratified by the act of a madman who not only means me no harm but has deluded himself into thinking of me as a paragon of virtue, is determined to meet me despite repeated rejection, and ends up breaking the

law. I am not so starved for popularity that I must welcome adulation from a psychopath.

No, I was feeling something different. On that morning in the rainy season, when I saw the preternaturally pale face of that youth trembling in the dimness of my study, where no one but I should have been, I had the feeling that I was looking at my own shadow.

Not that I had ever been a madman.

I had never sought a meeting, without an introduction, with an author I admired, not even in my early twenties, when I was infected with literary fever. And I certainly hadn't broken a window to gain entrance to an author's house because he had declined to meet me and pulled from a shelf in his study an encyclopedia, of all things. I can safely say that it never occurred to me to do anything even remotely like that. In general, I've never had the experience of obsessing over someone else.

I have never once felt close to the world of madness; nor have I made any effort to understand it. Until now, an incident or a psyche has interested me only if it embodied a logical consistency similar to the order imposed by a work of art; what I love about fictional characters who are haunted is that, to me, logical consistency and the state of being possessed are interchangeable. Logical consistency has the capacity to become infinitely unrealistic yet remains far removed from madness.

I will say that there are times when I can't help feeling that writing novels and putting them out in the world for sale is an immoderately odd and dangerous profession. What is it that I radiate through the medium of language? There is something about an artist that resembles a liquor salesman. His product must contain alcohol; selling a beverage without alcohol would amount to desecrating his own profession. In a word, he sells drunkenness. A normal person knows he's buying alcohol, enjoys a night of intoxication, and regains his senses when he sobers up. But there are other possibilities. Unaware that he is buying alcohol, a man consumes what he supposes is a nourishing drink and becomes blind drunk. Or again: a man who isn't normal to begin with buys the drink, and the standard amount of alcohol in it produces in him a terrifying result beyond imagining. . . .

In any event, the police didn't talk much about the youth. All I overheard was that he had moved a considerable distance away from his parents and was working at a newspaper, leading a lonely life in Tokyo.

No surprise! While his variety of madness may have had a genetic component, it was clear to me from my first glimpse of him that it was fed by loneliness. Although the same madness can present in a variety of ways, it was also clear that my writing was somehow an accessory to his particular illness. If I hadn't been a novelist, there's no way he would have run wild with delusions garnered from my work and gone so far as to attack me.

Reading a novel is a lonely enterprise, and so is writing one. Through the printed word, our loneliness penetrates the loneliness of others we have never met. I have never once been present to witness that bizarre infiltration. Nor is there any chance that I shall witness it in the future. But thanks to this intruder, thanks to his madness, I feel as if, in his bloodless face, I actually beheld the face of "the reader," which an author is meant never to see. (To be sure, what he was reading at the time was merely an encyclopedia.)

There is little room for doubt that I had unwittingly been supporting the loneliness that was the root of his madness. To guarantee another's loneliness in that way is discomforting, but there it is: there is something that creeps outward from a writer's work like a vine, and that sinuous extension had doubtless wrapped itself around his loneliness and protected it.

I didn't know how much fertilizer would be needed to grow so much loneliness, but I felt certain that I had provided a portion of it. There must have been various mornings, various middays, various nights. Loneliness had coated the inside of his cabinets like mold and thrived in the weave of his tatami. And I was there in all those places.

I have always felt a certain repugnance for excessively lonely people and am inclined to avoid them, but my soul, conveyed by my writing, continues night and day to frequent just those people. If possible, I would choose to live among a bright and lively crowd, people who love to joke; yet it seems that a second self, an "I" unknown to me, is making his lugubrious rounds, like a welfare officer in a shabby suit, from house to lonesome house.

In those dwellings, loneliness is raging. That youth's pale face was swollen with the bacteria of loneliness. The smallest gesture or slip of the tongue is all it takes for a person like that to be despised; and over time, before he knows it, as a carrier of loneliness that could spread to others, he will be isolated. (In the past, I myself have been not unfamiliar with such loneliness.)

For now, with a certain degree of affection and a certain degree of contempt, I think I'll call the intruder "my young man."

My young man wakes up in the morning and probably brushes his teeth. When he chokes on the tooth powder, his mouth is already filled with the ashes of loneliness. (I'm not unfamiliar with this, either.) He prepares *miso-shiru* and it boils over and leaves a burned smell on the stove. By that time, the smell of loneliness is already in his nostrils.

The toilet, the jammed commuter train, the garbage can, all replete with loneliness. If he buys cigarettes, they are invariably damp and hard to light; if he bets on the horses, his tickets end up in the trash. When he goes in to work, the solvent on the mimeograph machine smells like the end of the world.

When he opens his desk drawer, loneliness stares out at him. And I am always there, too.

Where did my young man come from? Naturally, the police didn't tell me his address. But gradually I began to sense that I knew the answer. He came from inside me. From the world of my ideas.

I feel certain that my young man is my shadow and my echo, but I am not the simple black and white he imagined. A novelist's being is expansive: If there are airports, there are also bus terminals. Surrounding the central station, roads extend in all directions—to business districts and shopping malls, tree-lined boulevards and residential areas, suburban train stations and housing projects, baseball fields and theatres. I have memorized every side street and back alley in the farthest corner of my being; a detailed map is carefully folded and ready to use.

But there is a large area, which I have continually disregarded, that remains uncharted. I've lived my life ignoring it, careful to avert my eyes, but there is no denying its existence.

I'm speaking of the vast wilderness surrounding the metropolis of my being. Unmistakably, it's a part of me, but it is an unexplored, barren area that doesn't appear on my map. It is a region of desolation as far as the eye can see, no verdant trees or flowering plants, only a biting wind that dusts the surface of jutting rocks with sand and then blows it away. Though I know the location of this wilderness, I've managed so far to stay away; still, I know somehow that I was there once and that someday I will have to make the journey again.

Clearly, my young man came from that wilderness.

I'm not sure what he had in mind when he demanded the truth from me, but I have complied. I have told the truth. ♦

—1966

(Translated, from the Japanese, by John Nathan.)

This is drawn from “[Voices of the Fallen Heroes: and Other Stories.](#)”

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Books

What Do Animals Understand About Death?

The question isn't whether other creatures share our concept of mortality; it's whether any living being truly grasps what it means to die.

By Kathryn Schulz

October 28, 2024



The Virginia opossum, according to [John Smith](#)—that explorer of all things Virginia—“hath a head like a Swine, & a taile like a Rat, and is of the Bignes of a Cat.” Had Smith looked closer, he might have discovered that it also has opposable thumbs, fifty teeth (more than any other land mammal except the equally improbable giant armadillo), and, if female, thirteen nipples, which are arranged like a clockface, with twelve in a circle and one in the middle. These nipples are concealed inside a pouch on its belly, because the Virginia opossum is a marsupial, the only one native to North America.

All this is strange, but none of it is as strange as the behavior for which this possum is most famous: playing possum. Contrary to what you might imagine, that does not simply entail curling up and holding still. A possum that is playing possum keels over to one side, its tongue hanging out, its eyes open and unblinking. Saliva drips from its mouth while its other end leaks urine and feces, together with a putrescent green goop. Its body temperature and heart rate drop, its breathing becomes almost imperceptible, and its tongue turns blue. If, in a fit of sadism or scientific experimentation, you cut off its tail while it is in this state, it will not so much as flinch.

Idiomatically, “playing possum” means “pretending to be dead,” but what exactly playing possum means to a possum is considerably harder to say. Does the possum have any idea what it means to be dead (to say nothing of what it means to pretend)? When it is moved to begin its Oscar-worthy performance, does it know that it is in mortal danger? Does the implacable fact of death have any purchase whatsoever on its possum-y heart? And if it does not—which seems likely, given its unusually small brain—what of all the other creatures that feign death: frogs, snakes, spiders, sharks, swifts? And what of all the other creatures in general? The octopus, the elephant, the great horned owl, the house cat, the giant tortoise, the chimpanzee: who, in all the vast animal kingdom, joins us in having intimations of mortality?

That is the animating question of [“Playing Possum: How Animals Understand Death”](#) (Princeton), a new book by the Spanish writer Susana Monsó. She is not a biologist or a zoologist; she is a philosopher, with a particular interest in the nature of animal minds. And yet, though “Playing Possum” parses with sometimes excruciating precision the possible inner states of an entire menagerie of creatures, it is our own intellectual and emotional condition that haunts its pages. How much, the book implicitly asks, can any living being, human or otherwise, truly grasp about what it means to die?

The field into which Monsó has ventured in “Playing Possum” is known as comparative thanatology—the study of how different species respond to death. This question is not new: “Who can say,” [Charles Darwin](#) mused, in [“The Descent of Man.”](#) “what cows feel, when they surround and stare intently on a dying or dead companion.” The discipline, however, is very new. Monsó traces its origins to 2008, when sixteen chimpanzees at a rescue

center in Cameroon huddled together and watched, in utter, un-chimplike silence, as a deceased member of their cohort was wheeled away. A photograph of the scene, published in *National Geographic* the following year, triggered an explosion of sympathy and curiosity, both among the general public and among scientists, psychologists, and philosophers who were interested in ascertaining what exactly those seemingly bereft chimps were feeling.

That photo also captured, accidentally, one of the fundamental difficulties with studying what animals understand about death: you have to be there to watch them. In theory, you could conduct all kinds of experiments to help gauge their comprehension, but only if your curiosity is considerably stronger than your moral compass. You could, for instance, present various creatures with decapitated animals that have been stuffed and rigged to move around; you could use hidden speakers to expose mothers to prerecorded audio of their dead babies.

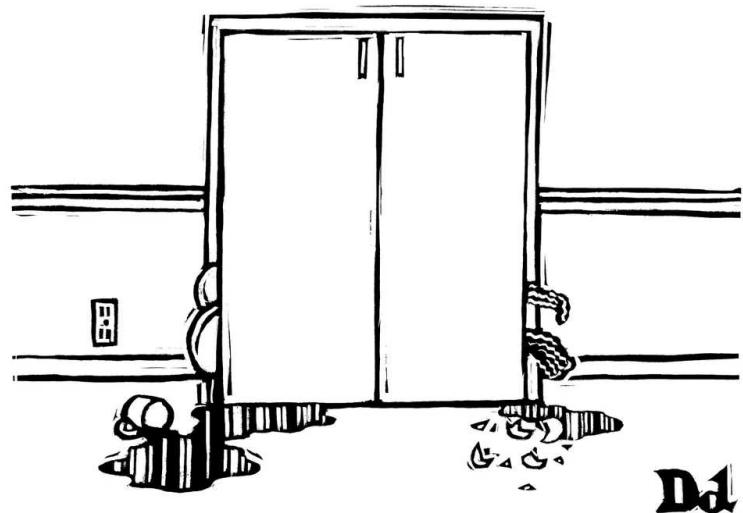
Both experiments have been proposed, although mercifully not performed, overt cruelty and gruesomeness having mostly faded from favor in academic circles. But that leaves comparative thanatology largely reliant on anecdotal evidence—incidents like that of the chimps in Cameroon, witnessed by chance and recorded with varying degrees of accuracy and acuity. Partly as a result of this, and partly because of its emotionally potent subject matter, the field is extremely susceptible to unwarranted anthropomorphic interpretations. Monsó’s goal is to clear this haze of subjectivity from the discipline, using the foremost tool of philosophy: logical rigor. To establish whether animals have any concept of death, she says, we must begin by establishing exactly what a “concept of death” means.

Consider, for instance, the behavior of your average ant. If an ant is trapped in sand, its fellow-ants will attempt to save its life, pulling on its limbs and digging away at the sand to try to free it. And if an ant dies inside its colony, other ants, acting like tiny insect undertakers, will swiftly remove the body, often taking it to a designated location outside the nest. At first, those behaviors seem to suggest that ants understand death, since they react appropriately to both its imminence and its actuality. But in reality the ants are only responding to certain chemicals—in the first case, one that serves as a kind of distress call, and, in the second, ones emitted by a carcass. If you

take a live ant and dab those carcass chemicals on it, as [E. O. Wilson](#) did in the nineteen-fifties, other ants will treat it as dead and promptly carry it out of the colony, even if the alleged corpse is waving its antennae, resisting its would-be pallbearers, and otherwise displaying every possible sign of life.

The ants, in other words, have no concept of death; their reaction to it is governed solely by instinct. We can recognize such reactions, Monsó explains, because they are automatic, provoked by specific stimuli, and entirely predictable: each individual ant will always react the same way when confronted with death, and every ant will exhibit the same behavior as its peers. By contrast, animals with a concept of death will react to it in ways that are learned rather than instinctive, not rigidly responsive to specific stimuli, and highly variable: the same individual will react differently to different deaths, and different individuals will react differently to the same death.

BREAKFAST IN MURPHY BED



We should recognize our own species in that sentence. Adult human beings—even the callous, tone-deaf, emotionally immature ones—demonstrate an understanding of death that is remarkable in its sophistication. It incorporates a grasp of, among other things, causality (every death is precipitated by something), universality (all living things must die), personal mortality (that includes us), and unpredictability (although we know we will

die, we can't know exactly when). And that's before you get to beliefs about the afterlife and expressions of grief and mourning: wearing crêpe, reciting the Kaddish, writing "Hamlet." The fact that we have such an elaborate concept of death has sometimes been used to argue that other animals can't possibly have one at all, because to do so would require, say, the ability to comprehend annihilation. But that's nonsense, Monsó insists. The question isn't whether animals have anything like a human concept of death; it is whether they have any concept of death at all.

A word of warning: you should not pick up "Playing Possum" expecting a series of heartwarming tales demonstrating the existence of a love stronger than death between animals. If that's the book you want, it was published back in 2013: "[How Animals Grieve](#)," by the anthropologist Barbara J. King. King makes no claims about whether animals comprehend death, but she does assert that they feel grief—because they care about and bond to one another, "because of a heart's certainty that another's presence is as necessary as air." In support of this hypothesis, she offers touching accounts of responses to death in every corner of the animal kingdom, from the big-brained megafauna (primates, elephants, whales) to the domesticated crowd-pleasers (cats, dogs, horses) to the completely surprising (chickens).

Monsó serves up stories like these, too, but far more sparsely, and with far more scrutiny—and the longer she scrutinizes the more complicated they seem. Back in 2017, for instance, a female Tonkean macaque known as Evalyne gave birth to her first baby, which died five days later. The morning of its death, Evalyne refused to eat, instead staying in her enclosure and screaming; after that, she carried the infant's body everywhere, grooming it, licking it, and at one point putting her fingers in its mouth as if to stimulate the suckling reflex. For seventeen days, she never even set it down.

Evalyne's behavior is not altogether uncommon in the animal kingdom. Many primates, including male ones, have been observed carrying dead babies, albeit typically for only a few hours or days. So have several cetaceans—most famously, an orca known as Tahlequah, who, without the primate's advantage of hands, carried her deceased infant on her back continuously for weeks, across more than a thousand miles of the Salish Sea. Occasionally, such behavior is spotted in other species as well; in 2008, in

Queensland, Australia, a dingo was observed carrying her deceased pup from place to place for four days while tending to its surviving littermates.

It is almost impossible to read such accounts and not feel that these animals understand what happened to their babies and are profoundly bereft. But Monsó counsels caution. When primates carry around their dead babies, she tells us, they often do so not tenderly but carelessly, in their mouths or dangling from one hand, letting the body bang into rocks and trees while they engage in all their ordinary activities, including mating. As for Evalyne, nineteen days after her baby died, she began to eat it. When the corpse started to fall apart, she would gnaw on one scrap of it for a while before discarding it in favor of another.

This is not the only story in Monsó's book which takes place at the intersection of love, death, and dinner. We also read about a dog that, following the suicide of its owner, proceeded to eat the dead man's face, even though the man was found less than an hour after death and the dog had plenty of food left in its bowl. This probably strikes you as an appalling violation of a relationship we typically imagine to be based on love and trust, but it is not exceptional. Good data are hard to come by, but estimates suggest that almost a quarter of pet owners who die alone will be partly consumed by their erstwhile animal companions.

Taken together, such anecdotes illuminate the limits of what you might call our intuitive thanatology. On hearing that a fellow-primate won't let go of her dead baby, we ascribe to it maternal tenderness and piercing grief; on hearing that a dog ate its late owner, we ascribe to it blind appetite and brute indifference. But neither inference is necessarily correct. The primate's behavior could instead suggest a failure to grasp the fact that the baby has died; far from being inconsolable, maybe the animal in question is just oblivious. More persuasively, maybe it is optimistic, since baby-carrying seems to occur only in so-called K-strategists—creatures, including primates and cetaceans, that invest enormous amounts of time and resources into a small number of offspring. For such creatures, it might make sense, no matter how lifeless a baby appears, to hold out for the possibility that it will somehow revive.

As for the dog: before you give yours away, consider this. Wild dogs that encounter a carcass generally begin consuming it at the nutrient-rich abdomen, then move on to the limbs; ninety per cent of the time, according to Monsó, they never even bite the face. By contrast, pet dogs go for the face almost three-quarters of the time, only rarely biting the abdomen. Monsó concludes from this that they don't set out to eat their deceased owners but, rather, to get them to react, and that they focus on the face because they have always done so previously, studying it to ascertain their owners' meaning and mood.

The moral, Monsó says, is that simply observing an animal's reaction to death cannot, on its own, tell us anything about what that animal is thinking or feeling. The chimp could be clueless and content; the dog could be wild with grief. But, if the stories themselves don't make this plain, how can we go about determining what, if anything, a given animal knows about death?

To answer that question, Monsó proposes a bare-bones definition of death, the absolute minimum an animal must understand about it in order to understand it at all. In that stripped-down version, death entails the permanent cessation of functions associated with life. Tucked inside that definition are the two ideas she believes an animal must grasp in order to have any concept of death: irreversibility and non-functionality.

This schema lends some precision to a subject that is often story-driven and sentimental, and it leads to some fascinating discussions. On the matter of non-functionality, for instance, Monsó begins by pointing out that animals don't need to understand that every function ceases at the moment of death, only that certain salient functions do. Even humans, after all, don't agree on what exactly stops working when we die. Maybe you believe that your late grandmother is watching over you in Heaven, and your brother believes that she is moldering away in her grave—but surely he does not believe that you lack a workable concept of death simply because you regard fewer of her functions as having terminated.

Similarly, for an animal to understand non-functionality, it need not understand the whole spectrum of capacities that terminate with death, only those it regards as characteristic of living beings. Our friends the ants fail this test, since they take for dead a stinky but fully functional fellow-ant.

Rats fare better, in an interesting way: they, too, will remove the body of a living rat that is dabbed with eau de decay—but, as Monsó observes, only if that rat is also anesthetized. That means rats understand something ants do not, which is that normal motion is incompatible with being dead.

Do rats also understand irreversibility? The conventional wisdom says no, on the ground that understanding irreversibility requires engaging in sophisticated reasoning about the future, a capacity that is likely beyond many nonhuman animals. But does the raven really need to understand “nevermore” to understand death? Monsó doesn’t think so. Knowing that a dead creature won’t come back to life, she argues, requires nothing more than being able to reclassify an animate entity as an inanimate one—categories that are recognized across great swaths of the animal kingdom.

Whether or not Monsó is right that animals use this kind of category-swapping to understand irreversibility, the evidence that some do understand it is on her side. In 2018, for example, a chimpanzee in Uganda gave birth to an albino baby, a vanishingly rare occurrence in the species. Although chimps typically react to newborns with the doting excitement of Italian grandparents, the albino one provoked terror; its fellow-chimps shrieked the way they do in response to mortal danger, until the group’s alpha male snatched the baby from its mother and, aided by others, killed it. The moment the baby died, the attitude of the chimps utterly changed, from panic to curiosity. They sniffed the corpse, inspected it, and stroked its fur, evincing perfect confidence that the object of their terror would not come back to life.

Monsó’s focus on defining a concept of death helps render stories like this not just interesting but meaningful, by clarifying what we can infer from them—in this case, that chimps understand irreversibility. But though her approach is often productive, it can also be frustrating. Monsó, in her desire “to take nothing for granted, to question every assumption,” can leave us feeling as though we’re constantly putting off the big questions rather than delving deeper into them, and she does not always take care to distinguish straw men (such as the claim that animals don’t have minds, a view that has few if any credible proponents today) from serious and substantive disagreement (such as whether possessing a concept of death requires possessing a concept of life).

Still, “Playing Possum” represents a major contribution to comparative thanatology. The field, throughout its brief history, has mostly focussed on apparent instances of intraspecies tenderness, care, and distress in the face of death. Monsó, usefully breaking with that tradition, pays sustained attention to violence and predation, in both intra- and interspecies relations. Death, she reminds us, is everywhere in nature, from wildly high rates of intraspecies infanticide—the cause of death of some twenty per cent of hyenas and up to sixty per cent of chimps—to the red-in-tooth-and-claw character of the carnivore’s every meal.

For predators, who must constantly act as agents of death in order to survive, each kill is a chance to learn more about death—but so is each failure. One of the clear, if tangential, takeaways from Monsó’s book is that predation is a very tough business. If you’re ever in a position to bet on a contest between a red-tailed hawk and a gray squirrel, back the squirrel; by one count, it will get away nine times out of ten. Likewise, your tender heart might side with the antelope, but the lion is the underdog in that competition, losing the vast majority of the time. Because predators face such long odds, they are highly attuned to any potential vulnerabilities in their prey. A study of Alaskan wolves, for instance, found that they struggle to catch healthy caribou, even young ones, often choosing instead to hunt animals that display signs of sickness or injury—or, in Monsó’s terms, signs of impaired functionality, which the wolf might successfully turn into the irreversible non-functionality it needs in order to eat.



The pressures on predators, in other words, make them excellent candidates for possessing a concept of death. Consider, again, that possum who is playing possum. Monsó points out that this state is biologically distinct from another condition with which it is often confused: tonic immobility, a kind of freeze-in-place reaction common to many animals facing a threat from which there is no obvious escape. Tonic immobility is extremely useful, both because it can effectively camouflage an animal, since motion is easier to detect than stillness, and because some animals lose interest in prey that doesn't move. But if temporary paralysis would suffice, Monsó asks, why does the possum bother with its far more elaborate display?

The usual answer is that playing possum induces disgust in a would-be predator. But nature provides many far simpler ways to do that, as you know if you've ever smelled a skunk; in fact, possums themselves sometimes forgo the whole death drama and simply excrete that putrid green goo to ward off an unwelcome animal. What, then, is the point of all the rest—the reduced heart rate, the low body temperature, the blue tongue? The point, Monsó writes, is that the possum is not “trying to appear disgusting, but to appear *dead*”: recognizably, incontrovertibly, irreversibly dead. And the only reason it would do that, she argues, is if one or more of its traditional predators understood death. In other words, such an understanding not only exists in nature but has shaped it: because some animals can recognize

death, others have evolved to mimic it, by way of thanatosis. That is an elegant and interesting argument, and one with far-reaching implications. Because thanatosis occurs across so many dramatically different species, Monsó concludes, the concept of death must be widespread in the animal kingdom.

Our traditional reluctance to grant this possibility is part of a long-standing if increasingly untenable commitment to human exceptionalism: the idea that we are unique among species because we possess countless traits found in no other creatures. Like language, tool use, altruism, and numeracy, a grasp of mortality was long cordoned off as the special, if difficult, birthright of human beings. “An animal will never know what it is to die,” [Rousseau](#) wrote, “and knowledge of death and its terrors is one of the first acquisitions which man made in moving away from his animal condition.”

That claim is wrongheaded in two directions, limiting our understanding not only of other animals but also of ourselves. One of our many reactions to death, for instance, is the awareness that dead bodies present a threat to our well-being, both as signs that danger might still linger in the area and as sources of pathogens. Accordingly, like ants and rats, we are unconsciously sensitive to necromones: chemicals emitted by corpses, which activate our fight-or-flight mechanisms. And that is only one way our response to death is likely continuous with that of other creatures. Anyone who has ever been in mortal danger or in the grips of primal grief will recognize the error of Rousseau’s claim that knowledge of death and its terrors moves us *away* from the animal condition.

As for limiting our understanding of other animals: sometimes seeing another creature for what it is requires rather than forbids seeing ourselves in it. Although Monsó is appropriately critical of anthropomorphism, she is equally troubled by the opposite impulse. We impoverish our sense of our fellow-creatures, she writes, not only when we attribute to them human qualities that they lack but also when we refuse to attribute to them human qualities that they possess—or, more precisely, qualities that do not deserve the modifier “human” in the first place, because they are not uniquely our own. For many species, she argues, the ability to understand death is one such characteristic.

The same may well be true of a capacity for grief, although Monsó, with her instinct for caution, treads more lightly here. She is right not to conflate the two qualities, since it is perfectly possible to recognize death without feeling grief (as we humans do when, say, reading the obituary section of the newspaper), just as it is perfectly possible to feel grief in the absence of death (as when your cherished dog runs away or the love of your life announces that she is leaving you). And Monsó is also right to point out that comparative thanatology has been skewed by searching for evidence of grief, that quintessential human reaction to death, rather than focussing on all the other ways an understanding of death might manifest in the animal kingdom. (Thus the field's relative indifference to the concept of death among predators.)

Still, it is impossible to read "Playing Possum" without returning again and again to the question of sorrow and mourning. In its pages, an elephant keeps coming back to the place where its closest companion died, like a widow making a weekly trip to her husband's grave. A dying dolphin is supported by its pod, which forms a raft to hold it up and help it breathe. Two chimpanzees who were not particularly fond of each other grow close after both of them suffer the death of their babies. A healthy young chimp loses first his mother and then his interest in life, refusing to eat and eventually dragging himself off to the place where he last saw her body, and dying there, too.

At some point, the effort to find alternative explanations for such behaviors comes to feel not conscientious but simply contortionist. The late primatologist Frans de Waal once criticized the kind of hedged scientific language that insists animals have "favorite affiliation partners" rather than friends and that chimps display "mouth-to-mouth contact" rather than kiss. Maybe animals just like each other; maybe they just grieve. Maybe the focus on behavior misses the undercurrent of emotions that makes all the behavior meaningful, as our own emotions do.

There are, I suppose, practical reasons that we hesitate to grant so potent an emotion as grief to animals. To begin with, doing so would oblige us to reckon with how routinely and brutally we humans expose them to peril and slaughter, including from the spread of roads and the loss of habitat, to say nothing of industrial food production. But behind that lurk other, more

shadowy motivations. For many of us, our first exposure to death involved an animal: the firefly in the Mason jar, the bird beneath the window, the deer beside the highway, the beloved cat gone gaunt with age, curled up stiff below the basement stairs. We ameliorate our sorrow at these deaths, and at all death, by imagining that it is different for animals: that there is some better, wiser way to die; that if we lived closer to the bone of things, we would neither fear the end of life nor grieve it.

Thus our strange relationship to animals and death—we aren't sure whether they understand it, and if they do not we aren't sure whether that makes them lesser than us or luckier. This is a problem as old as Eden: we long to be distinct from the rest of nature, and we long to be more fully part of it. And, of course, when it comes to understanding death, we are distinct. No dolphin will ever perform an autopsy, no dingo will read Heidegger, no macaque will write a requiem for piano and violin. But who's to say that they don't know things about death that we do not? However sophisticated our own concept of death may be, after all, it is necessarily, self-evidently incomplete. If you are devout, death is part of God's plan, but what could be more mysterious than that? If you believe instead that death amounts to the annihilation of consciousness, what could be harder for the mind to fully fathom than its own nonexistence? For us, then, as for all species, some part of death will always remain the way it so often feels: unthinkable. ♦

Books

Does the Enlightenment's Great Female Intellect Need Rescuing?

Émilie du Châtelet's scientific contributions were appreciated by some, then forgotten by all. But redeeming her as a mind shouldn't undermine her as a woman.

By Adam Gopnik

October 28, 2024



Historians championing previously marginalized intellectual and literary figures are often caught on the horns of an odd dilemma. On the one hand, the subject—the woman scientist, the Black composer, the Indigenous military strategist—must have met with some degree of social acceptance in their day or the work would never have had enough support and attention to have flourished and survived. Since historians wish to draw on the wiser judges of the era to establish the importance of their subjects, we are told about whom they wowed and how they wowed them. On the other hand, the point must be made that such subjects have had far less attention than they

deserve. So they must be shown to have been keenly appreciated by the better spirits of their time as well as wrongly consigned to oblivion.

This reflects a historical truth—the marginalized often are esteemed, at least by some, before being neglected by all—but it creates a strange biographer’s two-step. We regret that Louise Farrenc, the French Romantic composer, has fallen into obscurity, while reporting how much her contemporary [Hector Berlioz](#) admired her in order to establish the injustice of her obscurity. Isaac Rosenberg might be “the greatest English war poet nobody’s ever heard of”—as one of his champions insists, comparing him favorably with Rupert Brooke and Wilfred Owen, and ascribing his oblivion to his being working class and Jewish—but his work’s excellence is established by the fact that [Ezra Pound](#) and [T. S. Eliot](#) were impressed by it. Vindicated and victimized: this two-step is very much on view in [“The Enlightenment’s Most Dangerous Woman: Émilie du Châtelet and the Making of Modern Philosophy”](#) (Oxford), Andrew Janiak’s engrossing life of the French scientist, mathematician, and philosopher.

Janiak, a professor of philosophy at Duke University, makes the largely persuasive case that du Châtelet was not just a significant figure in eighteenth-century physics but one of the most important women in European history. So we hear of the universal fame she enjoyed after publishing her “Foundations of Physics,” which was first printed in 1740, revised for a second edition in 1742, and translated into so many other languages that she gained a European audience. Janiak reports that the work “was then cited, debated, and praised by major figures in science, mathematics, and philosophy,” and “read from Prussia to Russia, from Italy to France, from Switzerland to England.” But we also hear much of her subsequent neglect, and pages are spent inveighing against the way she has been referred to as “Voltaire’s mistress.” (She and the philosophe had a passionate and public love affair that started in the seventeen-thirties, working and sleeping side by side in her castle at Cirey with the acceptance of her complaisant husband.) “She was not merely betrayed by later misogynist portrayals in recent times,” Janiak writes. “Even as she rose to the highest levels of intellectual fame in eighteenth-century Europe, she was first betrayed by the Enlightenment itself.”

Yet, in trying to save her from being an appurtenance of [Voltaire](#)'s, her biographer disembodies her a little. We lose sight of her as a French marquise of the eighteenth century, with lovers to juggle, a watchful husband in an arranged marriage to mollify and manipulate, family properties to manage, children to bear, raise, and marry off, footmen and parlormaids to hire and fire, card games at which to gamble extravagantly, literary-society feuds to arbitrate, and, not least, health crises around every corner. Instead, Janiak makes her sound more like an assistant professor at an American university, with theses to present, colleagues to placate, abstract arguments to win and lose, and tenure to pursue. In truth, we diminish her by lifting her out of her own time and circle; making her even more of a mind needn't make her less of a woman. In Janiak's account, Voltaire's central role in her life, as her friend and teacher and ideal mate and intellectual wrestling opponent, is cordoned off, for fear of making her once again Voltaire's mistress. The term is indeed deplorable and demeaning, but her being Voltaire's *lover* was a decisive aspect of who she was and how she lived and why she wrote so well, just as Harriet Taylor's mind was liberated, not limited, by her love for [John Stuart Mill](#). (As his was by his love for her.) Du Châtelet wrote as movingly as anyone ever has about love found and lost, and that, too, is as much a part of her legacy as her now rediscovered "pluralistic" vision of physics. Indeed, one draws on the other. In trying to protect du Châtelet from a tradition of condescension, we subject her to another form of condescension, denying her the sensual wholeness that matched her intellectual heft.

Gabrielle-Émilie Le Tonnelier de Breteuil, as she was born in 1706, came from the top of French society; she was introduced to the world in what is now the Place des Vosges in a building that still survives on that matchless square of matched red brick homes, which was among the earliest modular urban developments in European history. She had an unusually happy childhood, with a family bent toward the sciences. Bernard de Fontenelle, the great Academician and the author of one of the first books of popular science, the "[Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds](#)," was a regular at her father's table, and was said to delight in conversing with Émilie. (Already old when he knew her, Fontenelle lived in good health into his late nineties, and was famous for having said, at ninety-two, on meeting a beautiful woman, "Ah, to be eighty again." He credited his long life to a diet of strawberries.)

Wildly precocious, Émilie mastered Latin, Greek, and English. In such a milieu, she was encouraged to read and study, but was soon married off to an even grander aristocrat, the Marquis du Châtelet, a well-meaning, somewhat bumbling Army officer, who was interested only in his military exploits and soon forbidden by his wife to discuss them at the table. He was completely outmatched by her and wise enough to know it. But she pined for more study and chafed at the strictures placed upon women: “I feel the full weight of prejudice that excludes us universally from the sciences, and it is one of the contradictions of this world, which has always astonished me, that there are great countries where the law permits us to decide our destiny, but none where we are brought up to think.”

Madame du Châtelet solved the problem in a way that only a very smart (and very rich) woman could: since she couldn’t get to the colleges, she would make her home one. She drew a procession of philosophes to her country house in Cirey, while her husband fussed and watched, unable to comprehend the arguments but eager to see his beautiful wife happy. Like any French woman of her class, she immediately began to collect a series of lovers: first the very grand Duc de Richelieu, who remained a lifelong friend, and then Jean François de Saint-Lambert.

Among the intellectual luminaries of the time, Voltaire was the big “get,” and she got him. In 1730, just back from a prudent self-imposed exile in England, he had succeeded Fontenelle in the French role of *maître-penseur*. He was a passionate Anglophile—French Anglophilia, with its Savile Row suits and Scotch in preference to champagne, being at least as passionate a pursuit as English Francophilia—and had become enamored of Newton’s physics and Locke’s laws.

A preoccupation of du Châtelet and Voltaire’s, in the château and then in later households in the Faubourg Saint-Germain, was a highly abstract one that nonetheless had a tribal charge: the clash between Newton’s “English” theory of gravitation and the cosmic theories of the dominant French thinker, [René Descartes](#). It was the scientific crisis of the era. Descartes, though better remembered as a philosopher of mind than as a physicist, posited a lucid, mechanical model of motion and matter: invisible vortices—cogwheels somehow situated in space—pushed at each other across eternity and were responsible for the movement of the spheres and the stars. Against

this was Newton's vision—ridiculously occult, to the logical French mind—of action at a distance, with the sun moving the Earth by a mysterious pull that spread across space, the Earth then moving the moon, and the moon then moving the tides. Why Voltaire took up the very abstruse [Newton](#), and how thoroughly he understood his theories mathematically, as opposed to ideologically, is much debated, but the reality that Voltaire's enemies in the French academy were all Cartesians was as good a reason for his Anglophilic allegiance as any. In the event, Voltaire was a passionate, evangelical, monomaniacal Newtonian, and he spent his time making war on Newton's behalf, and persuading du Châtelet to join him, a mutual venture that, in time, led her to produce a French translation, long the standard one, of Newton's ["Principia."](#)

That she loved Voltaire no one can doubt, and she wrote a beautiful little book about happiness, sometime in the seventeen-forties, that remains the most vivid record of her mind. A perfect instance of French wit, with its mixture of sharp candor about human motives and sincere sentiments about the human heart, she briskly lists the necessities for happiness as good sense, good health, good taste, and a capacity for self-deception, since “we owe the majority of our pleasures to illusions.” She went on, “Far from seeking to make illusion disappear by the torchlight of reason, let us try to thicken the veneer it places upon the majority of objects.” Yet, however thick the veneer, she writes plaintively and honestly about the great love of her life. “I was happy for ten years through the love of someone who had subjugated my soul; and these ten years were spent in intimacy with him, without one moment of loathing, or of weariness,” she recalls, adding:

It takes a terrible jolt to break such chains: the gash in my heart bled for a long time; I had reason to pity myself and I forgave everything. I was sufficiently fair to feel that . . . if age and ill health had not entirely extinguished desires, I might perhaps again experience them and love would return them to me; lastly, that his heart, incapable of love, felt for me the most tender friendship, and he might have devoted his life to me. The certainty that a rekindling of his desire and his passion was impossible, since I know full well that this is contrary to nature, led my heart imperceptibly to a peaceful feeling of friendship.

She does not omit a candid note of qualification: “But can such a tender heart be satisfied by a sentiment as peaceful and as weak as that of close friendship?” Her wistful worldliness is captured in another sharp bit of breakup counsel: “Never show an eagerness when your lover cools off, and always be a degree colder than they are; that will not bring them back, but nothing will.”

It is neither du Châtelet’s love affair nor the wise, melancholy little book on happiness that makes her reputation in scholarly circles today. Instead, it’s her “Foundations of Physics”—originally published as “Institutions de Physique”—which she wrote while she was still with Voltaire and finished toward the end of their affair, in 1740. The work is a formidable read, and it has only recently been translated into English in full, by a collective of women scholars. Exactly what the book is about is hard to say; some insist that it is a search for the metaphysical foundations of physics, others that it is a search for the physical foundations of metaphysics.

Janiak, though, fairly summarizes its importance as the first blossoming of a pluralistic, social view of the growth of scientific knowledge. “Voltaire’s vision of science and of Newton’s heroic role in helping to make it a modern site of intellectual progress is far more familiar today than du Châtelet’s alternative vision of science as a collaborative endeavor that exceeds the powers of even the greatest genius,” he writes. “When confronted with a debate among the revolutionaries of the past, whether it concerns hypotheses, the nature of matter, the large-scale structure of space and time, or the shape of knowledge, du Châtelet seeks to find the insights hidden in opposed positions.” Voltaire and his Enlightenment confrères, the argument goes, were drawn to great-man theories of scientific discovery—Newton and the apple bonking him on his head were enough to usher in a revolution—and so silenced the collective, proto-feminist view purveyed by the “Institutions.” This is the sense in which Janiak believes that du Châtelet was “betrayed” by the Enlightenment.



Certainly her “Institutions” displayed a far subtler understanding of the limits and the power of Newtonian physics than Voltaire did. Newton was right, she understood, not because he saw farther than anyone else but because his weird idea was open to public inspection by people capable of criticizing it. Edmond Halley could show that Newton’s physics predicted the paths of comets, and experiments conducted by Pierre-Simon Laplace could show that Newton’s theory about the speed of sound was basically right, once some adjustments were applied. It was this understanding of science as a collaboration across time that inspired du Châtelet to offer a memorable aphorism: “Physics is an immense building that surpasses the power of a single man.”

Her understanding of science as a social enterprise was genuinely prescient. She grasped, as early as anyone, the critical difference between science as a specific set of ideas and science as a peculiar kind of social practice. That was the point of her architectural metaphor. Many hands make light work, the old saw has it, and many heads explain light. Her chapter on the role of the hypothesis would by itself be enough to earn her a large place in the history of the philosophy of science: recognizing the imaginative centrality of shared speculation, she insisted that, though no number of positive affirmations can establish a theory, one falsification can disprove it. “A single experiment is not enough to confirm a hypothesis, but one alone is

sufficient to reject it,” she wrote, two centuries before [Karl Popper](#) made the idea a commonplace of twentieth-century science.

Another guiding impulse in “Institutions” foreshadowed a less edifying tendency. Du Châtelet was searching for a grand synthesis of Newtonian, Cartesian, and Leibnizian ideas, in the way that Viennese visionaries of the nineteen-twenties hoped to unify all the sciences, and in the way that later thinkers tried to reconcile quantum physics with Einstein—and both with theology. On the one hand, then, there is her persuasive idea that science is a social act with many assessors; on the other is the view that no one hypothesis can win, and that the truth is best available in a composite of theories and ideas. Either can be called “pluralism,” but the biographer does not always keep the two senses straight; to be fair, neither did du Châtelet.

The view that the models of celestial mechanics proposed by Leibniz, Descartes, and Newton all contain truth is appealingly broadminded; it is not, unfortunately, true. Descartes’s legible, sensible view that it took one thing to push another just isn’t so, while Newton’s weird idea—that action can take place in a vacuum through occult attraction—describes the way the world works, and not just the world but the whole damn universe. A pluralistic marriage of the two is no more possible than is a true marriage of Lamarck (who thought that giraffes grew tall by seeking to eat the tops of tall trees) and Darwin (who guessed that they developed long necks by chance and stepwise selection, with the treetop eating a lucky and lingering aftereffect). The pluralistic souls who tried to augment Darwin with some idea of transgenerational acquired traits were wrong—sometimes catastrophically wrong, as with the rise of Lysenkoism in Stalinist Russia. (Various modern attempts to rescue neo-Lamarckism have, so far, failed, or been subsumed by the neo-Darwinian synthesis.) Science is inhabited by a community, but it isn’t built by a committee.

Where du Châtelet was certainly right, however, was in recognizing the error in using a scientific model, validated within its domain, to explain everything else. She saw, as Voltaire did not, that attempts to extend Newtonian attraction at a distance to electricity and even to animal secretions—to make of it a theory of everything—were mistaken. To do so was like imagining that, because a key is perfectly shaped to fit a particular lock, it possesses some energized quality of “keyness” that can open any

other. The scientific revolution did not depend on the constant replacement of spiritual explanations with mechanical ones—action at a distance hardly qualified as mechanical. It depended on what actual experience said afterward about the truth of a hypothesis. (In French, the words for “experiment” and “experience” are the same.) Newton did not give us a clockwork universe, working blindly to rule; he gave us a universe in which everyone can see the hands on the clock, and check the time for themselves.

Hovering behind Janiak’s book is another, Nancy Mitford’s [“Voltaire in Love,”](#) her 1957 account of the same story and people, albeit with an emphasis marginally more on the man and far less on the science. Her book captures the spirit of the couple perfectly and places their intellectual adventures intelligently within the context of French society life. We learn exactly how and when those servants were fired and then rehired, and Mitford makes much of what is omitted elsewhere, that du Châtelet was a compulsive gambler who loved high stakes but, despite her mathematical prowess, almost always lost, sometimes at enormous expense.

Yet Mitford’s book is never once cited, even in a footnote, in the new one; in a curious irony, Janiak has, in effect, done to Mitford what he complains was done to du Châtelet—written a brilliant woman right out of history as a mere amateur. That’s too bad, since Mitford was extraordinarily knowing about the social milieu in which du Châtelet moved, which had changed little from the Marquise’s day to hers. Her storytelling makes du Châtelet and Voltaire both come alive as Enlightenment people. She tells the hilarious story of how Voltaire and du Châtelet, when she became pregnant by another lover, arranged to bring her husband back to the dinner table and encouraged him to tell his military tales, while du Châtelet wore a conspicuously low-cut gown to encourage his concupiscence. Husband and wife went off to bed, three weeks later she announced her pregnancy, and the proprieties were saved. Apocryphal? Perhaps, but anyone who knows the still intact social habits of the Parisian gratin will vouch for its plausibility.

Mitford also grasped the politics of Parisian intellectual life and knew that it is an anachronism to see Voltaire’s single-minded sponsorship of Newton as having been fathered by ideological rigor. Voltaire’s avidity was, instead, part of the performance of his role as Top French Thinker—a position that might be unofficial but is as sharply defined as the papacy and has been

handed on from one intellectual to the next over the centuries. It is incumbent on anyone in the role to be aggressive and audacious, and more so in public manner than in private belief. Americans and Brits, being less royalist and more empirical in temperament, are bewildered by the general French understanding that the top thinker is *supposed* to be imperious and maximalist.

But it comes with the role. The political absolutism of Sartre was a way of asserting fearlessness: Nothing, not even the presence of the U.S. Army, can intimidate *me!* French intellectuals no more expect their top figure to split the differences and see the middle way than Catholics expect the Pope to see all sides of an issue. (As the famous motto had it, “Better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Raymond Aron,” the sane pro-democracy centrist.) For Voltaire, asserting Newtonianism was simply a strategic way of asserting Voltairianism, which he cared about more than he did about gravity. Danton’s line “*L’audace, toujours l’audace*”—audacity, always audacity—expresses a shared tenet of French intellectual life.

Whatever the truth of the tale about the décolleté dress and the husband’s deception, the pregnancy had a tragic result: though the baby was delivered safely, the Marquise, like so many women of the time, fell sick shortly afterward, and died within the week. Voltaire mourned her. “It is not a mistress I have lost,” he wrote, emphatically. “Rather, I have lost half of myself, a soul for which mine seems to have been made.”

The subtitle of this new book seems earned—du Châtelet really did play a significant part in the making of modern philosophy. But the Enlightenment’s “most dangerous woman”? Surely this grafts the preoccupations of a later era onto her eighteenth-century life. In her book about happiness, “danger” is a word that occurs only once, in the context of gambling, while *amour* rings throughout the text. She never would have taken herself to be dangerous; she would have wanted to be known to be wise.

And loving. She learned more than we may realize from her childhood mentor, Fontenelle. His “Conversation on the Plurality of Worlds,” which she must have read as an adolescent, tells a story of courtship through learning: a philosopher woos a marquise by introducing her to a Copernican-

Cartesian view of the universe, and particularly to the doctrine that the stars we see have worlds like ours orbiting them. The plurality of worlds becomes the foundation for a plurality of viewpoints. Science emerges as a version of the pastoral, with the physicist as swain. Romance and research are seen as twinned enterprises, a vision that set a keynote for du Châtelet's own life.

It was a keynote, too, for the era. One of the easily overlooked masterpieces of the romance of science is right here in New York: Jacques-Louis David's incandescent portrait of Antoine and Marie-Anne Lavoisier, at the Met. It shows the great father and mother of chemistry not as a male thinker and a female muse but as the married, working couple they were. Their love and their work are shown as one, and the pure world of experiment they inhabit—with the form of a test tube likened to that of a Doric column—is compatible with the poised, erotic elegance they display. (Antoine was murdered by the Jacobins during their Terror; Marie-Anne survived him, married an American, and kept their work alive.)

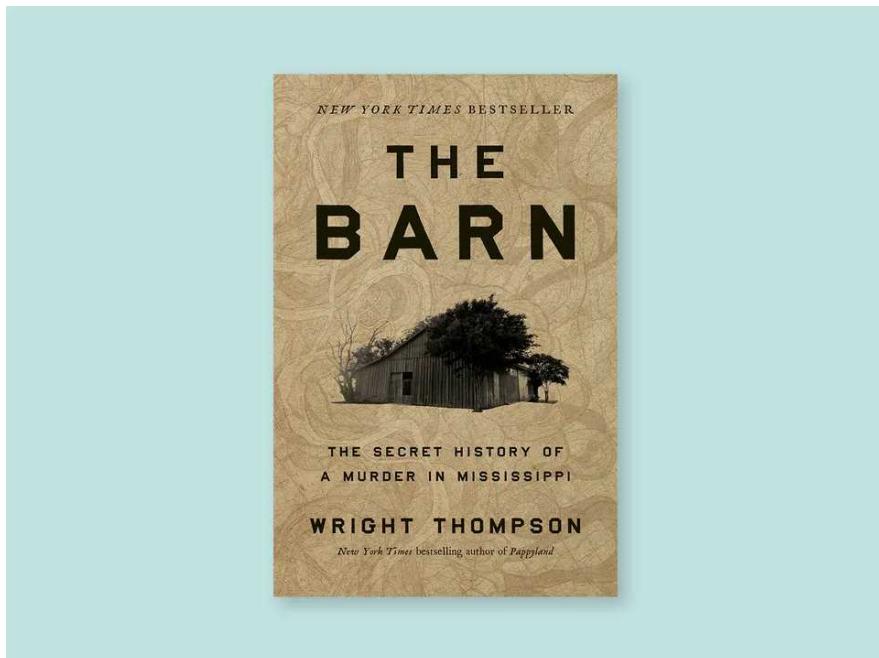
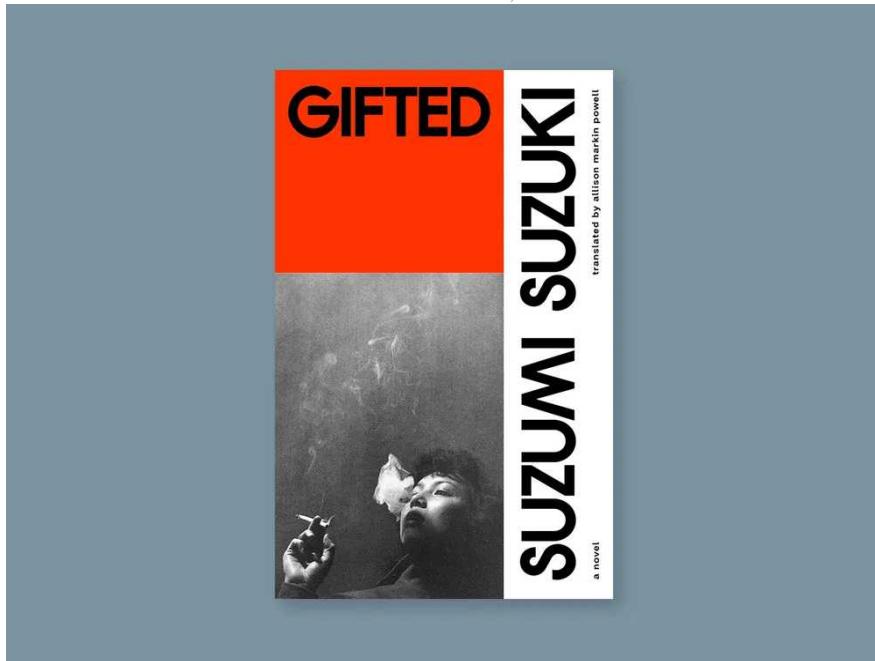
The social aspect of science has been bureaucratized in our time; what “peer review” often means is something that no reviewer wants to peer too deeply into. But in an earlier era it was a happier matter of encyclopedias and societies. Science is communal in the first instance, a matter of clubs and, not infrequently, pairings. Most of these have been friendships, brooding Charles Darwin and blunt Joseph Hooker; but a few of these partners, often French—the Curies, the Lavoisiers, and Voltaire and du Châtelet—were lovers, too. It’s a cheering thought in a lovesick time. ♦

Books

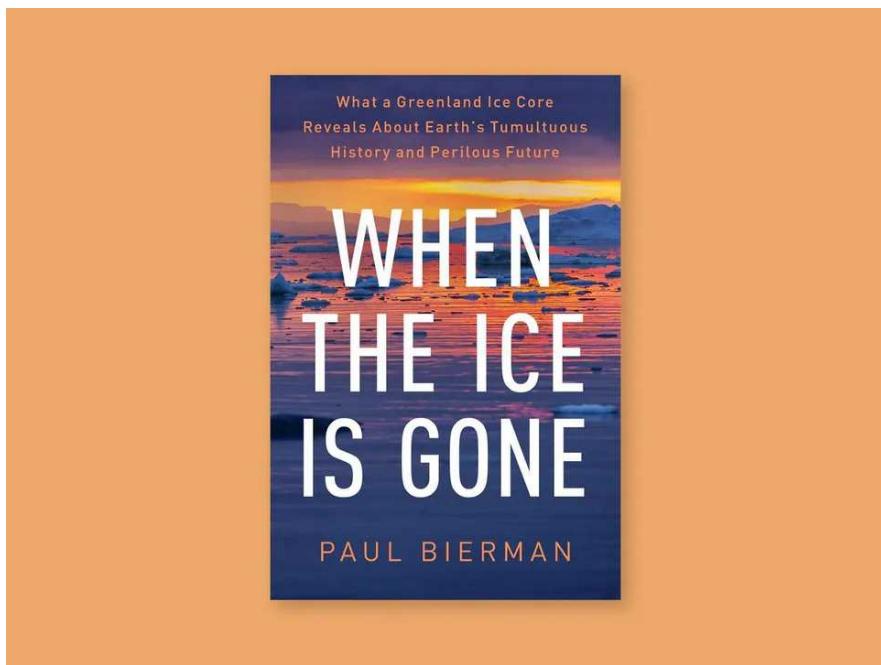
Briefly Noted

“The Barn,” “When the Ice Is Gone,” “Bright I Burn,” and “Gifted.”

October 28, 2024



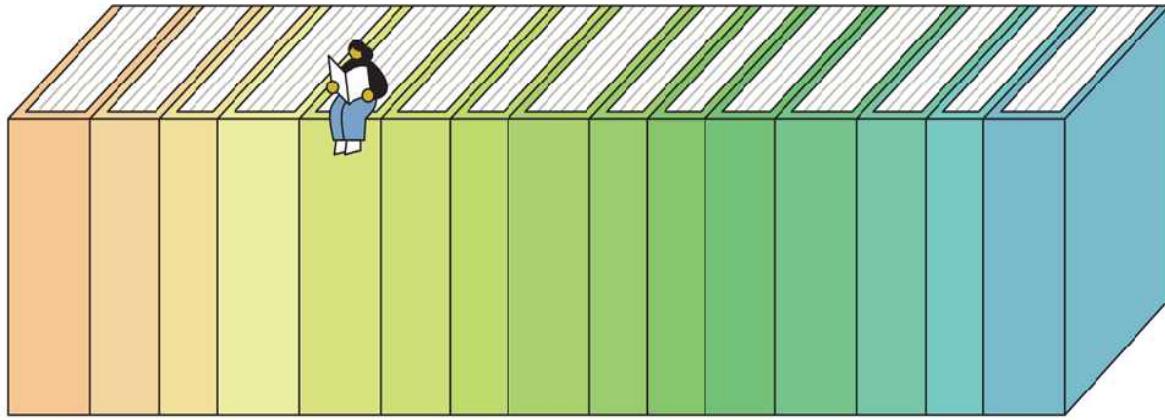
The Barn, by Wright Thompson (*Penguin Press*). Thompson, who was born into an old Mississippi planter family, grew up only miles from the barn where Emmett Till was tortured and killed. This book is not only a retelling of the crime—a story that Till’s family, among others, has already published—but also a rich and wandering history of the township in which Till died: the few square miles of plantations that helped birth both the blues and the Ku Klux Klan. Thompson writes movingly of more than one “enormous web of interconnected people” in the Delta, and of the ongoing fight to commemorate its lynchings. He brings a local’s intensity to the project: the book is as much about his neighbors, and even his kin, as it is about his country.



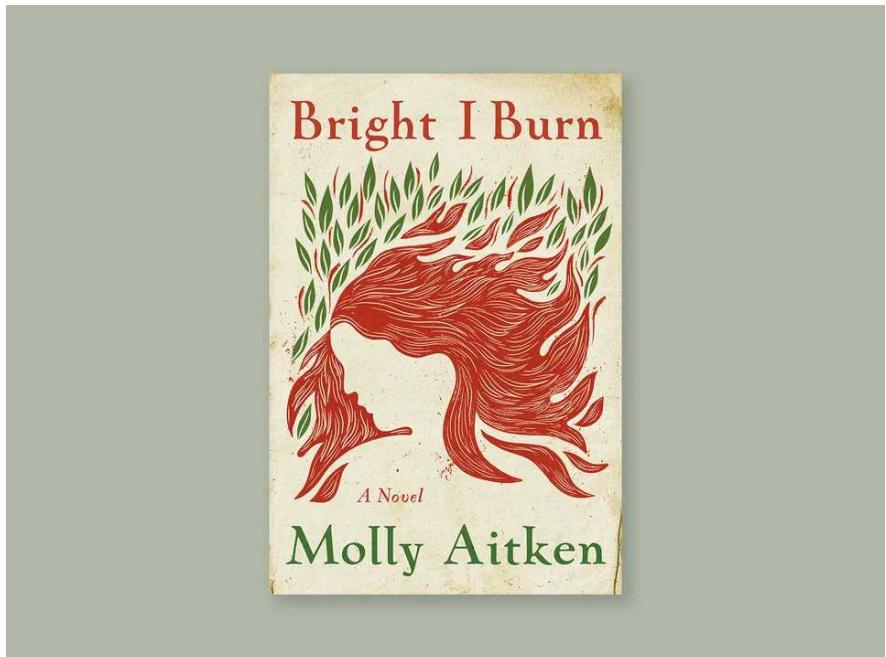
When the Ice Is Gone, by Paul Bierman (*Norton*). This scientific history recounts the drilling, in the nineteen-sixties, of the world’s first deep ice core—a cylinder of ice that extended more than four thousand feet below the surface. Efforts like this one contributed to the creation of a new scientific discipline. By analyzing the dust, ash, oxygen isotopes, and air bubbles preserved in ice cores, scientists could now reconstruct the history of Earth’s climate. In 2019, Bierman, a geologist, and his team discovered plant fragments in the frozen soil collected from the base of the core—evidence that Greenland’s ice sheet had melted before, under climatic conditions

similar to today's. Unless we curb climate change, he writes, "the island will be green again."

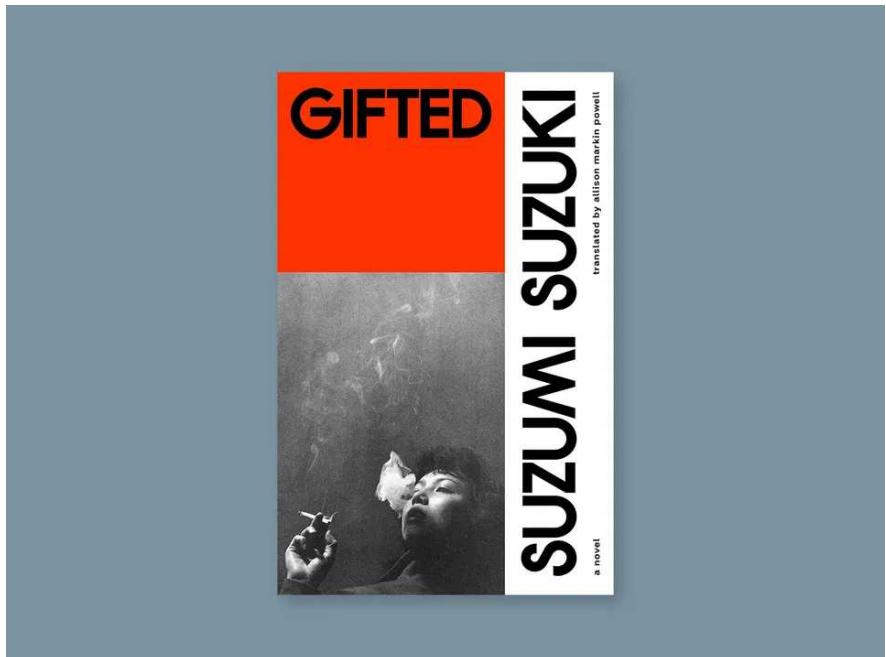
What We're Reading



Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Bright I Burn, by *Molly Aitken* (*Knopf*). Inspired by a real woman, Alice Kyteler, who was born in the thirteenth century and accused of witchcraft, this gripping novel follows its protagonist from her youth in Kilkenny, as the captivating daughter of an innkeeper and lender, to her old age, hiding out as a priest in England. In between, Alice takes over her father's business; is struck by lightning; marries four times, each with violent ends; births two children; and amasses significant wealth. “I am a rare case,” she says, of her story. “Once brightly I burned, I drew them all to me and consumed them all, unwittingly and wittingly, in my fire.”



Gifted, by *Suzumi Suzuki*, translated from the Japanese by *Allison Markin Powell* (*Transit*). In this unsentimental novella, a young woman working as a bar hostess and sex worker in Tokyo reckons with several unresolved personal traumas in the course of a few weeks. Her mother, an unsuccessful poet, is dying—first at her daughter’s house, in the entertainment district, then in the hospital. The unfortunate circumstances force the unnamed protagonist to reflect on the abuse she endured at her mother’s hands, as well as on the recent deaths of two of her friends. Based on Suzuki’s own experiences in the adult industry, the book chronicles the young woman’s wanderings from bar to bar, hospital to home, with brutal honesty. “This district is rife with women walking around with two million yen,” the character remarks. “Nearly the same number who say they want to die.”

Dancing

The Haunting Otherworld of Japanese Puppet Theatre

In two piercing works, the National Bunraku Theatre's puppets—floating, airy creatures weighted by earthly human spirits—explore the clash between duty and passion.

By Jennifer Homans

October 28, 2024



The National Bunraku Theatre, in New York recently for the first time in more than thirty years, presented an evening of suicides. The performance, at the Japan Society, consisted of excerpts from two of the company's most celebrated productions. In the Fire Watchtower scene from "The Greengrocer's Daughter," by Suga Sensuke and Matsuda Wakichi, from 1773, the titular character sacrifices herself to save a temple page boy she loves. In a scene from "The Love Suicides at Sonezaki," by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, from 1703, two lovers are driven to take their own lives. Both plays were inspired by real events, and Chikamatsu's was followed by a wave of double suicides that led to a ban on further performances. This

mirroring of life and art is all the more astonishing given the fact that the actors are not people but puppets.

Bunraku, named for Uemura Bunrakuken, the owner of an Osaka puppet theatre, has its roots in the seventeenth century, and especially in the plays of Chikamatsu. Writing often for puppets rather than actors, he was interested in the clash between duty and passion in the lives of a rising merchant class. Bunraku was a kind of people's theatre, but it wasn't light entertainment, showing fascination with tragedy and ritual violence in ordinary lives.

The Fire Watchtower scene has a cast of one: Oshichi, whose beloved will have to commit ritual suicide if she cannot help him recover a lost sword. To do this, she must sound a false alarm on the fire drum, opening the city gates—an offense that, in a city of largely wooden buildings, is punishable by death. As Oshichi enters, she is convulsed with fear and determination, and her puppet body, half the size of a person, flings violently forward at the waist as she makes her way to the watchtower, escorted by three puppeteers, two shrouded head to toe in black, the other unmasked.

I was so engrossed in Oshichi's mission that I hardly noticed the puppeteers at first; she seemed to be acting alone as she scrambled up the tower steps, fell back, and tried again. But in an extraordinary moment, when the drum is struck, she meets her barefaced puppeteer at the top of the tower stairs. All I could see was him, his thick right arm coiled around her frail limb as she—he—struck the bell. A crucial shift had occurred: she appeared to be watching as he pumped her arm and the alarm sounded. Which of them did the deed? The puppeteer is implicated, or is he? We saw his hand, but, in the world of the story, he does not exist, and Oshichi alone will ultimately pay the price.

After this came a jarring interlude that looked to me like a puppet autopsy. With comic delight, the puppeteers took poor Oshichi apart and revealed her naked, inert form. In Bunraku, one puppet is handled by three puppeteers, each of whom is responsible for a different portion of the puppet's body: the lead puppeteer takes the head and the right arm and guides the torso; the second puppeteer handles the left arm; and the third operates the lower half. Moving a single body part in synchrony with the whole is a skill that takes years of training; Kiritake Monyoshi, one of the lead puppeteers, has been

practicing his art for more than thirty years. He explained how his right hand enters the puppet, how hidden strings move the eyes or raise the eyebrows, and how he and the second puppeteer cue each other to coördinate the puppet's arms. Perhaps most shocking of all, the puppet's skirts were thrown up so that we could see her missing legs (female puppets have no legs, only a kimono that falls to the floor), and we glimpsed how the third puppeteer nonetheless makes her appear to kneel and walk.

Presumably, someone thought that this Japanese art form needed to be demystified for an American audience, but I was dismayed by the jokey and mechanical treatment of a puppet that, moments before, had conveyed a devastating human drama.

The next scene, from “The Love Suicides at Sonezaki,” comes from the end of the play, when Tokubei, a clerk ruined and humiliated by a cheating friend, drifts onto the stage with his beloved courtesan, Ohatsu. It is night: they skim ghostlike through the dark, and we sense their faint breathing and taut nerves.

The lovers, knowing that society will never let them be together, set out to end their lives and be together in the afterworld. They stand on a bridge, weeping into the water; they embrace and flow apart, reflecting with remorse and pride on the act that they are about to commit. An animated backdrop (designed by Oga Kazuo, a frequent collaborator of Hayao Miyazaki’s) moves them along a path through the forest. Ohatsu expresses sadness at leaving her parents behind, while Tokubei, whose parents are dead, says that he will meet them in the hereafter.

These are intimate moments, but the lovers are not alone, because of the puppeteers tenderly carrying them. Human and puppet limbs are entwined, and there is a sense, both comforting and disconcerting, of a group-individual, like the shadowy figures who merge with the dark in Goya’s Black Paintings. Each puppet is both itself and a small society, and even the puppets’ materiality is uncanny—they are floating, airy creatures weighted by earthly human spirits. The puppeteers are not the only artists giving the puppets life. On a separate platform to the right of the action, three male chanters sit in a neat row, next to men playing the shamisen, a stringed instrument with a raw and piercing tone which is often used in vocal

accompaniment. The chanters give the puppets voice with intense and compressed screeches, gasps, and tears of terror, shame, and remorse—but they themselves slip from our awareness. Their disembodied voices operate like a soundtrack, synchronized with puppet gesture and emotion: a sinking chest, the kink of an elbow, a feverish shake.

What we are seeing is an elaborate division of labor, in which body and soul, movement, sound, and speech are parcelled out among different players—witnesses who (like us) are also players in the events onstage. Who is responsible for the terrible deaths that will follow? Are the individuals to blame, or are they impelled by a cruel society or a divinely sanctioned hand? With Bunraku puppets, culpability for unbearable individual acts is shared, making intimate human violence possible and even disturbingly beautiful. None are guilty; all are complicit.



In the lovers' final hour, we see poor Tokubei draw his sword and despair. He moves to strike Ohatsu, who opens herself to his blow, but he hesitates, overcome by her vulnerability. Then, in a piece of choreography that momentarily brings puppeteers, chanters, and musicians all into view, Ohatsu pulls her long obi across the stage, a complicated maneuver that ends in a striking tableau: Tokubei at one end of the sash and her at the other, with

the black figures of the puppeteers between them—a silently adjudicating human presence—and the musicians completing the visual arc.

Finally, the lovers wind themselves tightly together and the sash falls away. Ohatsu solemnly turns to Tokubei, her back to us, and falls to her knees before him. His arm shaking with tension, he raises the blade high above her and plunges it into her neck. She sinks backward, and he immediately turns it on his own throat and falls on her, as if in love. It is a riveting scene but, for the record, was edited for this performance to spare the audience the most gruesome parts. In Chikamatsu's version, the narration tells us that, when Tokubei first thrusts, "the point misses. Twice or thrice the flashing blade deflects this way and that until a cry tells it has struck her throat. . . . He twists the blade deeper and deeper, but the strength has left his arm. When he sees her weaken, he stretches forth his hands. The last agonies of death are indescribable."

Which may be why I did not need to be lifted to the skies by the animated backdrop, which now flew the lovers' bodies upward and turned them into a rocklike monument to incarnation and passing lives, a pretty distraction from the tragedy at hand which left me rewinding in my own mind to the real final image: dead puppets. ♦

The Theatre

Stars Collide in “Sunset Blvd.” and “Romeo + Juliet”

Jamie Lloyd casts Nicole Scherzinger as Norma Desmond, and Kit Connor and Rachel Zegler play a Gen Z version of Shakespeare’s famous lovers.

By Helen Shaw

October 25, 2024



In Billy Wilder’s ur-camp masterpiece “Sunset Boulevard,” from 1950, Gloria Swanson plays Norma Desmond, an aging grande dame of silent film, who slides from self-regarding eccentricity into homicidal delusion. Intent on a comeback, Norma has seduced a young screenwriter named Joe Gillis (William Holden), but, when both he and the studio reject her, she swerves into a permanent dream. “All right, Mr. DeMille, I’m ready for my closeup,” she famously purrs to a wall of crime-scene photographers, her face smoothed flat with grease and powder. In the film, Gillis still narrates—though he’s just been shot dead, like Jay Gatsby, in the pool.

Andrew Lloyd Webber débuted his musical adaptation of “Sunset Boulevard” (co-written with Don Black and Christopher Hampton) in 1993, returning to the dark sensibility of his then recent mega-hit, “The Phantom of the Opera.” Webber might have felt on familiar ground. The Phantom and Norma are both attention-hungry spiders in glittering lairs; both are fantasists whose faces, either twisted or simply aging, become their obsessive focus.

Faces—gigantic, black-and-white ones—are certainly the main scenery of the director Jamie Lloyd’s souped-up and stripped-down “Sunset Blvd.,” newly transferred from London to the St. James (after winning seven Olivier Awards), and starring Nicole Scherzinger, onetime lead singer of the Pussycat Dolls. Casting a gleaming Scherzinger as the fading Norma is deliberately counterintuitive: a burlesque dancer, she twerks her way through Fabian Aloise’s club choreography barefoot, wearing only a black negligee. Everything—the “reality” of 1949 and even Norma’s supposed decrepitude (she’s meant to be, like, fifty)—will have to exist in the imagination.

Like Webber, Lloyd enjoys both the gothic and quoting himself. (From “A Doll’s House” to “Cyrano,” there seems to be no drama he won’t stage in a stark emptiness, whether that makes the story hard to follow or not.) The set and costume designer Soutra Gilmour, his frequent collaborator, has created another elegant void for him, filled with white fog and an immense movie screen. Ensemble members, in black-and-white streetwear, carry cameras mounted on Steadicam frames, shooting live closeups of the main characters: Scherzinger’s Norma; the screenwriter Joe (Tom Francis); and Max (David Thaxton), Norma’s butler and chief enabler. Almost every projected face stares directly at us—I was reminded not of film noir but of Andy Warhol’s lonely, mug-shot-inspired “Screen Tests.” Even when Joe and Norma kiss, they seem depersonalized; cold mannequins, colliding in space.

During the Act II overture and the subsequent title song, the video designers Nathan Amzi and Joe Ramson have arranged a thrilling coup de théâtre: a live camera tails Francis from his dressing room down through the guts of the building, then into the street. The company glides behind him as he sings and strides along, staring down the camera’s barrel. It’s been done before—

Lloyd sent Jessica Chastain out of “A Doll’s House”; Ivo van Hove did a live walk-and-talk video in “Network”—but here the spectacle is so precise, the superimposition of Broadway on L.A. so droll, that Lloyd turns the cliché fresh again.

A camera makes its own decisions about who has star quality. Francis, as a physical presence, can be recessive, but there’s a silvery charisma in his projected image that his co-stars never find. For all her beauty, Scherzinger onscreen remains unexceptional; she mugs for the camera, like a TikTok influencer taping a reaction video. But, in the final mad scene, she abandons sarcasm, drenches herself in blood, and turns into a terrifying harpy. Tellingly, she’s best when she stops vamping for the camera’s attention and starts reaching, her fingers curled into claws, for the people in the room.

For much of the previous two hours, though, she’s been rolling her eyes. Maybe she can’t believe how shoddy a big-deal musical can be? Despite its many lush passages, Webber’s sung-through score is bloated with repetitive vocal figures, and the lyrics by Black and Hampton fall flat in comparison with lines lifted from Wilder and his co-writers, D. M. Marshman, Jr., and Charles Brackett. For instance, Norma’s iconic “I am big. It’s the pictures that got small” is followed almost immediately by the lyrics “No words can tell / The stories my eyes tell / Watch me when I frown / You can’t write that down.”

If Webber’s uneven musical is a grainy copy of Wilder’s film, this production is an intentionally distorted copy of a copy. But Lloyd is less interested in the specifics of either work than in the chthonic rage underneath. For the folks giving standing ovations during the show, the strategy seems to work. Scherzinger’s voice does contain a terrific power: instead of phrasing lines as thoughts, she attacks every clause with big, jackhammering blows. I was reminded that she has been a judge on “The X Factor”—there’s a sense of desperate competition in the way she delivers her numbers, holding nothing in reserve. The audience responds gratefully to this level of self-abnegation, and the frankly chilling sounds that come out of her. That’s all Norma Desmond wanted! She doesn’t mind suffering, as long as the people in the dark love her for it.

Meanwhile, “Romeo + Juliet,” at the Circle in the Square, takes a more straightforward approach to its star casting. Sam Gold’s inventive, emo-lite production features Rachel Zegler, from the recent film version of “West Side Story,” as Juliet, and Kit Connor, from the teen-Brit TV show “Heartstopper,” as Romeo. The moment we see them, running full-tilt out of a shouting gang of rowdy youths—the 2024 stylings by the costume designer Enver Chakartash include Hello Kitty backpacks, mesh tanks, and lots of baggy pants—they’re already avatars for Gen Z romance.

But the couple must also kindle something together. I found myself thinking wistfully of the National Theatre’s recent film with Jessie Buckley and Josh O’Connor, in which Buckley’s clever Juliet reads as being capable of diverting O’Connor’s Romeo from his violent path. Here, Zegler and Connor both seem like innocents, with a kind of inverse chemistry—as they get farther away from each other onstage, their connection appears to strengthen. Their finest moment is their first one, when they’re almost a full twenty feet apart. Zegler sings a song (written for the show by the über record producer Jack Antonoff) at a Capulet party, and her performance roots Romeo, an otherwise flighty fellow, to the spot.

After his work at Circle in the Square with “An Enemy of the People,” Gold has clearly taken the measure of in-the-round space, and so the rough-and-tumble Montague gang—which includes the wonderful Gabby Beans as Mercutio—clammers around in the catwalks overhead, dropping down near theatregoers in the standing-room section. Connor is particularly deft at interacting with the audience: he plays Romeo as an inexperienced softboi, offering the whole room his flustered courtesy. (When he does a chin-up to kiss Juliet on her balcony, his biceps bulging, the audience gasps. All that flirting really pays off.)

Gold and his company seem most comfortable in these swoony sections. The fights are silly; the final scene in the tomb is bizarrely quick and awkward. But, earlier, the mood is wonderful, and Antonoff’s electronic underscoring gives everything a kind of fuzzed-out, after-midnight sweetness. There’s a lovely moment when the circular black stage floor flips itself over to show a field of flowers. (The set design is by the collective called dots.) I know that the “bank where the wild thyme blows” line is from a different play, but it somehow *feels* as if it belongs to this production. The cast here is most

believable as young people—enemies or not—who stay up all night and then fall asleep in a pile, like puppies in long grass. ♦

The Current Cinema

“Blitz” Uses Classical Storytelling to Advance a Radical Vision of War

In Steve McQueen’s harrowing film, starring Saoirse Ronan and Elliott Heffernan, London faces threats from above—and from within.

By Justin Chang

October 25, 2024



Early on in “Blitz,” Rita Hanway (Saoirse Ronan), a London factory worker, puts her nine-year-old son, George (Elliott Heffernan), aboard a train. Rather, George puts himself aboard; he twists angrily free of his mother’s grasp—“I hate you!” he cries—and tears off down the platform. Rita, distraught, tries in vain to say a proper goodbye, knowing that they might never see each other again. It’s 1940, German bombs are falling across the city, and George is being evacuated to the countryside, as millions of English children will be in the course of the war. His bitter resentment at this upheaval is startling, even in the annals of Second World War cinema, where fraught farewells in crowded train stations abound.

You may recall another boy telling his mother “I hate you” on a railway platform, though with a mitigating tenderness in his voice. So began “Au Revoir les Enfants” (1987), Louis Malle’s sobering account of his coming of age in Nazi-occupied France. For “Hope and Glory” (1987), the director John Boorman drew on intimate memories of a Blitz-ravaged childhood, with improbably buoyant results; the mother in *that* film pulled her children back from the train, unable to let them go. But Steve McQueen, the writer and director of “Blitz,” is not making a memoir. He was born more than two decades after V-E Day and raised in London’s burgeoning West Indian community—the rich inspiration for his five-part film anthology, “Small Axe” (2020). While researching that project, McQueen discovered a wartime photograph of a young Black boy with an oversized suitcase. Who was this child, and what became of him? “Blitz” imagines an answer.

Its conclusions, though daubed with Dickensian whimsy and child’s-eye uplift, are remarkably tough and unyielding. George rages at Rita for the same reason that, an hour into his journey, he leaps from the train and hightails it back to London: for a child of a white mother and a Black father, reared in intolerant times, a prolonged family separation would itself be intolerable. For nine years, Rita and her father, Gerald (Paul Weller, quietly magnetic), have been George’s lone bulwark against a city’s cruelty. He has never met his father, Marcus (CJ Beckford), a Grenadian immigrant who was deported, years earlier, for the crime of defending himself against two loutish white men. George has encountered the same bigotry; in a flashback, a neighborhood kid calls him a “Black bastard,” and the pain that springs into George’s eyes makes sense of his every subsequent flinch, frown, and outburst. Heffernan, a gravely captivating newcomer, wraps each expression and gesture around a hard little nubbin of distrust.

A surfeit of flashbacks can topple a narrative, but “Blitz” bends time sparingly, and with great purpose, in a story that surges forward with multipronged urgency. It has much ground to cover, and much devastation to show. The terror of the nightly German assault comes at us in dark, disorienting aerial bursts: bombs fall in what feels like slow motion; ripples of movement coalesce into Luftwaffe planes, reflected on the Thames. At one point, McQueen cuts to a staggering overhead view of the city, a smoking and hauntingly silent ruin in Adam Stockhausen’s intricate production design. Most of the tale, however, unfolds at ground level, and in

astoundingly intimate detail. The opening images plunge us into a roaring conflagration, but Yorick Le Saux's camera is mesmerized not by burning buildings but by a rogue fire hose, whose high-pressure spray nearly defeats the workers trying to wrest it under control. The image tells McQueen's story: here is a nation, and a defense effort, divided against itself.

George's mother nonetheless toils in noble service of that effort. By day, she labors in a munitions factory—Rita the Riveter, resplendent in denim. By night, she and her girlfriends knock back drinks in a bustling pub, trying to keep calm and revel on. She also volunteers at an air-raid shelter run by a real-life hero of the Blitz, the organizer Mickey Davies (Leigh Gill), and she shares his activist spirit. In one of the film's loveliest moments, she croons a tender ditty on the factory floor for a BBC program—a scrap of melodious cheer to chase away a nation's gloom. Once the song ends, though, so does any gauzy sentimentalization of working-class women. Rita and her sisters-in-arms, presented with a radio microphone, put it to defiant good use. This is McQueen's method: a passage of lyrical beauty, a chaser of righteous struggle. You cannot survive a war, he suggests, without both.

For those of us who first saw Ronan as Briony, the impulsive teen-age antiheroine of “Atonement” (2007), “Blitz” can feel like a spookily full-circle experience. A slightly older, wiser Briony was played by Romola Garai, but it is hard not to picture the grownup Ronan in her place, stepping determinedly through the London rubble. (Here, too, as in “Atonement,” walls of water surge through a Tube station, turning a refuge into a death trap.) In “Lady Bird” (2017) and “Little Women” (2019), Ronan incarnated the fiery stubbornness of youth; now she stokes her natural warmth into the consuming blaze of a mother’s love. When Rita learns that George is lost in London, she sets out to find him, aided by a police officer, Jack (Harris Dickinson), who quietly loves her. He remains a fuzzily benevolent presence, and any hint of romance is snuffed out too soon; whether this is a casualty of war, or merely of a screenwriter’s haste, remains unclear.

It is George’s perspective, not Rita’s, that dominates “Blitz” and troubles it most deeply. Over a few hellish days and nights, the boy is hurled from one misfortune to the next, none ghastlier than an encounter with two leering Fagins (Stephen Graham and Kathy Burke), who are not just thugs but profiteers. They force the boy to rob bombed-out shops and, horrifically,

dead bodies. If their malevolence threatens to throw the story off balance, it has a moral counterweight in Ife (Benjamin Clémentine), a kindly blackout warden who meets George during his rounds. When racial tensions suddenly ignite among Londoners in close quarters, it falls to Ife, a Nigerian immigrant, to chasten the citizenry: bigotry is Hitler's evil, he reminds them, not theirs.

That's a flattering message, and not exactly subtle in its appeal to our better angels. Yet some of us in the audience, disgusted by the persistence of Nazism and anti-immigrant invective in the present, may well appreciate the force of McQueen's rhetoric. There is nothing tactful, after all, about the prejudices that assault George on every corner. Watch as the camera follows him one night, toward a storefront window display larded with grotesque African caricatures. The next morning, he will be rudely shooed away from another shop by a proprietor, who would doubtless treat a white child differently. There is, in short, another war raging in this movie, and it exacts its grimdest damage not from above but from within. The Blitz doesn't just plunge London into chaos; it reveals and exacerbates the chaos that has been seething there all along.

This is a bracing, even novel, perspective on a war whose film depictions so often traffic in sententious Greatest Generation platitudes. But that hasn't kept "Blitz" from being dismissed in some critical quarters as "conventional"—and it is, I suppose, next to McQueen's previous work, the monumental documentary "Occupied City" (2023), which used extreme formal limitations (a methodical recitation of past atrocities, layered over present-day footage) to convey the immense scale of the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam. "Blitz" offers a swifter, more accessible vision of a city under siege, but it is guided by the same impulse: to give definition to horrors that often turn abstract in the imagination.

For McQueen, the boundary between the conventional and the unconventional has always been porous at best. His movies unfold, thrillingly, on a scale between classical narrative and radical form, and he is versatile enough to adjust the slider according to the material. In "Hunger" (2008), "Shame" (2011), and "12 Years a Slave" (2013), he transfigured various abuses of the body into stark tableaux of spiritual torment, and his camera looked on with unflinching, almost ritualized composure, as if it

were recording the Stations of the Cross. But his gaze relaxed considerably, and beautifully, amid the communal panoramas of “Small Axe,” in which joy commingled openly with sorrow, and singing and dancing became their own forceful assertions of life.

“Blitz,” too, is filled to bursting with music. Hans Zimmer’s dread-infused score at times evokes the drone of planes and the scream of sirens, but McQueen practically cues up an orchestra in jubilant response. He steers us through the red lights of a night club where Rita and Marcus once embraced with loving abandon, and through a lavish dining hall where a Black jazz band performs for white partyers. In his most audacious stroke, McQueen dramatizes the ghostly purgatory of an Underground station where newly arrived spirits, some of whom aided George on his journey, stand transfixed by song. “Blitz” shows us their courage, if not the train that will bear them onward. ♦

Poems

- [Backbend](#)
- [Pregnancy on Street-Cleaning Day](#)

Backbend

By Diane Mehta

October 28, 2024



Clever in the fold, you bend
backbend (uplift, clouds),
bend again as if the spine,
excited to perform,
thinks without uncertainty
that it is dance itself.

Uncertainly, we see
grace, fracas, memory—
we are always seeking
good inversions, chiefly
because we know discomfort
and want to conquer it.

I wonder how it feels
inch by inch to find the floor
and, forsaking safety, leave it.
So much your body is meshed
in flex and yet yields tougher
than softness suggests.

But do you ever feel your body
is a noose? Do you see
my shoulders moving in my seat?
I think you must be limber
in the heart the way I used to be.
You are the opposite of an elegy.

I almost look away, thinking
we pay for each performance,
to sit there in our vanishings—
life is cold, the stage is hot,
you backbend to eternity
half in air, and firmly on your feet.

Poems

Pregnancy on Street-Cleaning Day

By Laura Kolbe

October 28, 2024



When I thought myself most honest
I was merely moving
aside from the relevant surface

and not getting down
to the nature of things.

Me in my rattletrap
baring the black road
so the sweeper truck touches
its gray skirts there and departs
with ratty nibbled leaf.

Then I would roll my vehicle back
to the lip of stone fringed above

what's happening in the street.
Little changed.

I mean to announce the coming of a child.
Not a god, not more particular
than all particulars,
but I get lost in simple repetitions
and forget to speak
with my whole heart.

I was what's known
as a *good girl*, completing the exercises,
claws trimmed, a zip on my coat.
O diagnosis!

I see myself now in those forgotten unbeloved
presidents of the nineteenth century
gaunt even when they were fat—

zones of flesh who lied
a bit, bluffed, bought items
not quite for sale, came down
with wintry infections and warred
on small islands.

Who chose a tiny corner
of a big borrowed house as the one place
to slake their muzzles in
foreign stamps, say, or Latin, or theatrical
women.

There is nothing to pity
them for, and yet, watching my white breath
lather and shave
these brick edifices,

I am dumbstruck by all those of us
who evade true grandeur and the crimson

calypso of feeling,

unwrite our own parts
faster than the couriers
can lay sheaves of script at our feet,

slide our phones in and out of pockets—
silvered oars sculling up and down—

as though by dint
of our small motions
the great river would stay down
and be stroked and not enter us.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Tuesday, October 22, 2024](#)

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, October 22, 2024

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Brooke Husic

October 22, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Eyal Press's article about blue-collar voters, Hannah Goldfield's piece on Southern California's health industry, and Sage Mehta's essay about her father.

October 28, 2024

Union Strong

Eyal Press's piece about the political shift among blue-collar workers reminded me of my own experience ("[The Worker Revolt](#)," October 7th). I grew up in a union household, and, when both my parents got sick, we became poor. Despite this, with the help of Social Security, Medicare, and union benefits, we were lifted up by a strong social safety net. I received a good education and became a lawyer and then a judge. It helped that my youth and my early professional life occurred from the nineteen-forties to the eighties, a period when income inequality and wealth inequality were actually decreasing. Then came the Reagan revolution, and those inequalities began a steep rise, which continues to this day.

It amazes me how little the Republican Party in general, and Donald Trump in particular, has to do to earn the support of working-class Americans. It also amazes me how those same Americans take for granted the benefits gained for them by unions and Democrats.

*James M. Cronin
Westport, Mass.*

Embarrassment of Riches

Hannah Goldfield nailed the nuances of Southern California's wellness culture ([On and Off the Menu](#), October 7th). I live in SoCal and refer to this community, with its health-food zealotry and proximity to the film industry, cults, and pseudo-science, as the wellness industrial complex. What I find

most disconcerting about the W.I.C. and its orbit of capitalist enterprises (see Goldfield's description of a twenty-five-dollar bottle of water at Erewhon) is how utterly navel-gazing it is. We Californians seem unable to tear our attention away from the micro-fluctuations in our glycemic index after a keto smoothie, despite everything that is going on in the world.

Californian eaters might be better represented by the late Pulitzer Prize-winning Los Angeles *Times* columnist Jonathan Gold; the 2015 film made about him, "City of Gold," captures a rebel humanist food writer showing that L.A. is a democratic place made up of diverse diners, and that food can be a matter of community, not just of ego.

*Olivia Joffrey
Santa Barbara, Calif.*

Reading With Ved

I was interested to learn from Sage Mehta's essay about her father, the *New Yorker* writer Ved Mehta, that I'm a member of a group I didn't even know existed: the Vedettes ("The Sighted World," October 14th). Living in New York City in my twenties and trying to scrape together rent, I answered an ad in Craigslist that intrigued me: an unnamed *New Yorker* writer needed an amanuensis. The mysterious word alone was enough to make me read on. After showing up at an Upper East Side apartment, I was hired instead as one of Ved's readers, and soon spent many a weekend morning reading to him. I remember how he induced me to read "faster, faster!" and how I came to enjoy the challenge of keeping his desired speed—that is, until one day when I arrived still stoned from the night before and felt as if I were hurtling off some kind of word cliff.

I found Ved to be bold, confident, amiably teasing, and generous. A few sessions in, he asked if I was a writer, and offered to read a short story I'd written. He read it, and by way of feedback he said simply: Keep writing. It was the best advice about writing I have ever gotten.

*Jackie Delamatre
Providence, R.I.*

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

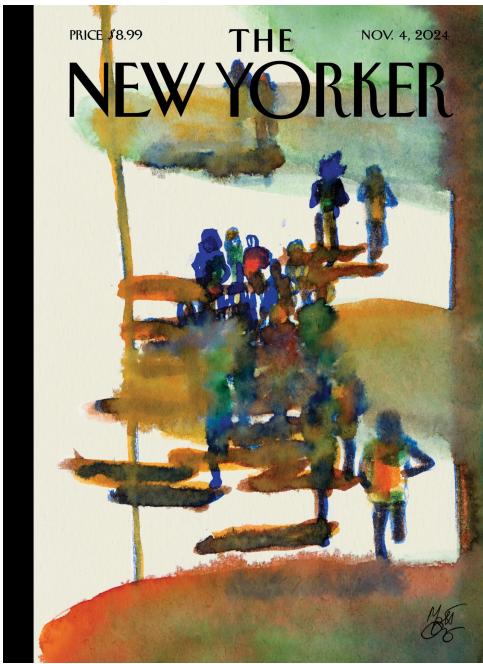


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